

Readercon 21

Souvenir Book

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Welcome!

Whether you are an old friend or a newcomer, on behalf of the Readercon Committee, we welcome you to Readercon 21.

The Readercon Committee is filled with some of the most intelligent and hardest working people we know. They have dedicated untold hours putting this convention together year after year. We are grateful to all Committee, staff, and volunteers who help us make Readercon a unique place.

We work together for you, our fellow readers, and hope that you enjoy yourself this weekend. We've been successful if you learn something new about your favorite subject, discover six new authors before breakfast, or rediscover a treasured book or story from your past.

And when Readercon is over, remember to pass your love of imaginative literature on to others. Be a good parent, aunt, uncle, or friend who introduces both kids and adults to what we like to read. This is the way to sustain the spirit of Readercon.

We often read that these are the best of times and the worst of times for the reader. Readercon works to make sure that some of the very best is right here—within our grasp and available to all.

Have a fantastic Readercon!

B. Diane Martin
Chair & Co-CEO, Readercon, Inc.

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Nalo Hopkinson



Photo: D.C. Findlay

I have wondered, though not often, what it was exactly that Alexander the Great learned from his tutor Aristotle. I doubt that the venerable philosopher offered a seminar on conquering the world, and it's hard to imagine that dialectic figured in the defeat of Darius.

I'm still not sure what I was trying to impart to Nalo Hopkinson during the three years when she was my writing student. She came to me fully-grown, like Athena, with a couple of acclaimed novels in print and a contract for her work-in-progress.

In time we began functioning essentially as colleagues, for it happened that we were both wrestling with pathologically ambitious historical novels.

While Nalo provided astute reactions to my embryonic *Last Witchfinder*, her putative mentor critiqued the manuscript eventually published as *The Salt Roads*. Reviewing Nalo's novel on Amazon.com, Laun Gaines got it right: "Hopkinson has penned a fantastical tale of empowerment and joyful sexuality, but accomplishes much more: the intoxicating prose entertains and informs, indicting the brutal institution of slavery. Guided by the author's powerful intuition, take this exceptional journey, as mysterious as the world of the spirit and as real as the steel chains that bind the limbs of those bought and sold." So did Blissengine: "Much like *Godmother Night* by Rachel Pollack and *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ, this novel reaches

beyond the confines of genre to sing passionately with new rhythms." I am proud to have been present at the creation.

One can easily imagine an alternative-universe Nalo Hopkinson taking her postmodernly marketable, attractive résumé—African heritage, Caribbean coordinates, feminist sensibility, politically transgressive-discomfiting, voice of a plenary eroticism, to say nothing of a gorgeous smile—and parlaying it into celebrity status, accompanied by regular attention from media establishments

both bourgeois and countercultural. But Nalo has instead elected to labor in the marginalized field of artistically ambitious, linguistically felicitous speculative fiction, knowing that she'll reliably reach a small but by no means dismissible demographic comprising open, eager, and hungry minds. While I would be the first to celebrate the advent of a Hopkinson title on the *New York Times* bestseller list or the appearance of a Hopkinson grin on *The View*, I salute her present choices. Our Guest of Honor has figured out how to make writing its own reward, and anyone who delves into her stories and novels will immediately perceive that in this case the reward is a pearl of great price and a ruby red with the blood of a seer.

James Morrow

Emily Breakfast

by Nalo Hopkinson

(previously published in *TOK 5: Writing the New Toronto*, Zephyr Press, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2010)

With thanks to writer and performer Elena Rose Sims, for inspiring work and for introducing me to the real Lunch, Dinner and Emily Breakfast.

Cranston woke into a bougainvillea-petalled morning, a rosy-fingered dawn of a morning. Soft, pinkish sunlight was streaming its way down from the bedroom skylight, his husband Sir Maracle was sprawled and snoring gently beside him, and Rose of Sharon was crouched on his chest, eyes closed in bliss, the low, vibrating hum of her purring making sleepy syncopation with Sir Maracle's snores. Her bliss was doubtless because she'd found an especially helpful ray of sunshine that not only kissed her with its warmth, but bathed her in glowing light which displayed the highlights in her chestnut fur to a most flattering advantage.

Cranston stretched and sighed, which caused Rose of Sharon to open kiwi-green eyes at him and chirp a single questioning mewl. She wanted her kibble. She always wanted her kibble, and most mornings, either Cranston or Sir Maracle had to stop in the middle of their scurrying about dressing for their j.o.bees to serve Rose of Sharon a big scoopful of kibble into one of her yellow-green bowls (the bowls matched her eyes), and to wash and fill the other with fresh water from the tap in the kitchen.

But there was to be no scurrying this morning. This was the first morning of the blessed furlough that was the weekend. The j.o.bee could go hang for two days, and there was a bedroom full of morning light, his man sleeping by his side, and Rose of Sharon basking on his chest.

With one hand, Cranston shovelled Rose of Sharon gently off him. She made a lazily offended mraow and landed thump on all fours on the floor. Cranston swung out of bed, grabbed his dressing gown from the hook on the wall, and threw it on. He shuffled his feet into his slippers. He stepped over a leather blindfold and a wooden paddle that

had been tossed onto the floor and tiptoed out of the bedroom. He could put the toys away later. Now, it was time for breakfast. Rose of Sharon wove infinity symbols around his ankles with each step he took. This weekend morning, that felt like endearing affection, not exasperating annoyance. Though he still closed her out of the bathroom while he did his morning ablutions.

When he got out of there, Rose of Sharon was busily cleaning and preening herself with her rough tongue, stretching out her pinions till each individual feather at their tips separated from the others. When she saw him, she snapped to and got to her feet. She rubbed herself against his ankles, purring, until he bent to scratch the back of her neck. He dug his fingers into her scruff and scratched. She closed her eyes in purry bliss. He tried twice to stop, but she butted her head against his hand, begging. So he kept at it a little while more.

But it really was time for breakfast. Cranston straightened up. "Come on, then," he said. Rose of Sharon chirruped a complaint at him for stopping so soon, but she trotted beside him into the kitchen. He scooped her a scoopful of kibble from the big brown paper sack that lived behind the kitchen door. She stalked in circles, her tail an exclamation mark of impatience, until he put her bowl down and she could fall upon it like a hawk upon a mouse. While Rose of Sharon was delicately wolfing down her kibble, Cranston had a look into the 'fridge. There was bacon, there was butter, and the bread was still fresh. There was spinach in the garden. It needed only eggs to make the meal complete. "Time to visit the sisters," he told Rose of Sharon. It was time to let them out of the coop and into their run, anyway.

Cranston let Rose of Sharon out the kitchen door ahead of him, and stepped out into the backyard, along the crazy-paving path that led to the vegetable garden and the chicken coop. He was picturing how he would manage, since of course he'd forgotten to fetch a basket from the kitchen, and of course he wasn't of a mind to go back and get one. He figured spinach first, almost filling one of the big pockets of his dressing gown. One egg cushioned safely on top





of that. The second egg in the other dressing gown pocket. He'd have to walk gently then. Once he'd gone too quickly and had had to wash raw egg and eggshells out of his dressing gown pocket. The third egg he would cradle in one hand, leaving the other free to let himself back into the house.

