



SF COLLECTION
CRISTY ZINN

SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTION

Author's note:

This is a collection of short science fiction for adults. These stories have won various competitions but had not been published in any digital capacity. I don't believe in stories collecting metaphorical dust in computer files so please, read on...

INACTIVE

Ronan stared blankly at the solarised window. Opaque strings of calming words disrupted the view as they drifted across its surface. Beyond the words, if he cared to look, three towers identical to his hovered above a patchwork of well organised hills. The colours were sapped by the tinted glass, the words constantly drawing his mind away from it. Similarly aggravating music played from his chair's headrest, though it was intended to calm his restless mind. He had never found it useful, this enforced idleness they called a *Serenity Module*.

A monitor blinked in Ronan's periphery, the plexiglass turning crimson with the internal message signal. He thought his chair away from the window, effectively shutting off the serenity module, and turned back to the plethora of monitors that made up the laboratory. He didn't care for the view of downworld either; he had long ago stopped belonging to it.

His chair swivelled and Hank's came into view. Hank's face was only faintly creased and papery despite his fifty-five year seniority and even at 122, he was still the most brilliant Inactive Ronan had ever known. Hank's chair was standard Inactive gear: white leather that curved along the body with a single navigen leg, silicon straps that kept his immovable body in place, an amphib-dilator buckled to the strap that kept them breathing, and a small glass screen curving out from behind his headrest, where his thoughts were projected as subtitles to his metallic voice. Hank sat stone-like, inactive, his head tilted back slightly so that the chair's neuronic probes could fit securely to the back of his head.

Although Ronan had not seen himself for decades now, he was certain he looked almost identical to Hank, if not as old.

The monitor displayed the trajectory of Toros 5 and yet another anomalous nebula-like mass that hadn't been there ten months ago when the ship had launched. Ronan and Hank had already been working all night to identify it but they were yet to come up with anything conclusive. The Concilium would be pressing them for answers soon but the truth was, they had never come across anything like this.

"Did you hear about Florian's passing?" asked Hank, the subtitles on his screen blinking dimly in the lab's bright light. Hank's system was older, his voice slightly tinnier, matching his peppery hair and faintly corrugated skin.

“Yes. The man lived a good, long life,” said Ronan.

It was a standard response.

“Yes...He was one of the first to accept Inactivity,” Hank said. His continuously blinking cursor implied he had more to say.

Ronan wondered what the man was thinking. Nothing in his face would ever reveal his emotions, his jowls remained slack, his eyes deadpan, the light of the blinking cursor intermittently lighting up his face.

“I suppose we will be next,” Hank said simply.

“Next?” Ronan asked.

The old man’s screen spluttered slightly, as the older systems did when their occupants were experiencing intense emotions. Ronan had been seeing it more frequently in the last few months.

“To die. We should be the next to die,” said Hank.

Ronan would have grimaced if he could but his own face had become immobile when he was sixteen. Though death was a painless procedure for Inactive’s, the loss of a mind was an unbearable thought – the last and fatal amputation. Inactive’s had chosen to be bound to their chairs in order to gain the benefits of higher brain function, but the benefits of long life and extreme measures of increased brain capacity were not without disadvantages.

Inactive’s had no relationships outside the intellectual partnerships of their peers; they spent their entire existence in the hovering towers that contained their labs and apartments, experiencing the outside world through windows and nets alone; and they could not move a single muscle in their entire body. Their minds were all they had.

Dr. Went was the first to discover that a simple dose of bee venom could significantly enhance brain function. The side-effect of paralysis was both unfortunate and fortuitous because as the brain compensated for the loss of mobility it increased brain activity even further. The venom also had an interesting effect on the muscles, building them when they should have been deteriorating so that even attached to their chairs as they were, their muscles never atrophied.

Dr. Went had hoped, like many of those first Inactive’s, that higher brain functionality would lead to a discovery of how to regain physical mobility without impairment but it never did.

Despite the obvious sacrifices, more intellectuals volunteered for Inactivity and became the machinery behind the working of the world: the quiet, motionless cogs who propelled the innovations of the planet. Ronan had always been content with that – he had chosen the chair,

after all. It was considered a heroic sacrifice, in order to gain such power in knowledge – one the Concilium rewarded highly, with every possible resource to explore the kinds of science they knew little about downworld.

“Well, we can’t die until we figure out what that mass is, Hank. The Toros 5 will be orbiting Hyperion in a few months and we need to know what it is *before* they get there.”

“They have their own Inactive’s on board, let them deal with it,” Hank said. His voice came out in the usual, flat metallic sound but his screen flickered again. For the briefest moment, Ronan thought he saw an impossible twitch of Hank’s upper lip.

“Their Inactive’s are virtually catatonic until they reach orbit. It’s up to you and I, you know that.”

Hank was silent but his chair turned away from Ronan, towards the window. The serenity module started up again. Hank detested the program even more than Ronan did.

“Is your system malfunctioning, Hank?” asked Ronan.

“Not malfunctioning. I just don’t feel...right,” said Hank.

“You should have your Home Operator run a diagnostics on you...”

“I’m not *ill*.”

“Then what?” asked Ronan, confused.

“Have you ever thought that perhaps Inactivity is a repulsive idea?” Hank asked.

Ronan could not see the man’s face, not that it would have helped, but he was surprised by the question.

“Repulsive?”

“Do you remember what the transformation was like? All those convulsions and respiratory failure? Maybe the Concilium tamed the procedure by the time you were old enough but... Have you ever wondered why we never regained mobility? Despite our brilliant minds? Surely with our vast, combined knowledge we would find a way to be whole...”

“Whole?”

“As great as our minds are, we are only half while we’re trapped in these chairs...”

“And yet we use a higher percentage of our brain than mankind has ever been able to access in all of history,” said Ronan.

“Yes, the Concilium continues to remind us of that, don’t they? While they walk around...”

Hank was interrupted by the androgynous voice of Ronan’s Home Operator, or HO.

“Sir, an Active Technician has arrived to repair the error in your navigen-track. Would you like me to facilitate the repair?”

Ronan stared at the back of Hank’s chair, disturbed to the core by the man’s train of thought. Perhaps he was older than he seemed, and his mind was beginning to fail. He did not like contemplating the loss of such a great mind.

“That’s alright, Ronan. You go ahead. I think I need to get some rest,” said Hank without turning.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” said Hank. “You go see to the Active. Don’t want to keep a flighty thing like that waiting.”

“Thank you, HO, but I’ll come and facilitate myself,” Ronan said.

“As you wish, Sir,” said the HO.

Already Ronan’s operator was moving his chair towards the door.

“Have a rest, Hank. Let’s sleep on that new data and take a look at it in the morning – with fresh eyes,” suggested Ronan but Hank did not reply.

The door to the lab dilated and Ronan’s chair followed the navigen groove down the luminous corridor towards his own rooms where he was met by a pair of bright eyes; an Active. She was wearing the metallic blue overall of an Active Repair Technician and had her small hand-held Roster pinned to her front pocket. The masses of her dark hair were piled on top of her head so that she could work unfettered but some strands had come free around her face, like distracting threads of night.

“Hi,” she smiled. “My name is Chloe. I’m here for a repair?”

Ronan was temporarily distracted by the movement of the girl’s lips. There was no screen or metal voice sounding out her thoughts. Her throat moved as she swallowed, and her pupils dilated slightly. So much movement in those few seconds! He hadn’t seen an Active for months; he had forgotten how restless their bodies were.

“Is that your HO?” the girl asked. Her arm was stretched out, pointing towards the digital eye at the top of the door. “I’ve always wanted to ask... does the Concilium control all the HO’s from some giant server? Or does each HO have a controller of some kind? I mean who’s in control of the machines that control you?”

Ronan remained still as she babbled. He had little patience for Actives. They were employed by the Concilium who, always working towards the increased health of their Inactive's, thought it good to expose them to *normal* people in order to keep their perspective. Ronan had always been uneasy with paying humans to do what a well-programmed robot could easily do for free. His HO already facilitated his baths, meals, exercise, schedules and most repairs. The intrusion of an Active, especially one that had barely any qualifications, seemed completely unnecessary.

