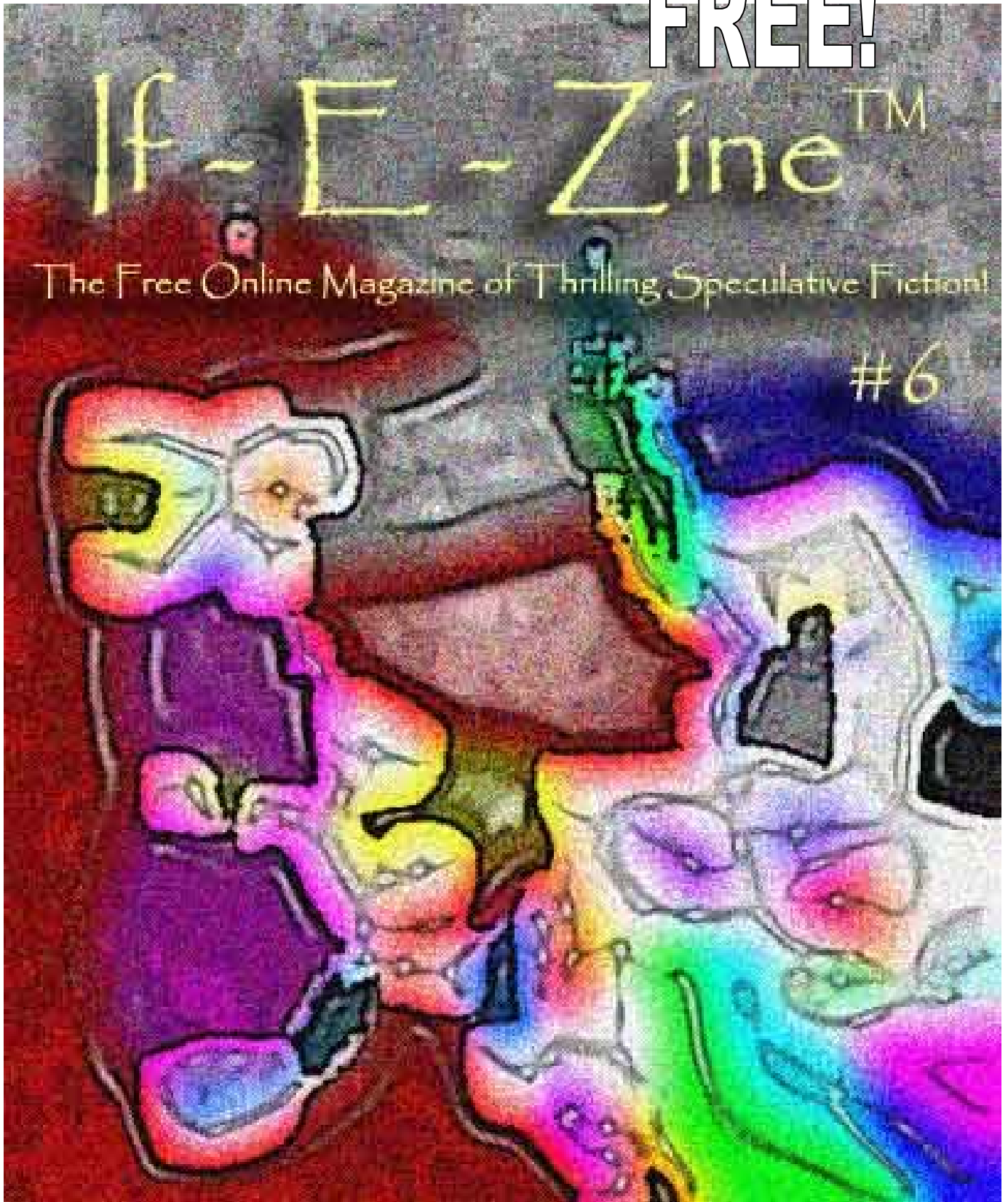


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#6



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Editorial

by Charles Shaver

Times have been tough. Not just for me, but for the many I have come into contact with. In the last few years I have seen the often obscured, sometimes obfuscated, lines between the proverbial "haves" and "have-nots" become clearer, more well defined and totally blatant. Attitudes have shifted, as well. Tourists and the rich have become more demanding. Locals and the poor have gone two ways: either more subservient or borderline violently defiant. Yet the truth of life remains today as much as it did when we were growing up impoverished in the Eighties: We are all just trying to get by. To keep afloat. Our heads just enough out of the water to breathe.

That is the life that I have been living for so long. I grow weary of it. Weary not because I am a demanding individual who wants a lot out of life. A dry place to sleep, unluxurious food, a pen and paper and a friendly local library is all I truly desire. But when you're dog-paddling against the currents of a storm, finding it hard to keep your nose out of the water, your sleep becomes interrupted, food has no taste and there's no time for reading or writing. What few thoughts you can afford time for often drift into images of drifting in those torrential tides, letting go, allowing yourself to slip under those waves that seem never-ending and stronger than you. Bruce Lee's ironically immortal words "Be water, my friend" takes on new morbid meanings.

And yet I swim.

Of all these pains and anguish that I experience or see others experience, a vast majority is at the hand of our fellow human beings. So, in reality and in reason, these pains and anguish don't have to be. Yet they are. Why? All I can fathom is that it is due to a lack of basic human compassion. "That person over there," goes the new philosophy, "is not my immediate neighbor. They are alien to me. Hell, I never even have to *see* them. I'll tax them, legislate, litigate, operate, masturbate, jail them, buy them, sell them, kill or convert them. It won't affect me."

If that's not a theme in science-fiction, then you don't know your science-fiction.

And it also seems to be a theme in this issue of *If - E - Zine™*.

I've had some difficulty writing. The two stories in this issue are among six short stories I wrote in six weeks last summer. By the time things settle down and I have a moment to steal for writing, I am so mentally and physically exhausted that even the thought of one of my characters makes me want to fucking vomit.

I am hoping, with the move from Maui to Michigan looming on the horizon like a nightmare I've already had, little in the way of demands will be placed on me and I can dedicate nearly 100% of my time to writing. I need to do that. The characters of my stories are residing in my head like so many restless unemployed fucks living in the projects... and they're ready to burn this shit down.

But right now is the end of history and I have to make history. This is the triumphant sixth issue of *If - E - Zine™*. It's not quite what I expected, yet it's more than I am right now. It's complete. It's also, hopefully, provocative enough to make you think and enjoyable enough to make you come back for more.

~ charles



"George, 2055"

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I've been in a daze as of late. But not from booze. I quit that shit years ago. Cold turkey, too. It's just a daze where the world slips from you, smokes about like spectral fingers, and you float along wherever you go.

Maybe it's The Sickness. Snow will be coming soon. And if anyone's gonna get The Sickness first it's gonna be someone like me, someone who lives under the Patterson Street Bridge. I can't imagine being the first one to get it. The Sickness wasn't always bad. Most people suffered through it during winter, but lots of people died from it every year. Just my luck, when I was finally getting some work. Not that it's much work, and definitely not much pay, but it's work and it's pay and that's all I need.

I wasn't always like this. I once had a job. A good one, too. But then The Factory shut down, my wife then pregnant with my son. I looked and looked every day for another job. There was nothing. There simply wasn't anyone hiring. Over a year later a sheriff shows up on my doorstep with an eviction notice. 'The bank wants their home back,' he says to me. I asked him why, I was sure they already had a home of their own. But he wasn't listening. So, on Christmas Eve some years ago, I can't even remember when the hell it was, me and my family were pushed out of our home. Besides my wife and son, I had no family to speak of. She had a father, but he was overseas. We had no place to go, and I tried to explain this to the officer. He wasn't listening. He gave us an hour to pack our whole world into our hover car; and when we didn't make his deadline he yelled at us.

