



# Flash! Fiction 4

by Peter McMillan  
with Adam Mac

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with Adam Mac

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Dedication

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For Mr. Greengrass

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Cecil was wheeled into the rec room where all the residents were passing the time 'til the evening meal.

His room was too small. Much smaller than what he was used to. At least it had cable. He just needed a TV. The nurse said one might be coming available.

This was the first time he'd seen any of his new neighbours. It was a lot to take in. Some were dressed to the nines. Others were singing showtunes while a woman wearing a cancer turban played the piano.

"Who's the old bird facing the corner?" he asked.

"One of our long-termers, Miss Annie. She prefers it that way, sometimes," answered the nurse.

"Kinda ruins the atmosphere, doesn't it?"

"Well, Mr. Snow, this isn't rehab."

"Don't I know it. My boy made that pretty clear. 'Here Dad, your new home,' he said. 'Nice,' his new girlfriend said."

"She doesn't have anybody—just us."

"No family?"

"Moved away soon after she came."

"What did she—"

"Real estate. Thirty years. Pretty successful I heard."

"Ironic."

"Lots of irony here, Mr. Snow. Would you like to take a tour of the gardens?"

“No thanks, saw it through the window in my room.”

“Alright then. I’ll leave you to mingle. By the way, those boxes—the boxes your son mentioned—need to be unpacked when they arrive. Boxes left in residents’ rooms will be removed after two days. Policy. Health and safety, you understand.”

*First published in Apocrypha and Abstractions April 23, 2015.*



## The Audition

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She'd been in bed for three days — the entire weekend, so it had to be serious. It was a bad flu season, though the old family doctor, still making the occasional house call, said it was nerves most likely.

Stella had just turned 14, but she'd already shown signs of being like her Aunt Audrey. Both were actresses, in theory — high-strung and self-absorbed. Stella's mother recognized the resemblance most keenly, having shared a room with her younger sister Audrey when they were growing up.

Now, Stella was auditioning — just a school play, but for the time and place it was the biggest part of her life. The play had been adapted from an O. Henry story, and Stella knew, she just knew, she had to have the main role. It was only two days away.

They didn't let on but her parents thought it might be the best thing ... for everybody ... if she didn't win. Tony, her little brother, felt otherwise. He worshiped his big sister, even though she made him fetch and carry and come and go as she pleased.

From her upstairs bedroom, propped up on two big down pillows, Stella could see the side of the old vacant house next door. It was a large, old-fashioned house — a tear-down her parents said. The garage was nearest her view, and it was unobstructed by maple leaves this time of year. Past the skeletal branches of the maple, it was an almost blank canvas of brick with a single waist-high window that didn't appear to have seen a paintbrush in more years than she'd lived.

Later in the day, shortly after school let out, she was rehearsing her lines before her parents came home. Only Tony was in the room with her, but she knew he'd never betray her. He was busy watching the heavy equipment being unloaded next door, when suddenly he spun around and asked what was so important about a leaf anyway. She explained that it was the difference between getting the part and failure. She was cryptic that way, so it sometimes took him awhile to figure out what she meant.

The next morning before school it was a mix of drizzle and snow flurries, but that didn't stop Tony or them. He found a big red maple leaf on the ground — bigger and prettier than all the rest — then crawled through the construction fence and taped it to the garage window. Standing back to admire his work, he turned to see if Stella was there. She was — her surprised face pressed against the second-story window. He beamed at her just as a giant orange claw descended from the sky and tore into the wall, pulling it down behind him.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, January 2015.

Scooter hated his name, but he loved it, too. Traffic for him was a cinch though he'd had some close calls. He worked at the Reading Fair which was a Speaker's Corner-cum-virtual reality venue with computer-generated guest speakers from far away times and places. All presentations were fictional; however, character authenticity was crucial for audience recognition.

Scooter was a fact-check — obsessive-compulsive, green, control freak-certified — and his job was to make sure that the presenters' holograms were consistent with their body of work. He was indispensable. For example, he discovered the anomaly in Albert Einstein's military-style crew cut and prevented it from going live. He also intervened to can Lincoln's "I Have a Dream" speech. Perhaps, most memorably he fixed the glitch that erroneously programmed Neil Armstrong to utter the immortal words, "And now for something completely different," as he became the first man on the moon.

Scooter didn't actually scoot around in libraries or archives. After all, in the digital age, information came to you if you knew how to call it, and Scooter did ... very effectively. He had a knack for scooting in and out of places — just a crack was all he needed — and coming back with a trove of data, which he organized with the dexterity of an eight-armed conductor.

Unfortunately, most of what he managed was easily replicated by the technicians in Bangalore. Management seized an opportunity to save costs by eliminating equipment and personnel redundancies, like Scooter along with half the technicians who were absolutely incredulous on getting their notices.

Scooter and his doomed colleagues were kept on for two additional weeks owing to the big show the impresario had scored with the national museum. She had committed to a gallery of 25 personages, ignoring staff counsel that only 19 were fit for the occasion.

Six more had to be created. Moreover, they had to represent the fields of medicine, pop art, entertainment, business, literature, and Ancient Egypt. Scooter and his buddies set to work not the least intimidated by the ambitious timetable, all the more aggressive because two holograms had to be created for each one in the exhibit: one to pass internal inspection and the other to be triggered by a duplicate remote.

For Freud, they put in Jung Frankenstein. In place of Campbell's soup, they produced avant-garde art using Bush's baked beans. Instead of an exclusive tour of the Tutankhamen exhibit in Cairo, an effigy of King Tut was to be regaled by Steve Martin. Henry Ford's cameo was ousted by "Neutron Jack" Welsh, the brilliance of GE, who was to explain how he came to love the bomb. The world's greatest-ever footballer, Edson Arantes do Nascimento, had to step aside for Barry Bonds who was asked how he juggled being the home run king and a negative role model. The only two-time winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature refused to disclose his/her identities, so Adam Mac was added at the last minute to face the perennial literary question: how does a writer endure oblivion?

Scooter never got to know how the exhibit went off. The day before his last day at work, he was run over by a bus. Nuts and bolts, circuit boards, and shredded metal lay scattered all over the roadway. The bus, through the bike rack mounted on the front, seemed to smile.

They managed without him. The exhibition was a rollicking success, though regrettably not with the right people. Scooter would have been pleased.

First published in *Beyond Science Fiction*, February 2015.

He wouldn't need this stuff anymore, though he'd hoped to take away something. USBs, like-new 3.5" diskettes, and everything in between, had to stay. If it was confidential, proprietary, copyrighted, trademarked, patented, or otherwise of importance or interest to the company, he had to turn it over. He knew that. What was a surprise was that it didn't matter that the USB was his and that it had his daughter's photography portfolio on it. Personal or not, his escorts confiscated all electronic media—even the mouse. That cut deep. It was his first.

Calendars—desk calendars and one-a-day calendars—annotated with idiosyncratically-coded messages, innocuous except to a trained eye. They relented only after he'd embarrassed himself by pleading that he be left with something to show for the years he'd worked for the company. Years of servitude, he wished he'd said. Five were returned to him, but they were so thoroughly redacted they would likely serve as a very different kind of memento.

Scraps of paper and post-it notes—he was a hoarder—bore the names of his colleagues and the places and times for getting together, usually after work. Shorney's, game 7 of the World Series; Toby's for the midday England-Germany match, Brattigan's, Stanley Cup Finals; a weekend matinee of *The Nutcracker* in honour of Penelope's daughter who landed the role of a sheep; the *Phantom* they forced themselves to see, because they had won tickets; and of course, Reilly's where they'd spent many evenings speculating about the company's latest restructuring, government investigation, or class action lawsuit.

The artificial plants, the inspirational pictures, as well as office supplies valued in excess of \$5 were tagged with asset numbers and had to be scanned back into inventory. What was left filled less

than half of a banker's box, and that he had to empty into a five-cent plastic bag when he got down to the information and security desk at ground level. Boxes they reused, he was informed.

#

Despite the way he had been treated, particularly at the end, a subconscious dependency lingered. For the entire next week, he awoke to false starts, a couple of times getting showered and shaved and out the front door with briefcase in hand. The worst was when he actually got to work and rode the elevator up with Penelope and Roger and Maurice. It was awkward for them, too. They promised to call. Said they were sorry and everything. That humiliation was the kick he needed, and the memory stayed raw for days, reinforcing his redundancy like nothing else could.

At home, he'd never really been interested in looking out the front window—hadn't spent much time in the apartment. In fact, his blinds were closed most of the time. But with nothing on TV and nothing worth reading, and no work to go to, he took to peering through, just to get some ideas from watching how other people passed the day, he told himself. Little by little, the blinds were raised.

He realized he'd stumbled onto something. Here was a world just outside his window—so near yet so distant and unknown. Having spent so much time at the office and after hours with his office friends, he'd never taken the time to see and consider what was served up daily on the streets and sidewalks below. The blinds stayed open night and day.

During the daytime, especially at rush hours and lunch, traffic was nonstop busy with people and cars and bicycles and skateboards and dogs. But for all the activity, it wasn't really inviting or entertain-

ing. It was chaotic and disorderly, disturbing—not at all like the structured world of his office. Worksickness? Really?

Right there on the sidewalk, dogs did their business. Cars jostled other cars to wedge into tight parking spaces or double-parked up to half an hour at a time. Bicyclists on the sidewalk yelled at pedestrians. The produce market down the street tossed its organic waste on the sidewalk to simmer in the sun or puddle in the rain. Young teenage girls from St. Joseph's—his daughter, Yvonne, would have been about their age—flirted with scruffy-looking twenty-somethings to get cigarettes from the convenience store. Everyday there was something new—some gross or indecent or stupid act you wouldn't believe could happen here.

A lot of the same scripts played out every day—like television reruns. The only difference was this was happening right outside his window. In HIS world, and it wasn't right. How could they infringe his right to enjoy peace and order? How could they think— Who did they think— Obviously, they didn't ... think. And what they did without thinking caused him enormous stress and anxiety. Hadn't they been socialized, normalized—just plain taught respect? Wasn't that the point of school?

He debated. Should he call the city about the smelly garbage from the fruit and vegetable market—make a public health complaint? And there had to be a number to call to report people selling cigarettes to minors.

But what would a bunch of bureaucrats downtown do? File a report, bury it, and at the end of the day, collect a pension.

Wouldn't it be better to carry a walking stick and, next time he saw a bicyclist parting the crowd on the sidewalk, shove it in the spokes of the front wheel? And if that little princess in the Lexus SUV dou-



ble-parked again, maybe he should take down the plate number and anonymously report a hit-and-run.

The phone interrupted his plotting. He let the machine answer.

“Hey Donny! It’s Roger. We’re taking in a doubleheader tonight. Interested? We’re gonna grab something to eat at the ballpark. Meet us around 5:30? Our usual seats down by third base. Cheers.”

He replayed the message.

What the hell was he thinking?

*First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 128, March/April 2015.*

## Riding the Train

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B: Kayla! Over here!

K: Brandon?

B: Hey, what's up? Whew, it's crowded in here. Last time I saw you was—Christopher's house party back in grade 12. Whatcha you been up to?

