

Empty Boxes

Short Stories by Christopher Hester

Version 3.0

18th April 2012



All stories except the last one are presented in chronological order.
There are more stories I have written to add to this collection.

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The Worst Day Of My Life

18th April 2012

The day they took my son was the worst day of my life. The loss was unbearable. I don't think I will ever get over it. He was so very young. Only yesterday I watched him playing happily in the fields, enjoying the sun. I hope they haven't harmed him. Maybe they have killed him? Maybe he has been cut into pieces... and eaten... surely no-one would do that to someone so young, with their whole life ahead of them? No, I'm sure he's safe and well.

The waiter came over to the table.

"So what'll it be sir?"

"I think I'll have the lamb."

Clones

18th April 2012

I ordered a clone. She was tall, thin, tanned, long blonde hair, bedroom eyes, a cute look about her, pure beauty. The sex was everything I expected and more. I taught her to do it just how I wanted. She was programmed to fulfil all my sexual desires, so long as they did not harm her, or anyone else. Was she human? She felt like she was. I couldn't tell her apart from a real person. Yet she was a clone - a perfect replica of a human being, but with a programmable brain.

Sometimes she'd giggle as if she knew what I wanted next. Or smile shyly as if she knew she really shouldn't do what I just asked. But she would always oblige, and she was always polite, sweet and warm. I couldn't have chosen a better clone.

When I looked again at the other clones available to order, I couldn't better her. So I bought another clone exactly the same. Hell, why not, I thought. My mind was racing with the possibilities. When she arrived I was in heaven. The sex with a threesome was even better than before. I even taught them to love each other while I watched. Anything seemed possible.

Soon I had bought six of the same clone. I couldn't get enough! I had a clone in every room, always ready and willing for me.

M12 hated clones. To him they went against his ideals of religious purity. Taking a code name, he was one of a group of activists who worked in secret. Dressed all in black, M12 believed clones shouldn't exist. But rather than resort to the crude bombings and killings previous groups had used in the past, M12 was a hacker. His group had developed a way to break in to the wireless control units that came with each clone. These fed back anonymous user data to the makers about the clone's activities, to ensure they weren't being used for illegal purposes. The control units also updated the clones with the latest software upgrades automatically. Perfect, thought M12. He had just completed a virus after many sleepless nights of programming. It was easy to transmit it to a nearby control unit. A quick scan of the local area revealed several units operating nearby. M12 could also see how many clones each unit controlled. Most showed just one clone, but one unit controlled six! He would send the virus to that unit. What a sinner, he thought, to have six clones. Unspeakable sexual thoughts came into his mind. He fought them back and pressed a large black button on his keyboard. The virus started transmitting...

I woke to shuffling sounds in my house. Had a burglar got in? Immediately I thought of the clones. I turned over in bed but the clone I slept with last night was gone! If a burglar had gotten in and taken her I would be furious. I opened the bedside table drawer to get my gun, only to find it had been removed. In shock I got out of bed and stood listening for the burglar. It was then that the bedroom door burst open. All six of the clones marched into the room and stood in a row facing me.

The first clone was carrying my portable electric drill. The second was carrying my baseball bat. The third carried a metal coat hanger in both hands that had been bent open and looked capable of strangling someone. The fourth clone had my gun. The fifth had a large metal pipe. While the sixth had a long piece of rope.

The clones each had a menacing smile on their face. They had something to say.

"It's payback time!" one raged.

"This won't hurt a bit," grinned another. The next one spoke.

"OK, she lied."

The Failure

15th April 2012

I had always been a failure. I failed my exams at school. I failed to get in to university. I got a job but failed to keep it. When I got married it didn't last long. I had failed as a husband. I also failed my driving test. Then I turned to drink. But I stopped as I really didn't like the taste. So I guess I failed as an alcoholic. It was then that I knew there was no point trying anything new as I would fail at that too. So I bought a gun. I sat in an armchair and brought the barrel up to my face. But my arm slipped off the side of the chair and the gun fired a bullet clean past my head. Damn, I thought. Failed again.

A Day In The Life Of A...

5th February 2012

We reached the edge of the deathtrap. My brothers and sisters waited beside me. A gap appeared ahead. We decided to risk it. Moving as fast as we could, we only just made it to the other side. Phew. Many before us hadn't made it across the deathtrap. That's how it got its name. Being squashed by metal wasn't our idea of a good day.

Ahead of us lay the park. But first we had to negotiate the giants. On and on they came, stopping only briefly to look down with curiosity at us. We had to be careful not to be trodden on by a giant looking the wrong way.

A nearby sandwich lay on the floor, abandoned, half-eaten. One of my brothers went to eat it, but the others held back. We had to move on. There'd be time for food later. The brother saw us stood waiting and abandoned the sandwich to rejoin us.

We pressed on to the entrance to the park. It was then that a monster appeared, walking proudly along towards us. It was big and brown, with fierce looking teeth. A giant walked along beside it. Run!

We ran into the park as fast as we could. The monster saw us and began to bark. Luckily the giant held it back with its lead.

We carried on into the park until we saw it - the pond! At last! We all climbed in to the lovely cold muddy water and swam to safety. No monsters could reach us there. We waited for a passing giant to throw us food. Some stale bread would be nice. We waited and waited. We had all day.

John Lennon

9th October 2011

December 7th, 1980

Alan was a huge Beatles fan. So when the Devil offered him the chance to be anyone in the world in exchange for his soul, he jumped at the chance to be John Lennon.

December 8th, 1980

"We're getting reports that John Lennon has been shot dead..."

A Deal With The Devil

11th February 2011

I was at my lowest point. That's when the devil appeared. He said he'd give me whatever I wanted, in return for my soul. I told him I wanted to be surrounded by beautiful women all day long, who saw to my every need. Consider it done, he said. The next day I woke up paralysed from head to toe. I lay unable to move in the hospital bed. Time for your bath said the nurse.

John Divine

22nd January 2011

Ever since I was five, I received a parcel every month. They were always from the same man, John Divine. Who was he? And why was he sending me gifts? I had no idea.

The gifts were tiny objects, such as porcelain figures or toys, from around the world. I loved them. I treasured each one, increasingly keen to learn who they were from. The only thing was, my father told me not to try and find out, ever. But why would he do that?

Then one day, when I was eighteen, my father sat me down and told me I was adopted! After I had recovered from this unexpected shock, he came out with another truth, one that had remained hidden from me for so long. John Divine, the sender of the parcels I received, was a pseudonym used by my real father. I knew then that I loved him dearly.