But, once we were done packing and he saw my son being carried out in my wife's arms, he finally took interest. He somehow found it in his heart to give a call to the people over at Child Services. They came and got my son. We saw my son several times after that. But I still couldn't find work. My wife and I took to bathing and laundering in the city's aqueduct. When Child Services found out about this a year later, and since my son was being placed in a Controlled Sponsor Home, we were no longer allowed to visit him. We just showed up one day to visit him and were told we'd never see him again.

A week after I lost my son, I went to the City Public Meeting to speak on the behalf of my fellow former Factory workers, most of who were still out of work. No one listened.

A week later still, while I was at an interview for a job I wouldn't get, our hover car was broken into. My wife was in the car, asleep. By then we had sold off all our things of value: Electronics, teleprocomps, stereos, Artribus stations, even the stereo from the car. Whoever robbed us, for they were never caught despite the robbery taking place in broad daylight, took our sole possessions: our clothes. But that was nothing. They had raped and murdered my wife, as well. All in a matter of a few minutes. When I pressed the police to investigate, they gave it a once over and claimed that the bastards were probably just after anything of value we had. When I told them that our only possessions had been our clothes, the officers couldn't help but laugh. I wasn't sure at the time if they laughed at me and my dead wife or at the sorrowful bastards who ran off with a single trash bag of clothing. The officers quickly, but with effort, stopped their laughing. They

then told me that my wife had been attacked either because the robbers had discovered the futility of their efforts... or because my wife had put up a fight. In any case, they weren't interested in wasting any more time on me.

After that, I could no longer look at the hover car. So I sold it, rather low, and started drinking'. I became a bum. Yeah, you heard me. And I hear you. I hear you call me a bum, or street trash or worse. Hell, I've been spit on in my day, when I first tried panhandling and chose a rather kindly-looking elderly lady in expensive clothing. She spat and cursed and threatened me.

So that's how I took up residence under the Patterson Street Bridge. And that's how I became intimate with The Sickness. I've gotten it nearly every winter. Sometimes, when I got it, I woke up at night in a coughing fit. I'd roll over and spit out a small mixture of bile and blood. Then I'd roll over and go back to sleep.

One night I awoke to screams. I was pocketed deep inside a wall of the bridge. I looked out and by the light of someone's flashlight I watched one of my fellow residents being beaten by two men. Well, actually by one man. The other just held the light so the other could see. They were dressed rather nice to be under the bridge, I noticed, and thought I saw a gun in the other hand of the man with the light. I just lay still and hoped they wouldn't see me. I just lay still and watched. And once my fellow citizen of the bridge had been beaten about the head until he didn't move, I watched as the two men dragged over a large suitcase, took out an electric saw and cut off his limbs.

Body harvesting is big business. Especially for black marketeers. And they are rumored to come by the bridge once in a while to meet the demand. Body parts are big business. A lot of people go in for body modifications, or Bod-Mods. While some Bod-Mods are mechanical, and others are vat-grown organics, the biggest on-demand, expensive and exotic Bod-Mods were those from real bodies. Some such accidents or crimes, so rumor has it, are even planned to meet the demands of the black marketeers.

Watching a fellow citizen being harvested for limbs scared the hell outta me. It stayed on my mind for weeks. Then I realized that if my limbs could bring in so much money, I could sell them myself. If anyone was gonna make money off me, it damn well better be me. So I found a doc who worked under the table for the black market. He took my legs and replaced them with robotic ones. He then paid me the difference. Actually, they very weren't robotic, but they more closely fall into that category than anything else. They're made of a hard plastic and look more like a couple of sticks with swivel-ball knees. The feet are stumpy with balled heels and curved feet. What's left of my muscles swing them. It took quiet a while to get used to them. It's mostly a balance thing. For the first few weeks answering Nature's Call was an adventure-and-a-half.

Still, the Patterson Street Bridge is a good place. Traffic is never heavy in the City at night. But Patterson Street is a major avenue; though the traffic thins at night it remains constant. The heat coming off the bottom of the hover cars warms the bridge, which, in turn, provides us with a minimal warmth and comfort.

I've found some work at The Shelter. It's not much. Just fixing minor house gadgets and appliances. And I only get paid thirteen cents an hour, but it's thirteen cents more than I had each hour before. And they pay in cash. I hadn't spent a damn thing of my money on anything. I haven't even told anyone what I'm up to.

Seeing that the winter winds would soon be closing in on The City, trailed by the strangling fingers of The Sickness, the first thing I wanted to do with my money, once I

saved some up, was to buy myself a jacket. I had actually wanted this wool long coat I had seen down at this store in downtown. A robot was modeling it in the store window. But after a few days of excitement over that idea, I realized that such a thing would be dangerous. I'd have been stabbed or killed for it, just like my wife. So I resigned to getting something from a thrift store.

When I finally had enough money, which took months, it still took me weeks to find the right jacket. When I did find something, it fit the bill perfectly. It was a long coat, but by no means as nice as the one I had originally wanted. But it was still heavy, resembling something like old sofa upholstery. It was also cut and slashed here and there, a pocket had been torn off, a pocket was hidden on the inside, and it was well within my price range. Surely no one would want such an ugly old mess. With it, and my two shirts layered on top of one another, I should be able to keep a little warm this winter. So I bought it for forty-two dollars. And to celebrate I used the remainder of my cash to buy a half-sandwich at Chester's Automat and a half-pint of milk.

In the alleyway behind the automat, I took off my new prize and shoved it around in the dumpster to cover any fresh or laundered scents it might have. If others asked, I would simply tell them I had found the rag in a dumpster.

But, despite my preparations, The Sickness seems to have somehow crept in on me early. So I've been walking around in a daze.

I was crossing Armory Road when she came. And she didn't stop. A lady in her hover car ran the stop right when I was crossing. I woke up damn near seven meters away, behind the hover car. I saw her hover car first, then people gathering around me. I tried to get up, felt a sharp pain in my right arm, and then everything went numb.

"Lay down," I heard a voice say.

"I gotta get to The Shelter," I muttered. Not that I was on any schedule to work there, but the more I worked, the more money I got.

More numbness came. So did dark, speckled spots in my vision. Then the Emergency Craft came. It flew in on its VTOL jets. The doors on either side slid open. Men appeared with automatic weapons. Emergency Techs had to be trained and heavily armed long ago in an attempt to dissuade associates of organized crime connected with the Bod-Mod black market from harvesting body parts from accident or crime victims.

"Stand clear of the body!" A crackling voice boomed over the Craft's PA system. The small group backed away from me like a hamlet backing away from a plague victim. But I wasn't a plague victim. I just had The Sickness. And maybe a few broken bones.

The Emergency Techs were on top of me. Furious hands flew about me. They loaded me onto their craft in record time. I was soon off to whatever the hell hospital they wanted to take me to. Probably the closest.

The craft hung and swayed in the air. If I weren't sick before, the ride was damn sure making me so. I could see red lights flashing from outside. The siren blared. I wanted it all to stop.

"Sir, can you hear me?" I heard a man's voice. "He's not responding!" Hands worked all about me.

"Cut his coat away!" someone yelled.

"Noo!" I spat.

My long coat was torn away from me, as was my shirt.

"I can't find ID! He has no ID!" I heard the man shout.

A few other voices joined the first. My head swam through an ocean of shouts.

“Sir,” this was a lady’s voice, “Can you hear me?”

I grunted or groaned and I think I nodded. The nod, working against the movement of the craft, brought a bit of vomit to the back of my throat.

“Sir, can you tell me your name?”

I swallowed. My throat stung. I was growing sicker than before.

“Sir,” came the lady’s voice again, this time louder, “What is your name?”

Determined not to move, not even a nod, I muttered, “G-George.”

“His arm,” it was the man again, “is infected!”

A darkness slipped over me, or perhaps was injected into me.

A mechanical hum filled my ears when I awoke. I didn’t know what it was, and it scared the hell outta me. Everything smelled of cleaning chemicals. I opened my eyes. I was in a hospital bed. The first bed I had been in since... since 2050. That’d be over five years.