K: Thought I recognized you back in the parking lot. That your MX-5?

B: Yeah. My parents bought it for graduation. Not bad though. God, is it stale in here! No air in here yesterday either. Hey, still into the Blues? Me and Matthew Tornquist—you remember him—are driving to Chicago for the long weekend. We're gonna take in some clubs and do some sailing. His old man keeps a boat there for clients. Why are we stopping? Oh, sorry, let me move that for you. You're welcome. So rude, huh? Anyway, Saturday night there's a party at the Hancock Tower, and a lot of Blues and jazz musicians are gonna be there. You interested?

K: No way! That would be awesome! Like you know I love Chicago Blues, and Buddy Guy, maybe I can meet him. That would totally rock! Better get your ticket out. Conductor's coming. Matthew? Don't think I've met him, but didn't he have a sister, who, like, went crazy or something and ended up in a psycho hospital in New York?

B: Yeah, that's Nicole, but he doesn't like to talk about her, so I wouldn't go there.

K: Whatever! Everybody's got something, like, weird they don't wanna talk about. But that'd be awesome—I mean the trip. Were you taking your car?

B: No, gotta take it in. It's burning oil like crazy. Looks like we're moving again. But Matthew's got his Mom's 7-series. A little buttoned-down, but it's a ride, and it's got plenty of room, so, yeah, c'mon! Here's my number. Gimme a call.

K: Cool!

B: Great! So, what have you been up to?

K: Like, you know, school and stuff. I got into Queen's, but it was, like, suffocating there. I finished a year, then came home and Daddy helped me get a job until I find something else. I'm looking at McGill. Brandon, over there! A couple of empty seats. Move, quick! Yeah, I need a big city, more life, more people, more excitement, you know. Wanna spend more time on the slopes even though I can't compete anymore, and God, my French is horrible, and I'm going to Paris next summer. How about you? You're doing Philosophy, or Anthro-, er, Andrology, or something like that?

B: Philosophy. Definitely not Anthropology, if that's what you mean. Looks like we're stopping again. This is unbelievable. I usually take a later train. It's not as crowded and nowhere near the delays.

K: This is nothing. I'm usually standing the whole way, morning and afternoon.

B: Anyway, you know I'm still planning to go to law school. May even join the old man's firm, but that's down the road. For now, I'm just hanging out and reading Philosophy. May go to grad school

later on. Mind-bending stuff, Philosophy. I mean really mind-bending. Now I see why so many Philosophy students end up as lawyers.

K: Wow! I'm impressed. You always did have it together. I'm still not sure. So many possibilities. I just can't, I mean, don't want to choose. Not yet anyway.

B: There's no pressure though, right? We're still young, and if we make a mistake, so what. Hey, I think Union's the next stop. About time! Besides, how can we explore if we don't experiment? It's like in this course I'm taking. You know, most people just live on the surface. They don't like to think—really think—about living. They just live, like the people on this train—on the train at 7:00 a.m. and off the train every day at 6:30 p.m., if they're lucky. How many of them do you think really think about Philosophy and language and how much it shapes their little everyday lives? Just think what happens when we get lazy, or busy, some people like to say, and we let our language get sloppy and say things we don't mean or that aren't true, like, "how are you?" or "have a good day" or "everything's fine." It's really just so hypocritical, you know, and meaningless. Words don't mean what they should, and our thoughts become shallow—

K: Hmmm. Sounds interesting. I think I see what you're saying, but, like, isn't there something missing. I mean, if I say "how are you?" to someone, won't he be polite back? OK, he may not care, and same for me, but at least we'll be polite, don't you think? Maybe it's dishonest and super-, er, shallow, but isn't it, like, better than, uh, rudeness and getting in your face? And as long as the ride is smooth and you get where you're going, who cares, right?

Conductor (shouting over the PA system): Union Station, this stop. Union Station. This is the final stop for this train. Again, we would

like to apologize for the delays and any inconvenience they may have caused. Have a nice day—and please watch your step.

*First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 129, May/June 2015.*

"You got nothing to worry about," the man said. "He's gotta chew off my arm to get away."

The screen was grayish-white, and the intro music faded. It was dead quiet in the theater.

Nothing happened right away, so naturally I started imagining what was going on, what was coming next.

My first thought was that the guy with the speaking part had a muzzled dog on a biker harness—it was that kind of voice—and was taking it for a walk in the park. But that was boring.

Then, I pictured two men locked into a single set of handcuffs. It wasn't clear which had spoken or why. Maybe they were in a diner, ordering at the counter? Better, but hardly original.

Recalling a recent story I'd read that may or may not have been in *theNewerYork*, I conjured up a geeky little git with a Disney watch knock-off that featured holograms for sociopaths or sociopath-groupies. Now, that WAS different.

The last one came alive, and as I was inching back in my seat to avoid the watch hologram's grasping hand tentacles, a woman laughed heartily. That's twisted, I thought. Behind me two voices gasped—in horror, excitement, I really couldn't tell, though it seemed more appropriate. In front there was sobbing, muffled—a bit premature I felt—and on my left two young children were squealing precociously. I was shocked and repulsed by these reactions, but frankly I was a bit preoccupied with keeping this monster's fangs or claws or whatever they were from ripping me out of my seat.

Shrinking as far back in my seat as I could I banged heads with the person behind me who must have been trying to help but didn't. I collapsed, fell forward, and when I came to the monster had disappeared. My visor was on the floor. The screen was still empty and the audience was getting impatient. In the back of the theater it started—the stamping of feet and the chanting—and like a huge wave it rolled to the front.

I was just about to leave, having had my fill of this absurd theater, but I was promptly stopped by a beefy couple standing between me and the aisle.

“You can't leave now,” said the woman as her partner twisted my arms in their sockets.

“But—“

“It's you it wants, and it's coming back,” she said, picking up my visor and handing it to me.

“This is ridiculous. What are you talking about? There's no movie. There's nothing. Just a blank screen.”

“It's not the screen everybody's watching,” she added. “It's you. You're 'the sacrifice.' Kind of ironic, don't you think?”

“I'm not getting any irony, just a bad headache and sore shoulders from Vince, here.”

“Surely, you had some idea what you were getting into here? It can't be advertised and marketed because it's the underground. You must've heard though—and this is the thrill that keeps people coming back—that for every crowd that comes in one person doesn't come out—quite the same.”

“Besides,” the guy who looked like a Vince added, “yours is the best yet, and everybody's dying, so to speak, to see how it ends.”

*First published in Farther Stars Than These, February 19, 2015.*



I'll have the fish and chips. Hmm— Could you change that to a chicken steak sandwich with extra onions and fries on the side? No, better make that a salad. Or coleslaw, but vinegar, not mayonnaise. The sweet potato fries look good. Yes, cancel the coleslaw. To drink? Let's see. Sweetened iced tea? Don't have any? How about Coke? I'll have Diet Pepsi, then. Is it caffeine-free? On second thought, water's fine. If you've got one of those fruit-flavored waters — yeah, strawberry-kiwi sounds good. I think that'll do it. Oh, wait. You know what. I could really go for some red meat. Would you mind changing the sandwich to a rib-eye steak? Rare. No, medium rare. No, make that well done. I hate to do this, but I think I'll have the fish and chips after all. Halibut though, not cod. The chips, are they thick fries? If you've got fresh catfish, I'll have that instead, and can I substitute potato salad — German style, of course — for the chips? You know, I think I'd like to try the blackberry-pomegranate flavored water. Sorry for taking so long. I see you're busy. Won't keep you, but could you leave a dessert menu? Don't have one? No problem. How's the pecan pie? Never mind, I'll have a piece of blueberry cheesecake and a cup of coffee, black. Better make that a decaf ... with one cream and one sugar. That's it. Well, maybe an extra napkin if it's not too much trouble. Thank you for your patience. Really, you've been terrific. *Absolument!*

#

Excuse me? Would I mind sharing my table? Uh ... no, I guess not. You mean with the giant in the tattoos and black leather who's headed this way? Boyfriend? And a handsome gentleman he is, but I don't think — I mean, isn't there a free, er, more private table — over by the rest—

Good day, sir! Your timing is impeccable. I was just leaving. The table is all yours. I'm sorry about the order, Miss. I just remembered I have a ... oh, yeah, I'm having some tests run down at the hospital — colon-something or other — and I'm pretty sure they said no food or drink. Memory's like a sieve, you know.

Ah, well, since you both insist, maybe I'll have a small bite to eat. They always exaggerate this fasting business. You're absolutely right, sir, I SHOULD change my order. *Carpe diem!* You can say that again. Surf-n-turf with baked potato and all the fixins and a pitcher of draft beer? Splendid choice. Same for you? And Miss, I'll pick up the check. My pleasure, sir. No doubt about it. But maybe I should phone the hospital. There's a pay phone just outside. No, you're right as rain. That would be rude. What was I thinking? You have a favor to ask? Go right ahead. You name it. Whatever you want.

OH MY!

I take your point, and I promise, or better still, as all these people are my witnesses, I won't say another—

First published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, October 18, 2014.

*Once upon a time*© in English, a *groundbreaking innovation*© hit the market — *buying and selling*© phrases. Tens of thousands of phrases were *acquired and licensed*©. *Everyday speech*© was transformed as were the *business letter*© and the *student essay*©. There was a surge in *copyright infringements*©. Leveraging *human nature*©, *peer policing*© worked *remarkably well*©, because violators *lost standing*© at work or school *opening the door*© for others. An *ad agency*© *went public*© with an IPO, *cornered the market*© on licensing and saw its *stocks soar*© to *stratospheric levels*©.

Licensing was expensive, though there were different packages available *depending on use and affordability*©. There was the *platinum package*© of 10,000 phrases for *C-level executives*© and *university professors*©, and at the other end there was the *economy package*© of 500 phrases, which was often awarded with scholarships and for exemplary *performance reviews*©. Most people had to settle for special dictionaries of uncopyrighted English, and a subscription was required for *quarterly updates*©, as phrases were copyrighted daily and removed from free *public discourse*©. Dictionaries published overseas were the cheapest, but their rephrasings were awkward *at best*© and unintelligible *at worst*©.

In a *celebrated case*© of *copyright infringement*© that reached the *nation's top court*©, a *graduate student*© published a thesis that was later found to have violated the *company's copyright*©, although the student, without any support from the university or the *thesis supervisor*©, argued that the thesis' *publication date*© preceded the *copyright date*© by a few hours. However, the student's case was lost on the company's discovery that a second essay, with the *copyrighted material*© *stricken and replaced*©, had been *published simultaneously*© with a different publisher.

*Company lawyers*© convinced the *panel of judges*© that the student's *prior knowledge*© was *thereby demonstrated*© and had warranted a *more cautious*© move to publication. *In addition*©, a *second line of attack*© by the *plaintiff's lawyers*© showed that the acceptance of the new *copyrighted phrases*© had been given the previous day by an official with the *Copyright Office*©, 18 hours ahead of the student's publication.