The Taxidermist

11th November 2010

My father was a taxidermist. He often worked from home, inside a room he kept locked at the end of our hall. I longed to know what was inside this mysterious room. I fantasised daily about it, but nothing could have prepared me for what was inside. When my father died, I found his key. Inside the room I saw the pointed hands and handsome face of a large clock; a table on thick legs stood near a rotund chest; a large coat of arms hung above a fireplace, two feet long. All these things were made from human parts.

The Dragonfly

26th May 2010

The Dragonfly set off into space. After 300 years the crew rejoiced at the exciting alien discoveries they had made. Planets and creatures no human had ever witnessed before were catalogued, photographed and samples taken. How glorious their return to Earth would be. So many scientific secrets to share! How life on Earth would be enriched with the news that life on other planets had been found, albeit primitive and not intelligent. How the crew would be rewarded with admiration!

As The Dragonfly set down on a barren field on planet Earth, the crew emerged to an eerie silence. Something was wrong. One of the crew tested the air with a geiger counter. It started beeping rapidly.

“Oh my God! Everyone get back inside!”

Watching the deserted Earth from the screens inside the ship, sonic sensors started to pick up voices outside. Distant at first, then growing in volume. An angry crowd was audible.

“Look! There! Over the hill!”

A crew member pointed to the screens where the sight of a gathering was now visible as it made its way towards the ship.

The crew decided to wait and see what happened next. They didn't have long to wait. Soon they were surrounded by the angry crowd on all sides. The crowd were shouting and carrying long poles of wood and metal. Their clothing was poor and muted colours of brown and white only. Each person had long straggly hair. The men each had beards, rough and untrimmed. Was this the highly advanced civilisation the ship had left behind? The crew knew that due to Einstein's theories, the time they had been away in space was much longer for the Earth people, who had clearly descended into a post-apocalyptic barbarism.

Suddenly the ship began to shake. The crowd were banging on the sides with their poles.

“Aliens! Aliens!” they shouted angrily. “Demons! Demons!”

The captain of the ship opened the airlock and stepped outside.

“We are from Earth!” he protested. “Here! Sent by our ancestors 300 years ago to explore space! We have found many new...”

A rock hit the captain on the face, causing him to fall backwards into the ship. As the rest of the crew gathered round him, the angry crowd surged, ascending the metal steps to the door of the ship. Before the crew could close the door, people were surging onto the ship, smashing anything in sight. Soon the screens were damaged and the controls wrecked as the crew ran further into the ship to escape. Sadly, with the power no longer working, the crew couldn't seal the internal doors, leaving the crowd free to follow them until they were trapped.

The following morning, the sun rose. The crowd had gone, leaving behind them the burnt-out shell of a spaceship. A crude wooden frame several metres wide had been built in front of the ship. On it hung the headless bodies of each crew member. They were battered, bruised and bloody.

Inside the ship, all the alien samples had been destroyed. Only the sealed basement had survived the attack. Inside, an indestructible black box kept a perfect record of all the videos, photographs and data the crew had collected on their travels through space.

2000 years later it would be discovered, by intelligent humans who had rebuilt Earth into a shining planet. The discovery was groundbreaking.

Immortality

6th January 2010

It came to him in a dream. The name of the scientist who could make people live forever. Immortality. It was all the old man wanted. His days were numbered, due to illnesses and diseases that left him knowing he could die any day soon. He couldn't let that happen.

From his hospital bed he had arranged for the nurse to contact the scientist. Weeks later (or was it days? He was losing track of time) he felt more alive than he had for ages, as he was wheeled in to the scientist's private meeting room, near underground laboratories.

"Greetings! I'm so glad you could make it!" began the bright eyed scientist, who had large fluffy eyebrows and big round glasses made of shiny black plastic that made him look quite serious. But he was jovial and polite towards the old man.

"I'm still surprised that you have heard of me – not many have – my research into preserving human life indefinitely has been kept most secret until now. In fact you're the first person to volunteer for the procedure. I just need to warn you about the consequences such as..."

"Just do it!" broke in the old man impatiently. He didn't want to hear all about the technicalities. He could die at any time.

"But you haven't considered..."

"Now! I can't wait any longer!"

"Are you..."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. I didn't pay you all my life's savings to pause with doubt at the last minute!"

The scientist snapped his fingers to alert the nurse nearby to take the old man into the waiting room.

"Then let's begin!"

This was going to be a pivotal day in history. The scientist couldn't wait either. His work might also make him rich, beyond his wildest dreams. That's why he'd had to keep the research secret for so long. At last he could start marketing and selling the treatment – for those with enough money, who wanted simply to live forever. That wasn't much to ask in life, was it?

Next morning, the old man awoke. He suddenly felt enormous fear. He could not see anything. He tried to listen but he couldn't hear anything either. Where was he? He tried to shout out but it was in vain. He felt completely isolated, in a dark and silent void.

“Vital signs are looking good!” reported the scientist, eyeing the machine now keeping the old man alive. It had a cold fusion power pack that would last forever, sustaining a constant low voltage. The machine was simple – a square box made of indestructible metal used by the military in their latest tanks. There were no moving parts. Everything was as basic and permanent as possible. Even radiation wouldn’t damage it.

The scientist removed the test gear from the top of the machine, which was capable of measuring the old man’s mental activity – in other words if he was still alive.

Closing the door of the bomb proof room, the scientist turned out the lights. Inside the machine was the old man’s brain. The rest of his body had been removed.

The old man was alone in his thoughts. Hours passed. Days passed. Centuries passed. Now all he wanted to do was die.

Lucky

8th February 2009

She sat next to me on the rose-coloured seat on the morning train. The sky blushed.

I turned to look at her and saw part of her right ear was missing. Her teeth looked cracked and worn. She had shoulder-length auburn hair that appeared to be a mess of different lengths, which fell unevenly onto her scarlet red coat. On her fingers were scabs and flakes of skin peeling off. Her nose was crooked and she had bad breath. I also noticed her eyes were puffy and bloodshot. The only thing I liked about her was her smile.

Suddenly her blood red fake leather handbag that had been resting on her knees fell to the floor. Several small items rolled out.

"Oh dear!" she apologised as she bent down to try and rescue her belongings. I grabbed a cherry red lipstick that had rolled under my seat and gave it to her without speaking. I didn't fancy getting into a conversation with her to be honest.

"Thanks," she smiled and restored the escaped items to her handbag. I noticed it had a hole in the side which had been patched up with the wrong coloured tape.

"Nearly there," she stated.

"Yes," I replied, limiting my words for fear of an ongoing discussion about the merits of public transport.

"My stop I mean. The next stop. I get off there."

"Bramley?" I asked.

"New Pudsey. That's my stop."

"We've just gone past New Pudsey," I told her. "Bramley's next, then Leeds."