He picked a batch of spinach from the garden, shaking the occasional slug off the leaves, led on by the image of crisp-cooked rashers of bacon, six each for him and Sir Maracle, laid out on the big blue oval serving platter. Bed of barely steamed spinach in the middle of the platter, fried eggs arrayed on top, their edges crispy and their yolks over easy. To keep him company, Rose of Sharon tracked in among the beds of spinach, basil, chives and oregano and pointed out more slugs to him. She didn't eat them. She'd tried that once, gotten herself a mouthful of slime for her trouble, and had never tried it again. The only thing Rose loved more than tracking slugs was getting the back of her neck scritchd. "You've got to be part hounddog," he teased her. She gave him a bland stare and switched to chasing butterflies. Problem was, of course, that butterflies flit and flutter, while Rose of Sharon was more the 'soar and dive' type of flying cat. Although she could fly more quickly than they did, the butterflies changed direction on a dime, and she couldn't do that. She almost never caught one. Or perhaps that was part of the fun. When she did catch one, she'd crush it down to the ground under one paw, lift the paw and shake it delicately, and look in a kind of nonplussed way at the brightly coloured smear she'd created. It was as though her playmate had out of the blue chosen to grab his bat and ball and go home.

Cranston layered the spinach into both pockets of his dressing gown, along with some basil and chives. The sweet smell of the basil and the sharp, fresh smell of the chives rose into his nostrils and made his tummy rumble. He got to his feet. "Come along, Rose."

Rose gave a brief, cattish 'yip,' batted ineffectively at one more butterfly, and landed at Cranston's feet. She flapped her wings shut and inquired whether she might have a scritch for the road.

"Not right now, girl," Cranston said. So she sighed and walked along beside him as he made his way to the chicken coop.

As they got close to it, her ears perked. She sniffed the air, and her eyes went avid. Rose loved her some stewed chicken, and ever since Cranston and Sir Maracle had gotten the three hens, she'd suspected she might be partial to raw, recently-hunted-down-by-Rose chicken as well. "No, Rose," said Cranston. "I keep telling you, they're not good

for you." He gently pushed her aside with one foot while he opened the framed wire gate to the run and let himself in. She sat on the grass outside the run and evil-eyed him, her fur twitching in that way cats have when they're chagrined.

The chicken run was a wire mesh pen with the wooden chicken coop at one end of it. Cranston scooped a scoopful of feed from the big bag they kept under the coop; much like feeding Rose each morning, it was. He opened the little door to the coop and began scattering the feed on the dirt ground of the run. He called out to the three chickens: "Here, Lunch; here, Dinner; here, Emily Breakfast!" The names had been Sir Maracle's little joke. But Emily Breakfast had already had a name when they'd gotten her and her sisters from the animal rescue, so they'd let her keep it, and just added her new name on at the end. Cranston doubted that any of the hens either knew or cared that they had names, but it was the principle of the thing.

Hearing him call, the hens inside the dark coop began to cluck excitedly. Dinner, brick red with white feathers scalloped in amongst the red ones, rushed through the little door first. She almost always did. She hopped down to the ground and started pecking up feed, just as Lunch put in her appearance. Lunch was a kind of yellowish-brown that matched her beak. She was plump and round. "If you don't watch it, girl," teased Cranston, "you won't be able to get out the door pretty soon."

Of course she ignored him and hopped down to the ground with a clumsy half flap of her wings. She started pecking up feed faster than Dinner, keeping one eye on Dinner and rushing her every so often to scare her off a bit of feed that Lunch had had her eye on.

Emily Breakfast was late to the feast today.

"Emily?" Cranston called. No Emily.

"Come on, lazybones. Or are you trying to make sure I don't get your egg?"

He stuck his head inside the coop. In the darkness he could make out the three straw-filled nests, side by side. Lunch had laid a brown egg, and Dinner her usual white one with purple spots.

The third nest was empty. No egg, no Emily Breakfast. Cranston yanked his head out of the coop, banging the back of his skull on the jamb of the tiny door as he did so. He barely noticed. "Rose of Sharon, did you get in here and make off with Emily Breakfast?"

Rose looked hurt. And actually, there were no signs of a struggle in the run; no feathers, no blood. Cranston looked all around the coop and the run, and finally had to admit it. Emily Breakfast was

gone. Disappeared. Like the poultry Rapture had come.

Cranston left the henhouse and rushed past a baffled Rose. Yelling for Sir Maracle, he barreled in through the kitchen door. Sir was up and washing the dishes left in the sink from last night's dinner. He was also naked. Ordinarily, Cranston would have stopped to admire his husband's fine brown form; the broad shoulders that narrowed to a lithe waist, the firm swells of his ass and thighs below. Not today. Well, not for long, anyway. "Emily Breakfast's been rustled!" he told Sir Maracle.

"What?" Sir turned away from his washing up to face Cranston.

"She's gone! Gone away clean! Not even an egg, not even a feather! What are we going to do?"

"You're sure she's not hiding somewhere in the coop?"

"There's nowhere in there to hide. The straw's not thick enough to cover a mouse."

"Rose of Sharon didn't get in and cause mayhem?"

"I don't think so, Sir. I think a two-legged miscreant got into the henhouse and took her away from us."

"Chickens walk on two legs," said Sir musingly. "And kangaroos, sometimes."

"That's not—"

Sir frowned. "Let me put some pants on." He came and took Cranston's hand, gave him a kiss. "We'll figure this out."

"We have to find her soon. Before she becomes just breakfast, no Emily."

"I know, love."

While Sir was getting dressed, Cranston started in on making breakfast. He'd forgotten to take the two eggs that had been in the nests, but he didn't have any taste for them right now. Not with Emily Breakfast missing and probably in peril. It'd have to be just bacon and spinach. Cranston laid strips of bacon into a frying pan on the stove. Into another frying pan he put butter, garlic and the chopped herbs.

Sir came back into the kitchen. He ground some coffee beans and put the coffee on to perk.

The butter in the frying pan had melted and was starting to smoke. Cranston tossed in the spinach, covered the pan, turned the heat off.

"Sit," said Sir, pulling a couple of stools out from under the kitchen counter. "Let me serve." He knew that nothing melted Cranston's heart more than when he flipped the script a little.

Cranston beamed his thanks at Sir, but he was too preoccupied to show his full appreciation. "What are we going to do about Emily Breakfast?"

And the bacon needs turning."

Sir leapt to rescue the bacon before it burned. "I figure we search the yard first, in case she got out of the henhouse somehow." He set out two mugs, began pouring fragrant coffee into them.

Cranston nodded. "Makes sense. And I'll check with the neighbours. She could have gotten over the fence."

Sir flipped the bacon out of the pan onto some folded paper towel. He began serving it onto two plates, then gasped and stopped. He looked stricken. "Have you checked out in the street?"

"Oh, my god." Cranston shoved his stool back and ran out the front door. Sir was right behind him. They went up and down their street, in both directions. There was no Emily Breakfast roadkill to be seen. Sir breathed a sigh of relief.

By now, their neighbours had begun to notice the two of them looking. Sally and Beth offered to call the police. "For a chicken?" said Sir Maracle.