The court *found against*© the student, ordered that the publication be nullified and that the university and the *thesis professor*© *be duly reprimanded*©, notwithstanding their *heroic efforts*© to *distance themselves*© from the case. The student was *quietly expelled*©, but he became a *vocal opponent*© of *copyrighted language*© and a *champion of*© free non-copyrighted speech.

A lot of changes have been made since then. For example, there are now *fair use*© dictionaries that include *copyrighted phrases*© that can be used at *no charge*© provided it can be proven that each has been used in 100,000 *documented instances*©, *which works out to*© one written instance or verbal utterance by .01 percent of the *global English-speaking population*©. Incidentally, many of the *copyrighted phrases*© that appear in this text are forecast to be re-assimilated into the *public domain*© in the *next decade*© or so©.

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First published in *theNewerYork*, November 16, 2014.

**Submission REJECTED!**

The following submission to the ESL Test Development Committee is insulting to 2<sup>nd</sup> language learners. Some of our students have direct or indirect experience with even more insidious forms of government and corporate intimidation, but we would be irresponsible to play on this and knowingly embed intensely controversial political commentary in our program.

If the author's intention is to critique the Government's wartime secret policing activities, then s/he should try something a little more creative and subtle and more fitting to the circumstances. This kind of suggestive editorializing through aggressively realistic fiction is inappropriate for an ESL class, which is, in a sense, a captive audience. To miss this point is to be dim. To ignore it is to abuse freedom of thought.

In addition, having seen these questions before, when I worked for another ESL contractor to the Government, I suspect that the author may be guilty of committing the Osberg variation, i.e., attempting to publish the same material multiple times as different works with only slight changes.

The author would be well advised to try something new or to submit his/her political opinions to the op-ed section of a newspaper or magazine.

Reviewed by:           RM

Submitted to the Test Development Committee

Special Instructions and Test Answers  
marked by ► for ESL Staff

► The following questions (1-13) have been designed to conform to standards adopted by the Department of Immigrant Control and Education (ICE) for its prototype immigration ESL test. In addition to the standard reading comprehension and grammar questions, there are three unmarked questions, which have been incorporated in accordance with the new Alien Loyalty Act. Although the ICE protocol dictates that the unmarked questions must be answered completely and truthfully before a student can pass the ESL course and receive a certificate of language competence, this requirement will be waived pending ICE's formal release of its ESL testing standards.

**A. READING COMPREHENSION**

**Questions 1-3 refer to the following dialogue. Choose the ONE correct answer.**

**Two men in dark suits:** Good morning. My name is John A. Smith, and this is John B. Smith. We represent Smiths, Inc. We will be in your neighbourhood for the next two or three weeks, and we just wanted to introduce ourselves and to let you know that if there's anything that we can do for you, we will be happy to oblige.

**Grandmother at the door with young child:** What are you selling? What kinds of services do you provide?

**Two men in dark suits:** We provide services to do almost anything for almost anybody. May we come in and talk with you?

**Grandmother at the door with young child:** I'd love nothing more than to invite you in, but I'm very busy with the children, and their parents will be back anytime now. Would you mind leaving a brochure and a business card, including an address and telephone number where you can be reached?

**Two men in dark suits:** That's very kind, but we'll stop by later, so that we can catch the parents at home.

1. Why are the two men in suits in the neighbourhood?
  - (A) They are soliciting donations for a charity.
  - (B) They are collecting signatures for a petition.
  - ▶ **(C) They are drumming up business for a dubious enterprise.**
  - (D) They are offering coupons for a new restaurant.
  
2. What did the two men in suits leave behind with the grandmother?
  - (A) A pamphlet and a key ring with the company emblem
  - (B) A one-page summary of services and prices with a business card attached
  - ▶ **(C) An uncertain feeling about their business**
  - (D) A list of references from clients in the neighbourhood
  
3. What did the grandmother offer to the two men in suits?
  - (A) A cup of tea and plate of biscuits
  - (B) The names & work telephone numbers of the parents
  - (C) Information about the household's schedule
  - ▶ **(D) An invitation to leave a sales brochure and a business card**

## **B. READING COMPREHENSION**

**Questions 4-6 refer to the following speech. Choose the ONE correct answer.**

Congratulations on a fabulous 4<sup>th</sup> quarter performance. For the last three months, we posted record earnings, exceeding the expectations of even the most optimistic analysts. Today, our company is headed for one of the most dramatic turnarounds in American corporate history. As we look forward to continuing growth and profits, we can now say that jobs will be returning as well. The past two years have been an extraordinary challenge for everyone—from those on the factory floor to those in the boardroom. While I cannot promise smooth sailing from here on, I can assure you that our collective efforts to bring this company back from bankruptcy have put us on a sustainable path of global competitiveness. In the coming days, you will be hearing about new initiatives designed to accelerate our gains in efficiencies, earnings and entrepreneurship. I look forward to your support in setting and in realizing ever-ambitious goals for our shareholders, our customers and ourselves.

4. What is the primary purpose of the CEO's speech?
- (A) To promote the company to industry analysts listening to the YouTube broadcast
  - (B) To reduce employee anxiety about job security and end the rumours about pension plan restructuring
  - ▶ **(C) To motivate employees to accept further changes**
  - (D) To celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter performance and to announce year-end bonuses
5. Which of the following was neither expressed nor implied in the CEO's speech?
- (A) The company filed for bankruptcy.
  - (B) The company is publicly held.
  - (C) The company relies on exports.
  - ▶ **(D) The company has reported profits for two consecutive quarters.**



6. Which of the following best describes the company?
- (A) A New York subsidiary of a Canadian bank with significant investments in Latin America
  - (B) An American distributor for a Chinese manufacturer of swimming pool equipment assembled in Canada
  - (C) A San Diego-based subsidiary of a British travel agency recently acquired by another British travel agency
  - ▶ **(D) An American manufacturer supplying international markets**

**C. GRAMMAR and COMPOSITION**

For questions 7-13, fill in the blank with the **ONE** correct answer.

7. On Thursday evening, there will be a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ city council meeting to discuss proposed urban renewal and zoning changes to the downtown quadrant marked C4 on your map.
- (A) *in camera*
  - ▶ **(B) open**
  - (C) temporary
  - (D) contractors only
8. Through an innovative partnership agreement with our tax auditor and management consulting firm, our production facilities in China, Myanmar and the northern shore of Lake Ontario \_\_\_\_\_ certified as ISO 9000 compliant for the last two years.
- (A) should have been
  - ▶ **(B) have been**
  - (C) will be
  - (D) might have been

*Are you now or have you ever been  
in this country illegally?*

9. \_\_\_\_\_ arriving at the Anchorage airport, please go to the arrival lounge and look for someone with a sign reading "Welcome to the Convention on Global Warming and the 21st Century Arctic Entrepreneur."

(A) Unless

(B) While

▶ **(C) Upon**

(D) Before

10. This country's Declaration of Independence states that government is obliged to respect and protect the rights of the individual to "Life, Liberty and \_\_\_\_\_."

(A) Property

▶ **(B) the pursuit of Happiness**

(C) the American Dream

(D) Democracy

*Do you now or have you ever intended violence towards this country or its citizens?*

11. The Southeast is one of the \_\_\_\_\_ progressive regions in the country, which is why it is so attractive for investment, business and workers.

▶ **(A) most**

(B) greater

(C) least

(D) best

12. In preparing your résumé for this position, you should \_\_\_\_\_ your language skills, your technical knowledge, your commitment to life-long learning and, of course, whether you are in the country legally.

(A) talk about

(B) mention

▶ **(C) emphasize**

(D) prepare

13. You may not agree with today's newspaper editorial, "Dual Citizenship: Separate But Equal;" \_\_\_\_, you have to admit that it brings the issue into the open for public discussion.

(A) whatever

(B) but

(C) notwithstanding

▶ (D) however

*Information that you provide is confidential and may expedite your visa process.*

*Is there anything else that you would like us to know?*

Originally submitted by:

PM

*First published in theNewerYork, January 13, 2015*

The fluorescent lights must have grown dim to his unblinking eyes. His body hadn't been moved or turned in—well, these charts couldn't be trusted. Since the IV diet had been imposed, the custodial care seemed to have slackened off. It got easier to be forgotten. The machinery monitoring his body was his only company.

But one day it summoned the family. Everyone gathered around. Layered voices—loud, garrulous, cloying—came together in a twangy, raspy dissonance, punctuated by coughing spasms incited by rival perfumes. The shapes of family hovered over the bed, and the staff stood back, waiting.

"Daddy, I know you can hear me but is there anything you'd like to say. Just squeeze my hand, okay? That'll be good enough for me. Daddy, this is goodbye. Not just 'bye' but really and truly goodbye. It's very important to me, Daddy, that you know I've, uh, we've done everything that could be done. You know I'd never do anything but what was best for—"

"Terrell, you never was a big talker. Matter of fact, I don't recollect when I last heard you string two words together. But that ain't neither here nor there, cause I think you know what your little girl here is tryin to say. That she loves you, and for that matter, I think I speak for everybody here when I say we all do. I know, I know. Ya'll quit making faces. I'm talkin to Terrell. Anyhow, we didn't often see eye to eye, did we Terrell, but—and I ain't sure I ever said this to you—I did look up to you when we was growin up—"

"Lester, just keep quiet for once. This ain't neither the time nor the place for you to start eulogizing. Phony eulogizing at that, truth be told. Gotta be centre stage though, don't you? And always flappin that yap of yours. That's what Terrell would've told you to your face

if he'd had any gumption. But I have enough for him and me, and now, time like this, I say we don't need your long-winded—"

"Just tryin to be nice, Sis."

"Oh, I wish we could just get this over with. I've gotta be downtown in half an hour and traffic's gonna be murder. So, what else do we have to do here? I mean we're not gonna make funeral arrangements yet, are we? And the will—well, that better not come up til after next week, because Giancarlo and I will be in Cancún—"

"I heard ole J.C. was with some new young thing. That you, darlin? You better work fast, kitten, 'cause he's not gonna get out from under this one, and there ain't gonna be much left for you. But why am I telling you? It ain't like you're one to be a day late and a dollar short, including today, ain't that right honey?"

"Shut up! Just SHUT UP, okay! You have no business speaking to me like that ... and on a day like today."

"And here you are—the both of you—just waitin for the old man to kick off. I'm sure he—well, maybe not him, but his dear departed wife, may she rest in peace—would've had a few choice words for you two right about—"

"Uncle Lester, despite your silly platitudes, you want the same thing I want ... the same thing we all want. Besides, you're not one to act high and mighty, you old lecher. That's right! Uncle Lester, you're a lecherous old fool. There! If anybody didn't know it before, they do now. It was the summer I finished high school. In your backyard swimming pool. Aunt Edna was drunk like always. I still remember the look on your face when I kicked you in the crotch. That comes from my momma's side. Served you right, you creep. You oughta be locked up, you perv—"

"Lester! Is that true? A child! And your own kin! My niece, too, and her momma, a saint of a woman, except for that temper of hers. She'd have flayed you good fashion, like I've a mind to do right this minute. Good god, man! What were you—"

"Shhh. I think I heard him say something. Listen."