"Oh shit! I missed my stop! I thought New Pudsey was first, then Bramley! Why didn't the ticket collector say which stop the last one was?"

He had. He'd announced it before the train stopped. She mustn't have heard the announcement.

"I'll have to get off at the next stop," she sighed, "Oh well." She sounded used to disappointments. She told me her cat had just died. Plus her car had broken down again, so she was using the train instead.

When the train reached Bramley a few passengers got up to group by the nearest door. I stood up to let my companion get off but she staggered for a second. One of her bright red stiletto shoes had got stuck and come loose from her foot. Wriggling it back into place she nearly fell forward and bumped into my chest.

"Sorry!"

"It's alright," I replied lying.

"I'm Lucky," she said. I gave her my name and we shook hands. Her hands felt cold and rough. I noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"I'm the luckiest woman alive," she revealed.

"Oh, why's that?" I enquired puzzled.

"Because I have had lots of luck in my life. Apparently when I fell out of the cot the nurse named me Lucky."

I said nothing, trying to think of a suitable reply as she moved towards the open door of the train.

"The problem is," she explained, "my luck has all been bad."

As she stepped off the train, her heel caught on the last step and she fell onto the platform, flat on her face.

The Heart Of Music

A cyberpunk-inspired sci-fi story mostly written in the 80s and completed in 2006.

Digitown, a 24-hour disco where the lampposts strobe the streets in rainbow waves, pouring out rhythms to stir your dancing feet. A crazy place where the pavement is the dancefloor. You don't walk nowhere, you dance there. Gotta keep on movin', keep in step. When you stop, you gotta get out the way, pick a skyscraper shell to sleep. They made Digitown out of a whole set of abandoned blocks when the businesses collapsed. Now it's the place to be when you get sick of Partytown. The music's so hot, you'll need a fresh pair of dancing shoes every week. That's all the shops round here sell. Glowlers, Shiners, or anykind of shoes you want. Plus your jacket, with your favourite brand name on the back, and some metallic trousers to reflect the lights. Chains, rings, belts and pants. The only thing you don't wanna buy is a watch. Who cares what time it is in Digitown? It's either night or day. No difference to the music. Some kids dance night, sleep day, some dance day, sleep night, while some crazies dance day and night. Catch up on their sleep days later, maybe take a day off solid. Course they're taking. Couldn't do it any other way. The shops don't sell that kind of stuff though. You gotta get to know the right people.

There's even a block where the kids have ripped out the lamppost speakers and put up their own. Play their own music too, kind of like a constant gig. Different members of the group step in to take over when the others need a rest. So they can keep playing. Some would call it jazz, but there's no real type of music. They just play. And the kids just dance. Some wanna set up their own block this way, but they're not sure yet. Too busy dancing. Having fun. Why not? Ain't no jobs any more, so you gotta do something.

So where's the music come from that feeds a thousand lampposts? No-one knows for sure, but they say it's up in the hills. A place we call the Heart of Music. Rumours come and go but this one's always around. Me and Fast Larry decided one day to check it out. Hey maybe we could earn some money again. Forgotten what that feels like. Was it heavy, carrying around dollars, or did you put it all in a credcard? Anyways we reckon, me and Larry, that we could use some money and open a new block or something. Maybe start our own band.

We took off from Digitown and left the noise behind. My ears sounded like they'd suddenly got water in 'em, or something. When we reached the slope to the hills, the disco sounds of Digitown were now very quiet. Looking back, it looked like a giant funpark or something, all lit up in changing colours. Made Close Encounters look dull.

I sat down on the grass, at least I think that's what it was. Larry thought so. Used to be everywhere, he told me, before pavements. I'd gotten pretty fit from all that dancing, so climbing the hill was gonna be no problem. The sky was dark blue now, getting darker. I could see the moon, like a giant arc of bright white that you never saw in the town. Just colours, never static. But the moon kept white.

"We'll have to use that to see." Fast Larry said. He'd also seen the moon and was right. The hills were ominous curves of darkness, topped by silver moonlit grass. I hoped we'd find the source of the music soon. Would it be a house, or a cave, or what? Maybe a guy up there on his own with a weatherproof deck, just spinnin' those hits.

"You ready now?" I asked Fast Larry. He was, so we set off climbing the rough grassy slope to the hills. When we reached the top, Digitown was just a square of colour behind us. We felt it best not to look back too often, 'case we wanted to return. In front of us was a giant dip in the land beneath a larger hill than we'd just climbed. It was completely dark. What was down there? Anything?

"You wanna check that out?" asked Larry.

"No thanks." I replied.

"Maybe there's a way to the Heart of Music down there."

"Yeah? Down there?" My ears were now a pulse of sizzling silence. I was glad to speak just to hold it back. Up here there was total silence if we didn't speak.

"Got any better place to look?"

"Well not there, Larry. It's too dark. Let's try the hill ahead. They'd need light at the Heart, surely?"

"Yeah, guess so."

We crossed over to the other hill, careful not to walk too far down into what we couldn't see of the black dip. The moonlight didn't shine that far. At the slope of the other hill, I slipped and grabbed a turf of grass to keep hold.

"Hey, watcha." Larry warned.

I carried on climbing, a little behind Larry. How much easier it was to dance on a pavement than to climb a slippery hill. Soon we were near the top.

"Look, there, Larry, look!" I pointed to an edge of light appearing beyond the hilltop. As we climbed further up, we began to see a row of lit windows in the valley ahead.

"What is it?" asked Larry.

"I dunno. Looks like some of building. Small house you reckon?"

"No. There's no roof. And what would a house be doing out here?"

"It'd gotta be the Heart of Music."

"Bit small, ain't it? They got all the records in there? Come on, let's investigate."

I followed Larry, darting down the hillside into the darkness. We were both stumbling over rocks, but we didn't care. My trousers had caught on something and ripped at the left ankle. But we kept on running, towards the windows of light. I began to make out some details. The windows were dead square, about eight in a row. Through the glass there were blank rooms with no people in them. I could see closed doors, salmon pink walls, and the odd poster of fuzzy shapes. Gradually Larry slowed down and started walking towards the low building. I caught up with him.

"Looks empty." I said.

"Yeah. Where's the door?"

We reached the windows, leaning against the walls inbetween for breath. They felt like concrete, rough and cold. Larry walked round the side, looking for a way in. I peered through one of the windows. There was nothing but a desk and a leather chair. On the desk were hundreds of round knobs in neat rows. It looked like an incredibly sophisticated machine.