So Sally and Beth sent their eleven year-old son Juniper to knock on everyone's doors and ask permission to look in their yards for Emily Breakfast. Morrigan, June and Sam's daughter Sabina went with him. She was two years younger, and had a bit of a crush on Juniper. In the meantime, June was broadcasting the news to the neighbourhood via her herd of messenger lizards. Herd?

"What do you call a group of lizards, anyway?" Cranston asked her.

June frowned as she used a length of bright blue ribbon to tie a tiny rolled-up note around the middle of a squirming three-inch long lizard. "You know, I've never known the official term for it? I just call them a 'scuttle.'" She released the lizard. "Off you go, Baby. When you come back, Mama'll feed you some nice fresh crickets." She sighed. "If it comes back, that is. If it's not losing them to predators, it's message recipients that want to keep them."

Mr. Finkelstein brought out some lemonade for Cranston and Sir Maracle. "Fresh-squeezed," he said proudly.

Cranston muttered to Sir, "I'd really rather have my coffee." But they both politely drank their lemonade down while Mr. Finkelstein sat in the rocking chair on his porch and beamed at them.

By the time they got back to their house, half the neighbourhood was either mobilized or alerted in the search for Emily Breakfast, and Rose of Sharon was on the kitchen counter, gobbling down the last of the bacon. Cranston scolded her and packed her back outside.

Sir sighed. "At least someone got to eat it before it got cold."





"I'll go get the two eggs from the henhouse."

As reports came in from all over the neighbourhood, it became obvious that Emily Breakfast hadn't gone walkabout. Not on her own, at least. Cranston was beside himself. He'd been polishing the padded leather bench in the play room, but his mind wasn't on it. "Who d'you think would want to steal Emily Breakfast?" he asked Sir, who was arranging paddles on the wall in a row according to size.

Sir considered. "Someone hungry?"

"Oh, don't. I can't bear to think about it. Besides, there's probably no-one in this city who has a clue how to pluck and" —he swallowed —"gut a chicken."

"I do. My ma used to keep chickens when we lived out Manitoulin Way."

"But you didn't take her, did you?" Cranston was feeling snappish.

"No, of course not."

Cranston sighed. "I'm sorry. I just worry that we're running out of time." He polished a little while longer, then said, "Wanna go sit out in the backyard?"

"You just want to check the yard for her again, don't you?"

"We might have overlooked her somehow. Don't you think?"

Sir thought about it, nodded. "We might have." But he didn't look very hopeful about it. "When we get her back, I'm putting a proper padlock on the door to their run, instead of a latch."

Cranston was already halfway up the stairs to the main floor.

Outside, the early afternoon sun was the soft yellow-white of Emily Breakfast's plumage. Sunlight glowed through the leaves of spinach and the low grass that covered the rest of the backyard. The leaves gleamed a delicious kiwi green, the same colour as Rose of Sharon's eyes. Sir and Cranston sat in their adirondack chairs and pretended to be enjoying the sunshine. Rose pestered them for scratches, but they both got tired of it pretty soon. In a huff, Rose wandered off to do cattish things.

Sir said, "Suppose we don't get her back?"

"Let's not get her back first before we think about that, okay?"

Sir thought his way through that twisty sentence, gave an unhappy nod. Then he said, "Silly cat. Stop that."

"What's she up to now?" Cranston turned to look. Rose of Sharon was tracking through the grass in front of the henhouse, her nose to the ground and her head weaving from side to side, picking up the scent.

Picking. Up. The. Scent.

Sir must have been thinking the same thing, because he asked, "Maybe it's you she's smelling? You went to the henhouse this morning."

Rose turned towards the stone paving path that ran along the side of the house to the front. "I didn't go that way," Cranston replied. He and Sir Maracle looked at each other. Rose of Sharon was on the trail of whoever had been in the henhouse last night. Sir Maracle went and undid the latch on the henhouse door.

Cranston stood. "Here, kittykitty." He tried to grab Rose of Sharon and missed. His foot slid on the grass and he went down. Sir Maracle leapt to help him up. He must have pulled the henhouse door open when he did so, and that was the moment that Rose chose to switch directions and dash into the henhouse. "Oh shit!" said Cranston. "Never mind me; get Rose!"

"Screw Rose. Is your ankle okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Get Rose!"

But Sir Maracle was already helping Cranston up instead.

A godawful noise came from the henhouse; a cross between a growling and a crowing. It made the little hairs on Cranston's arms stand straight up. Rose was in the middle of the run, standing very still in a stalking pose, one front leg raised to take another step. But she looked more startled than stalkerish; in front of her, Lunch and Dinner had puffed their feathers and drawn their bodies up to full size, which was a good six inches taller than they usually showed. Rose took an uncertain step closer to them. Dinner screeched another challenge. This one came with a small spurt of fire from her nostrils. Her spurs, normally tucked harmlessly against the sides of her legs, descended. Cranston made it into the run just as Dinner and Lunch, snorting Bunsen burner-sized flames, both lunged spurs first for Rose. He pulled Rose out from under. Lunch's thrust gouged a line down his forearm. "Ow!" He tucked Rose under his forearm and hightailed it out of the chicken run. Sir slammed the gate shut behind him. Cranston put Rose down on the ground. She shook herself and stared disbelievingly into the run. Lunch and Dinner, chests out, were stomping around the run, glaring at her. They were still blowing little puffs of smoke from their nostrils.

Sir knelt and stroked Rose. "Now do you see why we don't want you in there?" he asked her. "Chickens are descended from dragons, you idiot."

"Now they're never going to let her in there long enough to get Emily Breakfast's scent."

Sir looked at the chickens that were slowly

deflating again as they calmed down. "I'm beginning to think that Emily Breakfast might be able to defend herself."

"Against a cat, yes. But against a human?"

"I don't know what else to do, love. Come. Let's clean out that cut."

"Wait! Check Rose out."

Rose of Sharon was tracking again. They followed her along the paved stone pathway to the front of the house, where she veered off to the wall that ran along the front of their property. She leapt to the top of the wall with a flap of her wings. She sniffed around the top of the wall for a second, then leapt down to the ground outside their property.

"Bastard came over the wall," said Cranston. "Find her, Rose! Go find Emily Breakfast!"

Rose didn't even look up. She just kept following the trail.

Sir put one arm around Cranston. "D'you think that'll really work? It's one thing to track a slug through the spinach patch, but a human?"

"We still don't know that it was a human. Don't foxes get into henhouses?"

"Damn. Let's hope Rose doesn't corner a fox."

"Shit! I didn't think of that."

But though they went looking for Rose, calling out her name, they couldn't find her, either. They finally gave up and went back home. "We keep this up," said Cranston gloomily, "and we won't have any pets left."

A screech split the air of a peaceful Saturday afternoon. It was coming from down the street. Sir sighed. "What now?"

"Ow! Get off me! Stop that!" June was stumbling up the street towards them. She was waving her hands above her head. "Not the hair, you mange-ridden fleabag!" She was actually being harried in their direction. Rose of Sharon flew above her, dive-bombing her head from time to time with outstretched claws. And worrying at her ankles with spurs extended and the occasional tiny gout of flame —

"Emily Breakfast!" Cranston flung himself through the gate and out into the street.

Emily Breakfast was magnificent. Sunlight glowed white-hot on her feathers. She was at full height, her neck all snaky. She strutted angrily, growl-shrieking her challenge at June.