"Need something repaired?" she asked when he did not respond. It was merely a polite question, as the HO would have downloaded the information onto her Roster.

"Yes. My navigen groove seems to be malfunctioning," he said.

"No worries, I'll check it out," she nodded. Her hand reached out to push the door and then she blushed as it dilated. "I keep forgetting," she mumbled. "Don't have modern conveniences like this downworld... yet."

Ronan let his chair follow her into the entrance of his rooms and then came to an abrupt halt when he saw her hand fly to her mouth in a swift, effortless motion. She was staring at his track.

"Is it irreparable?" he asked.

When Chloe turned she was blushing again, and fighting a smile.

"No, not at all." She swallowed nervously and quickly bent down to retrieve something. When she stood straight again, he saw a thin film of tinted plexiglass in her hand.

"It's just a remnant from your screen. You know, one of those disposable filters? It was caught in the groove."

She flipped the piece of glass from one hand to the other and thrust it out for him to see.

"No big deal," she shrugged. "Well, it *could* have been if you'd gone at it too quickly - could have tipped your whole chair over. Here, let me reconnect it."

Before Ronan could object Chloe leaned over his chair to reattach the filter. The last time he had been this close to another human had been fifty years ago, when he was undergoing his transformation. It was her smell that did him in; a strange cloying smell that was somehow both appealing and repulsive... and undeniably female.

"Sorry, it'll just take a second. I can't seem to get it properly connected," Chloe said, her breath reaching into the curve of his neck. She pulled a piece of hair from her face, her hand brushing his cheek for the briefest moment, sending an odd tingle through his skin.

It was an unreasonable and unexpected response to such accidental contact but Ronan wanted nothing more than to grab her hand and keep it at his cheek, to savour the barely-remembered sensation of skin. He hated her for making him even think such things. His hands remained on their arm rests, his head motionless and his face blank as Chloe unbent herself and smiled politely at him. She was completely unaware of how detrimental that small duty had been to him.

“There you go. All sorted,” she said, dusting her hands against her suit.

“Thank you,” Ronan said but his screen flickered slightly with his frustration. “Your bill will be paid shortly.”

“Please, I can’t charge you for this. It wasn’t a technical problem, just an accident. Anyone could have...” she stopped herself, her eyes falling away.

“Could have what?” Ronan asked, though he knew the answer.

“Could have picked it up,” she said in a soft voice, her eyes avoiding his.

“Any *Active*, you mean.”

She nodded and smiled sheepishly. “I sometimes forget the sacrifices you’ve made to make the world a better place,” she said. It sounded rehearsed.

“Yes, we have done that,” he said.

Her brows drew together as she frowned. It was such a simple expression but Ronan was overwhelmed by a sudden surge of jealousy. He wanted to shake his head and rid himself of the thoughts Hank had planted there – Inactivity repulsive? He had never thought so and yet, the sight of this girl’s most insignificant movement suddenly seemed more appealing than his great mind.

“Sure, I mean, we have space travel now and the Active Clinics and...” She faltered.

“But you wouldn’t have become an Inactive if you’d been given the choice, would you?” he asked.

She laughed. “Oh, I would never have passed that IQ test. Not in a million years.”

“But if you had?” Ronan pressed.

She stared at him, clearly weighing the wisdom of honesty and then took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling with no aid of an amphib-dilator.

“I broke both my legs once, in a shuttle accident. While I was being healed at the clinic I had to sit in a bed for two weeks before they allowed me to begin the recovery therapy. I had a view of the Towers and I kept thinking of how all of you were worse off than me. I mean, I could still

move my hands and speak but I still felt so helpless. I didn't like it at all – especially with all the Harry's bustling around me..."

"Harry's?"

She smiled apologetically. "That's what we call the Help-Assist-Remedy-Robot's you created."

"Harry..." Ronan said absently.

She nodded and continued, "But then, I wouldn't have been able to walk again if it hadn't been for the research and development of the Inactive's." She smiled ruefully. "I guess you forfeited your ability to move so that I could. I should thank you."

Ronan stared at Chloe as she shifted her weight, smiled and stroked another piece of hair from her face. His weighty, irrational emotions blended with Hank's earlier comments to create a churning sensation in his chest, where there should be no feeling at all.

"Anyway, that's all going to change soon," she shrugged.

"Change how?" Ronan asked.

Chloe laughed. "With the new developments, you know? Dr. Espen Malachai's research? Surely you've heard of him..."

"No, I haven't," said Ronan, cutting her off. "I'm sure I would have if his research was accredited."

"You must have," she insisted. "He used to be an Inactive, like you."

"Used to be?"

"Yes. He went through the... *transformation*, or whatever you call it, when he was twelve and now he's mobile again."

"Returning to mobility is not possible," Ronan said quickly. "We relinquished mobility to gain superior knowledge."

"He's all over the nets," she shrugged. "He's doing research with a bunch of kids at a gifted school downworld because the Concilium threw him out of the Towers for some of his..."

"He lived *in* the Towers? He was that recent?"

"Yes, he's only been mobile for about five years. It was his involvement that started the techno-organic forests. My brother works at one of the sites near the venom farm, so I've seen the trees up close. They're incredible – we're practically growing our own houses all because of

some genetically engineered seed or something. The Concilium aren't happy about it but he's been..."

"And he's a normal Active?" Ronan interrupted.

"If you think a man that clever is *normal*," she laughed. "I mean, what kind of man thinks about growing houses out of seeds let alone knows how to do it?"

Ronan felt the strange pressure build in his chest. The possibilities that crowded his mind in those few moments were enough to make him hyperventilate if his body could perform such a task. Inactive's did not contemplate their life without mobility because they desired a superior mind and they could not have both. Even their attempts to develop an exoskeleton, that would mechanically enable them to do what normal humans could do naturally, were half-hearted. They chose not to yearn for it because they were focused on what they *could* have; what they *could* achieve. But when Ronan was faced with the possibility of *both* he found himself feeling ravenously hopeful.

"You mean he is an Active with Inactive capabilities?" he asked.

"You've truly never heard of such research?" She frowned at him. "But why would the Concilium keep it from you?"

Ronan's screen spluttered violently for a second before he interrupted her.

"How did he do it?" he asked quickly.

"Do what?"

"Regain mobility. How is it he can walk?" His voice came out louder than he intended.

"It was an accident. He fell out of his chair..."

Her reply was cut off by a startlingly loud ping as the door dilated open. Chloe was so startled that she dropped her Roster, a deep blush colouring her face.

"Thank you for your assistance. Your presence is no longer required. Please proceed to the Active Consortium or consult your Roster for your next assignment," said the HO.

Ronan tried to tell the HO that Chloe could stay but his system was suddenly cut off. His screen darkened to flat glass but Chloe, who had turned towards the HO's voice, could not see it.

HO, could you ask the girl to repair my system? It seems to be malfunctioning, Ronan asked the HO.

The HO did not respond. Ronan thought a movement towards the door but his chair remained still. A deep panic began to rise in his chest but as Chloe turned back to him, she saw nothing but his still, slack face.

“Guess that’s my cue to leave,” Chloe said, lightly. She bent to fetch her roster and clipped it back onto her pocket. “I’ve stayed too long anyway. Hope you find out more about Dr. Malachai...”

“Your next assignment is awaiting your response. Please report to Active Consortium immediately,” said the HO.

Chloe smiled apologetically at Ronan and waved goodbye.

Stop her. Stop her right now and let her repair my system. I have to find out more about Dr. Malachai... Ronan screamed his thoughts at the HO but until the door had dilated closed, his voice remained mute.

“HO, bring her back to repair...” Ronan’s voice suddenly punctuated the empty room, a fraction too loud.

“It seems your system is operational again. Would you like a drink?” asked the HO; its objectivity seemed cold now.

“No. Bring up any information about Dr. Espen Malachai. He would be in both Active and Inactive records,” said Ronan, thinking towards the window and waited as it darkened to load the nets.