I followed Larry round to the other side of the building. The wall was blank there, and only a couple of windows long. But round the next corner was the door. A metal rectangle with a plain thin handle. Larry turned it with optimism, but the door stayed closed. He then knocked on it. The sound rang out like a tolling bell into the night. I was beginning to shiver, and Larry was desperate to get inside. The rest of the wall was just concrete, no windows. We walked the length of it and found another door, just like the first one. Larry was about to try the handle when we heard a voice behind us. We turned round and the other door had opened. A tall woman stood in the doorway, bathed in yellow light that looked so warm and inviting.

"Hey, you kids. What'ya messin' at?" She spoke like my mother, high-pitched and clear-spoken.

"Nothing." lied Larry.

"No, nothing much." I added.

"Yeah, I'll bet." the woman replied. "You both get yourselves here. I wanna look at you." We wanted a look at her too, so we walked towards the door. She had black frizzy hair, cut short around her ears, and wore a long red dress tied by a white belt. She looked us over, while we stood there, both feeling a bit guilty.

"I'm cold." I said. "You gonna let us in?"

"Where'd you come from?" she asked annoyed.

"Digitown." I replied. "We're looking for the Heart of Music."

"Heart of what?" She looked despairingly at Larry, then me. "Well you'd better come in. It's gettin' mighty cold out there."

We followed her in to a warm corridor leading down to several doors.

"What is this place?" asked Larry, but she ignored him, taking us to one of the doors on the left. She held it open and we were ushered inside.

"Hey, who are these kids?" came the voice of a fat guy laid out on a long black sofa. The woman entered the room and closed the door.

"Sit down." she urged. There were two chairs by the wall. The tall woman crossed over and sat on the edge of the sofa on the far wall. The man was the opposite of her, with a big round face and dark moody eyebrows. He wore plain brown trousers and a light blue jacket that didn't match.

"They came knocking at the door." she explained. "From Digitown, they say."

"What'ya doing out here?" asked the man. The woman answered automatically.

"They say they're looking for a place called the Heart of Music."

"That's right." Larry confirmed.

"Where's that?" enquired the man. I told him it was where we thought the music came from that fed the speakers in Digitown.

"Well you come to the right place!"

Me and Larry were excited. We'd found the Heart of Music?

"But I don't hear any music." said Larry.

"Not here, you don't." the man explained, shifting slightly on the sofa. "We feed Digitown from here, but you have to go there to hear what we play. We turned the sound off ages ago for a bit of peace and quiet. You know it's rather nice up here, middle of nowhere." The woman was smiling in silent agreement. Larry asked a question.

"How d'you know what to play, though? Surely you have to hear the music?"

"Nope. I just set the computer going with the latest discs we receive from Lacity."

"Computer?" I echoed.

"Yeah, why not? You think some jock plays the hits? We still got the equipment to do that, but we can't be bothered. No-one wants to hear chat in Digitown, so we just relay the music, hit-to-hit."

"Don't even give out the titles anymore." explained the woman. Me and Larry sat silent. So this was what it was all about. Not so far from what we'd expected really, but it all seemed a bit safe. Not the amazing place we'd dreamt of from the rumours.

"You kids ex-dancers?" he asked us.

"Not really, we just had to find out what the Heart of Music was. Now we know." Larry nodded. "Thought we might also earn some cash there."

"We're overstaffed as it is. There's just me and Nance here now. I'm Gary Gray, by the way, an ex-jock from Nyork. Me and Nance just look after the hardware here, feeding in the new hits and taking out the old ones. Most of the time we just laze around, to be honest."

"Don't it get boring?" Larry juttet in.

"Yeah, but we ain't keen on nothin' else, dancing and all that stuff. The wages are big, so who cares? As I said, it's kinda nice out here."

"Sometimes one of us goes out to fetch a rare disc or something." the woman told us. "Mainly to Lacity or Kalif. Gary gets the food, every month from a place not far from Digitown."

"Gives me a chance to hear if the old streets are still dancing loud and proud."

"So what you kids gonna do now?" asked Nance. "Going back to Digitown?"

We thought for a few seconds before replying. My ears had grown accustomed to the lack of 24-hour music by now, though it was creepy to hear the gaps inbetween conversation, as if there should be a beat going or something. I had no wish to stay in the Heart of Music. Seemed a bit dull. It would have to be back to the town.

"You wanna stay here?" I asked Larry.

"No, it's back home for me."

"Me too, I guess."

"You can stay for a while if you like." said Nance. We won't mind at all, will we Gary?"

"Hey, no sweat. Show you round if you like."

"Well we've got no need to jump." Larry told them.

"Come this way, then." said Gary, rising from the sofa. He and Nance left the room and we followed them into the corridor.

"Who pays for you, then?" I asked as we walked towards a far door.

"Sweet LA." replied Gary. "The Lacity government had a big share in setting up Digitown, and you may not notice it, but all the hits we spin out there are from the same label, New House Discs, who agreed to provide the hits. We're paid from Lacity in a deal that ensures Digitown gets to hear all the hot New House tracks, so they save on promotions and videos. If you look at the charts in Nyork, quite a few hits are New House, 'cause of Digitown. When the kids leave, they buy what they danced to, going by the tune they've heard over and over. A bit nostalgic if you like. So New House score hot over the other labels."

We'd reached a door in the corridor which Nance led us through. Inside the room was a long curved silver table surrounding a small leather chair, which span round as Gary sat down in it. I reckoned it must have been a pretty strong chair to cope with his weight.

"This is the computer." he explained. "All this. I just feed the discs in here, and the computer picks 'em for a playlist, making sure the same hits don't get played again until the next day. There's enough hits in there to make a 24-hour playlist easily." The silver table really had very little surface features ontop, just rows of small red lights above a set of tiny buttons. A couple of numbers gave the current track, rather like one of those ancient CD machines you used to see around.

"This is it?" started Larry.

"The rest of the rooms are just power rigs." Gary told him. "That's all it takes to run this joint. When other blocks are cleared of businesses, we're hoping to create new places like Digitown across Nyork, maybe different ones for different musics. If we get the backing from other labels, we could set up all across the States."

"What track's playing at the moment?" asked Larry, eyeing the numbers on the computer.

"Track 0056." Gary pushed at one of the tiny buttons and the name came up in a small window. "That's 'Sugar and Vice' by The Ace Squad Supreme. Never heard it myself." he confessed.

"Wouldn't know if we'd heard that or not." Larry stated. The number switched suddenly to track 0104 and the window showed a new title and artist, but Larry wasn't interested anymore.

"This is dull." he said coldly. "Let's get back to the town." I agreed, and we thanked Nance and Gary for showing us the computer.

Outside of the Heart of Music building, we faced the dawn with weary eyes. I felt like dancing, but Digitown was quite a way off yet. We set off walking as the sky was brightening, thin grey clouds dispersing in the rising warmth of a lemon sun.