When they got closer, Rose landed on the pavement and butted her head against Cranston's shin, but Emily kept circling June, doing that hair-raising growl and menacing her with her spurs. June's ankles were covered in long red welts.

June stumbled to a halt, her chest heaving.

"Those animals are dangerous!" she said to Cranston, doing a little leap to avoid another welting from Emily Breakfast. "I'm going to call the pound to take them away!"

Cranston crossed his arms. "You may want to first explain to them why you trespassed onto our premises to steal one of them. Emily, it's okay. Stop now."

"Why should you guys have all the cool pets?" raged June. "Three chickens! You'd think you could have spared one of them!"

"Excuse me? Who's the one with the trained messenger lizards?"

June scowled. Then she yipped, jumped to one side, and started batting at her ankle. Emily Breakfast had taken one more shot, and had set June's sock on fire with a snort of flame. Then Emily Breakfast turned tail and squawking, did a waddling run over to Cranston, her wings held out at her sides, for all the world like an alarmed chicken. Which she was, after all. She was just the kind who got feisty when cornered. Cranston was so proud of her! He crouched down, but Emily Breakfast ran right through his welcoming open hands. She crouched under his butt and stuck her head out, quarreling at June from the safe shelter of Cranston's body.

Sir Maracle had come over to join them. "Give it up, June. I'm beginning to think there's a reason that so many of your lizards try to run away and never come back."

"June," said Cranston, "Go home. Maybe you'll be the one getting a visit from the animal shelter people."

June huffed. Rose yowled at her. June took a step backwards. "She would have been too much trouble, anyway. Little bitch dropped an egg on my head."

Sir laughed. "Good girl, Emily Breakfast."

June glared at them and stumped off towards her home.

Rose leapt out of Sir's arms. She hunkered down and peered under Cranston at Emily Breakfast. From a safe distance. Emily was back down to normal size. She stepped slowly out of Cranston's lee, towards Rose. Rose got to her feet, ready to flee or fly. But Emily didn't charge, didn't swell. Her spurs remained sheathed. When she got close enough, Rose stuck her nose out and sniffed Emily Breakfast's scent. Emily Breakfast stretched her neck out. With her beak, she scratched the back of Rose of Sharon's neck, the way birds do to show affection to each other. Rose sighed and closed her eyes in bliss. Emily Breakfast kept it up a good, long while.





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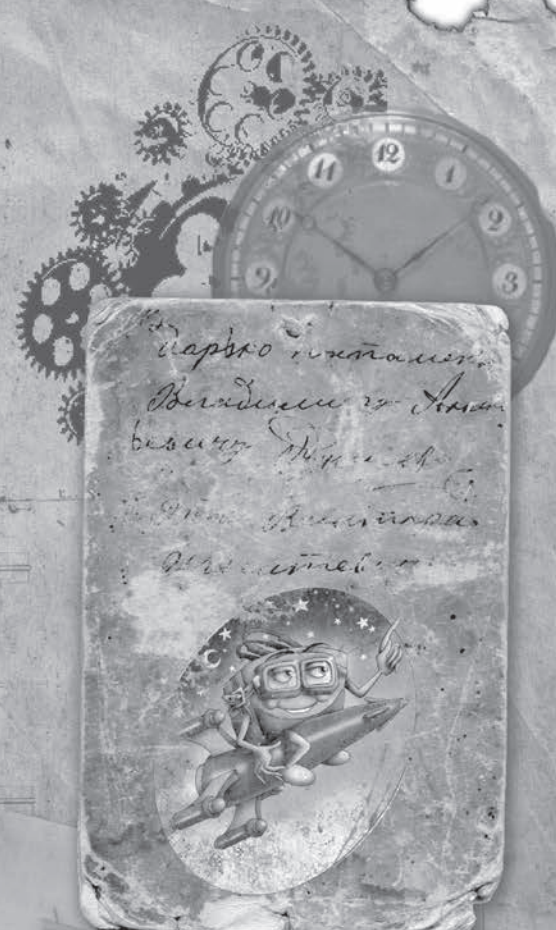
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Charles Stross

Extract from *Rule 34*



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ANWAR: Job Interview

Four weeks earlier...

In the end it all boils down to this: you'd do anything for your kids. *Anything*. So: does this make you a bad da?

That's what Mr. Webber just pointed out to you—rubbed your nose in, more like—leaning forward in his squeaky office chair and wagging the crooked index-finger of righteousness.

"I say this more in sorrow than in anger, Anwar"—that's how he eases himself into one of the little sermons he seems to get his jollies from. You're the odd one out in his regular client case-load, coming from what they laughably mistake for a stable family background: you're not exactly Normal for Neds. So he harbours high hopes of adding you to the 12 month did-not-reoffend column on his departmental report, and consequently preaches at you during these regular scheduled self-criticism sessions. As if you didn't get enough of that shite from Aunt Sameena already: you've already got it off by heart. So you nod apologetically, duck your head and remember to make eye contact just like the NLP book says, exuding apologetic contrition and remorse until your probation officer drowns in it.

But Mr. Webber—fat, fifty-ish, with a framed row of sheepskins proclaiming his expertise in social work lined up on the wall behind him—might just have got your number down with a few digits more precision than you'd like to admit. And when he said, *I know you want to give Naseem and Farida the best start in life you can afford, but have you thought about the kind of example you're setting them?*—It was a palpable strike, although the target it struck wasn't perhaps quite the one Mr. Webber had in mind.

He must have seen something in your expression that made him think he'd gotten through to you, so rather than flogging the dead horse some more he shovelled you out of his office, with a stern admonition to send out more job applications and email a progress report to him next Thursday. He

didn't bother giving you the usual social worker crap about seeking a stable lifestyle—he's already clocked that you've got one, if not that it's so stable you're asphyxiating under the weight of it. (See: Not Normal for Neds, above.)

And so you duck your head and tug your non-existent forelock and shuffle the hell out of the interview suite and away from the probation service's sticky clutches—until your next appointment.



It is three on a Thursday afternoon and you're out of your weekly probation interview early. You've got no job to go to, unless you count the skooshy piecework you've been doing on your cousin Tariq's dating website—using his spare pad and paid for in cash, which you are careful to forget about when discussing income opportunities with Mr. Webber and his colleagues—and you've not got the guts to go home to Bibi and the weans in mid-afternoon and hang around while she cooks dinner in that eloquently expressive silence she's so good at, that translates as *when are you going to get a real job?* It's not like you've been out of Saughton long enough to get your legs back under the table anyway; and on top of that, you're not supposed to use a network device without filling out a bunch of forms and letting Mr. Webber's nice technical support people bug it (which would tend to rule out your usual forms of employment, at least for the nonce).

Which can mean only one thing: *it's pub time*.

To be a Muslim living in Scotland is to be confronted by an existential paradox, insofar as Scotland has pubs the way Alabama has Baptist churches. Everyone worships at the house of the tall fount, and it's not *just* about drinking (although a lot of that goes on). Most of the best jobs you've ever had came from a late night encounter at the pub—and paid work too, for that matter. You're not a good Muslim—in fact you're a piss-poor one, as your criminal record can attest—but some residual sense of shame prompts you to try and keep the bad bits of your life well away from the family home.