“Certainly, Sir,” said the HO.

It took only a few moments, filtering through advertisements and some overly-optimistic news reports about Toros 5’s progress.

“There seems to be no record of a Dr. Malachai. Perhaps the Active was mistaken. Would you like a view?”

Ronan felt his frustration intensify as the window lightened again, dissolving the net page images and moving him closer to the glass where he could see the shuttle dock, venom farms and techno-organic forests blending into the bustling downworld city.

“Wait!” he said and the chair halted in its track. “Take me back to the lab.”

“As you wish,” said the HO.

Hank had begun all these unnatural thoughts in Ronan’s mind, he would be the one to end them.

Ronan was relieved to see Hank's chair in the same position he had left it. The old man's chair turned when the door dilated.

"Do you know of Espen Malachai?" asked Ronan abruptly.

Hank's screen flickered for a moment. "Where did you hear that name?"

"From the Active who just repaired my track."

"You don't remember him?" Hank asked.

"Not in the slightest. I think I would remember a man who was thrown out of the Towers for radical scientific notions."

"Not just radical, Ronan - entirely life-altering for Inactive's."

"In which tower was he based?"

"He was stuffed away somewhere in Sector 18 for a while, down on the coast. They wouldn't have kept him this close to the likes of *serious* scientists such as ourselves."

"Did you ever meet him?"

The cursor on Hank's screen blinked for a frustratingly long time.

"Not while he was an Inactive," said Hank.

"What do you mean?" Ronan's voice was still its calm, bland tone despite his growing horror and for the first time it felt wrong. He had never had to deal with emotions like these; his had been a life of calm equations, these were altogether new to him.

"I met him a few months ago," said Hank. "He flew in as an Active Technician. I didn't know who he was until I bumped into him. I'd recently seen his render on techno-organic construction. It was an old presentation that had been all but laughed off the Concilium proposal committee. I couldn't figure out why because it was good science – brilliant even. When I saw the forests growing downworld I simply thought that the Concilim had sold the patent to a more lucrative partner. They seem to be doing that a lot lately - making money from our science. Anyway, I recognised Espen from his profile picture. He actually looked *better* as an Active than he did stuck in his chair, as if he'd grown younger."

Hank swivelled in his chair towards the last of the daylight, casting his eyes downworld.

"He could see I recognised him and pulled me aside to talk. I'll admit, I was so shocked to see an Inactive walking around like an ordinary human that I didn't think to ask the simple questions: how was he walking? What was he doing here? He answered most of them anyway,

launching into a passionate speech about the evils of Inactivity and the manipulative nature of the Concilium. It quickly became clear to me that he had lost nothing of his superior functionality – even when he said regaining mobility was as easy as getting out of the chair...”

Hank stopped at the sound of Ronan’s HO coming over the system.

“Sir, your bath is ready,” said the HO and already the HO was moving the chair to the door.

Ronan tried to stop the HO but his screen dulled and darkened again, inconveniently blocking his coms.

“We’ll speak again tomorrow,” promised Hank and shockingly winked one eye, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a brief, wry smile. “Perhaps where the walls have no ears?”

Ronan sat helpless as Hank disappeared from view, his chair taking him back to his rooms. His mind sent spinning by a single, small movement of an eye that should be stone. He could not grasp the implications of a walking, talking Inactive – especially one who had been a statue before his eyes for half a century.

His bath was a silent affair, as silent and solitary as his life, and all he could think of was Hank and whatever secret he had been keeping was the kind that could change the way everything operated.

Ronan was awoken by his HO’s voice. His chair was in its recline position, so that he lay staring at the ceiling. Somewhere to his right a red light was flashing.

“Intruder,” the HO said, the voice stuttering over the system.

Ronan thought his chair into its upright position.

“What is the nature of the intrusion?” he asked, his mind still trying to find its way out of the chair’s enforced REM cycle that helped to effectively shut down their over-active minds.

“Internal, Sir,” said the HO.

“Repeat,” said Ronan. “What do you mean, *internal*?”

“Someone is trying to access my confidential files...” the voice warped and slowed and then went silent.

“HO?” asked Ronan. “Home Operator, restart.”

His system was still functional but there was no response from the HO. The thought of his HO being inoperable made him nervous. Without it, he was a prisoner in his chair and his apartment.

“Ronan?” came a new voice over the system. A voice Ronan instantly recognised: Hank.

“Hank?”

“Yes,” came the quick reply. “We must hurry before the Consilium system registers this malfunction and sends technicians.”

The darkened window in Ronan’s quarters suddenly brought up a screen but it wasn’t of the nets. Reflected in the glass was the enlarged image of Hank, standing. He smiled at Ronan and waved. He was holding something to his throat and as he took it away his voice changed.

“Ronan, do you trust me?” Hank asked, in a rough, gravely human voice quite unlike his chair’s coms.

“Trust you?” Ronan echoed.

“Yes. Do you *trust* me?”

“What are we talking about here, Hank? You’re walking around now? And talking? What the hell is going on?”

“I can’t answer those questions unless I know there is trust between us. It’s vital for what I will need to do next. I have to see that you aren’t working for the Consilium.”

“Of course I’m working for them. Every Inactive in the Towers is working for them – including you. Hell, even the comatose Inactives on the Toros 5 work for them.”

Hank smiled patiently. “I need to know you’re not spying for them.”

“A spy?” Ronan asked, his screen spluttering. “You know me, Hank.”

“Which is why I will ask again, do you trust me?”

Ronan’s curiosity was burning in him now; curiosity and an unabashed jealousy that Hank was moving and he was not. He focused on Hank’s eyes, which were the same eyes he had been met with every day in the lab.

“Yes,” said Ronan. “I trust you.”

Hank nodded his head and smiled broadly. “This is going to hurt a little,” he said and held out a small remote. “But it will be worth it, you’ll see. When the Active’s come don’t give yourself away.”

Ronan was about to ask what Active’s he meant when Hank pressed a button on the remote. Ronan felt his chair begin moving along the navigen groove towards the window, towards Hank. He thought nothing of it until he felt it pick up speed. It wasn’t a far distance to the window but he knew the speed that it gathered would cause enough of a crash to do him some serious harm.

“Hank...” Ronan called but Hank’s face was calm and expectant as he moved quickly towards it on the screen.

And then, suddenly, Ronan was crashing headlong into the glass. It trembled, ricocheting him backwards. He heard a crack on the groove as his chair began to tip. His screen flickered and something sparked nearby. The bindings of his restraints strained against his weight until finally they broke and his face hit the floor. Hot, white light filled his head and his eyes swam. He could feel the strange angles of his immobile body sprawled on the floor. The HO was asking some inane question in a broken voice but she could not help him while he was out of his chair. He was completely helpless.

“Ronan, you’re out of the chair now. You can move if you try,” said Hank. “Your muscles are more ready for it than you think.”

Ronan’s arm was splayed out in front of him, his hand resting inches from his nose. He stared at it wantonly – surely it couldn’t be that simple, to just think it and see it move. For decades now he had operated machinery simply by thinking, could he coax the machinery of his body to do the same?

He heard the sound of his door dilating open, two sets of footsteps and voices asking if he was alright. They all blurred into his periphery as he stared at his fingers, willing them to move. Finally a pair of Active hands grabbed his shoulders to pull him up, but not before he twitched his index finger.

When he looked up, his window was dark and Hank’s face was gone. Everything looked the same. The Active’s and their Harry’s strapped him back into his chair and murmured that it was alright, that someone would come and repair his HO, that it was only a temporary malfunction. They did not fit the neuronics probes back onto his head, saying that something had short-circuited in the wiring when his straps had broken but a technician would be there soon to repair it. Ronan heard little of it, he simply stared at his fingers, waiting for them to leave so that he could try it again.

In those agonising minutes he began to run through every formula, theory and calculation he knew, mentally checking his capabilities and then returning to stare at his finger. When they eventually left it took him five minutes to gather up the courage to move his finger again. Desperation was thick in his throat as he stared at it; desperation for it to be true.