"Let's not go back to Digitown." I said suddenly. Larry looked baffled.

"But it's only over the hills."

"I know, but it won't be the same now we know about the Heart of Music."

"Why not? It don't make no difference, does it? Scared of computers or something?"

"No, Larry, course not. It's just... well, maybe we've been there too long. Dancing away. Maybe it's time to move on."

"How d'you mean?"

"Well you can't dance for ever, can you?"

Larry looked down at the ground.

"Man, that's sickly. Never seen Big Nige? He's been there ever since it opened."

"Yeah, I've seen him. But he's different. I mean, we two are a team. We should be rakin' in the dollars. Ever used a Jackman?"

"Course not. I dance, don't I? I'm not a wizkid. I leave that Sony stuff to the jackers.

"Yeah, but I've used one." I told him. "Before I ended up at the town. Long while back now, but I remember how it works and all."

"So? What are you planning on doing? Jacking into a Netbank or something? Wanna end up in jail?"

"Larry, listen." We sat down on the base of the slope on the grass that was greener with every minute of the rising sun. "I tried a few quick jacks. You know, hacking my Mom's account, that sort of thing. Never removed nothing, but it went OK. Easy stuff, when you get into it. The point is, I could have stolen Mom's entire account, and Pop's. Cleaned out my family. When I left for the Big City, which led me to Digitown, I gave up jacking, but I never forgot how it was done. You gotta have a knack, you know? Not every kid can handle it. Lots of data and stuff. Can turn nasty if you mess around with Nets. But I couldn't see a real use for hacking that didn't involve stealing massive amounts of money."

"But why didn't you steal any?"

"It was too easy to get traced. Kid on our block cleaned out a Museum Net, and found the cops waiting for him outside his room. He's locked away now of course."

"Are you figuring out a way to hack some money and not get traced then?" asked Larry.

"No. It's too risky. Or I'm too cowardly. I've got a better idea. How'd you fancy making a No.1 hit?"

"How's that? We'd need money for that. Instruments and so on. Digital studio time. Video and so on."

"Yeah, but didn't you hear Gary Gray talkin' about the hits the computer plays? They're all New House right? And because of Digitown, they don't need no video promotional stuff. They're assured of a hit from the town when the kids leave. What'd he call it, nostalgia or something."

"That's right. They buy the hits to remind 'em of dancing in Digitown, so the charts are full of New House stuff. Plenty of kids leave the town every day, of course. Can't stand the pace I guess."

"Right. So what if we got a record put out on New House? We'd be laughing!"

"Yeah, but how?"

"This is my plan."

Larry listened attentively.

Cold hotel. Loud music. Beat beat beat. Cold bed. No sheets of course. Just a rug, but Larry had it on the floor. Some kids turned gay after keepin' warm together in the cold nights. But me and Larry weren't like that. He could have the floor and the rug if I could have the bed. We slept in our clothes of course. Shoes and all. Saves putting them back on when you wanna dance in the morning. Dance. In Digitown. Where else? But not for long. I'd needed my old Sony Jackman so I'd gone back home. Hitchhikin' across the USA. Wasn't that an old hit or something? Anyway, it'd taken me a month and now I was back in Digitown with Larry. We were six flights up in the abandoned skyscraper that we'd chosen tonight. Kids filled the other floors of course. Plenty of free room if you don't mind the rats.

I'd sussed out how to sleep with the loud music in Digitown a while back. You dance until you're tired, then you dance some more. Then you sleep. The cafés are free, so long as you keep up your dance points. That's a bit like money, I guess. All sponsored by Lacity I knew now after my visit to the Heart of Music. You made a deal when you entered the town. Free food and music if you dance and nothing much else. No violence, well that was getting boring anyway. Nothing much to vandalise when the businesses went. You had to go down to the harbour or someplace else. No-one checked up on us, but that wasn't the point. We were in a great place. Hell, you could just sit on the pavements and listen to the music if you liked. But it was cool to dance. Everyone did. The only trouble was when rival gangs got hot up about some new dance routine they wanted no-one else to copy. I reckon if the music stopped, we'd all be lost causes. Don't stop the music. Another old hit? Who could remember them now. Forget the names and the boring faces, just dance. Digitown needed no visuals. We'd all have stopped and watched them if we had the videos. And now I knew that they saved on them - quite a saving too - by using our town. New House must be makin' a

fortune. Loads of hits. Now I wanted that success too. I needed it. The money. All it would take is a No.1 hit.

I'd known a guy called Kez for years, an old school friend, but I hadn't seen him for a while. Then one day, I'm dancing in the streets (another one of those old hits?) when I see him with a group of girls, all dancing away. He stopped dancing when he recognised me and we ended up talking in a café for hours about old times. When I asked if he knew of any contacts in the world of music, he was only too happy to help me out. Kez told me of a guy making music for himself - no label. Said he couldn't get signed because he didn't have a video or something. I asked Kez if he could ask him to let me use one of his tracks. A month later and Kez said he'd agreed.

The track was fairly basic, but that didn't matter. You don't want anything too complicated on the street. People might not want to dance to it. I then tried the Jackman on the local Net. I wanted to see if New House had a Net, or were connected to any local ones, but I couldn't find them. As the winter grew nearer - not that the snow would stop people dancing - they just cleared it away, or moved to the skyscraper car parks - I was becoming desperate. Then it came to me. Why use the New House label at all? Why not release my song on another label? The labels didn't matter to the people dancing in Digitown.

So I hunted around the Nets a bit more. Sometimes I found a useful door, but most of the labels were heavily guarded. Too much money at stake to let a mere hacker into your system. The exception was a new label called Fruitless. The name seemed kinda strange, like a negative term that would put people off. But they were so new, they hadn't released anything yet, nor installed any security. Their Net was wide open to me! I had to get past the standard blocks of course, which stop random hacks by machines. But then I didn't even need a password. Every juicy piece of data Fruitless had was available to me.

I uploaded the track I had, which was called Dirty Diamonds. I made up a band name, The Vanilla Hill Crew, and set up a release date. Then I got clever and locked the system, so Fruitless couldn't stop the release when they discovered it. Plus I added a crude video that a friend of Kez's called Jake had done himself. It was very dark in places, but who cares? I think he did it in his bedroom or something. Just random shots of walls and stuff. The video would be needed for the rest of the States, but Digitown would only need to hear the track.