Compartmentalisation, Mr. Webber would call it. Anyway, you figure that as long as you avoid the fermented fruit of the vine you're not *entirely* doing it wrong: the Prophet said nothing against Deuchars IPA, did he?

The more devout and twitchy-curtained neighbours don't know anything about your private life, and you want to keep it that way: our neighbour Anwar, he's a good family man, they say. And if you want the free baby-sitters and community bennies you'd better keep it that way. So you are discreet: you avoid the local boozers and are at pains never to go home with beer or worse on your breath.

Which is why you go about your business in a snug little pub that sits uphill from the top of Easter Road, close by the Royal Terrace Gardens for a wee outing afterwards.

Of course, going to the pub is not wholly risk-free. For starters there's your phone, set to snitch on your location to the Polis—and if they call, you'd better be there to give them a voiceprint. (It's not like you can leave it at home: you've done the custodial part of your sentence but you're still under a supervision order, and carrying a phone is part of the terms and conditions, just like wearing a leg tag used to be.)

Your phone copies them on everything you text or read online, and you heard rumours when you were inside—that the Polis spyware could recognize keywords like "hash" or "dosh". You figure that's just the kind of stupid shite paranoid jakies make up to explain why they got huckled for shoplifting on their second day out of prison—but you can't prove it isn't so, which is why you keep a dirty sock rolled over the phone's lower half. (And your *real* phone is a pay-as-you-go you got Bibi to buy for you "for the job hunting.")

But anyway: *pub time*.

You're in the back room, surfing on a pad borrowed from the bar as you work your way down



Photo by kind permission of Ace

your second pint, when the Gnome materialises at your left elbow with a pot of wheat beer and a gleam in his eye. "Good afternoon to you, Master Hussein! Mind if I join you?" The Gnome is a vernacular chameleon: going by his current assumed accent—plummy cod upper-class-twit—you figure he's in an expansive mood.

You nod warily. The Gnome is not your friend—he's nobody's friend but his own—but you understand him well enough, and he's interesting company. You've even spent a couple of relaxing afternoons in his bed, although he's not really your type. "Bent as a seven bob note,"

the Cardinal pronounced him when the subject of trust came up in conversation: "yes, but *he disnae get caught*," you pointed out. On paper he's a fine, upstanding member of the community; despite looking like the personification of Uncle Fester cosplay fandom, he even managed to get himself elected as town councillor in some deity forsaken hole in Galashiels. (Probably on the Hairy Twat vote. You can persuade the remaining students at Herriot-Watt's out of town campus to vote for *anything*, if you get them drunk enough, and there's precious little else to do out there.) "Have a seat."

The Gnome sighs appreciatively and smacks his lips, then sits in contemplation of his beer for a minute or two. "What brings you to my office today?"

"The usual." You frown. The Gnome claims to work for the university computer science department, on some big make-work scheme called ATHENA, but he seems to spend most of his time in the back rooms of pubs: you figure he's most likely working on his own side-projects. (He maintains that nobody can earn a full-time living in academia any more, and who's to say he's wrong?) "I've just had my weekly sermon and I don't need a second serving right now."

The Gnome chuckles, a quiet hiccupping noise



like a vomiting cat. “I take your point.” He necks another mouthful of beer. “And is business good?”

“Don’t be daft, Adam.” You switch off the pad. “I’ve only been out two months; my mobie’s running six different kinds of Polis spyware and I can’t even surf for porn without official permission. What do *you* think business is like?”

The Gnome looks duly thoughtful. “What you need is a line of work that is above reproach,” he declares after a while. “A business that you can conduct from a cosy wee office, that is of such utter respectability that if they’re getting on your tits you can complain about how shocked, shocked! you are and they’ll back off.”

“I couldna hack the law courseware you pointed me at,” you remind him. “And besides, I’ve got a record now.”

He’s shaking his head. “No. No-no-no. I was thinking...” He cocks his head on one side, as he does when he’s hatching one of his malicious little schemes. “I was thinking, how would you like to be *an honorary consul?*”

“A *what?*” Visions of a residence on Calton Road and a shiny black BMW hybrid with diplomatic plates clash confusingly with your gut-deep sense that such a scam is beyond even the admittedly-impressive grifting capabilities of the Gnome. “Don’t be silly, I was born over here, I don’t even hold dual Pakistani citizenship—”

“You don’t understand.” He takes your wrist. His fingers are clammy from his beer glass. “Let me explain. You don’t need to be a native. You just need to be a fine upstanding citizen with an office and enough time to attend to the needs of visiting nationals. The high heid yins all have proper embassies staffed by real diplomats, but there are plenty of small players...play-states, just like Scotland’s a play-state, hived off the old Union for the extra vote in the council of ministers in Brussels and some plausible deniability in the budget. The deal is, we find some nowhere country that can only afford a proper embassy in London or Brussels, if that. They issue you with a bunch of papers and an official phone, and you’re on call to help out when one of their people gets into a spot of bother over here. If you’re really lucky they’ll pay you an honorarium and the office rent.” He *winks*; the effect is inexpressibly horrifying.

“Get away with you!” You take another mouthful of beer. “You’re winding me up.”

“No, lad, I’m serious.”

“Serious?”

He chugs his pint and smacks his lips. You roll your eyes: you recognize a shakedown when you see one. “Mine’s a Hoegaarden,” he says, utterly unapologetic.

Five minutes later you get back from the bar and plant his new pint in front of him. “Spill it.”

“What, the beer” —he kens you’re not amused and shrugs, then takes an exploratory sip. “All right, the job. I have a mutual acquaintance who happens to work for a, shall we say, *small player’s* diplomatic service as a freelance contractor. They’re a very new small player, and they’re hiring honorary consuls for the various Euro sub-states—”

You’ve had enough of this bullshit. “Do I look like I was born yesterday?”

“No.” His brow wrinkles. “Here’s the thing: Issyk-Kulistan is a *very new state*. It used to be part of Kyrgyzstan, but five months ago there was a vote on independence and they seceded, with official recognition...” You stare at him. The Gnome has a warped sense of humour, but he’s not crazy. He’s got dozens of fingers in scores of pies, some of them seasoned with very exotic spices. And right now he’s got that intense brow-wrinkling expression he gets on his gizz when he’s desperately serious, or trying to pinch a jobbie in the lav. He’s droning on: “No budget to speak of, but they’re soliciting recommendations. The angle is, they’re dirt poor—all they’ve got is a played-out gas field, and a bunch of collective farms. Their capital city’s smaller than Stirling; in fact the whole country’s got the same population as Edinburgh. I *believe* the real story is that Issyk-Kulistan was let go by Kyrgyzstan because unemployment’s around 40% and the big man in Bishkek wanted an excuse to cut their bennies. Think of it as national downsizing, Anwar—Kyrgyzstan’s got a budget deficit, so what are they going to do? Cut overheads! Anyway, the Independent Republic of Issyk-Kulistan can’t afford a real diplomatic corps. Indeed, there’s probably nae cunt from Karakol in the whole of Scotland. Or Latvia, Iceland, or Moldova, for that matter. Which is the reason—”

You look the Gnome in the eye and utter three fateful words: “Adam: Why. Me?”