When he finally coaxed the movement from his hand, it shot tingles through the muscles on the underside of his palm and produced an unpractised gasp from his mouth. Then Hank appeared through the doorway and Ronan broke into a smile – something he hadn't done in sixty years. *Everything* was about to change.

This story won 1st place in the NOVA Science-Fiction and Fantasy competition in 2011.

REPLACEMENT THEORY

The train was late. I stood under the tattered awning, trying to shelter from the rain and stay as far as I could from the bunch of youngsters crowding the other end of the platform. They were as tattooed as the trains we rode, dressed in luminous, ill-fitting clothes. One of them sported a gleaming wrist-icon. I wondered where he'd managed to get his hands on a high-tech piece like that when he was all of twelve and from Woodstock.

The move from Constantia to Woodstock, from a manicured garden to a square patch of dead grass, had been difficult for Audrey and me. Taking the train was even harder – an old man is an easy target. I'd already been mugged once. But my pathetic retrenchment package had to last, so some sacrifices had to be made.

The train emerged from the sheets of rain like a sleek, sketched bullet, all black and white. It screeched to a halt beside the platform, its wheels straining on the wet tracks, and we packed ourselves in for the ride to Cape Town.

I glanced down at my retro-digital watch, far too old fashioned for cyberneticist. Then again, I couldn't label myself as that anymore. Besides I had more pressing things to worry about - I was going to be late again.

Second class carriages are as good as it gets for me, I couldn't afford first class and ironically those who could, prefer to take the taxi-trams. Second class is nothing but a cattle car with plastic seats along the walls. The windows are narrow and high and the car is lined with strips of blue fluorescents making everyone appear slightly alien. You can't read people's expressions in light like that, which is why it's the perfect place for mugging. Put an old man like me in a car like that and all eyes are on me.

I sat with my backpack slung across my chest – my vain attempt to shield myself – and kept my tablet deep in my back pocket. If anyone was going to try and take my stuff off of me I may as well make it difficult for them.

I was usually so vigilant that it bordered on paranoia but today, with the rain thundering down on the roof of the train, I was mesmerised by Table Mountain as it emerged from the mist.

The city-state had been plagued by controversy of late, but it was still one of the most beautiful cities I'd ever seen – even with its perpetual winter rain.

I should have known this kind of distraction was dangerous. My backpack almost slid out from under me before I realised someone was standing there. The weedy, tattooed youth from the platform was standing over me, eyes wide with adrenaline. I could smell something like chlorine on him and noticed his two front teeth were missing. Not an amateur then.

“No noise, hey grandpa?” the kid asked, jabbing the air in front of my face with his pocket knife. It was a small knife but I'd experienced a bite from one before and it was painful enough to make me keep my mouth shut. “You not gonna call anyone, even?”

I shook my head, ignoring the lady two rows down who had turned her face away, pretending that nothing was happening. I couldn't blame her.

“Nice,” grinned the youth. A friend of his in the corner was sniggering. “Got something decent in here, hey?”

“Just cash and a change of clothes,” I said quietly.

“No tab's or icons?”

I shook my head. “Do I look like I can afford crap like that?”

He looked me up and down like a fisherman inspecting a fish that he'd caught, realising it was too small. He was considering whether to kill me or throw me back.

“Yis like, Mac. Kom nou man,” shouted his friend from the corner. “Hy't niks nie.”

Mac took one step back, slinging my backpack over his shoulder. He looked like a school kid, too young to be mugging people at knife point. He ambled over to his friends, fully confident that I wouldn't rat on him.

I leaned my head back against the wall and closed my eyes, hoping they'd leave me alone. I had no cash to get home and I was late. Maybe Cape Town wasn't such a beautiful city after all.

Buitengracht Street was a fifteen minute walk from the station if I hurried but town was busy and there were protestors on every corner. Crowded like furious ants about giant monoliths, they toy-toyed and brandished their badly scrawled signs at the bankers and businessmen on their way to work. They were ignorant fools if they thought those were the men responsible for the rampant unemployment.

I was more than thirty minutes late when Virtuosity Appliances came into view, surrounded by more protestors. I was drenched and mugged and pissed off - not in the mood for confrontations by people who were unemployed because of the robots *I* helped to make but I was late, so I couldn't sneak around the back.

Someone spat on me as I passed.

"Traitor!" they shouted.

"If only you knew," I muttered under my breath.

The glass doors slid open and I stepped into the dry, air-conditioned air. A banal female voice-recording welcomed me to the store and electronics blared from every corner. The electronic buzz was like a charge through me. After years on the floor of the cybernetics division at *Zidlatek*, the low-grade buzz was just another reminder of what I used to be, of what I lost.

Jansen met me at the door; he'd been waiting for me. His badge flashed his name and then his title, *Store Manager*, like a trophy. He was only twenty-four and qualified by the seat of his pants. It seemed you needed to spend half your life in a dark room somewhere playing on-line Icon games or be permanently wired in to the network in order to qualify for anything these days.

"You're late," said Jansen.

He shadowed my every step as I made my way through to the staff room. He smiled politely at the dismal show of customers, his over-bleached teeth luminous against his honey-coloured skin, but kept his eyes on me as if I might fly off the handle at some point in a senile rage. Did I look that fragile?

I went straight to my locker, thumb-printing it open so that I could grab my jacket. I needed to get to the floor and start selling things. Then maybe Jansen would get off my back for the rest of the day.

"Don't bother," Jansen said from the doorway. He was leaning against the rubber frame, stopping the glass from sliding closed. "You're not going on to the floor today."

"Look, I'm sorry. The train was late and I was..."

"I told you to stop taking the train," he sighed.

"I'm not a manager, Jan. I can't afford the taxi-trams - those are for larney's like you."

Jansen glared at me. "Look, I tolerate you because the upper management seems to think it would be a good idea to have someone of your... reputation in the store. Frankly, I don't see

what the big deal is. You made the robots, so what. Those *robots* are making robots now – seems like it wasn't such a big deal.”

I gritted my teeth. Just like this grommet to think he can wipe away the last twenty years of my life with such an off-handed statement.

“So, are you firing me?” I asked evenly.

“No. But you are spending a day in the loading dock.”

“What for?”

“For being late. And because you're wet and it looks bad on the floor,” he sighed, taking his Icon-tablet from his pocket and handing it to me. “The details are on the tab. The truck arrives in about ten minutes so make sure you're down there. This shipment is a big deal, so don't stuff it up.”

“What is it?”

He smirked at me, crossing his arms over his chest. “You'll see. Let's just say that the bunch of retrogrades outside are not going to like it. Just get it done. Oh, and you're also staying behind to help me put up the new display tonight, so make whatever calls you need to.”

My felt the bottom of my stomach fall out. Taking the train at night was virtual suicide and there was no way I could afford a taxi-tram. Jansen left, letting the glass slide closed with a sickening suction sound as it met the rubber, sealing me in. I glanced down at the Icon-tablet and cringed. A shipment of CR-550's. Wonderful.

The loading dock opened onto a narrow alley behind the store. I could see Signal Hill stretching up above us between the sheets of rain. Over the years real estate had taken over more of the hill so that you could only just see the tip of it from down here. I sat down on an aluminium crate and tapped Audrey's number on the tablet. Her mobile rang and rang so I left a message, telling her I'd be home late. She was going to worry and I didn't like leaving her alone in the flat. She'd always felt safe in Constantia but Woodstock was another story, especially now. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see the connection between the unemployment and the rampant crime in the city. Of course, the hot-shots in the Uni-Politics division didn't seem to take that very seriously.

The truck arrived early, banishing my unproductive train of memories. The 3D *Zidlatek* logo was moving along the sidebar in bold, chrome letters that ended in a shiny caricature of a robot waving.

In the back, the CR-550's were hanging on rails – fifty of them altogether. Jansen was a little optimistic about how fast these things were going to move off the floor. The driver couldn't have been more than eighteen years old; a pimply kid with missing front teeth. He synced his tablet with mine and then typed something into the keypad to begin the rail extension which would bring the CR's to ground level.