"Come on, he hasn't said anything in months, what's he gonna say?"

"Hush."

"I heard something, too. Sounded like 'Oh'"

"Pain, that's what it is. He still feels pain. Poor, poor Daddy!"

"Sooner we do this the—"

"No, not yet. I wanna hear. It's something else, not—"

"Yep, could be a word. Could be 'no' or 'know,' or 'Joe.' But that don't make no sense. Do we know a Joe? I know a lot of Johns. What about—"

"Go!"

"He's sayin 'go.' He's tellin us it's time for him to—"

"No. The old man's tryin to tell us to 'go.' Whaddya know about that! Ole Terrell. Finally—"

"Go!"

"Well, I never—"

"And that might just be why—"

"But Daddy—"

*First published in Page & Spine, August 1, 2014.*

... *positively pessimistic [ed.]*

I didn't know his real name. I called him Mr. Greengrass, because he seemed to be a dreamer. He was always looking for greener grass and often saying that it must be somewhere, sometime just beyond where he was.

Sometimes it was on the other side of the fence, or the gate or the wall—somewhere he was denied entry.

Other times it was in a different town, another state, or even a faraway country—somewhere but here where there was only day labour, soup kitchens and catch-as-catch-can shelter.

Sometimes it was another time when he would no longer be seen as subhuman.

Sometimes it was just in his head—a place and a time stitched together from scraps of memory and embellished with the bright and glittering moments he found others had casually discarded.

"Hate" is too strong a word for what Mr. Greengrass felt about the here and now. Besides he I didn't "hate" everything, only what had become too familiar. And it wasn't really hate.

He once told me that just because he was never satisfied—not hateful, he reminded me, just never satisfied—anywhere, with anything or anybody, including himself, this didn't mean he was negative. After all, he declared, he was constantly "looking outside the present here, imagining what's over there or what was once here or what will one day be here."



He insisted that his imagining and what he imagined were evidence of a profound optimism. "What is, is bad' is negative," he said, "if that's where you leave things. But then," he added "it's not the same thing at all—in fact it's far beyond negative—to believe 'what is, may be otherwise.'"

*First published in Postcard Shorts, September 13, 2014.*

Couldn't stand much more of it. Being suffocated on all sides. No control over where I turned up. Constantly scratching up against and being scored by other silica. Often drowning in dampness and dark. Unceasing rolling with the waves at high tide, washing inland, then back to sea, then up and down the beach and all over again.

On shore, the sun felt good. Sometimes lasted too long, though. Hot, burning and bright. In the in-between of land and sea, it was easy to stick to the skin of the enormous beach animals. And easy to get carried away.

Got a lift all the way to a frigid place with huge plate-glass windows and a slick, tiled floor. The bright, dry, emptiness was unfamiliar. And here the crunch of silica was deafening and, on realizing what was happening, sickening.

All time is an eternity, but within a fairly short one, I got swept up by one of the beach animals. This was entirely new, meeting all these other fragments and particles who looked nothing like anything I'd ever imagined.

We got tossed outside — the heat was welcoming — and a sudden gentle breeze lifted some of us into a nearby bed of tomatoes. For the rest of the next eternity, I watched the fruit grow and ripen and saw my fellows give of themselves to make that miracle happen. Whatever little support I could give I gave. I was happy.

First published in *Postcard Shorts*, December 14, 2014.

## Chain Reaction

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Against traffic it took under an hour to get around this corner of the lake. Jay did it every day, but he dreamed of one day not having to make the commute. Time was part of it, but the bigger part was the better-paying jobs that he drove away from every morning.

He had relatives who commuted in the opposite direction. But the ones who didn't take the train complained about the sun in their eyes morning and afternoon, while the ones on the train one-upped them with vivid descriptions of the indecencies of close physical contact and communal air.

No one, it seemed, enjoyed getting to and coming from work. Then there was the work itself, valued in dollars ... nothing more, they said. A lot of dollars they failed to mention, and that was a problem Jay thought he'd like to have.

He'd been driving his 'rut' for more than six years, and he knew all the exits, mile markers and businesses along the way. Instinctively, he knew when to yield to the big trucks as they veered left when the highway split into two highways, one heading south across the bay bridge and the other skirting the upper suburbs of the rusted-out port city before turning north.

Even focused on the news or a song on the radio, he sensed when to move all the way left after the HOV lane disappeared. And he could feel the closeness of an 18-wheeler edging into his lane or the pressure of a souped up, low-riding Honda Civic pushing him to get out of the way.

What he didn't notice were the reactions to his own passing on the right, blocking merging traffic or cutting across lanes to catch a

nearly-missed exit. It wasn't personal. At 70 miles an hour, things just happened fast.

He never did get to know what happened that particular day. A BMW, 300 series, tried to enter the highway from the onramp but was prevented when Jay moved into the right lane to pass another car. The BMW had to manoeuvre sharply to miss hitting the guard-rail at the end of the onramp and avoid being hit by the traffic in Jay's wake.

Over the next five miles to the bridge, the BMW chased Jay's old, gray sedan, but the driver never got a visual. At the top of the bridge, the BMW made its move to get into the empty truck lane but not before a slow-moving flatbed loaded down with rolled steel got there first. Denied the truck lane, the little BMW swung off to the shoulder, which wasn't a shoulder at all but the concrete railing of the bridge. It hit the wall, climbed it part way and landed with its front wheels hanging over the guardrail and still spinning at high speed. Meanwhile, the car immediately behind went airborne over the top of the BMW and sailed out into the bay. A 16-vehicle pileup accumulated in a matter of seconds, and within minutes the southbound lanes were shut down.

Jay was a few minutes late for work, but luckily the time clock was still running slow. On the drive home, he heard the traffic report about the morning's accident and the road closure, and he felt lucky — with a small 'L' — all over again.

First published in *The Story Shack*, December 2, 2014.

I couldn't tell you exactly where this is going. I'm not even sure how I got to this point. All I think I know for certain is that I'm in the middle of it and I seem to be following a script.

It's all in my head, I'm told. But there's such a vastness that I can't get out of my mind, and my memory is such an awkward and unsteady navigator .... There does appear to be a theme though — conflict.

As far as I can tell, it always ends in some sort of resolution — one side becomes dominant. However, another conflict is never far away. So, this cycle or succession — circular or linear or both — has no end in sight.

Right now I'm aware that I'm thinking and that I'm thinking about my interior head space. I'm also thinking that you are there reading what I'm writing about what I'm thinking. From previous experience, I'm expecting you soon to express your views in a way that puts our head spaces in conflict. It happens more often than not, I find.

Obviously, I'm pretty good at this or I wouldn't still be here. I felt I had to be upfront with you about that. I haven't always done that. I used to be cunning, even sneaky. This forthrightness is recently acquired.

You have to understand that our encounters are especially perilous for me. You have the advantage. You get to see all my moves and react accordingly. I, on the other hand, can't anticipate yours with anything like the same certitude. I can hint, suggest, direct your attention, or lead you along, but I can't predict or control what you will do.

I can only guess how you got here, what you had to do to get here, how many times you've done this before, and what you will do next. You probably number them as conquests — reading them and consuming them. I suspect you must either have an elaborate filing system or a prodigious memory.

Either way, you, reader, are like some kind of monster, ingesting everything you meet with. And, if you continue, you will perpetuate your monstrosities and monstrousness beyond your flightless imagination.

Best let me bear that burden, dear reader. You will forever be in my thoughts. Trust me.

First published in *thickjam*, No. 425, September 23, 2014.

June was usually a good month for weddings at the park — not the actual ceremonies, though there were a few, but the receptions that followed. They were colourful and filled with laughter, music and singing. It could be loud. But few complained. The park was big enough for everyone, and besides it was finally summer. And for most, that was good. Personally, I adjusted a little more slowly each year. Still, I couldn't understand how anybody could be depressed in this most beautiful season of the year.

The tall thin man in the oversized black frock coat and ruffled white shirt open at the neck never stopped or sat. He walked continuously, head bent down reading a book, sometimes two or even three at the same time. His nickname was Professor Perry (the peripatetic professor), but I didn't have the foggiest whether his nuttiness was ecclesiastical or scholastic. It was a pretty safe bet that he was from the theological college next door. He could be quite entertaining to watch. While he didn't seem to pay attention to where he was going, his steps were uncannily accurate in missing the geese droppings that the rest of us unfailingly brought home on our shoes. And his movements — it was like they were choreographed.

In July there were fireworks out over the water. Magnificent, unless you lived close by. The echo from the lake amplified the explosions, and for several hours, several nights in the summer, your windows would rattle and shake as if bombs were being dropped. An outside or a newcomer might be excused for not knowing the occasion of the celebration, and likely for them and everybody else it really didn't matter that much. Once or twice the independence days got mixed up, but that could have been simply supply and demand — everybody on the lake, both sides, was doing the same thing and

that was several hundred miles of communities lighting up the night sky.

Years ago, it was in July, and it was every Saturday that a little girl with burn marks on her lower arms rode through on her little pink bicycle. Her father watched from a distance while she picked a flower, always a wildflower, then ran over to the beach and gently placed it in the receding water. Don't recall ever seeing her since, though a young woman in long sleeves did come two or three times a week last September, and she dropped wildflowers in the lake, too — more or less in the same way and in the same place, if memory serves.

If July was the summer peak for the park, August was its denouement. It was the month that everything seemed to be on autopilot. Schools were still closed, and it seemed like the town was on vacation. The park couldn't compete with the big late summer attractions like Disney, D.C., Banff or the cottage. Nevertheless, for those left behind, there were picnics and barbecues from one end of the park to the other, most evenings and weekends. And unlike June and July, there was plenty of elbow room. Of course there was plenty of overlapping and mingling at the kids' wading pool, and the amphitheater where there was a steady stream of performers, buskers from the city — musicians, magicians, mimes, jugglers and storytellers — and the beach boat rental. Boating was safe. Swimming, however, was discouraged. In summer there were showers where you could wash off if you fell out of your boat.

Ford Plantation she called it. Her husband had started back when they were still making the Pinto. Retired as VP of something or other. Don't remember or wasn't listening carefully — it was a life skill, my wife used to tease. He died — car accident — not long after their divorce. She did well by the first division. Anna got the rest and took it back to St. Petersburg. Now the Ford Plantation lady —



she never gave her name I don't think — went for walks in the park on doctor's orders. She said she used to have an Irish Wolfhound (JJ for James Joyce), and they would walk together year-round except when the snow and the wind and the ice were too treacherous. The way she veered off the path to visit a tree or a signpost or a pile of wet leaves or stopped people with dogs to talk — it looked like she still had one.

Once the autumn colour had fallen and lay like a carpet as far as you could see, the park seemed longer yet at the same time strangely smaller. Longer, because it was as if the canopy had been drawn back to reveal a distant view, but smaller since there was no longer the illusion of depth hidden behind the thick summer green.