A thin white curtain surrounded me.

I remembered my arm hurting. I looked at my injury. My right arm had been cleaned and was bandaged up quite a bit.

I heard voices tunneled through a hall. I concentrated on the voices. They came to me broken, but clear enough to let me know that there were two men doing the talking.

“He’s... The Sickness.”

“I know... can’t do anything.”

“But...”

“... trash... no ID.”

“I can do it... simple enough...”

“No.”

Quiet filled the air. I strained to hear.

“But I can do it.”

Footsteps echoed, some coming closer, some fading.

“And if I do,” muttered a voice, “I lose my job. Maybe my career.”

The footsteps grew closer. Upon the curtain formed the ghostly image of a man. The curtains flew back.

“Oh! You’re awake.” The man who owned the approaching voice appeared like a magician on stage. His top and pants were green and plain. He was a young and healthy-looking man. In his hand was a small E-Pad for making notes. “The Techs told me your name is George. Is that right?”

I nodded.

“How are you feeling, George?”

Again I nodded. “Where am I?”

He pulled a chair over from behind the curtain and sat. “Sector Twelve City Hospital.”

I got my bearings with the map in my head. I was right. I was taken to the nearest hospital.

“George,” the doctor looked at his E-Pad, and then at me, “Do you have The Sickness?”

I nodded. “I think so.”

“You got into quite a situation,” he said. “The hover car that hit you damaged your left leg. You’ll be limping until you can get that fixed. And when you hit the ground the skin on your right arm was torn away. But that’s not what concerns me.”

“So what concerns you?”

“You see, George, there’s a new strand of The Sickness. Alone it can be bad enough. But when combined with other illnesses or injuries...” I didn’t like the way his voice trailed off.

“What is it, Doc?” I asked.

He sighed. “The wound is infected.”

“Bad?”

“Yeah,” he said. Then added, “This new strain of The Sickness has been popping up early. And it’s more volatile.”

“What’s gonna happen?” I asked.

“Well,” he sighed, “The wound you suffered opened a gash. Since you already had the Sickness, the weakened state of your arm caused The Sickness to become centralized. You see, this strain is showing signs of degenerative muscular disorder.”

“Meaning?”

“It’s eating away at the muscles in your arm as we speak.”

I gave a shrug. “What do I do?”

“Well, there’s a procedure that other doctors have been experimenting with. It’s an advanced version of the artificial growth process.”

“Vat-growns?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Except vat-growns are basically all one hunk of meat. Grafted onto the body, it can react the same way to stimuli that real limbs do. They look and act the same. But the physiology and the science behind how they work are completely different. Vat-growns have no nerves. No muscles. Real limbs are made not of one big piece. They’re layer after layer of muscle, bone, and skin.”

The Doc stood up, picked up my arm and examined the bandages. “I could contain the infection, preventing it from spreading, and then graft on a vat-grown. That’s one option.” He gave my arm a squeeze. “Can you feel that?”

I shook my head, “Not really.”

The Doc shook his head, too, and returned to his seat. “Or there’s another option.”

“A real body part?”

He smiled. “No. Well, if we had a spare arm. Truth is that most real limbs are on the black market. The paperwork and such the bureaucrats give us takes time. And not many people donate their body after they die.

“No. No real parts. Well, not per se. Not as you know them. You see, George, there’s a new procedure. Instead of making vat-growns all at once, we can now make the body parts a little at a time. We can make muscles, strand by strand. Same way we make vat-growns, but in much smaller pieces.

“Basically, what I’m saying is this: Instead of getting rid of the whole arm, we can contain the infection, cut out the infected muscles, and graft new ones on to those pre-existing. We don’t have to get rid of your whole arm. Just the infected parts. Then you walk out as good as new.”

I sat watching The Doc's face for some time. I think he was waiting to let the stuff he had just said sink all in. he didn't need to, but I liked the moment of quiet. Then I said, "You look like you've got a 'but' somewhere inside ya, doc."

He sighed and nodded, lowering his head. "George," he said. "Are you a... are you..."

"A bum?" I finished his sentence. "Yeah. I haven't had a home for quite a few years now."

"So no medical insurance?" He picked up his head.

"Nope. Nothing. Just the clothes on my back and a few bucks in my coat." That reminded me of something. "Hey, where's my coat?"

"Right over there," The Doc got up and pulled the curtain back some more to reveal a dresser all my clothes laying on top of it. "It's all right here."

I felt my body sink into the bed.

"Have you got much money?" He asked.

"No," I answered. His face turned grim.

"Hell," I chuckled. "I just hope I got enough to get a half-sandwich over at the automat."

"You mean Chester's?"

"Yeah."

"That place is great," he said. "I found it when I was going to college. The tomato soup is good, especially if you put a pinch of lemon into it. I still go there sometimes." He leaned against the dresser. "I don't think I've seen you there."

"I don't get to go there much. Just when I have a dozen or so bucks to get me a half-sandwich." I paused, then added, "Besides, I don't get seen much by anyone. But I kinda like it that way. Keeps trouble away from me."

The smile he had faded. After a moment, "You need the procedure, George."

"I know," it was my turn to sigh. "But I don't have the money to pay for it."

"The wonders of science," he goaded some unseen figure. "I used to marvel at it in the pages of comics. I loved math, even as a kid. Then there was that show 'E-Tech'. Remember that? Every week Hank and Larry would have new adventures, saving people, being heroes. That's when I decided to go into medicine." He looked around. "This place doesn't offer any adventures. You're rarely ever a hero here."

"But you do save lives," I said.

"Yeah... anyone who can pay top dollar," he said.

"Where there's a wonderful thing, there's a profit. Can't blame no one." I lay in silence a moment with him staring at his feet.

I chuckled, "I used to read those comic magazines about time travel. What were they called? 'Dexter and the Dinosaurs', I think. Oh, I so wanted to travel to far away times and places when I was a kid." I saw one of my plastic feet peeking out from under the blankets. I kicked until both were fully exposed. The one was mangled beyond belief. "I've traveled so much in my life already. I don't want any of that any more."

"No time travel for you?" he chuckled.

"Why should I? Time doesn't change a damn thing. People don't change. Just our technologies. The Greeks? They walked around in funny clothes, sure. The Romans? Spoke a different language, sure. But no matter where or *when* they were, there was still

The Rich, The Poor, The Bums... The Street Trash. They still died of diseases... just like us. They weren't any smarter or dumber than us. Nothing changes. Life goes on."

"Sounds a little defeatist," said The Doc.

"No. Defeatist would be to say that life goes on, nothing changes *and* none of it mattered. I didn't say none of it mattered. Science has given us a lot. Including longer life spans."

Another pause in talk came between us. Then I said, "What's gonna happen?"

The Doc looked up. "It'll keep spreading."

"And there's nothing you can do for me?"

The doc shook his head. "The woman who hit you was even talking of suing you. But when she discovered that her insurance would pay for the damages, and that you probably didn't have any money," he looked at me from the corner of his eye, "she left the hospital."

"Sue me? For what?"

"Damages to her car."

"But *she* hit *me*!"

"Witnesses say you stepped off the curb against a red. She never had time to brake."

"I stepped off?"

"Yeah." He hesitated. "Do you drink, George?"

"No."

"Do drugs? Marijuana? Anything?"

"No, sir," I said. "Been a year since I touched any drink. And I never did none of those others."

"So why'd you step off that curb against a red?"

"I thought it was... well, I guess I didn't check whether I could go or not. I just stepped up to the curb, then stepped off." I sighed again. "I guess I was too deep inside myself. I wasn't looking. I just wanted to get to work."

"You work?" he asked.

"Just at The Shelter."

Again we stayed in silence. "You know they're gonna bill you for all this."

I shrugged. "Let 'em come collect."

"If you don't pay, they'll throw you in The Compound."