What follows is blether: masterful blether, erudite and learned blether, but blether nonetheless. You swallow his flanneling. It’s all sound and fury, signifying naught; but you’ve got a scooby that there’s more to this than reaches the eye. The Gnome *knows you*, and he wants someone he knows in that shiny black diplomatic limo with the IRIK plates, which means he’s got some kind of caper in mind.

And *you* know Adam, and you know this about him: he may be bent as a seven euro note, but *he disnae get caught*. Ever.

Which is why...



Three days later you are certain you’re about to die.

You are twenty eight years old and a miserable sinner who has been a bad husband to his long-suffering wife, and a terrible father to his two children. (To say nothing of having failed to even *think* about making the Hajj, liking beer and other alcoholic beverages altogether too much, and indulging in such unspeakable perversions with other men that Imam Hafiz would swallow his beard and die of shame if he heard about them). You *deserve* to die, possibly, probably—for God is Great and he knows *exactly* what you’re thinking—which is probably why he has seen fit to inflict this destiny upon you, seeing you strapped into a business class seat in an elderly Antonov that rattles and groans as it caroms between clouds like a pinball in the guts of an ultimate highscore game.

The Antonov’s cabin is musty and smells of boiled cabbage despite the best efforts of the wheezing air conditioning pack. Here, up front in business class, the seats are tidy and come with faded antimacassars bearing Aeroflot’s livery: but behind your uneasy shoulders sways a curtain, and on the other side of the curtain you swear there is an old lady, headscarf knotted tightly under her chin, clutching a cage full of live chickens. The fowl, being beasts of the air, know exactly what’s in store for them—they squawk and cackle like nuns at a wife-swapping party.

The plane drops sickeningly, then stabilizes. There’s a crackle from the intercom, then something terse and glottal in Russian. Your phone translates the word from the cockpit: “impact in ten minutes.” You’re almost certain you can hear the chink of vodka glasses from up front. (The stewardesses haven’t shown themselves in hours; they’re probably crashed out in the galley, anaesthetized on cheap Afghani heroin.) You yank your seatbelt tight, adjust the knot of your tie, and begin to pray. *Save me*, you think: *just let me walk away from this landing and I’ll give up alcohol for a year! I’ll even give up cock, for, for...As long as I can. Please don’t let the pilots be drunk—*

There is a sudden downward lurch, a jolt that rattles the teeth in your head, a loud *bang*, and a screech of tyres. One of the overhead luggage bins

has sprung open and there is an outbreak of outraged clucking from the economy class area behind the curtain as a small, terrified *pig* hurtles up the aisle towards the cockpit. Now you see one of the cabin crew, her beret askew as she makes a grab for the unclean animal—she wrinkles her nose and a moment later a horrible stench informs you that the animal has voided its bowels right in front of the cabin door.

“Bzzzt.” Your phone helpfully fails to translate the electronic throat-clearing noise. “Welcome to Issyk-Kul Airport, gateway to the capital of the Independent Republic of Issyk-Kulistan. This concludes today’s Aeroflot flight from Manas International Airport, Bishkek. Adhere to your seats until she reaches the terminal building. Temperature on the ground is twenty-nine degrees, relative humidity is eighty percent, and it is raining.”

The Antonov grumbles and jolts across cracked ex-military tarmac, its turboprops snarling rhythmically at the sodden atmosphere. *At least it’s Aeroflot*. You’re not a total numpty: you did your legwork before you came here and you know that the local airlines are all banned from European airspace on grounds of safety (or rather, the lack of it). And you’re up to date on your shots, thanks to Aunty Sam’s abortive attempt to arrange a family reunion in Lahore last year. You also know that the unit of local currency is the som, that it is unsafe to wander round the capital at night, and that your hosts have booked you a room in the Amir hotel.

The only important bit of local nous you’ve *not* got straight is what the capital’s called—is it Karakol, or Przewalsk? They change the name whenever there’s a coup d’état, as long as there’s an “r” in the month. It *should* be Przewalsk—but how do you pronounce Przewalsk, anyway?

As the airliner taxis the short distance to the stand, you take enough shuddering breaths to get over your conviction that you are about to die—but now a new anxiety takes hold. You’ve been told you’ll be met at the airport, but...What do you *really* know? A dodgy Skype connection and the promise of a car ride: that and five euros will buy you a Mocha Frescato with shaved glacier ice and organic cream to go. For all you know the Gnome’s idea of an amusing jape is to ship your sorry ass to an ex-boyfriend of his who runs a leather bar in Almaty frequented by former US Marines, where they’ll steal your passport and tie you face down to a pommel horse—

You’re walking through the humid





rain-spattered air towards a terminal building, your shirt sticking to the small of your back. *I must have zoned out*, you realize nervously. You can't afford to do that: not here, not with the job interview that's coming up. Ahead of you the doors are flung open on a dusty arrivals hall. A porter shuffles past you, leading a motorised baggage trolley out towards the small Antonov. There's a bored-looking crowd just beyond a rope barrier at the far side of the hall, and among them you see a man with an upraised sign: ANWAR HUSSEIN.

"Mr Hussein?" A broad grin and a bushy salt-and-pepper moustache: firm handshake pumping up and down. "I am Felix Datka." He speaks English with a heavy Russian accent. "Welcome to Przewalski!" *So that's how you pronounce it.* "Have you had a good journey from Scotland? Please, let's fetch your suitcase and I will drive you to your hotel."

You have arrived in the Independent Republic of Issyk-Kulistan. And you relax: because now you know you are among friends.



"And that was the worst part of it," you tell him, wiping your moustache on the back of your wrist.

"It was?" The Gnome blinks rapidly, as if there's a mote in his eye.

"Yes. Once he told the porter to give my suitcase back and we escaped from the pick-pockets, or the police—I'm not sure who were which—he had a black Mercedes SUV! Well, it was mostly a Mercedes and mostly black—bits of it were made locally in this car factory they've got that runs on chicken feathers and corn husks or something, and the paint didn't match—" Just like the shite your neighbour Jaxxie runs up on the DRM-hacked fab in his garage—"but from there it was an hour's drive into town, and then dinner in a traditional Kyrgyz restaurant—" actually a McDonald's, after Mr Datka tipped you the wink that most of the posh restaurants in town were Russian-owned and not Halal: but you don't want the Gnome's pity—"the next morning, he picked me up and drove me to the Ministry building. Big concrete slab full of bureaucrats with boxy old computers, sitting around smoking." Your nose wrinkles at the memory.

"The Ministry." The Gnome hums and strokes his chin. "Hmm. Indeed. And how did it go, then?"

"It was a job interview." You shrug. Back in your normal drag, jeans and a sweat shirt and your favourite Miami Dolphins jacket, it's all mercifully fading into a blur: the stifflingly close air in the aircon-less conference room, you in the monkey

suit your cousin Tariq sourced for you from an Indonesian tailoring dotcom, sweating bullets as you tried to answer questions asked in broken English by the bored bureaucrats on the other side of the table. "They asked me lots of questions. How long I'd lived in Embra, what was my citizenship status, what I did, did I have a criminal record, that sort of thing."

"Did you tell them the truth?" The Gnome lays his hand on your knee, very solemnly.