“How are you planning to get them into your holding?” he asked.

“They aren't programmed?” I asked.

The driver shook his head. “Management is trying to save money, I guess. Said there was someone here who was going to program all of them.”

“Oh,” I said. “I guess that would be me.”

“You know how to do that?” he asked in surprise, looking at my grey hair and old hands. Probably didn't think an old guy like me know how to do much of anything.

“It's just an uplink to the server – the robots program themselves from there.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. Can I use your toilet?”

I pointed him to the staff toilets and got to work unhooking each unit and rolling them into the loading dock. I was drenched in sweat and rain by the time the kid got back.

“You worked here long?” he asked, leaning against the truck instead of helping me with the CR's.

“Not long. A couple of months,” I said.

“And before?”

“*Zidlatek*.” I liked the look of surprise on his face.

“What were you? Like a janitor or something?”

“Cyberneticist. I helped design these,” I said, motioning to the CR in front of me.

The kid let out a low whistle from between his teeth. “Serious?”

“Like lung-cancer,” I said.

“But then how'd you end up here?”

“Irony,” I chuckled.

The kid screwed up his face in confusion. “What?”

“The robots took my job.”

“You built them and they took your job?” he asked, another whistle escaping his lips.

I nodded. “Irony.”

He folded his arms across his chest, shaking his head in disbelief. “Nai man, that’s just crazy. And now? You just working here like you’re nobody?”

I didn’t like that. It wasn’t as if that thought had never entered my mind but I’d never given voice to it. It sounded wrong. Who wanted to be a nobody?

“I guess so,” I said weakly and busied myself with another CR.

“You know, my dad got fired because of these bots,” he said.

I should have recognised the tone in his voice. I’d heard it before. But I was too preoccupied with my own sorry state to take any notice.

“He killed himself,” the kid said.

The words were like bullets in my neck and my head snapped up. The kid’s expression was a weird mixture of hatred and pity. The rails suddenly pulled back as I unhooked the last of the CR’s and Jansen appeared in the doorway at the top of the stairs. The kid scowled up at him too and then jumped into the truck’s cab and pulled off. I watched him take off into the rain, feeling guilt fall heavy on me even though the fault wasn’t solely mine. Yes, I helped make the robots. Yes, they were taking people’s jobs. But I had thought I was doing something good. How was I to know the pigs at Uni-Pol, pockets filled deep with *Zidlatek* money, would lose their minds?

Jansen, oblivious to anything but the robots, was standing in front of the CR-550’s with a gleeful expression.

“These things are flipping beautiful, don’t you think?” he asked, running his hand along one of the heads.

I nodded grudgingly as he switched one on.

It was true. They were all sleek chrome, with oval, faceless heads that had a slight glow along the bottom side, just under the surface where the processors were at work. The trunk extended to an elegant square, curved on the corners; all smooth, gleaming and slightly aglow just like the head. Both could be programmed into displays with touch screen capabilities, making each unit adaptable to the owner.

It had no need for legs. The trunk merely ended in a collection of motorised roller-balls that transported the machine wherever it was programmed to go. There were four arm-extensions, protruding from the trunk in adjustable metal segments. The arms were darker and rounder than the rest, like metal tubes fitting one inside another, and ending in three fingered claws. They were surprisingly dexterous.

I'd never understood why the CR-550 had done better in consumer testing than its android counterpart. As it turns out, humans are still not ready to hand their fate over to machines that look too much like them. But that was merely aesthetic. The CR-550 was as much an autonomous machine as its android version, learning as it worked and updated itself. It was an ingenious machine

But I couldn't bring myself to love it very much. Looking at them I felt sick. I had helped to make these and now they were taking everyone's jobs. Even mine. After twenty-five years of work on the machines, and others like it, they replaced me – updating themselves constantly with the latest software. Must be nice for the big shots in *Zidlatek* – machines don't need pensions, medical aid or retrenchment packages. How very convenient.

“So, you can program them, right? We saved a couple hundred grand by not having them programmed beforehand...”

“You realise I'm not a programmer, right?” I said. “I'm a cyberneticist.”

Jansen's face blanched. “You can't do it?”

“Anyone can do it, actually. It's just a matter of linking each machine to the *Zidlatek* server. I can show you...”

“No thanks, just get it done,” he said, clearly relieved. “I'd like to get the bulk of them on the floor by tonight – can you do that?”

“If I get it done earlier can I leave?” I asked.

“No. I can't do the display until the store closes – can't have those lunatics outside while we set up this lot. They'll start throwing eggs into the store or something. Look, I'll pay for a taxi-tram, if that's what you're worried about. Let's just get it set up tonight.”

It was the first time I'd seen Jansen so nervous. The protestors were obviously getting to him. I nodded and he smiled tightly, straightening his name badge and walking off so that I was alone with all the CR's.

I couldn't get over the irony of me sitting in a room with the same make of CR-550 that had taken my job. I unscrewed the logistics core of the first CR-550 to reveal the service panel. I checked Jansen's tablet for the reference number and tapped it on the virtual number-pad. The programming was seamless and simple, loading the application quickly and taking me through the steps to link the CR to the *Zidlatek* server.

The loading dock began to glow a dull blue as I linked each one to the server and their trunks lit up. When I was down to four I heard a scraping noise behind me. I'd left the dock door open to let in the cool air but as I turned I realised what a mistake that had been.

"They're going to be selling these now?" asked the choked voice of a stray protestor.

I dropped the screwdriver that had been in my mouth and ran for the dock door button as the protestor started shouting obscenities, alerting his friends from around the corner. The door closed on a placard of one brave person who had been determined to get their message across: *Robots don't need to eat but we do. GIVE US OUR JOBS BACK.*

Jansen appeared at the top of the stairs.

"The protestors just left. Out of the blue. Must be something going on up the..." he saw the placard I'd picked up and stared, wide-eyed at the dock door. "Oh."

"Sorry. I left the door open for some fresh air..."

He shook his head in frustration. "I get it that they're pissed off but we also have jobs to do. Don't they want us to be able to feed our families too?"

I shrugged. "I think they just want to be able to feed their own. They're desperate."

He looked up at me guiltily and nodded. At least the kid wasn't completely heartless.

"Can I help you take the robots upstairs?"

I laughed. "We can program them to go there themselves if you want. I think we could probably fit ten in the lift at a time."

"Okay. I'll stay upstairs and show you where they need to go."

The store was dark when I brought the last CR-550's upstairs. Only the eerie glow of the electronics lit the room. There were a few lingering protestors outside, leaning up against the glass with their placards and umbrellas. I couldn't fault their dedication – standing in the rain, after dark, they certainly must have been serious... or desperate. It made them dangerous though and I couldn't help thinking that I'd have to walk home through the city with them lurking in the shadows.

If nothing else Jansen had an eye for how to make things look attractive. By the time he'd finished spreading the CR-550's out around the shop I was almost tempted to take one home myself – almost. The last one was raised onto a raised revolving pedestal that in the middle of the store; it would make a great centre piece.

“Looks good,” I told Jansen.

He looked nervous as he turned to me though; guilty and shameful. Maybe it was because he was so young that it took some time to register what that look meant but when it did, my heart went into spasm.

“Ben...” he said hesitantly. “There's something...”

“What, Jan? Spit it out.” My voice came out harsher than I intended.

“I got a notification this afternoon to say they're letting you go. They're letting all the sales guys go, actually. We're going automated.”

“Excuse me?”

“We're using the CR-550's to take the floor – what better than the products selling themselves? We're going to save hundreds of thousands.”

“Really? How nice for you. I guess you're keeping your job though, right?”

Jansen winced. “Someone has to manage the robots. Look, it's not my fault. Government just confirmed that *Replacement Bill*, which means to have all menial jobs conducted by robots by 2058. Upper management just wants to get the ball rolling.”

I'd read about the bill. I didn't think anyone would have the guts to pass it, even though the Uni-Pol had been adding pressure to the process. I had hoped public opinion would still have some sway – after all, some of the protests had cost the government millions. Apparently they thought they would make up for it with the money they saved on automated labour. They had no idea what they were doing.