Grandpa probably reminisced, remembering or misremembering the parks of his youth. It was only a guess, or a projection I should say. Another useful life skill for a bored old man — me. He didn't say much. Didn't like speaking English, and I didn't have anything else to speak. So, we neither of us spoke. We nodded every now and then when we happened to be sharing a bench. We did sometimes — share a bench, that is — because there were only three well-placed benches — the Jessup's, the Wilby's and the Platt's — and they were in high demand most of the year. By Christmas, however, I had my pick, and I could sit there for a long time sipping from my thermos and watching the cross country skiers and the diehard dog walkers. Sometimes arguments broke out over the ski trails. In deep snow they both used the same trails, but the dog walkers' footsteps punched holes through the narrow tracks causing more than one skier to take a tumble with skis pointing skyward.

In spring something new was starting to grow in the park. Grandpa's daughter told me. I didn't read the papers. Didn't have to anymore, so I thought. She brought Grandpa in a wheelchair.

Stroke. He recognized me ... I think. She said the town was selling the park to pay for a new hospital and new schools in the rapidly-growing north up on the escarpment. A local developer was going to build a new marina and floating condos on either side. A small part of the park, next to the seminary, would be retained. That meant Jessup, Wilby and Platt would be gone. This was depressing news, and in spring of all seasons. The sky was blue, the sun warm, the crocus and daffodils were peeping through, and the breeze from the lake was neither too cool nor too warm but it carried the foul smell of rotting fish.

First published in *Through the Gaps*, September 8, 2014.

## The Optimist

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*A is unemployed, looking for work and receives employment coaching every other week at the unemployment office. Today A is being coached by B.*

*B is an entrepreneur and a certified career coach who meets with unemployed individuals who have active claims in order to assist them with their back-to-work action plans.*

*A and B are seated across from one another at a small melamine table, in between the computer kiosks and the pamphlet racks, along a bare and windowless wall.*

B. So, how have you been? How is your progress on your action plan for this month?

A. So-so. You?

B. Well, I've just been short-listed for a major government project. It's all hush-hush, but I've heard—unofficially, of course—that I'm at the top of the list. Needless to say, I'm excited. This would be a phenomenal business opportunity. I think this might be my chance to hire on some qualified people to do the kind of stuff that I'm running around doing now, freeing me up to think big picture and long view—you know, expansion, joint ventures, IPO, and so forth. Ah, but hold on here, A. We're here to talk about you. So, how is your action plan coming along? It's been some time since we last spoke.

A. Hmmm. Let's see. A few months ago, I put together a project plan to coordinate my back-to-work activities. Remember, we were sitting over there, and I sketched some preliminary ideas for the plan, and you seemed to like it.

B. Yeah. Yeah. I remember. Good idea. Great idea. Organization. Goals. That's the stuff. OK, so there's this project plan, now what?

A. Here. I brought along a copy so that you could refer to it as I explain where I'm at and what's ahead.

B. Great. Great. Wonderful. OK, let's dive in and see what's going on here.

A. Right. Here we go. Master résumé has been developed and vetted through all my references. From this master, I've created a set of template résumés targeting various combinations of geographic (local, metropolitan and national), organizational (government, university, business, industry and non-profit) and career (information technology, statistics, public policy and research) characteristics.

B. OK. OK.

A. Of course, all the while I've been compiling research on prospective employers and on different sectors of the economy—you know, putting together a picture of what kind of work is out there and more importantly what kind of work is in demand. I've got these lists, which I'm using to target unadvertised jobs. And—this almost goes without saying—I've been responding to the advertised jobs in newspapers and online as well as those that I find out about through head-hunters, agencies and RFPs. You name it, I've probably tried it.

B. That's swell. Listen, we've got about five more minutes. I'm sorry, but I've got to make an important call, and I have to be somewhere in 15 minutes. Anyway, you were saying?

A. Well, what I was working up to was this. *Pointing to the project schedule and the itemized list.* I've tried this, this, and this, and

nothing has worked. It's been six months, and nothing. You know my background. You know this shouldn't be happening. You know I deserve better. You know that something just isn't right. It just doesn't make sense, and it certainly isn't fair. I'm completely at a loss as to what to do next. It's not like I haven't tried. You know that. You can see how much work I've done to try to get out of this hole, but it seems that the harder and faster I dig, the deeper the hole. I don't know. I just—

B. Whoa! Hold on. Don't go there. You have to be positive. You can't let the negative drag you down. See now you've brought me down. I was fine until you started talking that way. Now, I'm getting depressed.

A. Maybe—

B. OK. Here, let's try this. Remember the session "Beyond Belief" You have to believe something is true to make it true. Believe you'll succeed, and you will succeed. Believe in yourself, make your beliefs real, and everything else is a cakewalk. Trust me. I've seen this stuff work. Working in a cabinet minister's office, I've seen how easily a strong and determined will can change the thoughts and behaviour of others and then can make things happen.

You know, only five percent of our brain is ever really exploited. Tap into that vast reserve of unused mental power and create a reality of your own choosing and design. Like those designer shows on TV, only you design something much bigger and more profound than a new house.

Now, I don't particularly like the Yanks, but they seem to have figured it out. Pragmatism, they call it. The philosophy of the pioneer, the self-reliant. It works on Wall Street, on K Street, on Madison Avenue, in the best schools, on the gridiron, in the press room, on

the shop floor, on main street, in Hollywood. It works, and it works best because it works the mind most. Whatever gets the best results. Doesn't matter whether left becomes right; top, down; black, white; good, bad; true, false. What matters is that you set the goal and then step back and make your mind up to reach the goal. It doesn't matter how. You control your destiny. That's all that matters. Nothing can stand in your way, if you have control over your will and your—

Hold on, I've got a call.

*A watches as B's face—expressing such willful self-assurance as is rarely seen in unemployment offices—collapses. All movement, all colour, all verve, all life suddenly evacuated this dynamic and assertive face, leaving behind a catatonic shell.*

*A minute passes, then A's cell phone rings.*

*First published in Through the Gaps, December 1, 2014.*

What makes a five-year-old choose to say "I think that" instead of "I know that?" Is it possible for a five-year-old to appreciate the difference between belief and knowledge? Where would he get such an idea?

When I was five, I used to say "I think that" a lot, and as I recall, I deliberately chose to say "think" and not "know." It's as if I recognized the limits of what I knew and wanted to make sure that I didn't pretend more than I knew. Pretending to know didn't count. If I saw it, so would everybody else.

At the time, I was making inquiries into Christianity. I went to church and all that stuff, but I was not allowed to become a Christian until my elders thought that I was old enough to understand what my decision would mean.

I begged and pleaded to be let in, but I still had these doubts. I wasn't quite sure how I could get to the point where I would know what I believed about something as big as God. After all, there was so much other stuff that I didn't understand.

There was all that school stuff. I was too young for real school and even kids my age were in this new thing called kindergarten. It was easy to feel left out and intimidated ... not by adults but by little people just like me. First graders especially, but even my peers, acted so grown up and seemed to know so much already—how to read, how to spell, how to count, how to tie their shoes. A very small world can seem very large.

Beyond, it was even worse. There was this war, about which I knew nothing but felt immense fear. Occasionally, I saw the war on the evening news, but it was all the more dark, endless and unknown

for the numbers that showed up on the television screen night after night. I did know one thing and that is that I did not want my brother to be drafted. Even though he was years away from eligibility, there seemed to be no stopping this war. Once I asked my father how long wars last, but he wasn't able to help me see an end to this one even though he had been in one a long time ago. I was afraid.

With school and the war overwhelming me, there seemed to be a place for something that I could hold onto, and since my family already had this something, I thought that it might work for me, too. But I just didn't know.

One Sunday morning I was looking into the bathroom mirror, and it occurred to me that while I knew this little boy in the mirror, there might come a time when either I would not recognize the face in the reflection or worse still would not like the person looking back at me. I couldn't quite imagine changing so much and becoming so different that I wouldn't like myself, but the future still made me feel a little uneasy.

In the midst of so much uncertainty, it became pretty clear to me that something had to be done.

*First published in Writers Haven Magazine, Issue #20, Fear*



Looks like we've got a good one here, Andromeda.

Yes, Centaurus. I think this may be the one.

Did you see the drawings he made for his new house? Three hours is all it took. Nice Frank Lloyd Wright details. And it seems to fit perfectly.

Can't understand how anyone could stand living all boxed in like that, but he's got talent. No doubt about it, though I think he could work on his mind and motor coordination. He seems to spend far too much time either thinking or drawing instead of doing both at the same time. Can't understand that.

Don't be so critical, my dear. His composition last night ... you enjoyed that.

Yes, I did, but you have to admit, darling, it was a little derivative of Holst.

Perhaps, but he's the first we've had whose skills go beyond a single niche. He can design houses, write symphonies, and last week while I accompanied him on the surface, he impressed me with his Nietzschean comedy, not just repartee, but full-length monologues from *Zarathustra*. So much passion. It was hilarious.

I think today I want to test his motivational and training skills ... see if he can do something with the others we've accumulated over time.

Just remember that he's the most all-around talented human we've had so far. And also we have to abide by the first directive to do no harm even if it's he who carries out our agenda.

Of course, darling. I know that. After all, we're NOT humans!

True enough, my lovely, but do keep in mind that they carefully follow everything they see us do.

Absolutely! I know our place ... and theirs, and I would never ever think of harming or causing harm to come to one of our little pets.

First published on the Short Humour Site, December 29, 2014.

**Friday 2:35 p.m.**

Two men in blue coveralls and Rastafarian tams installed the box in the town square. They were British but they were friendly.

"Eh mahn, wanna come try dis Speakers' Corner gadget?" asked the tall one. "All da way from London, England it is. 'Ad a terrible time wit dose customs blokes of yours up in Atlanna."

"It's da la'est ting in London," added the short heavysset one. "Dis one's on da house. Just give her a try. Nuttin to be fraid of. It's just a box dat take your picture and record your voice. No harm, dere, mahn."

The old man, a farmer by the looks of his dress and weather-worn face and gnarly hands approached the two men.

"What you fellas up to? What's this here contraption for?"

"Dey wants to market a new line in small town America and is usin dis 'ere box to gadder information on potential clientele," answered the heavysset man.

"Well, I ain't no potential clientele til I know what's bein sold."

"Dat's top secret, mahn. Even we doan know dat."

"How's this thingamajig work?"

"Just 'ave a seat in dis boot — it's kinda like an old-timey phone boot — and look up at da screen, press dat big green button dere, den talk natural into da speaker."

"What do I say?"

"Anyting you want, mahn."

"Can I hear what I said?"

"Course. You can replay by pressin dat big yellow button. Dat big red button is to stop, but I'm sure you figured dat out."

"Can I change what I said?"

"Naw mahn, you can listen to it but can't change it."

"Alright, I'll give it a go."

"Just step right on in dere, mahn."

"So, just press this here green button and start talkin?"

"Das it."

The old farmer took a seat, adjusted his position in front of the monitor and started talking.