My final act was to observe the Net around Digitown. I could trace the feed from the Heart of Music quite easily, but I couldn't hack into it. So what I did was follow Gary Gray. Me and Larry took turns to watch him when he went to get new discs to feed into his computer. He went to a shop called Osmosis on 12th Street, which looked like it had been there forever. When Gary left the shop, we used forged IDs and pretended to be from New House with a fresh disc. The shop owner seemed taken aback, so we made up a story that it was a rush-release using a sister label. Anyway, the disc was white, so there was no label written on it. All we had to do was wait until Gary returned the following week to pick up the new

discs. Ours would be one of them. Then he would feed it unknowingly into the Heart of Music computer, and we'd have a hit! At least that was the plan.

But Gary never returned to the shop. On his way back home, some crazy in a black limo plowed into him, killing the ex-jock instantly. The latest discs were still in the back of his car.

Dirty Diamonds by The Vanilla Hill Crew was still released as planned. It was a minor hit in some States, but people blamed the video for poor sales. It never reached Digitown.

Nance left the Heart of Music computer running on its own. She never touched it after Gary died. Although it had millions of hits inside it, there were never any new ones added, nor old ones removed. Over time the people in Digitown thought they were hearing the same songs too often. The music had started to sound stagnant. Many kids upped and left, leaving only a few regular dancers behind. But after a few years, musical styles had changed, and no-one wanted to hear the old styles any more. Other similar towns had sprung up, which were said to be bang up to date. The exodus had begun.

One day, a gang of ex-dancers got so fed up with hearing one song again, they climbed up the lampposts and ripped out the speakers. Then they moved on the next street and did the same. Every street was left silent. Wires hung out from the tops of the lampposts like dead vines. There was no more music to be heard.

Digitown was dying. Me and Larry got out before it turned nasty. Sure enough, once the lampposts had stopped playing music, all that was left to attack were the cafés. With their windows smashed and the staff too frightened to work there any more, most simply shut down, leaving a mess of broken glass and wood.

I think the only people who visit Digitown now are the deaf. They have a nearby farm which keeps them fed and working. To them, the silence in Digitown makes no difference at all. Yet they were glad when the strobing colours from the lampposts stopped. No need for lights when there's no music to go with them. Maybe one day they will claim the town for themselves.

Empty Boxes

9th July 2006

The Zen priest led the man to the door of the room. While the priest was thin and agile for his fifty years of age, the man was overweight for his forty-four. He was glad when they had reached the door, as the climb up the seventy-seven steps to reach the temple had exhausted him. The priest showed no signs of exhaustion, being used to his daily routine of visiting the temple. He turned to the man and began to speak in a gentle but firm voice.

"Before you enter the room, you must agree to abide by my rules."

The man agreed. He had contacted the priest out of despair with his own life, but he wasn't sure what direction he needed to follow. Sick of the nine-to-five routine of the city, visiting the priest and his temple seemed as far from the office as he could get. The priest had agreed to show him a way forward, but only if he followed his exact advice.

Entering the room, the man saw it contained a long wooden table on which were placed several plain boxes of differing size, shape and colour. The man seemed perplexed. Had he come all this way for this?

The priest spoke again.

"My instructions are clear. Each box you see on the table is empty, except for a small note inside. You must choose a box, then follow the instructions on the note. If you do not, then you have already failed. Do you understand?"

The man nodded without saying a word. He was too busy eyeing up the boxes.

"Now choose a box and let us begin."

The man wasted no time. He walked quickly up to the table and grabbed hold of the biggest box he could see. Immediately he tore open the flaps and grabbed the note inside.

"What does the note say?" asked the priest.

"It says... 'To be free from your worries, you must give away all your money to charity'."

The man paused. He looked down with sadness. But then, he suddenly screwed up the note and threw it on the ground.

"Ridiculous! I can't give all my money away! I'd be broke! Do you have any idea how much money I own? Do you?!"

The priest showed him the door without answering.

When the blind lady reached the door of the temple room, again the priest said she must choose a box, then follow the instructions on the note inside. She was old

now, almost eighty-two. Whatever the note said, she was sure it would be good for her. She had checked her stars and today was a good day, she could feel it.

"Now please choose a box." the priest asked as they entered the room. Taking her time she moved forward until she could feel the edge of the table with her hands. Moving up, she ran her fingers gently over each box until she had mapped the shapes in her mind. She then lifted a medium-sized box off the table and opened it slowly. Feeling inside, she pulled out the note and handed it to the priest.

"What does it say? I'm afraid I can't see to read it."

The priest took the note and read it out.

"It says - 'You must now seek your ultimate ambition in life, or you will face going blind'."

A pause filled the room with silence.

"Of course, since you are already blind, you are free to ignore the note if you wish."

The woman lifted her head then replied, "In that case I will take the advice and use it anyway. I've always planned to write a book. Now's the time to start."

As the priest led the man into the room, he observed him in the same manner as he had the previous two individuals who had contacted him. Both sought direction in life. The first, a greedy obese man, had been quite rude, thought the priest. He had gone for the biggest box in the room, as if it held the best note. While the blind woman had used her hands to feel for a box she was comfortable with lifting. Perhaps, he wondered, she had simply chosen a box at random? Regardless, she had accepted the outcome, even when the priest had allowed her to ignore the note's advice.

But what was he to make of the man that stood before him? A man aged thirty-three, of thin build, who reminded the priest of a younger version of himself. He also seemed humble, at peace with the world and himself. Maybe he had come to the priest merely to confirm the direction he had already chosen for himself. Or maybe he was after a change in his life that he could not predict. The man and the priest were both about to find out as they entered the room.

At first, the man stood silent. He then picked up a small box. It wasn't the smallest of the boxes, the priest noted, as the man gingerly opened it and started to read out the words on the note.

But silence took hold of him. Was the note too shocking to read out?

The priest moved forward as the man broke his silence.

"It's blank." he reported. "The note's blank."

"Ah," the priest announced, "Excellent!"

This met with a puzzled look on the man's face, but the priest continued.

"Only one of the boxes has a blank note inside. You are lucky to be the one who has chosen it. What it means is that you are free to decide yourself what you wish to do with your life. The chances are you are already set on the right path."

The man smiled and shook hands with the priest.

"Thank you." he said.

Later that year, as the skies were darkening, and the air was turning colder, the priest was about to leave the temple when a large burly man approached him. The priest began to recognise him.

"Hi! Remember me? I had a mild stroke not long after we met. I knew then I had to abandon the stress of my city life. I had to make a serious change. So I did what you - the note in your box - said. I emptied my bank account and gave the money to a local charity for the homeless. You know what? It felt great! All that money was causing me a lot of stress, worrying about how best to spend it, or how to invest it... now I feel like a new man! I've lost weight too. No more company lunches. And I'm walking instead of taking the car. I must thank you greatly for your help in correcting my life. And you know the best news of all?"