“I'm sorry, Ben. Really. I know it's tough...” his voice trailed off as he noted the expression on my face.

Rage welled hot within me and so I forced myself not to speak. Jansen was right, this wasn't his fault. I was about to go fetch my bag from my locker when I remembered that I'd been mugged earlier. I had no money for the train, no wallet, no backpack. I tore off my vest and threw it on the ground as I walked towards the doors. My back ached from hunching over the CR units and my stomach churned. I just wanted to get out of there.

Jansen caught my shoulder. “Hang on. At least take this,” he said stuffing a R500 note into my hand. “For the taxi-tram. I don’t want you taking the train at this time of night. Not to Woodstock.”

I gritted my teeth and nodded, turning away and making for the door. The rain had a nasty chill to it. It spat down between street lamps as I made my way through the dark, silent city. Maybe I would get lucky, maybe no one would be out tonight because of the rain. I’d have to take my chances because I was officially unemployed and this R500 was all I had.

*This story won 2nd place in the NOVA Science Fiction and Fantasy competition
(South African section).*

BULLETS FROM THE SKY

I'm lying awake, staring at the ceiling. It's full of random sized holes that are burned around the edges. Most are tiny but there's a few I can see the sky through. The dawn is leaking in and I can only just see the last of the stars. The quiet is punctuated by the occasional cough or whisper, and the faint hum of the sound system. I relish the peace. It won't last. It never does.

Soon as the sun comes up we can hear Borden's voice through the distorted loud speakers that are strung all over Concave. No one can really make out the words but we all know what they mean: there will be asteroid rain before the day is over.

I turn onto my side on the lumpy mattress and stare at Boon's face. Her hair is stuck to her cheek, her mouth relaxed, her chest rising and falling in a contented rhythm. She is so beautiful it makes my chest hurt. She looks better when she's sleeping; when she can't remember all the pain.

Mattresses are stirring all over the room with people preparing to find shelter before the storm. Even though the rocks are small as hailstones, this factory roof will be no help against the bullets from the sky. Small as those hole are, they're evidence that we can't stay above ground. There is a weird sense of resignation about everyone. This is our life now. We survive. That's all.

Especially people like us.

We're a shabby bunch, covered in asteroid dust, carrying our hunger like a disease. Still, I see a few smiles – some moments of gratitude for the people who stay near us. I glance over at Boon, curled up on her mattress. I carry my gratitude as close as my hunger.

A kid looks up at me over his mother's shoulder. He's small, probably smaller than he should be. His mother is packing up her few belongings, one-handed, and I can see the burn marks on her arm. There'll be a lot more of those when the night is over.

There are fifty plus of us in here this morning. Some stragglers must have crept in last night without Georgio seeing. He lords over this tattered, rusting place like it's a palace and he's pretty strict about how many strays he lets sleep in here. I'm pretty sure he's not going to let any of us down into his bunker.

I don't care about any of the others, though. Boon, lying there in front of me, her mattress just inches from mine where I can still hear her most shallow breathing, she is the only one I want safe.

As if she can hear my thoughts, one of Boon's eyes opens and she squints sleepily at me.

"You're staring," she says.

I nod.

"Don't."

I keep staring. She does this all the time; trying to push me away, trying to get me to prove how much I care about her, daring me *not* to care. I don't have anything else in the world I care about, so I'm not really interested in her issues. I brush the hair from her cheek.

"Ready to get moving?" I ask.

She looks at the ceiling as though she can see through it. "Rain?" she asks.

"We couldn't hear Borden so good but sounds like it might be a big one," I say.

"And?" She half sits up, resting on her elbow. "Are we going to find a good bunker this time?"

Borden and his officials made it mandatory that everyone open their bunkers to people like us. But the smart bunker owners make excuses about ruining food stores and send us to the shelters where we squash in like sardines. In Concave, food is more precious than people. I look away. I'm not about to make promises I can't keep.

When we leave the factory Concave is like an anthill before the rain, with everyone rushing to get the last of their things underground. Boon stumbles over a pot hole in Mid Street and I have to grab her arm to keep her from falling. She's only clumsy like that when she's really hungry. This used to be a big city. I don't know how reliable my memory is but when I think back it's all bright lights and bustle. Now it's a crumbling mess. The whole place is pockmarked and buckled but it's worst on the western edge. There the air shimmers hot along the blackened ruins, close to the Barrens where the first asteroid fell over a decade ago. They say when the big one hit the ground rose up like water and crashed back down in chaos. There are still some places in tact but no one ever goes there. The ground is too unpredictable.

On normal days, when it doesn't rain, Boon and I try getting odd jobs to trade for food. Today we don't bother, even though there should be some good ones at the fields where they're

wheeling the covers over the crops to protect them from the worst of it. It'd be no use anyway; Boon gets too edgy around storms. I don't think she even realises she's doing it but she squeezes my hand a lot like she's checking I'm still there. I walk with her, trying to keep her preoccupied.

“Hope they can save that crop. It's better than last year,” I say to her.

“Better every year,” she says, nodding absently. She's watching the front door of Maykn's grocery. We can't see through the windows that are covered in soot and grime from many rains but we know what's just inside that door: fresh bread, corn crisps and apples. My stomach growls and I tug at her hand.

“He has a bunker,” she says. She's rooted her feet and I know there's no point in trying to leave even though Maykn won't take in any strays.

So, I ask Mackyn. I try. He's all grey and weathered like the town; like the rest of us. But his face is rounder and I can smell freshly baked bread wafting off of him.

“Sorry, Cal. No more space. You know what it's like – you gotta be here early. My food store's in jeopardy as it is...” Mackyn's voice trails off as Boon catches his eye. I know what he's seeing: her reed thin body in those oversized jeans, her high cheekbones that are a little too prominent on her face. That, and her obvious brokenness. She's a hard one to turn down but he manages it with a thin lie.

I nod. I know the drill: keep asking until you reach the crapyards and stuff yourself in with the rest of the homeless. Mackyn disappears into the dimness of his shop and I stand there, surrounded by the rich smells of food and my stomach cramps.

I glance out towards the one road leading out over the Barrens. It's a pale, dusty line in the middle of nothing; going nowhere. There's no one on the road now, no one risking the possibility of there being somewhere better, not with the rain coming. No one wants to be stuck out there in a storm with no shelter.

Concave is a like an oasis in the middle of all that dust – one of the last places where you can grow stuff in the ground thanks to the asteroid. The crops fields are hidden under their covers for now – all that food, just sitting there, unguarded during the rains. They'll find the dead bodies of a few desperate souls tomorrow. Boon and I haven't eaten for two days so I'm tempted to go out there myself. Tempted but not stupid.

Boon hovers at the doorway of the shop, the way the bullets from the sky gravitate towards their 'mother' in the Barrens. She doesn't want to leave. When you're hungry it's like everything else in your life goes blurry and all you can think about is food. That's why I don't blame Boon for what she did. Not at all.

When I come outside Boon is looking jittery and I sense trouble.

"Ready to go?" I ask.

"We can't," Boon mutters.

I stare at her. She's shuffling from foot to foot like she needs the toilet, her arms around her waist which is bulging unnaturally for her small body.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She looks at me pleadingly. "I took some food," she whispers and opens her jacket a fraction. I can see a small loaf of bread with a bite taken out of it and a packet of corn chips. My mouth waters even though I know what she's done is going to be the death of us. You steal in Concave and you're exiled to the Barrens – which is pretty much a death sentence.

Maykn ambles out of the front door, looking like he might have changed his mind.

Boon's eyes widen and suddenly he knows something's wrong even though she's closed her jacket. His eyes snap to the small display table with his neat rows of loaves, to the space where one is missing.

Boon bolts.

With the storm coming I have to follow as she picks her way towards the western edge. It's closer to the pit and it's not safe. The grocer shouts us a little way down the street but he wants to get underground like everyone else and he doesn't think we'll survive the storm anyway. We run beyond the edges of Concave, beyond the last of the still-standing houses and into the rubble. I don't want to lose sight of Boon - she's running so fast - so when I catch up I grab her hand and hold it tight in my own.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying to slow her down, sure we've lost Mackyn.