"Where I can get three meals a day?" I said. "Things are looking up for me after all."

More silence. Finally I said, "When do I get to bust outta this joint?"

His smile returned. "I'd like to keep you here a while."

"For what? Anything more you do to me will cost me money I don't have."

"I know," he said.

"You can't keep me here, can you?"

"Nope. We've done all we can do. We can't legally keep you here."

"What time is it?"

He checked his watch. "6:00 P.M."

"Already?!" I was shocked. I must have been knocked out for some time. The Shelter was already closed. No work for me today.

The squeak of wheels and a whiff of food caught my attention. “That dinner?” I asked.

“Should be.”

I was hesitant. “You think I could stay long enough for that?”

Again he smiled. “Yeah. I’ll go see what your choices are. Any preferences?”

“Anything hot,” I said.

“Will do.” He flashed another friendly smile.

My meal came. It was the best meal I think I’d ever had. Not that it was all that great, but it was hot. I found my arm made eating difficult. I knew it would affect me working at The Shelter. Maybe. But I tried not to think about it and enjoyed my meal.

Afterwards, I got up off the bed. I walked to the dresser drawers and got my clothes. I checked my long coat and found my plastic bag of thirteen dollars worth of change.

I dressed myself and walked out into the hall. While I stood at the front desk, signing myself out, The Doc came over to see me.

“You going to be okay?” he asked.

“Always been,” I said.

He walked me to the sliding doors of the entrance. As I walked out, he said, “George, don’t give up hope.”

“Doc. Sweet, sweet Doc,” I chuckled. “I was given up on long ago.”

And I the doors slipped between us.

I checked for my money again. Maybe I’ll go get a half-sandwich over at the automat, I thought. Maybe an egg-salad. Since it has no meat, it costs only twelve bucks. Then I’ll have breakfast first thing and head off to work at The Shelter even earlier. So I steered myself toward the automat to get my half-sandwich. Then it was off to the Patterson Street Bridge.

Maybe this is my place in the universe. Maybe I’m needed here. I’m here so the Middle Class can have a cause, the socialists can have an example, and the capitalists can have a lower bracket. But they only see me as an icon. I’m not just an icon. I’m just a man.



"Orby"

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I'm breaking my own rules with this one. I thought I'd never do another 30-pager here in *If - E - Zine™*. It's hard for many people to sit and read that much while at a computer. But I have an affection for this story. Enjoy.

The city twenty-two stories below hummed a quiet nighttime hum. Cars beeped in the distance. People moved through the streets. Life below streamed and flowed. From the little balcony of his hotel room Dr. Gershonzen couldn't help but see the entire world as a stage for patterns.

He eyed the streets far below. They moved up and down, back and forth, diagonally side to side. Between the streets lay buildings short and tall, fat and wide, thin and long. Speckled lights shone from within the buildings, the fires of Edison lighting modern caves. And through and between them all moved about cars and people with a few stray cats and dogs going "VROOM!", "HEY!", "MEOW!" and "BARK!"

Far across the bay sat the twinkling lights of the city's permanent carnival. The attraction had everything a child-at-heart could want: a roller coaster complete with local legends of hauntings, go-carts, an arcade so big it could house practically the whole young citizenry of the city. And the arcade was filled with games old and new. Anything one could want, any game, they were sure to have. There was also cotton candy and hot dogs and ice cream deep-fried on sticks. But the most prominent of all the features of the carnival was the most quaint. A giant ferris wheel sat upon a massive pier over the water, beckoning all night stalkers, children and anyone who peered out of their little portals from their assigned buildings, much like Dr. Gershonzen was currently, to come and play and spend their hard-earned money with the promise of delivering some youthful laughs and a belly-ache. The ferris wheel spun slowly, lazily round and round, looking like the spoke of a bicycle Dr. Gershonzen had ridden in some far-gone summer, complete with banana seat and tassels on the handlebars to emphasize his feelings of flight as he rode faster and faster through streets and dirt lots and in circle after circle.

But that was long ago. Now Dr. Gershonzen was an aged man of science, a roboticist to be exact. His eyes moved from the ferris wheel to the sun wavering into nothingness on the horizon as he thought, *Without so much as thinking about it, we always place things into a system. We are sporadic and systematic at once.*

"Master, it is 6:45. Are you all prepared?"

Dr. Gershonzen sighed, broken from the spell of the spirograph of life that swirled about him below. "Yes, Pantera. I am just trying to relax a bit. It's a big night for us."

"I know, Master." The voice was haunting and glowing at once. Overall its affect was calming. The voice belonged to a rather large robot, just over two meters tall. It's arms and trunk were spindly. At the end of each arm were overly large, two-pronged claws. Its mobilization came from a pair of hefty tracks that made it bottom-heavy. And its head was oblong, a vertical oval resting atop a thin tubing of neck. The whole machine had been painted black, every inch of it.

"If we do not make the kind of impact tonight you desire, what shall we do, Master?"

Dr. Gershonzen watched the world in its glorified flurry below.

“I’m old, Pantera,” he said. “I do believe I am finally getting tired of my work.”

Dr. Gershonzen paused in thought. “I suppose if things do not go our way tonight, I should like to retire.”

“Would that include a move in location, Master?”

“I suppose it would have to,” Dr. Gershonzen replied. “You know what I’ve always wanted, Pantera?” Then, without waiting for an answer, “I would like to move to the country. Maybe get a farm. Nothing big, but enough space for a small garden and maybe a cow for milking.”

“Master likes his milk,” Pantera said.

“Yes, I do,” then, “I’d like a small place in the country with a garden and a cow for fresh milk. And a lake or pond nearby for fishing.” Dr. Gershonzen smiled. “I’ve not yet taught you to fish, have I, Pantera?”

“I have a discourse stored on the study nature, survival techniques and first aid.”

“Oh, but you know by now that reading or being programmed with some abstract data isn’t quite the same as the experience.”

“Experience has its benefits.”

“Indeed it does.” Dr. Gershonzen’s eyes faded off to another place, tracing unseen footsteps back through time. “Do you know who taught me to fish, Pantera? My father. He took me to this little lake several miles into the country at least a half-dozen times every summer when I was young. Everything I learned I learned from him and just from plinking a line into the water.

“We’d leave early after a breakfast of hot cereal. Once there, we’d lie in the cool morning breeze with one eye on our lines and one on the sunrise. In the afternoon we’d slide over into the shade, munch on sandwiches we had packed that morning, and sometimes fall asleep. We lost so many fish falling asleep.” Dr. Gershonzen chuckled. “I can’t count how many times one of us would awaken to find a pole half in the water.

“Then we’d head for home, fish or no fish, knowing that we’d just spent the greatest day of our lives together, until our next trip out.

“That’s where I want us to go, Pantera. I want to retire to that kind of life. One without stress, close to the land and far away from people.”

“It is understandable that you would wish a life free of stress, Master. Especially considering that you have suffered two heart attacks in the last three years.”

“Both mild,” Dr. Gershonzen interrupted. “And neither did little to slow me down.”

“True, Master, but it strikes me as curious that one who would dedicate his life to re-creating human intelligence would be such a solitary individual.”

Dr. Gershonzen smiled at his robot. He had designed and built Pantera five long years ago. Pantera’s intellect and powers of observation made him proud, especially considering Pantera’s brain was a prototype of what he had just recently finished to a polished state in his most recent robot. It also made him forget at times that Pantera was a robot, not human. Then the heaviness of the observation weighed down on him. He sighed. “I tire of the world of men so easily, Pantera. More so with each passing year. Each person has such incredible potential, but they lie, cheat, steal and politic each other to death so often. And worse, those who excel at such underhandedness are always hailed for their *intellect*.

“*Intellect*. Bah! Intellect indeed! The potential of the human mind is so massive, yet so few ever push themselves to their fullest capacities intellectually. It sorrows me, Pantera. It sorrows me.