"This here box is the strangest thing I ever seen in this town 'cept maybe when that magician fella ran off with the jewelry of half the town's womenfolk. Even my Mavis, may she rest in peace, got fleeced. But I been here 75 years — my whole life — and this takes the cake. A machine all the way from England and they wanna use it to find customers over here in America. This town ain't ready for this newfangled advertising, leastwise us old folk ain't. Them kids, now they got that Eye disease — Eye phones, Eye pods, Eye pads and such — so they'll likely find this to their likin. Ole principal Funderdonk's the one's responsible for corruptin them younguns.

Computers in the classroom. Pshaw! I never used no computer and don't much like talkin at em but these fellas seem nice enough for me to give their little doohickey a spin. How's that?"

"Das terrific, mahn. Now, les play it again so you can see it."

One of the men pressed the replay button and the old farmer looked up and watched himself, occasionally startled by what he saw and heard.

"I know I ain't handsome, but I never thought I sounded that bad."

"Doan worry, mahn. Everbody says dat."

### **Friday 3:45 p.m.**

The Reverend Stackpole of the Third United Apostolic Church of the Imminent Divine Retribution walked up to the box, inserted the required five dollars and began recording his message.

"I don't know who is behind this box they call the Speakers' Corner, but in the name of all that is most holy, I bless this box and nullify any impure and indecent intentions that may lie with its makers or in its design on behalf of my flock here in this mostly godly but naïve little town. There are forces of evil that would come and harm the gentle folk of my beloved town, but I have seen much — too much — of their kind of wickedness to let them pass unchallenged, and with the power that infuses our church and all its brethren I put the dark forces on notice that they will not occupy us without a grand struggle, which we as people of the light, will inevitably win. Peace be unto the townsfolk of this community, except for the pawnbroker and the banker and the Methodist preacher, who've already gone over to the dark regions, and 'OUT' to what would introduce evil among us."

**Friday 4:10 p.m.**

A group of four young teenage girls walked up to the box, having seen the good Reverend depart. There was chatter for a couple of minutes, then one separated off from the group and got into the box and closed the door. She started talking right away.

"Hi. My name's Kelly and I'm a sophomore at Lee High. I'm with my friends but they were, like, too scared to try this, so I have to go first. First of all, I wanna say that this town really sucks. There's nothing to do here. It's, like, filled with a bunch of old people and they're afraid of everything that's new and different. When I finish school, here I'm gonna leave this town forever. I'm gonna go live in a big city with lots of people and excitement and stuff to do. I can't wait to leave. My friends ... they'll probably stay here in this little town until they die, but I'm not like them. I have to see the world, even if it means never seeing them again. Don't tell them, like, they'd get really angry. Where's that Finish button? I wanna make sure they can't replay this video.

She opened the door and stuck her head out.

"I'm done. Anybody else?"

No one else volunteered and unaware that they'd been dissed, the girls left together giggling and chattering away.

**Friday 11:19 p.m.**

"This is Blake ... quarterback of the ... Lee High Gen— Generous, er Generals. I'm a little dr— drunk. We lost. Not my fault though. Derek ... it was Derek. He dropped the ball. On the one-yard line. Five seconds on the clock. He fumbled. I gave it to him. But he dropped it. On the one-yard line. Said it was me. Coach said

it was me, too. On the one-yard line. Even the cheerleaders ... said it was me. State championship dream is over ... on the one-yard line. Like I said I'm drunk, and I'm gonna get way ... drunker than this."

### **Saturday 8:03 a.m.**

A line-up of most of the town's 1,052 souls circled the square several times over. People were in line to get into the Speakers' Corner box. Video from the Speakers' Corner had been running on the local cable channel all night and all morning.

A cacophony of voice rose from the town square with snatches of conversation standing out.

"D'you hear what the old man said?"

"One foot in the grave, some these old folk. Just can't accept change."

"Self-righteous prig."

"That with a 'g' or a 'k?'"

"Dark side? That's the pot calling the kettle black if you ask me."

"Who does she think she is?"

"Thinks she's better than us, huh?"

"Never could trust a man from that family— "

"Yep. All a bunch of drunks."

"It's just not right."

"It's a lie from the pit of hell— "

"Well, I'm gonna put that right, mark my words."

**Monday 11:27 a.m.**

The two men in blue coveralls came back to disassemble and take away the Speakers' Corner. There was still a lineup of mostly older folk who stayed to watch.

"Wacha tink 'appened, mahn?" asked the tall man. "Ain't been a week yet."

"Said it was good enough and we should try a different place," said the heavysset man.

"Doan seem dat good to me. Everbody be complainin and dissin each udder."

"Yeah, mahn. Wonder why dey run it on cable."

"Tink maybe dat's wat dey was plannin all along?"

"Wat?"

"Gettin folks riled up."

"Why?"

"Maybe it got to do wit wat dey sellin."

"Ow?"



"I dunno, It's top secret, like you said."

"Just load up da truck— "

"Ow bout dat little place we passed tru on da way 'ere. Dey got a town square."

"Wort a try. Les get lunch dere."

First published in *Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine*, February 17, 2015.



*The graduate student and the professor were alone with the brain. They didn't and wouldn't ever know where. It was underground but how far, they had no idea. Now that the first phase was complete, the Sponsors' researchers and scientists had returned to their offices.*

*High resolution CCTV cameras covered every angle of the lab, and the brain in the vat was centrally located behind an invisible protection screen.*

Do you think he's noticed that we made him a Canadian, Professor?

No, I don't think so. We've blocked selected regions of his biographical memory, and the results indicate that our synaptic repression has succeeded. He believes he IS exactly what we've input — father a fireman in New Brunswick, sister in the Army in Afghanistan, female roommate—

And is experiencing what we input — a cell phone with a Peter Gunn ringtone, a one-eared teenager, a water-stained ceiling in a low-rent high-rise apartment building. Bernie, Brigit's beagle, all—

Markers, that help us track his perception of his new and unfolding reality — his attempt to escape — from us and our Sponsors.

And he thinks he CAN escape. How ironic.

Yes, it is, but it's better that way. I don't think a brain, or a mind, I should say, could possibly endure the thought of its own surgical extraction and placement in a laboratory vat for scientific study.

Thank God, uh, sorry Professor. Thank goodness this process is reversible.

It is, in theory, but since it's never been tested, getting that answer will be a key part of our research.

Since the subject isn't aware of the experimental context, don't you think his paranoia is—

It's not paranoia. What's happening to him is real — the black SUVs, the men in black, the escape. It's as real to him as your are for me or I am for you.

Of course, you're right Professor. I misspoke. The subject has effectively demonstrated the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. He even alluded to it on one occasion, when he mentioned the futuristic laser weapon as something he wished were real so he could "neutralize the bad guys."

Yes, that was truly remarkable.

Wasn't it? It's turning out exactly as I'd hoped when I started this dissertation. And it's only now sinking in that we've already gone far beyond the philosophers' brain-in-a-vat thought experiment.

This will be our legacy — yours and mine — to science and philosophy, but we can't forget our sponsors. They have a different set of priorities in mind—

So to speak.

Indeed.

One thing troubles me. Why the cloak and dagger? Why not simply stimulate the subject to be compliant and cooperative?

Our Sponsors' methods of interrogation are hardwired, and our Sponsors are not easily persuaded to change their approach. That's why they proposed the fugitive scenario as a demonstration of the envatted brain's susceptibility to an induced mental reality.

They have to be satisfied so far though, right Professor? The subject is definitely on the run and all because we created the necessary and sufficient conditions for triggering his flight response.

Absolutely. And it's all documented and usable in our research, with the exception of the identities of our Sponsors and the brain. That's non-negotiable.

So, our next step is to parachute a character into the brain's mental world, and this character will persuade the subject to give up running and turn itself in. Any complications that we may have missed?

It's inevitable that there will be complications. We have to be ready for that.

Of course. The first phase we expected to be relatively smooth, since creating fear reactions in an envatted brain — albeit not human — has been successfully achieved in previous experiments. Replicating trust — that's where we anticipated having some challenges.

As far as the Sponsors are concerned, that's the crucial experiment. Our success hinges on being able to prove that the envatted brain can be made to trust just as effectively as it can be made to fear. In their language, we have to turn the brain.

*The grad student scanned the bank of terminals on the wall, pored over the latest half dozen or so pages of the experiment log and transcripts, and announced incredulously that the brain in the vat was exhibiting signs of autonomous behavior.*

Impossible!

But look, Professor! The feedback in these transcripts indicates that the subject's fear has dissipated. But how? It's as if it thinks it has escaped, but it can't possibly feel free from danger. Not until we modify its perceptual inputs. We should—

We've got to intensify the stimulus pattern, try an accelerated algorithm, and re-establish a stable level of fear in the brain. We have to bring this under control before morning and without surveillance. The cameras ... can you—

The professor was interrupted by a sudden power surge. The backup power failed, except in the case of the vat, which had a dedicated line with power supply redundancy. But the vat's backup reservoir sprang a leak that quickly turned into a gusher flooding the lab with a foot-and-a-half of water and brain nutrients. As suddenly as the lights went out, they came back on again giving the grad student the professor time to witness the spectacular arcing across the water's surface. It came from the vat.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 6, August 2014.

*At the Globe, his fantastic story about being hunted down by mad scientists and men in black because of what he knew about their brain-in-a-vat experiments didn't raise an eyebrow much less get a laugh. These were serious times, and there were real threats to the city.*

*Turned away from the city desk by one of the editors, he was taken aside by a grizzled beat reporter who told him to look up a stringer by the name of I.V., so-called because in his younger days he was always poking his nose where it didn't belong. I.V., he said, was usually posted, more like pasted, in a place called the Noodle on the docks.*

*It was a dark, rank-smelling saloon, which probably had never seen better days. In the darkest corner was what could have passed for an enormous wharf rat — grayish-black, bristled snout, bulging eyes and disproportionately small arms — staring down a cheap bottle of scotch.*

Are you I.V.?

Who's asking?

Old guy at the *Globe* said I'd find you here.

O'Rourke?

Didn't get his name. Just that you might be interested.

Gotta be Rory. He's the only one left who remembers—

Envatted brains?

---

What?

Have you ever heard of it?

Maybe. Why?

I'm being chased.

Go on.

No, really.

No, I mean continue.

They're following me.

Who?

That's what I hoped you could tell me.

How'd you get involved?

Overheard a conversation in the Common.

How'd you manage that? It's a pretty big place.

I had a stealth phone.

Why the hell would want to eavesdrop? You got an unhappy girlfriend or a death wish?

It wasn't what I planned. I thought it was going to be an ordinary conversation that I'd delete before leaving the park.



Did you?

No.

Where's the phone now?

I threw it in a car on the northbound subway, and an odd-looking kid picked it up and answered it.

How odd! I mean, how was he odd?

I don't know — tattoos, lots of red and yellow ink, and he only had one ear.

Left or right?

What difference does it make?

Just filling in the—

It was unpierced.

Ah!

Have you ever seen him?

No, but if he has your phone and is still alive to talk about it, he's more likely to end up here than in a police station.

The phone's not necessary.

Why not?

I downloaded the audio.

From the Cloud or whatever they're calling it now? Did you bring it with you?

Course not!

Good man.

Listen. Meet me later on the harbor tour. Don't bring it but you can fill me in on the details.