"I lied like a rug." You weren't sweating bullets because of the questions (you realised it was a shoo-in when you clocked you were the only candidate they'd bothered to fly out for the interview): you were sweating bullets because it was *hot*. Even the criminal background question was meaningless. If they didn't already know the answer to the question, they weren't networked well enough to detect a lie.

You shrug again: "who're they going to call, Europol?" You let his hand lie: this is safe space, as safe as it comes, and you're still wound up from the nervous tension of a flight into the unknown. "They flew me to Moscow economy-class! Look, you said they've got no money. So what's your angle?"

You don't bother with *what's in it for me*, because that much is clear. You have got: a bunch of blank passports and a toytown rubber stamp set: a steel-jacketed data key locked to your thumbprint and loaded with encryption certificates: documents telling the government of Scotland that you are hereby authorised to act as the legally responsible Consul on behalf of the embassy of the Independent Republic of Issyk-Kulistan to the EU in Brussels: and a corporate credit card. Yes, you've come up in the world. But as you feel the warm weight of the Gnome's hand on your thigh you can't shift the feeling that there's more to this than him doing one of his on/off boyfriends a favour. You try again. "What's your angle?"

The Gnome sighs. "I wish you wouldn't ask awkward questions," he says, a trifle querulously. "But if you must know, I'll tell you." He leans across the table, and you instinctively lean towards him, until his lips brush your ear. "The angle, dear boy, is *money*—and how you, and I, and a couple of friends, are going to make a great steaming pile of it. Legally come by, no more and no less—and there'll be nobody to say otherwise." You can feel the heat of his Cheshire-cat grin on your cheek: you can smell his yeasty breath. You lean a bit closer, tensing expectantly. "The pen-pushers in Przewalski want you

for a sparkly consular unicorn. I think that's a *grand* idea. And I think it would be especially grand if you'd keep me informed of developments, as and when they happen..."

TOYMAKER: The Leith Police Dismisseth Us

It's four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon: have you got somewhere safe to hide?

You're in the shed, guts churning and palms sweating as you set up the run that Gav's put on you for tomorrow.

It's a' the fault of that fucking cunt down at the Cash-For-No-Questions shop on Leith Walk. He wouldn't offer you more than fifty euros for the telly, even though you could show him a receipt all legal-like to prove it wisnae hot. And he wouldna even *look* at your mobie. Or your bike. And the thing is, unless you get your hands on three large by Tuesday you're getting malkied.

You owe the Toymaker three hundred euros for Services Rendered: and the Toymaker disnae take "noo, ye ken I got knocked back by thi' bastid wot bought it" for an answer. Nor does the Toymaker play well with "a big boy did it an' ran away," "the dug ate ma hamewurk," or "pay you next Tuesday?" The Toymaker's approach to dealing with Intellectual Property Violations is drastic and memorable—you've seen the vid of that yin from Birmingham what crossed the Toymaker, even signed a fucking contract *on paper* to say ye kenn't what ye was getting intae. Fact is, you're the Toymaker's franchisee for Pilrig, and if ye couldna keep a float to cover your credit *you shouldna have fucking signed the piece of paper, ye ken?*

It's nae your fault you're hard up. There's a recession on, you're long on feedstock, and your car got crushed cos ye couldna afford the insurance after that eppy bastid Tony and his fucking jakey friend ripped off your stash reet after you paid the overdue council tax (it was that or they were gonnae send the Sheriff's court officers round; that would *never* do if them cunts keeked whit you'd hid in the shed). And then fucking Big Malc gouged you for three days' fab time an' gave you a right gubbing when you asked to be paid—

None of which matters, likesay? The Toymaker's gonnae have his half-kilo of flesh.

The shed at the back of your mum's hoose is cramped, dark, and dingy, surrounded by thigh-high grass and weeds land-mined with cat shit from

the feral tom what lives next door. You took it over after your old man died, chucked the rusting lawnmower and ran a mains extension oot the kitchen window—that, an' drilled through the brickwork under the sink and plumbed in a water hose. The fab needs water and power, and lots of it; like an old-time cannabis farm, back before they decriminalised it. You tiled the shed roof with stolen polymer PV slates (not that they're good for much this far north of Moscow) and installed shelves to hold your feedstock supplies and spares. It took you a year to scrimp and cadge and steal the parts you needed to bootstrap the hingmy. You *could* have saved for half that long and bought a shiny wee one in John Lewis, with the DRM and the spyware to stop you making what you will; but if you'd gone down that road, no way would the Toymaker take you on.

Which leaves you needing three big in four days, and nowhere to turn but Gav.

Not that there's aught wrong with the colour of Gav's money, but he's of a kind with Big Malc; a local businessman, higher up the food chain than most of the neds round these parts. There's something of the night about him, and the way he fucking grins without showing his teeth creeps you out, like he's fucking Dracula, likesay? And what Gav wants you to make for him, you really didna wanna get dragged inter that stuff. You could get lifted for this shit, eat some serious prison time, and all for three big? The fucking fuck.

There's a dump down in Seafield with a sideline in homogeneous graded sinter process feedstock; a butcher up in Balerno who sells polylactic acid under the counter in milk cartons from a dodgy farm somewhere in Fife. Cheap no-name pay-as-you-go data sticks and VPN software that disguises the traffic as noise overlaid on fake voice channels...This stuff isn't rocket science any more, it's not hacking any more, it's just illegal as hell because it pisses off the Money. The law disnae appreciate the likes of you *schemie scum*, like the nice security man called you between the second and third drive-tasing, that time they caught you shoplifting in the St James Quarter. The law especially disna like your kind owning 3D printers, fabbers capable of taking a design template off a pirate website somewhere and extruding it into the real world to an accuracy of a few microns. The good law-abiding folks—they're welcome to run off Rawlplugs and coffee coasters and plastic Nessie tat for their weans. But the Polis don't like unmonitored fabs. They could be making anything; plastic chibs that dinna show up on metal





detectors, chemistry kits, homebrew handguns—or what Gav is buying.

“Here’s the photies,” Gav told you in his flat English accent. He seemed to savour the words: “Fifteen shots each of the subject.” He slid an ancient memory stick across the tabletop towards you, its surface rubbed down to anonymous white plastic by age. You made it disappear hastily. “Stitch ‘em up and render the parts to scale—there’s a model there. It needs to be ready by Sunday night. Mozzy will pick it up and pay you at six sharp.”

“Eh, but ye ken it’s a big load of work? It’ll take twenty-four hours to fab ‘em, likesay?”

“So? You’d better get started. *Likesay.*”

You bite your tongue. He’s takin’ the pish, but the way he smiles tells you he kens he’s got your number. *Cunt.*

Gav’s buying on behalf of someone who’ll be *really embarrassed* if his habit comes out, that you can tell. The stick feels like it’s burning a hole in your pocket as you walk home from the pub. The job’s simple enough, but if they catch you with it...

Someone’s been naughty with their phone. They’ve been taking pictures. Innocent enough, and they’ve been careful, no upskirt perv service shots that might tip the Polis off: but once they’ve got enough angles it’s over to you (via Gav). There’s software that’ll stitch together a polygon map from a bunch of images, working out the perspectives and textures from all the angles. And once you’ve got the skin, you can drop it over a model of a doll and send it to the printer. Which will generate the pieces of a hard plastic skeleton surrounded by textured, colourized, soft plastic skin that the customer can squeeze and suck without any risk of screaming or telling, ready to clip together around servo motors to animate and sensors to react: and the beauty of it is that she’ll never know, this four year old whose animatronic double is going to star in some paedo’s dreams.