“The learned community is no different from the masses. So many scientists concern themselves with things such as morals. We have to have morals; I suppose, for the assurance of our survival on some basic level and to keep us devoid of anarchy, yet morals are more often restrictions, a repulsion of science and the unknown. So many of my colleagues fail to see this. They allow popular opinion to sway them one way or another and so science is stayed.

“The minute we allow popular thought to become a factor of research, we cease to be scientists. Instead we become politicians wholesaling ourselves for popularity and security. But, worst of all, my fellow man so loves the practice of ignoring morals for a profit. I suppose that defines *my* morals, Pantera.

“And yet that potential they have so fascinates me! That, dear Pantera, is the reason I work the way I work, on what I work, and desire solitude.”

Somewhere inside the room a phone rang. Pantera droned away and returned to Dr. Gershonzen’s side with the phone. Dr. Gershonzen picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Gary?” A thick voice flowed through the receiver.

“Yes?”

“This is Will.” Dr. Gershonzen knew immediately the reason that Dr. William Dravinski would be calling. He waited, making no conversation, for Dravinski’s answer, good or bad.

“I just finished reading your paper.” Dravinski said. Silence followed, and then, “It’s okay.”

Dr. Gershonzen smiled. “Thank you, Will.” The phone clicked into death. Dr. Gershonzen laid the receiver back on the phone still being held across Pantera’s claws. The two stood in silence a moment. Dr. Gershonzen leaned against the rail of the balcony, observing the world as before. Then he asked, “Is Orby ready?”

“He is,” Pantera replied.

“How is he doing?”

“He is nervous,” Pantera said.

Dr. Gershonzen smiled again, this time almost laughing at himself. “Good,” he said. “Very good.”

* * * * *

The massive chamber hall was filled, tier after tier, balcony after balcony, with men and women in dress attire, casual wear and even a few in lab coats as if they had just torn themselves away from their research for this momentary glimpse of the outside world contained within this hall of scientific minds. The hall was like an overly decorated wooden Greek theater. All the seats encompassed a small stage with a lone podium. Off to one side of the podium set a folding table lined on one side with rather dapper-looking individuals, all dressed formally and looking back out onto the gathered hall. No electronic equipment was present anywhere beyond the lighting of the hall for none was

needed. The hall had been so meticulously designed that the acoustics could carry a voice to every ear present. Far to the back of the stage were curtains and stage exits.

One of the men sitting at the folding table stood, positioned himself behind the podium, and raised a hand for everyone to quiet themselves.

“Next, esteemed colleagues,” his voice carried all throughout the hall, “We will finish today with a presentation by a man whose work has been controversial, but undeniably interesting over the course of the last three decades. I present to you for the first time on stage here at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Convention of Robotist and Cognitive Sciences Exposition... Dr. Gary Gershonzen.”

The introduction was met with a semi-generous amount of applause. From behind one of the curtains appeared Dr. Gershonzen, a collection of paper cards in his hands. He walked slowly, hesitantly, almost dawdling to the podium. By the time he reached the podium the applause had long since died, been buried and forgotten. He refused to look up at the crowd for fear of becoming overwhelmed with the sea of eyes. The last thing he needed now was the knowledge that human beings surrounded him.

Dr. Gershonzen produced a pair of generic reading glasses from his suit’s coat pocket, cleared his throat, and began his speech, most of which was written on the cards in his hands.

“Dear ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, and guests,” he began mechanically. “Most of you may know me by now. But my history over the last few years may have been obscured from the limelight.”

He dared a glance at the crowd, knowing how important eye contact was during a speech. His heart leapt and bounded and beat upon the inside of his chest in a vengeful mood, angry because he had dared that look. His eyes quickly fell back to his cards and resolved to never look again until the horror was over.

“Three years ago my research met with a disastrous blow when my federal funding, largely from grants, were cut for many, though mostly political, reasons. At that point, it was difficult for me to watch my labs that had been specially built for my research slowly fade from sight, and then from my memory. My research had all but stopped except in the form of amateurish paperwork conducted within the garage of my home, which I converted into an office space.

“But then, when all hope had faded and my research had been reduced to a mere hour a day in my discouraged state, I received a phone call from Johnathon Harrigan, Director of Research and Development for Arkinsaw Robotics, who expressed an interest in funding my continued research. Arkinsaw Robotics, of course, is most well known for home security robots,” a tone of slight sarcasm entered his voice, “as well as sponsoring a few of the professional Arena Robot Fighters.” This was met with a small murmur of laughter from the crowd. The internal tension within Dr. Gershonzen lessened a bit. A small smirk graced his face in relief.

He continued, “To make a long story short, we formed a subsidy of Arkinsaw known as Gershonzen-Arkinsaw Robotics Research Corporation, or GARRC. And I was allowed to move back into my old labs and continue with my research. With Arkinsaw and Mr. Harrigan, I would not be here today. So I would like to take this opportunity to thank them.”

A small bit of applause filtered about the hall.

“As some of you may know, I started out in life as a psychologist. But after an obsession consumed me, for I cannot believe that the study of Artificial Intelligence can ever be a mere hobby, I returned to school and earned my degree in robotics. For the last thirty years I have been conducting research into cybernetics and building robots centered around the idea of reproducing human cognition.”

Dr. Gershonzen found his mouth drying beyond belief. He eyed those that sat at the folding table for some help, noticing a few pitchers of water and several glasses. As quietly as he could, he asked for a glass of water. One of the men sitting at the table obliged him and after drinking nearly a full glass, Dr. Gershonzen continued with his speech.

“Thank you. Over the last thirty years I have not been alone in striving for greater milestones in the creation of artificial intelligence. However, these supposed milestones have all been in the area of creating progressively more complex patterns of programming to simulate logical thought. It has little or nothing to do with simulating or, more importantly, re-creating the processes of human thought. As anyone who has ever had a romance, or a playground crush, or a loss of a family member or friend to the Great Demise, or even simply gone through puberty, you should know that humans are not always the most logical of beings.”

Another low hum of chuckling echoed throughout the hall. Dr. Gershonzen took the opportunity to finish his glass of water before he continued on.

“Approximately a year and a half ago this month, Dr. William Dravinski, the known psychologist and a former school chum of mine, suffered a great personal tragedy in his life. His son was thrown from a car during an accident. While his son, thankfully, survived, he had suffered irreversible damage to the prefrontal lobes of his brain.”

Dr. Gershonzen took off his glasses and raised his head, though he was still defiant about looking at his audience. “Let me tell you folks something.” He said in a softer tone than before, but one still audible. “I’ve had the pleasure of meeting Will’s son on many occasions. Several times before the accident and once afterwards. Since a young age he had had an interest in art. He drew and even painted constantly and was already set upon the career path of an artist, much to the chagrin of his father. But one day I took Will aside and told him that his boy wanted to be an artist because he was so in tune with human communication, largely due to the psychological interests of the father. That seemed to ease Will quite a bit and he became more accepting of his son’s desires.”

The hall had grown quiet. All eyes and ears were turned towards Dr. Gershonzen. Those assembled knew that what they were witnessing was nothing like any other talk they had ever attended.

“He was a happy, healthy young boy full of all the energy of life and youth and the dreams that come with both. Once when I asked the boy why exactly he painted, he said ‘Because it’s fun. It makes me feel happy.’

“But that was before the accident. I have seen him only once since the accident. He has changed. While still a bright young man with an interest in the arts, his own art has become linear and minimalist. And the boy has become very analytic, almost...” Dr. Gershonzen hesitated. “Almost mechanical. Damage to the prefrontal lobes can result in a loss of some level of emotional value or expression.” Dr. Gershonzen paused again. “I am unsure of the popular wording for such an effect of the cause any more. So I apologize if I am not expressing myself with the correct terminologies. But the point is,

for lack of a better term, the boy has *switched gears* to become more analytical and found it increasingly more difficult to make decisions despite his new analytic ways.”