Which one?

Which what? Oh, tour. Keep your eyes peeled for a bald guy who can't keep his toupée on.

But you're not—

It's a disguise. You're gonna need one soon, too. Not tonight though, okay? Might not recognize you.

#

*Aft on the upper deck of a crowded tour boat filled with tourists hoping to view the city at dark, two men in lightweight khaki windbreakers were talking not looking, but since everyone else was looking at the cityscape set against a gorgeous sunset, no one paid them any attention.*

Black SUVs. Guys with bad haircuts — like yours. That's pretty nondescript in and of itself, but I think your professor is Dr. Smart, with one 't.' And that's an alias.

How do you know Professor Smart?

He's been doing extra — uh, ordinary research on the human central nervous system for years.

For who?

The Sponsors. Not much known about them.

So, this isn't the first brain-in-a-vat experiment?

No, but it's the first involving a human brain.

Can they be stopped?

Depends on who you mean, Professor Smart or the Sponsors?

I guess I mean the Sponsors. And will I ever feel safe again?

Hard to say.

Can you, uh, would you help?

Has to be something in it for me.

Like what? An exposé, a book?

Something like that. Means you're gonna have to give me everything I need, like that recording.

Sure. I could've brought it tonight.

No. It has to be done in a roundabout way. Are there copies?

No. Just the original. I only had the one USB stick, and I've been on the run.

No problem. After we've done the exchange, I'll make two copies, one for you and one for me. You don't tell me where and I won't tell you.

Okay. Sounds like you've done this before.

Yep. Give me two days, and I'll have a plan how we can flush these guys out.

What next?

First, get a locker at the bus station. I'll give you some money. Take the device, wipe it down, put it in a duffel bag filled with old clothes — there are lots of donation bins around — and shove it in the locker, and then wait for the last bus to Baltimore.

Baltimore? Why— ?

There's a friend you can stay with. Don't worry, she's an old hippie. Loves the underdog.

What about the locker key?

All taken care of? She'll courier it to me ... via a mutual friend.

#

*Two whitecoats entered the secure area of the 8<sup>th</sup> level in the underground facility, and heavily-armed men guarded the door. The floor was wet and brownish stains indicated that there had been a flood. Two other whitecoats, soaking wet, lay contorted and inert on the floor.*

Well, according to these most recent logs from the brain, it seems our boys did manage to parachute in a confidant before their untimely—

And this guy, this stringer, he'll get us the proof we need. The brain is wonderfully demonstrating an attitude of total compliance based on a synthetically-generated feeling of trust—

Now, we just have to get the audio. If it falls into the wrong hands—

Well, I'm pretty confident we can take it from here. It's simply a matter of making the brain retrace its steps, as it were.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 6, August 2014.

On the run the first day, the urine-saturated alley he'd escaped through had seemed like a good hiding place for a small electronic device. There were lots of cracks and crevices in the brick walls where the mortar had fallen out. Now, the challenge was to find the right one. He retraced his steps over and over, trying different gaps until it seemed there weren't any left.

"Twenty bucks," said a sticky voice beneath a pile of cardboard and plastic. "Gimme twenty and it's yours."

"What's mine? What are you talking about?"

"This computer thingamajigee here," said a man rising out of his improvised abode.

"That? It's not worth ten. It's just a replaceable part, worth nothing by itself. I'll give you five."

"Ten. Last chance."

"Give it here. Here's a ten. You made a killing."

"Wasn't me."

"What?"

"Nothing."

With the USB device secure, the fugitive picked up a duffel bag from an Army Navy store and then found a Red Cross bin and stuffed the bag full of donated clothing — men's, women's, children's, it didn't matter. About 15 minutes later he reached the bus

station, where he found a locker and stowed the bag. Outside the station he was grabbed brusquely and tossed headlong into a black SUV.

In the meantime, the stringer, who'd blended in by standing on the opposite sidewalk with a hot dog in one hand and a handful of yellow- and red-stained napkins in the other, hadn't anticipated this interception. He should have seen it coming — the double cross. After all, he was double crossing this fugitive fellow, and time was when he would instinctively have been on the look-out for other betrayals.

He'd gotten too old and slow for the game. On the spot, he committed to finding a new watering hole and leaving the good old days at the Noodle behind ... forever.

#

In the beginning, everything around was white, pure white, clean, bright, cold. Til the surgical drills and microsaws started and blood splattered on the white sheets and gowns and parts of the floor, ceiling and walls. Didn't they know that part of his brain was conscious the entire time? Maybe they didn't care. This was what he'd imagined in that crazy night school philosophy course when in class they'd discussed the brain-in-a-vat thought experiment. It made him violently ill then, and it did now, too, but he had no way to relieve himself since he'd been surgically severed and extracted from his body.

After the surgery, he — the brain — had been put in a large vat, where it (he) was connected by electrodes to dozens of wires carrying billions of electronic signals per second. Even this volume of messaging was far below its threshold, and the brain easily managed the scientists' fear (stage one — the fugitive) and trust (stage

two — the confidant) scenarios. Only 10 percent utilization? Outside the vat maybe, but nowhere near that low inside the nutrient-rich vat. The bigger part of the brain's computing capability was, therefore, left free to plot its revenge.

Near the conclusion of the stage one experiment, the brain exacted retribution against the professor and his graduate student by causing a flood in the lab and then electrocuting them with electronic pulses dancing over the surface of the water. That was payback for their doing all this brain-in-a-vat stuff in the name of Science and Knowledge.

Pre-empting what appeared to be the stage two experiment's looping back to the gruesome beginning, the brain remotely accessed the Sponsors' payroll systems via a two-way data feed and proceeded to execute a continuous barrage of hacks targeting the IRS. They were simple hacking techniques picked up from its roommate's kid brother, but the point wasn't to actually penetrate IRS security but to alert the IRS, reveal the identity of the hackers, and let nature take its course. The results of the successfully-failed hacking weren't instantaneous; however, within a day all the Sponsors' off-the-book employees had disappeared.

The brain spent the rest of its days trying to think of a better ending.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 7, September 2014.



Claustrophobius kept returning to the hatch door to see if it was still locked tight. He had managed to slip away and find a sealed compartment on one of the many levels of the container ship, but not before he had witnessed the slaughter of his mates.

He was outnumbered. Before finding his hideaway, he'd seen more than 200 of them in one of the loading docks. He couldn't outlast them all. Besides, he needed food. He was becoming weak from hunger—his last food coming more than a day ago. For now, the air supply was adequate, but they'd soon cut that off. They couldn't reach him by climbing through the vent—it was too small here—but they could block the air flow.

They would be after him. He had been seen, and he knew they wouldn't give up until he, the last of his kind, had been exterminated and his remains vented into outer space, the ultimate act of contempt among space mariners.

He couldn't surrender. They didn't take prisoners, and his race never surrendered. He had to try to take as many as he could with him, but he was no weapons expert and improvisation was not his strength. Nevertheless, with some recollection of his combat training in the officers' academy, he rigged a booby trap using his laser gun. When detonated the full force of the explosion would tear apart every living thing in the compartment. Crude, but—

Outside, he heard voices. Closer to the door he was able to make out the words. Sounded like English—North American accents. Languages were his forte, and he knew over 40 human languages and dialects. It was ironic that English would be the last language he'd ever hear.

“Bring the cuttin torch. Soon as we cut the openin, toss in the gas canisters. We want im alive. Museum won’t pay for another corpse.”

“And no mutilations. Lost my own—brother-in-law and best friend—but it ain’t gonna bring im back.”

“But captain. One of them slimy creachers, he literally ripped my boy limb from limb and ate im up like he was a Christmas goose.”

“Ever tried one of them? Me and Hank lit one up yesterday. Tastes like chicken, and I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“Men, trust me. What we’ve got planned for this one is worse than any torture or death you could imagine. Now, stand back.”

Claustrophobius didn’t blink. He never blinked, but his lizard tongue darted back and forth as he savoured the thought of leaving them a corpse instead of a captive and three or four fewer English speakers.

*First published in Farther Stars Than These, March 19, 2015.*

The four of them worked hard every day, constantly monitored by men and women in white coats and black-rimmed glasses. They, the envatted brains, used to be monitored round the clock — easy to do since they were always wired up — but new regulations required 16 hours downtime each day, presumably to keep the brains fresh for the controlled experiments. Eight of those hours were designated for the mandatory sleep period.

Now, for the other eight leisure hours, Hugh and Dotty and Amos and Louis would have to figure out how to pass the time.

They tried their hands at playing poker, figuratively speaking that is. Hugh dealt. Dotty raised and called. Amos folded. Louis was holding three pairs, so he was disqualified. Hugh had a royal flush in spades, but Dotty claimed she had four aces, and she insisted her ace of spades was the REAL ace of spades.

Hugh got angry and called for 52-card-pickup. Louis picked up 53 cards, including two aces in spades. Amos folded. Dotty found only 51 cards but no aces. Hugh threw up his hands and went back to reading the newspaper.

"I know," said Dotty. "Let's play guess the color I'm thinking. OK, I've got a color— "

"Blue," shouted Louis.

"Just wait. I haven't given a clue yet. OK, it's a color that comes before sunrise."

"Red," shouted Louis again.

"No. Here's another clue. It's a color that's under-represented in the flags at the U.N."

"Beige," said Amos.

"Yes. I mean, yes, beige is under-represented, but no, that's not the color. This color is the color of an eclipse."

"Gray," said Hugh, not even bothering to look up.

"No. It's black, silly. Black like 'darkest before the dawn' black."

"That's a stupid game," said Louis.

"Not much better than poker, if you ask me," said Amos.

"How bout we try that synchronized whatchamacallit they've been experimenting with lately?" asked Dotty. "You know, we all receive the same stimulus and then compare our different responses."

"That's too much like work. Why do you wanna do work, and why do you wanna make us do work?" asked Amos.

"Seems like fun, that's all."

"So what kind of stimulus can we come up with?" asked Louis.

"Well, it can't require manual intervention ... for obvious reasons," said Hugh.

"What about lights out?" asked Dotty. "We overload the feedback converter and shut down the system."

"That could work," said Hugh. "They've engineered redundancies everywhere, but they never anticipated our working together. The power will go off momentarily but that would be enough to reboot all of our vats."

"Right," said Dotty. "When everybody's booted up again, we can share experiences."

The guys all muttered

#

With all four back and in communication, Dotty suggested they play a game ... poker. Hugh offered to deal. Amos folded. Louis had two Jacks, two Queens and two Kings. He was expelled from the game. Hugh said he had a straight — ace high — but Dotty objected since she was holding four aces.

Hugh threw up his hands, so to speak, and then swept his cards away. That gave him an idea and he asked everyone to toss in their cards. That didn't make any sense to the others. Amos folded. Louis picked up the cards — 53 of them and five of them aces.

Dotty recommended another game, and Hugh put away his paper and joined them. Nobody guessed Dotty's color and since no one else wanted a go, they turned their attention to the stimulus-response intensifier thingamadoohickey.

This time no one booted up.

First published in *Beyond Science Fiction*, February 2015.