The priest knew what the man was about to say. He knew because the man was wearing the same coloured robes as himself.

"I heard you were looking for someone to train as your replacement before you retire. So I applied, and was accepted!"

Both men began to laugh before embracing.

Notes

I had the title for a while, but wasn't sure what to do with it at first. The empty boxes aren't quite empty, but I don't think 'Almost Empty Boxes' or 'Empty Boxes Except For Having A Note Inside Them' would have made for great titles. Besides, I wanted to mirror the idea of zen and emptiness. Nothing is truly empty, even outer space (or is it?). A box contains air, if nothing else. If you took out the air and created a vacuum inside the box, then it would contain a vacuum instead. Now ponder on the meaning of the boxes and the notes, and the way each person reacts differently in the story.

The Gods

29th June 2006

The gods looked on nervously as the teacher began speaking.

"The scores for all your experimental projects are now ready to be revealed."

She looked around the room filled with a variety of gods differing in size, shape and colour. Each sat patiently in front of a small marble desk. She turned to the nearest god, a small one with blue skin, thin yellow hair and countless greasy tentacles that slithered onto the floor.

"Firstly, you, young god. Most impressive!"

The small god beamed with delight. His results were always good.

"For your project, you named your planet Bluesky, which soon developed a stable growth pattern that will last a very long time. Although you have allowed many differing life-forms to evolve, they are able to cohabit peacefully. Despite a couple of recent disputes over land, which were resolved diplomatically, little has harmed the overall progress of the people on your planet. They continue to dominate while respecting nature and the environment. Pollution is kept to a minimum. I can only mark this result a Pass!"

The god spoke a quiet word of rejoicing to himself. There were only two scores the teacher could give for this project—a Pass or a Fail. It seemed inconceivable that he would ever be given a Fail. He felt he was the brightest god in the class.

The teacher started to walk slowly around the room. She moved closer to a very old white-bearded god wearing simple white robes. The teacher's cold eyes and serious tone of voice told him what he feared would be his score.

"Your planet—while meticulously constructed, with a breathtaking array of species, suffered from too much pride, jealousy and fear. Before long, the inhabitants had evolved—if that's the right word—into people who were desperately trying to outsmart each other. Each group, spread across the planet, thought they were the best. Before too long, they had developed weapons capable of destroying the whole planet. Several times these were tested, with little or no thought to the resulting contamination. The weapons were even used in combat, killing a great many people. My calculations predict a low survival rate for the populace. Put simply, I cannot pass this experiment."

The god sighed. He had tried his best. But younger gods, like those seated around him, were able to outperform him. Their miracles were more spectacular, their life-forms infinitely superior to the crude ones he had created. But what the teacher was about to confirm was the thing that depressed him the most.

"As you know, all failed experiments are to be retested. If they cannot be redeemed, they must be completely destroyed. Your only hope is that the people on your planet can become peacemakers. They will need to follow your guidance, respect each other, care for their planet and its natural resources, care for the

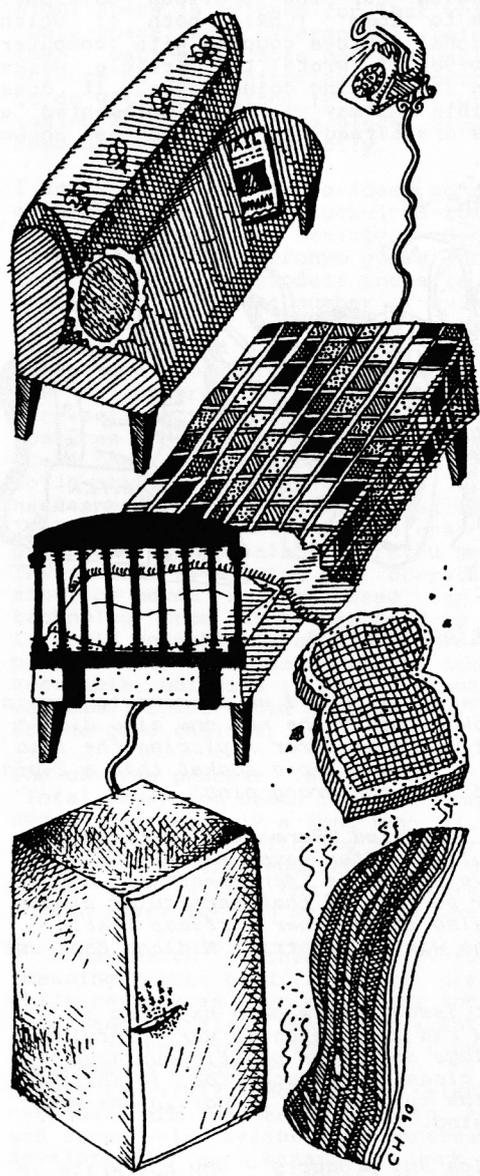
animals and birds, always seek peace instead of war wherever possible. I know you tried to help them once with your son, but he was sadly killed. Now the future of the planet hangs in the balance."

The god looked down. He felt a grave sadness come over him. All his hard work over millions of years of time, all could be destroyed in a matter of seconds.

"Better luck with your future projects." the teacher added. "And next time, name your planet something better than 'Earth'."

Practical Joker

1990



The old man looked into the mirror. His face was baggy, his hair was thin and grey, but his eyes still held a sparkle of life. He didn't feel old inside, even if he knew he looked it. 'Not old enough to die yet' he told himself bravely. He would get dressed and make some breakfast – a bit of spare bacon from the fridge, a piece of toast from the brown loaf in the cupboard – that'd be fine. Then... well, what would he do then?

He lived alone, in a ramshackled house that had not seen a drop of paint for decades. Sure it was dirty, and maybe a bit of a mess... but it was home. Iris the cleaner used to come round every Tuesday, once, until he couldn't afford to pay her any longer. Now the house was left as it was the day before – crumbs on the floor, so what? Cobwebs along the bannister – no one ever came to visit him, so why worry about it?

After breakfast, which was downed in the usual leisurely manner, he decided he'd find something he'd put aside upstairs the day before. It was sure to be up there somewhere. As he reached the top of the creaking wooden stairs, he realised he'd completely forgotten what it was he'd come up for. Was it a newspaper? Or a book? The answer eluded him, making him suddenly

feel like a young boy again, no cares in the world – he'd explore his own house!

What lay beyond the first door on the landing? He knew of course – it was his bedroom. But let's pretend, he thought, that he'd never been there before. What would he find? What did he expect to find? A bed, some furniture... He'd once crept upstairs at an early age and heard terrible groaning sounds coming from his parents' bedroom – where they in agony? He'd cast open the door to help them, only to see in disbelief his father ontop of his mother! And both were naked! Well, he didn't expect to find them now inside his bedroom. Besides they were long dead. The room would certainly be empty of people.