This time Dr. Gershonzen left the podium and helped himself to a glass of water. After he drank a bit, he returned, his eyes down on his cards that lay atop the podium, and continued. “Six months after that tragic accident, I attended a talk at Cranston University in which Dr. Dravinski made his most compelling and controversial hypothesis on the conditions of human emotions to date. I am sure that most of you will be familiar with his thesis by now, but for your edification I shall summarize the premise he put forth on that day.

“It is Dr. Dravinski’s educated opinion that all human emotions are extrapolations of one common emotion, that is the emotion of *fear* which is commonly presumed to be a rather primitive aspect of our mental design, the sole purpose of which is to instill within us a instinct for survival. Fear drives us away from danger, into safety, ensuring our survival as individuals and, ultimately, as a species.

“All other emotions, Dr. Dravinski theorizes at great risk to his own career, derive from fear. Hatred comes from the fear of the unknown. Guilt or shame is the fear of being caught doing something morally or socially unacceptable. Love is an amalgam of the fear of being alone and having a familiarity with others.

“From this speech I was inspired to re-introduce myself with the cognitive sciences and to human psychology. Both fields have produced over recent years evidence that emotions provide human beings with a certain ‘cog’ within the decision-making machine. We now know that individuals who have suffered damage to their prefrontal lobes have a difficult time making decisions. They become entirely mechanical, logical and deductive, but they lose a certain aspect of the human condition. They lose that *gut instinct* or *feel* for something that makes decision-making within the human mind possible.

“This, I think, is where we in the field of robotics have failed in the principles of designing an artificial intelligence. We cannot, my esteemed colleagues, make something from nothing. In order for us to create something, *anything*, we must first have the tools and materials to do so *as well as* a model by which to work from. The best model that we have to create any form of intelligence is, ultimately, ourselves. And, as I have already pointed out, we are *not* perfectly logical beings. Everywhere I look I see patterns and designs and systems of all sorts within nature, within our cities, and within our lives. But within and without these systems I can also see just as many fractals of chaos being perpetuated. So what makes us think that we can create such a perfectly logical being without ever having known or been one? I say we *cannot*.

“So, it is my considered opinion that we as roboticists have failed miserably, until now, to create anything resembling our own intelligence because we have excluded ourselves to designing and manufacturing brains steeped in logical patterns and then expect them to work properly within the context of a sometimes illogical world. This, my esteemed colleagues, is an unrealistic pipe dream.”

The words rolled from Dr. Gershonzen’s tongue as he became more and more excited with talk that was more and more within his realm.

“For us to make *true* intelligence, it must *not* be artificial. Rather it must be something more closely approaching a human brain. For us to create anything of *true* intelligence, we must closely replicate life. And life is not simply an abstraction of

thought, but an experience of the mixture of what one thinks *and* how one feels. A study of human existence that forgets either is not complete and a recreation of life that forgets both is *not* life. We must from this moment in time forward create not artificial intelligences, but *brains*, as Shakespeare's King Lear said, that 'see feelingly.'"

The hall had fallen quiet. Someone's cough echoed in everyone's ear. Dr. Gershonzen's nerves were once again set on edge. *What if they don't like my speech? Did I do well? Was I clear enough? What if they think I've gone mad? Dammit, maybe I have gone mad!* Dr. Gershonzen quietly yelled at himself in his own mind. *Hell, even I can hardly believe what I've done!*

Dr. Gershonzen realized that he was standing in silence. He dared another peek at his audience. His knees wobbled as he did so. He suddenly hated the eyes probing him. His eyes dodged away to some point behind himself and found Pantera standing in the shadows of the stage's curtains. Dr. Gershonzen was calmed at the sight of his friend.

"P-Pantera," he ventured. "Please bring out Orby."

Pantera rolled out from behind the curtain, a large object draped in a bed sheet and suspended in his arms. As Pantera approached, Dr. Gershonzen said, "Allow me to introduce my assistant, Pantera."

When Pantera had reached Dr. Gershonzen's side, he carefully set the covered object down on the stage. The sheet moved slightly. Almost at once every scientist in the hall leaned forward in his or her seat. Those at the table at Dr. Gershonzen's side sat up straighter, remaining dignified yet curious.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in the last year I have created a new source code to use when programming artificial intelligences. The code is the same basic language, but it works outside of the main processes of the," he hesitated, "brain." Dr. Gershonzen's heart pounded. For a moment the thought that a new heart attack coming on entered his mind. He feared his next words, forgetting what to say. Finally, he blurted out, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have programmed and created a new robot, a robot that *fears*. I give you Orby!"

At this Pantera grabbed the sheet and ripped it away. Vaporizing from under the flurry of cloth, a single small robot stood on the stage. He was less than a meter tall with a spherical head and torso, gangly long legs and arms, and oval eyes that blinked with eyelids made of a strange plastic film. The whole of the little robot had been painted gold.

Orby stood on the stage, straightening slightly after having been given his freedom from the sheet. He looked about, then turned and looked up at Dr. Gershonzen. His eyes widened. His arms flung gently up into the air towards Dr. Gershonzen like a child wanting to be picked up.

"It's alright, Orby," Dr. Gershonzen assured. He reached down and gave Orby a reassuring pat atop his metal head. "Now, I am unsure of the possibilities of Dr. Dravinski's theory on emotions. But the best way to study theories is by testing them. Therefore I remain open to his ideas. I have programmed Orby to fear, and with no other emotions. Fear alone was difficult enough. It took my staff and I more than a year and several robots, starting with Pantera and ending with the most recent, Orby, to come this far. Should Dr. Dravinski's theories prove to contain some merit, Orby should then eventually be able to learn not only to *cope* with his fear, but he should have other emotions grow out of that fear. He," Dr. Gershonzen continued slowly, "should show a

multitude of emotions. He should one day be able to express not only fear, but guilt, happiness, affection, jealousy and even *love*.”

“Dr. Gershonzen,” it was the man at the table who had introduced him. “*Both of these robots can fear?*”

“Indeed. Though Pantera’s programming is minimal, almost primitive, it would take a great deal to cause fear or any other emotion in him. With Orby, however, we have come closest to replicating human emotions.”

“You *can* provide us with proof of your claims?”

Dr. Gershonzen looked to the man. “Of course.” He took a deep breath, then said, “Besides the evidence that I will be publishing in the up-coming Scientific Analects Journal, I and my staff have also recorded over two-hundred hours of performance testing that we ran little Orby through in the last year.” Dr. Gershonzen’s eyes returned the cards atop the podium. “But today I have prepared a small experiment to illustrate what I have been able to achieve with Orby.”

Dr. Gershonzen turned his eyes to the little robot. “Orby,” he said. Orby responded with a longing look. “Orby,” Dr. Gershonzen repeated. “I want you to choose a point somewhere at the back of this hall to concentrate on visually. Just choose an object, any object, and stared at it. Understood?”

Orby nodded and obeyed. He turned his head to look out at the gathered scientists. He chose an exit sign to stare at. Dr. Gershonzen brought himself about to stand behind Orby, out of sight of the little robot, and removed his glasses.

“As you can see,” Dr. Gershonzen said, “The little guy obeys to my verbal commands like any other robot or machine programmed to do so. But allow me to introduce a new factor. Pantera?”

Pantera slid open a small compartment on his base between the two tracks, produced a small brown paper bag, and handed it to Dr. Gershonzen who funneled the end of the bag and began to blow into it. The bag expanded with his every breath. Twisting off the end, he trapped the air inside.

Dr. Gershonzen raised a finger to his lips without daring to look at his audience, calling for silence. He raised both hands, one empty and one holding the bag. With great force he slammed his two hands together, causing the bag to explode and emit a loud “POP!”

The gathered scientists reacted, some in horror, most in awe, but all in gasps as the little robot Orby jumped, startled, fleeing to the side, away from Dr. Gershonzen and the horrible sound. Orby broke his concentration, seemingly forgetting the command that Dr. Gershonzen had given him, and looked back with eyes wide in terror.