Well, it’s no’ like you can ask Gav: and anyway, you need his money. Otherwise you won’t be able to pay off the Toymaker.

The fab’s still warm from that bampot Malc’s job, so you start by stuffing fresh cans of feedstock up its arse—this job’s a hybrid, multiple plastics in the same structure. The workspace is clean and there’s no crap lying around from the last run, which is good, and it’s big enough that if you twist the model just *so* you can make it in one run.

So you cable your laptop up to the fab, stick your special dongle in its side, swipe your thumbprint

across it for access, and log in to Evil Santa’s workshop to download the templates for a bad night out in toytown.



Early afternoon.

You blink yourself awake in gritty-eyed confusion, stirring from sleep on the living room sofa. You’re surrounded by the detritus of a chaotic Saturday night; greasy pizza box upside down on the carpet, empty tinnies of Zywiek Super rolled under the TV console, game controller dumped in the ash tray in a confusion of dows— you swear under your breath: “Jesus Fuck”.

Ye didna get to bed in the end; microwave pizza and cheap Polish Beer fuelled you on an epic raid in *Tetsuo Epic 14*. You and the Grief Street Gang tooled up on what’s left of your stash of Provigil and kicked seven shades of shit out of the Baby Panda Squad in return for—

For—

Shite. It’s three o’fucking clock on the *afternoon!* Yon cunt Mozzy’s gonnae be round in a couple of hours. The fucking fab’s gonna be chirping its heart out, *feed me, clean me*, the usual after job shoe-shaggy it insists on. You gotta get the cargo bagged up and the hell out of your hoose in case that fat twat Mozzy skelps you. You’re gonnae plant them underneath an abandoned car in a back alley somewhere, demand the money up front in return for directions, likesay? Not good to be caught out the same way twice.

You roll off the soiled sofa, gurning, and stagger out to the lavvie. The keekin-glass shows you an orc with eyes like red-rimmed piss-holes in a block of lard. *Jaxxie, this is your life!* Loser, tosser, fabmonkey to the gentry of the night—it’s a’ there. You look away hastily, stumble out and through the grimy kitchen to the back door and the shed.

The shed. You open the door and step inside. First up, you ken it smells *wrong*. Fabbers have their ain smell; not humming, like, but a goosh of hot plastic and metal. When it’s working hard plastic there’s a *lot* of hot metal, and steam from the chiller circuit. This is like all soft placky. Which is wrong. So you hit the light switch.

Something’s gone very wrong with your fabber.

The red supply blinkenlights are pulsing manically across its front, and the lid’s come open. Not only that; it’s rising on a fucking pillar of multicoloured hingmies pushing their way out of the extrusion cell like a loaf of bread that’s risen too far. *Fuck, the fucking fucker’s fucked!* You grab the handle on

the lid. A lime-green hingmy pops up at you and you clock what it is, and that’s when you realize that no, the fucking fucker *isnae* fucked, it’s *you* what’s fucked.

The evidence is all over the screen of your lappie, which, fucking eejit that you are, *you fucking left online when you went inside last night.*

You grab the lime-green plastic dildo. It’s an anatomically-correct cock, only it’s the wrong colour, only about eight centimetres long, and there’s something embossed on it—a URL. As you squint at it, another wee plastic cock—this one cherry red—topples off the mound that’s rising from the fabber’s guts and bounces across the floor. “Jesus fuck.” You stare at the lappie in horror. About sixty-dozen overlapping windows are warning you that spyware has been detected, inviting you to download an antivirus package from a fly-by-night scamware vendor in Hainan. You ken it’s the same site as the URL on the dildo. “Jesus fuck,” you repeat.

It’s ransomware, pure and simple. Ye didna ken they could rootkit a fabber, likesay?

“Tha’ dug ate ma’ hamewurk.”

Never mind Gav and his minions. Tomorrow you’re gonnae meet the Toymaker’s tax farmer, who expects you to pay up for your key to the dark gates of toyland.

Twenty seven hours to lay your hands on three large. You are *so* fucked.



Hello.

We interrupt your scheduled browsing to bring you news of an unfortunate incident.

Stuart Jackson, aged 22, a resident of Hamilton Wynd, Leith, has just learned the hard way that just as cleanliness is next to godliness, so is INFOSEC close to the Toymaker’s gnarled and wizened heart.

Perhaps you are thinking that the Toymaker is unduly harsh in his (we are conservative by temperament and upbringing, and default to the masculine pronoun) treatment of defaulters. And it’s possible you have some sneaking sympathy for Jaxxie, a secondary school drop-out struggling to make his way in a cruel and bewildering world that has written him off as being of no conceivable value.

Well, you’d be wrong.

This vale of tears we live in holds a virtually unending supply of Jaxxies, eager neds ready and willing to sell crack to their grannies and jack their neighbour’s laptop to pay for the next bottle of Bucky. Jaxxie is distinguished from the rest of them solely by a modicum of low cunning, a propensity

for graft, and a minor eye for space-filling structure that—if he had applied himself to his Standards and Baccalaureate—might have found him a place on the rolls of a distance learning institution and ultimately a ladder up to what passes for a respectable middle-class profession in this debased and degraded age.

But Jaxxie is lazy. Jaxxie *isnae* enjoy the learnin’. Jaxxie is a petty criminal who pays his way by acting as an outlet for the Toymaker’s bottom-tier products. And Jaxxie slept through his Economics classes in school.

As you have doubtless realised by now, the Toymaker’s products are all illegal; this imposes certain cost externalities upon the operation—you can’t buy insurance and police protection for your business if what you manufacture ranges from MDMA labs to clitoridectomy kits.

We have learned over the years that it is necessary to take a stern but honest line with junior franchisees who ask for business development capital loans and then default on their line of credit. In the Toymaker’s world of unregulated free-market enterprise there is no “society” to offload business externalities like insurance onto, no courts to settle disputes equitably and no presumption of goodwill.

We have given Jaxxie every opportunity to pay off his debt on time. We have even steered business his way—when he was too lazy to get on his bike and look for work—by way of our local salesman, Gav. Despite which, despite having a suitable sale dropped into his lap, Jaxxie managed to fuck his shit up. This is the point at which our patience is normally exhausted. Jaxxie is in default of his contract, and thereby in jeopardy of his life.

But Jaxxie’s debt is not substantial. Furthermore, we are aware that he is willing and eager to repay it, and would certainly have done so on time had not “the dug ate ma hamewurk.” We are therefore pleased to announce that we are going to exercise the prerogative of mercy on this occasion.

Jaxxie: we hope you will take this punishment, which is intended to teach you a valuable lesson, in the spirit in which it is intended. It may strike you as unpleasant and draconian—but consider the alternatives! We have a franchise relationship model to defend. As it is, your punishment will not hurt much. You’ll make a full recovery. And it won’t even impair your ability to continue in your chosen profession.

Just don’t fuck up and make us come for your *other* kidney.