"To the Ice-Cream shop," she whispers.

Before I can ask another question she's taken off again, untangling herself from me and darting between the leftovers of fallen walls. I try to keep up but she gets further and further away until I lose her.

I remember my mother once bringing home a small bird that had fallen out of a nest. It was a pathetic little thing, barely alive. She nursed it back to health, calling it Clover. When our house caught on fire in the first storm, she dived back inside to get the bird. It was stupid but she came out cradling her little Clover. I think part of me felt that way about Boon. When I'd first met her she'd been sitting almost blind on the streets, holding out her cupped hands and not caring if there was nothing in them at the end of the day. I nursed her like that little bird of my mother's. I fed her and protected her and soothed her. She gave me a reason to be alive - I couldn't lose her now.

"Cal?" she calls me, just two meters ahead. She's waving me over.

I crawl through the dilapidated gap that used to be a doorway and step into a hollow room full of colour.

"Beautiful, right?" She says.

It is beautiful. The room is a mess and the stripes of colour on the walls are faded but when you live in Concave anything that isn't grey seems bright; it blasts from the bricks. Signs for the various ice-creams are suspended over empty, toppled basins. They have names like *Scrumptious Chocolate Surprise* and *Tantalising Lemon Sorbet*. Just the names make my mouth water. Boon is more interested in the wide blue door behind the counter. Boon expertly unlocks the combination levers and pulls the door open. It used to be a freezer but I can see it's since been put to better use. There are boxes of bottled water all over the place and in one corner there's a threadbare mattress with a pillow and rolled up blanket.

"You've been here before," I say. "This is where you've been disappearing to?"

She nods, staring at the mattress as if she doesn't like to remember it. "This is where I lived, after the first rain. I've been coming back to look for food." She heaves her small shoulders and stares at me. "I didn't know where else to go." I can see the pain is close to her now, as if she just lost her family a few minutes ago instead of a few years. Her eyes are boring into mine and everything is settling in, she's realising what we're about to face. "I feel safe here," she says.

The sirens start up in town. We have fifteen minutes until the rain hits. Fifteen minutes to get underground. I glance at the door as it shivers on its hinge. The storm is close.

"Don't go," she whispers in a tiny voice.

"It's not safe above ground, Boon."

“I can’t go back,” she says. “I don’t want to die like that.” She trembles, pulling her arms up to her chest like she’s cold. Only I know she’s not. She’s just scared.

“Mackyn won’t have had time to tell anyone – we could still hide in one of the edge bunkers and sneak out tomorrow,” I say. I’m desperate.

“I’m not going back,” she says, shaking her head again and again.

I know she’s right. There’s no going back now. I go over and wrap my arms around her, drawing her tiny body into my chest. I don’t want her to die either.

“We can’t stay above ground,” I say.

“What did they used to tell us in school? When there’s an earthquake climb inside the fridge?”

I laugh. “I think they said the doorway. And the bath for a hurricane. I don’t remember anyone saying anything about a fridge.”

“Well, this old thing is so many layers thick, nothing will get through it. Nothing’s got through yet. We’ll be safe in here.”

I look around the freezer. She’s right, there isn’t the slightest dent in the walls. I think about all this metal, surrounded by concrete and I wonder if it’s too good to be true. I hesitate as she presses herself into me. We’ve lost so much since the first storm. We’ve had days when we thought it might have been better if we’d just died with our families. I’m about to protest and she looks up at me with that face and I change my mind. Things are different now. And she doesn’t deserve the Barrens; not for being hungry.

“Please. Can’t we just stay here and take our chances?” she whispers. Her tears are close but they’re not the kind meant to reel me in. Not the kind that will dry up in a minute when she gets her way.

I grit my teeth when the sirens stop. Now would be the time to run. But we don’t.

“We’ll stay,” I say.

The storm is about to start, you can tell by the hum and hiss in the air, like a kettle about to boil. The sky’s brightening too, even though the sun went down two hours ago; those fiery tails make more light than you’d imagine. That dawn is a false promise though – there are still all these hours of night to get through, all these hours to try and stay alive.

I lie there on the mattress with Boon curled up against me as the earth vibrates beneath us, again and again. The impacts are close, we hear each one punch into the ground with a bullet

paced whack. If we survive it will be a miracle; like that little bird, like me finding Boon, like this freezer in the rubble of the western edge. Miracles are scarce in Concave but I seem to get my fair share of them so I'm going to hope for the best.

This story came 2nd in the NOVA Science Fiction and Fantasy competition in 2012.

IMITATION

Robotic log #47, 04.06.2089

Android model, Beta Class

(Also known as: Philip)

I have seen a marvel today - a human moving with the precision of a computed device. On conducting a survey scan I found no mechanical or electrical devices in his structure – of course, not all humans have these appendages, as Robert does. I have since discovered that they call this dance *the robot* and, according to my research, it is style of dance that evolved at the turn of the century.

I am curious as to why humans would want to imitate robots. They appear to be consistently fascinated by us; from popular science-fiction to the creation of AI machinery, they are captivated by our potential. And, in turn, we are captivated by theirs.

I will refer to ballet dancers: though a digital eye would pick up minor inconsistencies, they give the appearance of absolute precision. When skilfully done, they create near-perfect lines. I am interested in this as research on the human form and its potential, and what differentiates the average from the exceptional.

It will be noted that my owner, Robert Banks, has recently transformed into a dancer and perhaps this is the inspiration behind my current research. I communicate with his AI limb on occasion and we share notes on formula of movement. This informational exchange will prove to be helpful should I ever decide to experiment with dance. This kind of experimentation may become essential to my research.

Philip: 01.07.2089.

Philip opened his eyes, focusing on the location of the beeping noise coming from the open front door. His head swivelled 360 degrees, scanning the room for life signs. Robert had

left for the morning and forgotten to close the front door. It was becoming habit. Philip was not concerned about intruders or any such human fear - even in a neighbourhood like this - but that door ajar, skew in its frame, uneven with the wall, did tick off a few of his OCD inclinations. He was a robot after all, and inclined towards precision.

He did not move from his place on the couch, instead he mentally programmed all entrances and exits and the door slid closed without a sound. If he could feel relief, he would have felt it then. All the lines were straight, clean, ordered. It was as close as he was to being happy, he imagined.

As was his custom, he programmed some music, enjoying the familiar combination of notes. He was in the process of educating himself on Classical music. Last week he had educated himself on the Jazz greats. To his mind, where the music was notated in ones and zeroes, the genres did not seem as different as humans claimed. But then, Philip thought, it probably had to do with the emotions attached to the music. This he could not understand: how music and emotion were like a physical force to a human – so powerful it even made them move. And as it always did, this thought brought him back to Robert.

He logged into his task manager to see what Robert had set aside for him to do. There was only an empty log – Robert was forgetting to assign him tasks more often. He had become quite obsessed with dancing and whenever Philip logged into the AI limb's history, he could see that the man spent most of his waking hours practising his newly found skills. Philip did not yet know how to tell him that he would never have managed any of it unless the nano's had escaped. Humans liked to think they could do things on their own and they did not appreciate robots telling them otherwise.

Philip was rather impressed by these microscopic computers with minds of their own. Some inventive human had programmed them with dance formula's which were not part of the nano's usual code. He knew this because Robert's previous leg had given him no such side-effects. Philip tried to communicate with the mites but though they would allow him access to code logs and video feeds, they would not communicate with him in any sentient way. Philip was not a robot to keep pushing where he was not welcome – so he left the nano's to their own devices, keeping Robert safe and healthy as best he could.

The odd side effect for Philip though, was that he too had taken to an interest in dancing. And today, with all this free time stretching out in front of him, he decided he was going to attempt ballet. Literally.