Dr. Gershonzen handed the busted bag back to Pantera, then knelt stretching out his arms. “It’s okay, Orby. It’s okay. You’re safe. We’re all safe.”

Orby’s eyes, still wide, looked about the room, pausing only at the exit sign he had previously chosen, then back to Dr. Gershonzen.

Dr. Gershonzen waved his hands to Orby. “Come on, boy. Come on. It’s okay.”

Orby scrambled into the arms of his maker.

A slow, building applause started in the collective of scientists as Dr. Gershonzen whispered to his little robot in his arms.

“Dr. Gershonzen,” the man at the table said. “I-I cannot explain what I have seen here today. It is beyond words. You have been truly brilliant today.” Again the hall

erupted in applause and again Dr. Gershonzen whispered to Orby, soothing him. A smile graced Dr. Gershonzen's face.

"Oh, come on!" A voice bellowed throughout the hall as the applause faded. A large, somewhat over-weight man in a lab coat and suit stood up from his chair. A graying beard matched his graying hair; his eyes were squinting with both age and disgust.

"Dr. Gershonzen," said Dr. Pellovich, "I have followed your career for many years. I have supported, granted from a distance, your work openly. But this..." Dr. Pellovich guffawed, "Well, you *cannot* expect us to buy into the idea of machines that *feel*, especially after a demonstration that amounts to not much more than a parlor trick."

Dr. Gershonzen sighed. He set Orby down who took the hand of Pantera. "I understand." He said, "My experiment here today is not exactly the most mind-blowing example of scientific discovery, but I felt you needed to see *some* example of the work I have been doing over the last few years. I had hoped that this minor, what did you call it? 'Parlor trick' would set the stage by which interest in the essay I am to publish soon and the eventual release of the footage that we have would be garnered."

Dr. Gershonzen looked up at his current nemesis. "And, Dr. Pellovich," he said, "if you had reacted any other way I would not have called you a scientist."

The hall again was quiet.

Dr. Gershonzen turned to those seated at the table. He nodded, "I am done." Dr. Gershonzen collected Orby in his arms and walked off stage with Pantera at his side rather unceremoniously from the silent hall.

* * * * *

Dr. Gershonzen sat in a plush chair sucking on a gin. Pantera quietly rolled about the hotel room gathering things for their departure the next morning.

"Your speech seemed to go rather well, Master." Pantera commented.

"Nah," said the doctor. "It'll be a yo-yo effect. Today they were all down at my level of thought. By tomorrow they'll all be right back up there with Pellovich." Dr. Gershonzen stared into his gin. "Now is the time for me to retire, Pantera. Now more than ever. You and I can retire to the country and get ourselves some land far from everybody. I'll even take some of my equipment and fit you with proper hands so you can help me milk the cow."

"That sounds most pleasurable, Master. I think that I'll like that. But what of your research? I know that you will leave everything to the GARRC staff, but have you yet chosen a replacement to head up the research?"

"Restokin will do well."

"But he is young, Master." Pantera said as he pulled a suitcase over near the front door.

"Young? Dr. Gershonzen chuckled. "Practically straight out of college and therefore stupid as hell! He's also impetuous, arrogant, stubborn, and he hates people nosing into his business. It'll be as if I never left." Dr. Gershonzen drank the last bit of the gin in his glass.

"As you wish, Master. Shall I make arrangements for the transfer?"

"No. Not now."

Dr. Gershonzen sat in silence and watched his robot rolling about the room.
“Thank you for your part today, Pantera.”
“No thanks are needed, Master.”
“I know. Where’s Orby?”
“In your room, lying on your bed. I’m afraid today’s events took a toll on him. He’s curled himself up with his stuffed animal.”
“Is he alright?” Dr. Gershonzen asked.
“In perfect order. I ran a diagnostic on him when we got back to the hotel.”
“Good,” said Dr. Gershonzen. “Perhaps I should look in on him.”
Dr. Gershonzen struggled to get up. Pantera had to help him out of the large chair. He then walked over and into the bedroom.
“Orby,” he whispered. “Orby? Are you okay?”
Orby lay curled, as Pantera had said, with a teddy bear in his arms. He looked up and nodded. Dr. Gershonzen sat on the edge of the bed. “Today was quite frightening, wasn’t it?”
Again Orby nodded his bobbly little head.
“I’m truly sorry, Orby. But in order for me to show those people just exactly what you could do, I *had* to frighten you. I meant you no harm and no harm came to you. Will you forgive me?”
Another nod. Then Orby sprang forward and clasped the doctor in a hug, the teddy bear squeezed between the two.
“Oh!” exclaimed Dr. Gershonzen. “Mr. Persnickity has quite a hard button for a nose.” He pulled the bear from between himself and his robot. “I’ll certainly miss you, Orby.”
Orby pulled away and raised his eyes in a question.
“I and Pantera will be retiring from our work with you. You will be returning to the labs while he and I settle into a new life elsewhere.”
Orby shook his head furiously and hugged Dr. Gershonzen again.
“Now, now Orby. Do you remember Dr. Restokin? You did like him, didn’t you?”
Orby nodded gently into the chest of his maker.
“He’ll be your new caretaker. He’ll do a fine job by you. Didn’t you have a lot of fun when he was around?”
Orby nodded once again.
“Good. And Pantera and I will come and visit from time to time.” Dr. Gershonzen pushed Orby away so he could look at him.
A knock came to the door of the hotel room. Dr. Gershonzen stood, wondering who’d be visiting. He heard Pantera rolling to the door. Dr. Gershonzen moved to join him, but found his hand clenched by Orby’s.
“Okay,” said Dr. Gershonzen. “Come.” Orby leapt into the arms of Dr. Gershonzen and he carried him out of the bedroom heading for the door.
“May I help you?” Pantera droned.
“Is Dr. Gershonzen available?” It was the second time today Dr. Gershonzen had heard and recognized that voice.
“Damn it, Pellovich,” Dr. Gershonzen said as he stepped in view of the door.
“Can’t I even have a gin with my robots without you bothering me?”

The two exchanged smiles.

“Come in,” he said to Pellovich. He set Orby on the floor and took an open hand from the man while Pantera closed the door. “How are you?”

“Good, good. Busy.” Pellovich was dressed the same but with a derby which he removed as soon as he entered the room.

“What’s new?” Dr. Gershonzen asked sarcastically.

“Absolutely nothing!” Pellovich returned with a laugh of his own. “Well, actually, I’ve got an ulcer from stress, a kidney stone from poor eating and my son just broke his leg yesterday while surfing.”

Dr. Gershonzen smiled. “Sounds wonderful!” Then quickly asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Is there something so wrong with me wanting to come and invite an old friend out to dinner? My treat!”

“Oh no! The last time we went out you took me to some god-awful Indian place that put curry on everything! I had to sleep in the bathroom for a week after that!”

Pellovich laughed so hard his fat head almost burst.

“It’s not funny!” Dr. Gershonzen continued, “You have to remember that I’m an American! I eat a different kind.”

“And it will kill you just the same,” Pellovich tried his best to choke down and contain his laugh. “Okay, okay...” he gasped. “You can pick where we go.”

“Good. Let me get my coat.”

Dr. Pellovich stood, waiting for Dr. Gershonzen to gather up his coat. When he noticed Orby sitting on the floor beneath a nearby table hugging a leg, he squatted with a grunt to get a closer look.

“So this is Orby.” Orby backed away. Dr. Gershonzen returned. “I still cannot believe you, Gershonzen. Machines that *feel*. Indeed!”

“Just give it time,” Dr. Gershonzen said as he put on his coat. “Wait for my paper and the other stuff.”

“Wait for what? *More* parlor tricks?”

“They’re not ‘parlor tricks.’”

“Then what are they? Certainly not emotions. Just another layer of programming.”

“Damn it, Pellovich. Just wait for the paper!”