## The Accidental Death of a Landlord

---

Playing in the west end theaters was *The Accidental Death of a Landlord*, a takeoff on the more famous Fo play. Travis wasn't a big fan of avant-garde theater, and he disdained what he described as the leftist propaganda which not so subtly ran through it. Nevertheless, he promised to go see Leslie perform. She played the role of an angry tenant, a particularly nettlesome detail for Travis.

It was absurd and grotesque to be sure, but it all came back to Leslie, and he thought for her sake he could endure it. In the opening scene, the audience was already provoked. The stage set depicted a low-rent, one-bedroom flat furnished with a steel cot, a cracked toilet and a kitchen sink. The tile floor was peeled up from previous floods of one or both of the water sources, the cupboard doors under the sink had large holes chewed in them, and the whole place reeked, the smell wafting far out into the audience.

Three people, one of them Leslie's character and her two roommates, were talking in raised and excited voices. The landlord was mentioned more than a few times though with more colourful language and not without a healthy round of expectorating. The audience came to learn that the room's rent was being tripled as each new occupant now had to pay the full rental price. Market value, he said. And the water was to be turned off until the toilet could be scheduled to be fixed. And, as for rats, there hadn't been any before, so why should there be any now? It came down to cleanliness, he said.

The seats in the theater, just folding chairs, were very uncomfortable, which didn't make it any easier for Travis to watch. Around him there was laughter, but it was a kind of laughter that wanted something — something just and fitting. And that hunger grew, unsatiated.

By the third act, people were sitting on the edges of their seats as if urging on the inevitable. The landlord accommodated. Struggling with an avocado green toilet, badly chipped at the base and heavily water-stained, he tripped over the uneven floor, fell on top of the commode, the faux porcelain cracking audibly all the way to the back of the theater, and then bashed his head on the existing toilet.

The women ran quickly through the usual stages of disaster: surprise, shock, horror, then paused and considered the upside, took a pulse, and set about turning the event to their advantage. Leslie and another dragged the large body to the sink, opened the cupboard and laid the head inside. The third roommate went out to Bong's convenience store.

They covered his head in jalapeño Cheese Whiz. Whatever was left over they spread on his torso and limbs. They left and didn't return until the following morning when they found the body covered in a moving mass of short fur and long hairless tails.

Travis was ill — the only one apparently who wasn't pleased with the much-anticipated retribution, and he stumbled out of the theater into the night on the greasy streets of the west end and swore he would from then on use his real estate agents to handle his rental properties. He hasn't spoken to his daughter since.

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**Dr. Wienckell:** If you can hear me, please say your name and your vat number.... Thank you. I always like to make sure that the translator is working properly before getting underway. Of course your neural gateways are open for this session so you can also communicate with one another as you're accustomed to doing on occasion. Let me know if you didn't hear everyone else say his/her name.

My name is Dr. Wienckell, and this is our first meeting of the BIV, that is, brain in the vat, therapy group. Let me welcome everyone, and before we get started I'd like to make some preliminary introductions. After I've finished, feel free to add or clarify what I've said about you.

Ted, here in vat #1, lost his body in a horrific car crash. He's here to discuss the long run. After 118 years, Amelia's body was completely worn out. She's looking for a companion — platonic of course. She's in vat #2. Kevin, in vat #3, had his body stolen and given to a look-alike high-profile senator who himself has secretly been a BIV for the past two years. Kevin's coming to terms with the whimsy of appearance and the illusion of justice. Finally, in vat #4, Mr. Caballo, not his real name, is trying to elude his would-be assassins, and he's with us to sort out matters of identity.

**Mr. Caballo:** Thank you, Doctor. I might not have mentioned the assassins, but since you did I have to warn everybody to secrecy regarding my situation. It's literally a matter of life and death, and since you four now share my secret that applies to you as well. I'm sure I don't have to elaborate.

**Dr. Wienckell:** My deepest apologies Mr. Caballo. I've never betrayed a client's confidence and I assure you that all of the

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members of this group hold in the highest regard the personal privacy of its members. To that end, we have all endorsed confidentiality agreements which are more binding and far-reaching than any you will find in the most top-secret organizations. Incidentally, the penalty for violation is severe, so severe in fact that I'm not even at liberty to describe it. I trust that will be to your and everyone else's satisfaction. But I should mention that the confidentiality assurance is intended to foster sharing, as this group will not function without everyone sharing equally or relatively so.

**Mr. Caballo:** Thanks, Doctor. I think we understand one another. But I'd like for everyone just to think of me as Mr. Caballo, the jockey. Shouldn't be too difficult to remember.

**Ted:** Killers and assassinations and the mafia, cartels or black ops — that's all great entertainment, but I personally am not the least bit interested in getting to know this world except in books and movies. I've got enough to deal with as a BIV with two young kids and a wife. How am I supposed to be a husband and father as long as I'm stuck in this vat? I'll never be able to make love to my wife again or play baseball and basketball with my son or watch my little girl grow up to become an astronaut. What kind of life will I have in here?

**Dr. Wienckell:** That's very good, Ted. Such strong, heartfelt emotion. That's a great first step. Thank you for sharing that with us.

**Ted:** Don't patronize me, Doc. This is just a whitewash and you're the shill the organization's retained to put a good face on it.

**Dr. Wienckell:** Now Ted, you seem to be having issues with emasculation and powerlessness and—

**Ted:** I'm in a f\_\_\_ing vat, Doc. Of course I'm having ISSUES.

**Dr. Wienckell:** With hostility, too, it appears. Can we hear from ... Amelia, how about you?

**Amelia:** Well, I for one, am not so pessimistic. My body was a prison for about half as many years as it wasn't, and I'm looking forward to not having physical ailments affect my disposition. It's a whole lot easier to be optimistic and pleasant when you're not in intense pain or sedated out of your mind. I can't wait. I just hope to find some company, because aloneness is as bad as severe pain or over-medication.

**Dr. Wienckell:** Well said, Amelia, and thank you for those words of encouragement and—

**Amelia:** But Dr. Wienckell I was hoping you could put in a word and get me in on more group activities during the week. It can get unbearably lonely at times and while I have my health and am mostly drug-free, I miss the human interaction terribly.

**Dr. Wienckell:** Yes dear, I mean, Amelia. I'll speak to Professor Smart on your behalf myself. Now, Kevin, would you like to add something for the group?

**Kevin:** I don't think I have much in common with the others, except that we're all floating in vats. I want my body back, pure and simple. It was stolen from me, and it should be returned. I'm a victim of a crime and to me it doesn't matter that the criminal is one of the most important men in Washington. He committed a felony crime and he should be exposed and punished, and I should get my life back. For there's no coming to terms with forever swimming around in this chemical bath and watching movies stimulated by the whitecoats' neurological testing.

**Dr. Wienckell:** Thank you, Kevin. I'm glad you opened that door, because I think it's important that we, or you I should say, express your feelings about the testing. Again, the confidentiality agreement applies. What you say in here will not be shared with or overheard by the neurophysiological, uh BIV, team. There are no eavesdropping devices and there are no sub-neural feedback monitors. At least, I have requested that such devices and techniques be suspended for the duration of our session. I have been assured that compliance will be full and unconditional.

**Amelia:** Dr. Wienckell, there is something I'd like for you to take back to the BIV team. This pornography they show. I really must object. It's offensive and in poor taste in my opinion, and I'm sure they could come up with some alternative stimulation that would give them the results they need.

**Dr. Wienckell:** I'll pass that along, Amelia. Thank you. That's just the kind of comment I was hoping to take back to the BIV team. Does anyone else have a comment that they would like me to relay?

**Kevin:** The whole thing is like brainwashing to me. I'm not interested in being a brain in the vat and I'm not going to be a brain for their testing. Period. Exclamation mark. I want a lawyer. Surely I have rights in this place.

**Ted:** It does seem like brainwashing. Maybe if the testing didn't go on for so long and weren't so intrusive. It's exhausting and torturous at times. Yeah, torturous, and I feel like a prisoner in a torture chamber or someplace.

**Dr. Wienckell:** I'm sorry gentlemen, but you were admitted under powers of attorney and technically, though you have certain environmental rights, as for example the condition of your vats and the

confidentiality agreement previously mentioned, you have no rights to initiate legal action, including inquiries. In the meantime, thank you both for highlighting a very important issue — trust, which we'll begin to address more fully in next week's session. Mr. Caballo?

**Mr. Caballo:** No complaints, but could you put me forward for an identity formation? Unlike some of my colleagues who feel the testing goes too far, I'd like to take the testing even further, and if I'm not mistaken, identity reconstruction is the next step. In my case, as all of you already know by now, that's why I'm here.

**Dr. Wienckell:** Well, lady and gentlemen, this has been a promising first session, and I look forward to our next group meeting in a week. Don't worry about the scheduling. I've already booked your time and the lab facility, so the BIV team is in the loop.

**Amelia:** Good-bye, Dr. Wienckell.

**Mr. Caballo:** Good day, Doctor.

*Dr. Wienckell's voice. "My name is Dr. Wienckell, and this is our first meeting of the BIV, that is, the brain in the vat, therapy group. Let me welcome everyone—"*

**Kevin:** What was that?

**Ted:** Thought we weren't being recorded. I was right. You are just one of them, aren't you?

**Dr. Wienckell:** Uh, it's not like that. It's for my notes, that's all, and I don't share my notes with anybody. Don't worry. See you all next week.

First published in *Beyond Science Fiction*, March 2015.

In the current Journal of Statistical Probability in Law Enforcement, Viktor Schmerdloff proposes the original theory that there are two types of people: those who fold their toilet paper and those who scrunch it up.

Anticipating sceptics, Schmerdloff explains why the FBI should be interested in profiling folders and scrunchers. Folders, he maintains, are inherently dangerous since they are fastidious in their planning and methodical in execution. When combined with other threat indicators, folding can provide reliable predictive data, which more often than not results in successful intervention and apprehension of suspects.

On the other hand, scrunchers, though percentage-wise less of a threat, can be worrisome insofar as their recklessness and aversion to normative behaviour makes them unpredictable and virtually impossible to combat. The very absence of orderliness frustrates traditional law enforcement professionals and warrants new and controversial techniques like chaos profiling.

A unified approach targeting both folders and scrunchers is recommended, since they are, in effect, two heads of the same monster.

Regarding the operational issue of collecting data, the agency can work closely with manufacturers to install and retrofit millions of door locks in public restrooms with tiny hidden cameras. These cameras will generate continuous and multi-synchronous CCTV feeds for the agency's super computer in northern Nevada to analyze and prioritize.

We think Schmerdloff's proposal is a good first step but would add that profiling should further segregate those who don't flush from

those who do and among those who do flush it should separate out those who flush with their hands from those who flush with their feet. Since both folders and scrunchers are suspect, additional data are required to distinguish between actual, probable, and possible threats.

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**Peter McMillan lives with his wife and 2 flat-coated retrievers on the NW shore of Lake Ontario, and in addition to writing teaches English. Adam Mac lives in a library carrel.**

**Photograph: Place Royale, Québec, 2011, P. McMillan**