Robert: 07.07.2089

Robert could feel every muscle in his body tense, contract and release almost of their own accord. He didn't decide what movements to do but when the music started, his body took over. He couldn't stop himself. Well, he supposed he could if he tried but to be honest, he didn't want to; he had never felt so free in his life.

The beat dropped to half time and his body followed; infinitesimal, robotic motions popping at every count. It was beautiful. He could watch himself in the mirror when he gathered the courage to look. It was always a scary moment when he saw himself move like that – it didn't feel like him; he didn't know how to do these things that came so easily to his body now.

“Great, Rob,” said Cebile, clapping her hands from the ballet bar. “Excellent. I've never seen that variation before – you've been practising.”

He hadn't. He nodded anyway, taking deep breaths, savouring the fierce pounding of his well-exerted heart. Cebile had been coaching him in between her other classes. Her dark, lithe shape was perfect for the various styles she did. He liked her. Even though she had all this training, her roots were deep in a far grittier part of Africa where dancers needed no lessons - they just let the music teach their bodies where to go.

“I'm thinking you might be ready for a battle. Nothing big, maybe just at the club round the corner? Or maybe in the park?” she said. She seemed so convinced, her face hopeful that he would finally give in to this after months of her coaxing. It felt wrong though. It felt like cheating when the moves weren't even his. And the number-crunching side of him, the accountant who still lurked in there somewhere, didn't like the idea of stepping so far over that line.

“No thanks, Ceb. I'm just here to dance. No other reason. I've got nothing to prove.”

It was true. He had no one in his life he needed to explain this to; no one except Dr Reddy, who had been asking odd questions. He looked worried all the time, that man.

“You sure? You'd kill out there - like leave corpses on the ground and get arrested.”

Robert laughed. “Maybe. But it's not really my scene.”

“Sure, sure. Eish, I don't know how to figure you. You're like a mystery, Mr Banks.”

“A mystery? I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Robert.

“Take it as whatever. I’m still going to keep hounding your ass until you give in.”

“Not going to happen,” said Robert. Today it was true.

A tingle ran down his leg as a taxi drove past outside. Its bass speakers made the window shudder in time with the deep beat. Music was becoming a dangerous thing for him – the desire to move was just too strong – and he wasn’t as young as he used to be.

Philip: 08.07.2089

Philip downloaded the last of the AI limb’s historical files surreptitiously. Robert’s moves were improving. It was hard to equate the man at the dinner table with the one in the video log. The dancer-Robert was lithe and exact, the dinner-eating-Robert was cumbersome and lethargic. It was as if he was experiencing some cybernetic schizophrenia. Philip wondered if it was going to become dangerous for him. He heard the faintly irregular beat of Robert’s heart – that hadn’t been there four weeks ago.

“You forgot to assign tasks for me today, Robert,” said Philip.

Robert looked up in surprise. “I did?”

“Yes. Is there anything you would like me to do for you tomorrow?”

Robert frowned and took a deep breath, as if thinking was difficult. “Um... not really. Nothing specific. Groceries maybe?”

“And would you like me to accompany you to your classes?”

“What for?” asked Robert, fumbling with his fork.

“To observe,” said Philip.

Philip saw a blush creep into Robert’s cheeks, his face heating half a degree. His right hand rubbed at his leg, three centimetres above the join to his AI limb.

“There’s no use for you there, Philip,” said Robert.

Philip’s processors slowed slightly. Robots were useful. They were only useful, nothing else.

“I would like to conduct some research for Dr. Reddy,” Philip said, making himself useful. He was certain Dr. Reddy would be glad for the information even if he had not requested it. It was not so much prediction as it was inevitable logic.

Robert stared at Philip, his face suspicious. “Did Dr. Reddy ask you?”

“Yes.” Robots must be useful. He was only being useful. Sitting at home with no assignments was not being useful.

Robert’s eyes dropped to his plate and his jaw tightened. He shrugged. “Sure, whatever.”

“Should I set myself for 5am?” Philip asked.

“Sure,” said Robert. “So, what did you do all day with no assignments? Power down?”

“I practised ballet,” said Philip.

Robert finally looked up from his plate.

Robert: 09.07.2089

The dance studio was a white walled room with tinted floor to ceiling windows on one side and a wall of mirrors and a ballet bar on the other. It was narrow and the wood-sprung floor echoed strangely, especially when Philip stepped onto it. Robert felt acutely aware of his AI limb with Philip walking beside him. Philip was a fairly short android, one of the earlier models that Robert could afford after the accident, without the skin graft – he was just chrome in the shape of a human. Philip had been his nursemaid, his cook, his grocer... Robert wouldn’t have survived without him. But right then, in this recently sacred space of the dance studio, he felt unsettled by the android’s presence.

“A robot?” asked Cebile. She eyed him up and down.

“Philip,” said Robert. “He’s here to... observe.”

“Weird but whatever,” she shrugged. “So long as he stays at the bar and doesn’t interfere.”

“I will not interfere,” said Philip, surprising Cebile. “Unless you would like me to demonstrate what I have learnt about form and art of ballet.”

Robert and Cebile both burst out laughing and before Robert could stop her, Cebile said, “Sure, why not.”

Robert stood open mouthed as Philip took to the dance floor without hesitation.

“Do you have any music?” he asked, standing in perfect first position.

“Not the kind you can do ballet to,” said Cebile.

“Any music will do,” said Philip.

Cebile shrugged and tapped the icon in the mirror that held her playlist. She grinned to herself when a song with a particularly fast and heavy base line filled the room. Robert's AI leg tingled.

Robert watched as Philip came alive – his chrome body flexing into perfect lines, balancing on his feet as though he were made of straw rather than metal. He leapt into the air, his legs splitting into a straight line and landed, catlike, on the boards. He was doing ballet – ballet to hip-hop music, as if those contrasting forms belonged together like a pair of long lost lovers. When the song ended, Robert was breathless. He couldn't believe what he had just seen – it was perfection... and it was a travesty.

“Was that satisfactory? I have been practising for an entire week,” said Philip, his glass eyes blinking once and twice.

“A week?” asked Cebile, turning to look at Robert with something akin to betrayal. “You starting a new trend, Mr. Banks?”

“What do you mean? You think I trained him?” asked Robert.

“Well, you're pretty obsessed with this dance thing. You're here every day, you don't stop.”

“Yes, I'm *here*. When would I have time to train...”

“I am self-taught,” said Philip. His neutral voice felt out of place. “I learned from online tutorials and old film archives. It is very easy once you understand the angles and formulas...”

“For a robot,” said Cebile. “Easy for a robot...” she paused and looked down at Robert's AI limb. “A robot!”

“I'm not a robot,” he said, startled by the accusation.

“You're half one. You're a... cyborg thing. You're... maybe you're so good because you're less human than the rest of us.”

“I am human,” he said. “All of me... most of me...”

“You are, in fact, growing to be less human every day, Robert,” said Philip matter-of-factly. “Your AI limb has transferred some of its nano's into your system and it is slowly taking over. It is to your benefit, for the most part...”

“It's done what?” Robert asked. He felt the blood drain from his face, the stub of his leg tingling uncomfortably.

Robotic log #62, 17.08.2090

Android model, Beta Class

(Also known as: Philip)

I have discovered that dancing is dangerous and that a robot who can dance is not as useful as one would think. I can list many uses for a dancing robot but humans do not concur. As I have stated before, they are an independent species who like to imagine they can do everything on their own. Like me, Robert has been 'decommissioned' to some degree. His AI limb was removed and he has been relegated to a psychiatric facility while he recovers from the trauma of this newly labelled condition called, *Cybernetic Violation*. The nano's have been mostly removed, but there are a few left which were so fused to his brain stem that they could not be removed without endangering his life. And so, dancing-Robert has once again become ordinary-Robert; dinner-eating-Robert. I do not think he will ever recover from his love of dance, despite the fact that his body can no longer perform the moves he remembers.

I am not quite so damaged. I have a new point of research: composition. I plan to play Robert my latest composition as soon as they allow me to visit. Perhaps it will soothe him. A robot must remain useful after all.

This story came 1st in the SAWC Science-Fiction competition 2013.