The two men’s voices rose.

“If this was anything that you say it should be,” Pellovich pointed at Orby, “I wouldn’t have to wait! I could see it unarguably right *here*, right *now*!”

Frustrated, Dr. Gershonzen yelled, “I thought we were going to dinner!”

Dr. Pellovich stood. “I simply cannot stand by and watch a man who has propelled research in the field of robotics all his life to end it on a note so sour!”

“Will you shut up, you old coot!”

“‘Kook?’” Pellovich yelled. “Who are *you* to be calling anyone a ‘kook!’”

“I said ‘coot’!”

Pantera had seen the two friends argue like this through much of their meetings. Dr. Gershonzen had once said it was what made them such good friends and colleagues. So Pantera went about his duties unnoticing.

Orby, however, had never seen such an exchange before. He cowered as he watched the two men yelling at each other. Pellovich's head, all of it, had turned red while Gershonzen's mouth practically foamed. Pellovich became progressively more aggressive. Dr. Gershonzen, the quieter of the two voices, urged again and again for them to head out to dinner. Dr. Pellovich, however, simply would not give up the issue. When Pellovich raised a shaking hand to Dr. Gershonzen, Orby could finally take it no longer.

He crawled from his space beneath the table unseen and leapt for Dr. Pellovich. Clawing quickly at his coat, Orby was soon face-to-face with the offending intruder. Orby pulled his arm back and swung, sinking his fingers deep into Pellovich's thick neck. Blood sprayed, flowing all over the spherical little robot.

"Orby, noo!" Dr. Gershonzen cried. He grabbed Orby and pulled. Seeing his master upset, Orby released his grip. Pellovich's body thumped to the floor.

"Oh, dear," Pantera hummed.

Dr. Gershonzen clenched Orby to his chest. "O-Orby... why?"

Orby looked up. Dr. Gershonzen read the expression of fear in Orby's eyes.

"Perhaps he was trying to protect you," Pantera put forth.

"No, Orby, no. He wasn't meaning to do me harm!"

"Shall I call the authorities?" Pantera asked.

"Y-Yes," Dr. Gershonzen said. Then quickly, "No! Pantera, wait! If we do, they'll surely destroy Orby. Maybe you." Dr. Gershonzen's mind was spinning out of control. "Maybe even shut down all of GARRC." He swallowed hard. "I can't have that. Oh, Orby."

"What shall we do then, Master?" Pantera questioned.

"Oh, Orby," Dr. Gershonzen squatted above the body of Pellovich, rocking back and forth, clenching Orby closely to himself.

"Master?"

"Ohhh," another moan. "W-We'll go to the country, just as planned. We'll go to the country but we'll take Orby with us. We'll leave right away, right now! And never look back! We'll leave and take Orby with us."

Dr. Gershonzen pulled Orby from his chest, looking into his eyes. "Would you like that, Orby? Would you like to go to the country with us? We'll go far, far away and find a place hidden from other people. We'll live, just the three of us, together. I'll even teach you to milk the cow. Would you like that?"

Orby nodded.

"Good," said Dr. Gershonzen. "Pantera, grab our bags. We leave now!"

Pantera's humming tracks stopped near Dr. Gershonzen. "I'm afraid I cannot allow that to happen, Master."

Dr. Gershonzen looked up "W-What?"

"I'm afraid I cannot allow you to take Orby with us."

Dr. Gershonzen stood, setting Orby down.

"Our retirement was supposed to be just that... *ours!*" Pantera's vocal level raised, though still a monotonous drone. With lightning quick speed Pantera reached and grabbed for Orby, picking the little robot up in his industrial strength claws. Orby reached for Dr. Gershonzen. Pantera looked to his master. "I am truly sorry, Master."

The great claws of the black metal robot snapped shut around Orby's neck. His head popped off and thunked! onto the floor. Pantera then rolled forward, crushing Orby's head under the massive weight of his tracks.

"Noo!" Dr. Gershonzen yelled. His left arm fell. His right hand came up, twisting into an ugly claw. Dr. Gershonzen's mouth popped open in horror. His eyes focused beyond the robot before him. He stumbled, grabbing for the edge of a table. He missed and fell, a victim of his third heart attack in three years.

"Master?" Pantera asked. He received no answer. "Master?" Again no answer came. "I am truly sorry, Master." Pantera's head hung low for the first time in his life. "I suppose now I will be destroyed, as well." Pantera analyzed the situation.

The robot rolled out onto the balcony where his master had earlier been standing observing the nighttime. His claws cut through the railings there. He then pushed the steel back making a large enough hole for him to pass through.

Pantera looked back, unsure of his fate if he remained. He looked forward, his fate before him a certain thing. Pantera rolled slowly until his weight tilted him awkwardly forward.

The carnival exploded into lights. It was midnight, closing time, and the grand special effects of a fireworks show signaled the end of the day. As Pantera fell twenty-two flights, tiny sparkles skittled and licked the sky, drifting towards the earth to fizzle out and disappear.



Reading & Viewing List #6

1.) Brave New World by Aldous Huxley - I've just recently read this for the first time. it is difficult for me not to read something and then ask myself, "How does that reflect or affect me?" The timing of the movie and the reading of this book is amazing to me. Way too many similarities, right down to the fact that I have been taking a prescribed drug called *soma*. A very good book. And when you take into consideration this book was first published in 1932, it's fucking brilliantly prophetic.

2.) The Empire Strikes First by Bad Religion - Check it out. An epic and topical CD.

3.) The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian by Robert E. Howard. Howard created Conan and thus launched the bloody, darkly rich genre that would come to be known as Sword & Sorcery. Every fantasy fan should read this book. It collects all the earliest Conan stories in the chronological order they were written.

4.) All Men Are Brothers by Shui Hu Chuan and translated by Pearl S. Buck - An awesome classic of Chinese literature. It was just recently re-published (May 5th, 2005) in English. It chronicles the exploits of the 108 Mountain Bandits that opposed tyranny in ancient China. If you loved *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or have a love for high fantasy and high adventure, check out this massive tome (658 pages!).

5.) The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson. (Complete and Unabridged version) - A great story, and a classic. Though it is somewhat elitist and trapped in its style-of-the-day technique. But, with it's minimal 82 pages, the style is easily overcome.

6.) If Rock and Roll Were a Machine by Terry Davis - Sometimes slow-moving, but often fun and funny, this novel looks at a teen getting his first Harley-Davidson, witnessing the growth or turmoil of his family, as he struggles through high school to find himself. Not usually my cup of tea, this kind of book. But I really, really enjoyed it.

7.) A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck - Often dubbed a "modern classic", I had to pick this 150-pager up and give it a go. And I can see the controversy. Often, when books like this are banned, it's because the book in question and its author is really good at whatever its all about. In other words, only really good books get banned. *A Day No Pigs Would Die* more than lives up to that ideal. Set in rural Vermont, the book is told through the eyes of a very young boy on the verge of manhood growing up in Shaker country. The tale gets you by the throat (pardon the pun... read the book and you'll get the pun) from page one and hangs on to you from there. A good, down-to-earth kinda story in the heart of other writers like Steinbeck.

8) The Old Man and the Sea by Earnest Hemingway - The book that validated the author on a social level. I love a good book about the sea and life. All about the simplicity of tenacity, this book is engaging and straight-forward. It's also tender at times and filled with high adventure at other times.

9.) Captains Courageous by Rudyard Kipling - As I said above, I love the sea. Hell, it's in my genetic make-up. My ancestors were Greek, German, Hawaiian, British and Chinese... all of whom were sea-going peoples. A day under the sail is like none other. This book is about a young, pampered boy who is washed off the deck of his luxury liner and rescued by the men of a fishing boat. Since their very livelihood depends upon their fishing, they opt not to return the boy to shore right away and instead take him along for their seasonal sea-hunt. A coming-of-age story in every right, and a great one more parents should read.