Let's see then, he thought as he carefully turned the ivory door knob where the pattern of flowers had almost worn away. The door gave a rusty, tiresome

creek as it opened into a darkened room. He'd purposely left the curtains drawn except for a slight gap where the sunlight streamed through onto the bed... except that the bed was no longer there. The light streaked over the dusty floor instead, revealing a bright area of floorboards that had remained previously hidden beneath the bed. The old man's heart skipped a beat... where on earth was the bed?

His immediate thought was that it had been stolen – yet he had only just got out of it less than an hour ago – and who would steal a bed like that? Without him seeing them steal it? He rubbed his eyes – perhaps he was dreaming... dust scattered into the sunlight as he ran to pull open the faded blue curtains that that once been green. He stared out of the window – it hadn't been opened, and the frame was too small anyway to get a bed through it! Panicking, he ran out the room and onto the landing. Did he feel well? He wasn't sure – there had to be an explanation for this – but what? Had someone broken into the house... and moved the bed? That was it, it had to be in another room...

There were only two other rooms upstairs that he could check – the bathroom and the storeroom. He rapidly checked them both. The bathroom was far too small to hide a bed inside it. As for the storeroom, there was just too much stuff in there to start with, so... had the bed been carried downstairs? Without him hearing it being moved at all? He looked quickly into the bedroom again – his bed had definitely vanished!

Heading downstairs as fast as he could, the old man ran into the kitchen... no, the bed wasn't there – how preposterous! Who'd move a bed into a kitchen? Besides, there'd be no room for it, he thought, the fridge would get in the... what fridge? It had to be a nightmare – there was a giant rectangular patch on the wall where the fridge used to stand. The paint there was its original white colour against a wall of darker cream that had absorbed years of cooking smells. The white patch was like a huge notice saying “Your fridge has been removed from here”.

What was going on? First the bed had vanished – and now the fridge. He was scared – if a burglar was in the house, the old man felt he might not be strong enough to defend himself. Or perhaps the burglar was someone playing a practical joke – moving bits of furniture around to confuse him. It was all a game, it had to be – and one he was determined not to lose.

He decided that the joker had to be in one of the other rooms downstairs. He would try the lounge.

Quietly, he crept out of the kitchen and into the hall, peering round the lounge door. The room was empty. Or was it? Could the joker be hiding behind the sofa perhaps? Wait, that was impossible – there was no sofa! Like the bed and the fridge it had seemingly disappeared!

“Alright.” he announced impatiently, “Who's playing tricks?” He looked around but could see nowhere anyone might hide in the room.

“Come out, wherever you are. This isn't funny, you know.” He waited in silence for a reply. A sound, a movement, but nothing stirred. He crept cautiously out of the lounge, his heart beating faster and faster.

“Come out, I tell you. I shall call the police!” It was then that he saw it. Stood by the table in the hall with its hand holding down the phone.

“That wouldn't be a good idea.” spoke the... spoke the thing! It had the figure of a man, but with a pair of huge ram-like horns that spiralled out of its head. It was grinning. The old man froze. The thing took its hand off the phone and he stared at the skin of its body. All red, gnarled and spotted, hairy and grotesque.

“Allow me to introduce myself.” it spoke, with a booming voice that seemed like the thing was in a much larger room. The sound had an eerie echo to it that chilled the air. “You know me,” the hideous thing continued, “I'm the Devil! Ha ha...” and it laughed until the hall shook with sound.

“The...” but the old man was stuck for words.

“Quite a decrepit place you have here.” the devil said looking round with eyes that were like pools of thick blood.

“What have you done... with my furniture?” he asked stumbling nervously over his words. Was this another part of the joke? If so, was this the practical joker?

“Ah-ha ha! I had great fun with all that.” the devil replied with an added laugh. Each laugh exposed a mouth of rotten yellow teeth. The old man caught a smell of the devil's foul breath, like it'd eaten a whole zombie. “Yes, your furniture. All gone.”

“Gone? What d'you mean all gone? Where've you taken it?” The devil grinned knowingly.

“It's one of my best party tricks – making large objects disappear! I have the power to scatter each atom of any object I wish through the whole of space. They've probably just received an atom of your bed in Alpha Centauri, and an atom or two of your fridge in the Horse Head Nebula by now!” Again, an added menacing laugh that rocked the hall.

“Well, bring it back, you...”

“Back? Ha! You don't understand, old man, your stuff has gone forever – turned to atomic dust!”

“What else have you removed from my house?”

“Oh, it's not your furniture I'm really after...” The devil gave him a hard look that showed it meant business.

“What is it you want? Look, just take it and go – leave me alone.”

“Don't you know anything about devils? We are the agents of Hell – we trade in souls.”

“Souls? Why, what for?”

“They fetch a good price on the Devil's Market... especially the older ones... more mature, you see.” The devil smiled, its horns proud and dominating.

“You're not suggesting...” He wished he'd wake up now – that it was all a bad dream, but the devil continued.

“Come now, old man. Your soul is no use to you anymore. You've lived your life for long enough. Let me relieve you of your dreary existence in this house, let me free your soul.”

“No! I'm not ready to die! My soul is mine! No hairy devil's going to steal it!”

“I see...” The devil looked sadly at the floor for a moment, then smiled again, knowing it was in control. “So you decline my generous offer. Well you make it clear I shall have to take your soul from you – a pity really, we could have made a bargain. Your soul for eternal life.”

“I don't want your eternal life... how could I have that, without a soul?”

“Oh, I don't mean on Earth, you fool. Ha! I mean eternal life like me – in the pleasant surroundings of Hell. It's a little hot, but you'll soon get used to it.”

“You're just a cheat – my soul for a life in Hell! Besides, my soul's not for sale, so you can just...”

“Be careful what you say about me. I can make your whole house disappear if I want to.” Its eyes were intense now, as if the colour within them was stirring under a gradual heat, ready to boil. “But this is tiring me. You're not going to do a deal, are you?”

“Sod off, you bloody devil!” he shouted bitterly.

“My, a compliment! How kind you are! But you leave me no choice. Do you know what that makes you if I just take your soul?”

The old man stared blankly at the devil, but before he was given an answer, there was a flash of red light and he felt as if he'd been sucked inside out. He fainted instantly.

When he came to, relief flooded his face – it had been a nightmare after all! Devils? Pah! His imagination! Yet what a nightmare it had been – so real...

He got up off the floor and floated up the silent stairs to the landing. What a fool he felt – just a dream, he told himself, just a dream! He drifted through the bathroom door and looked into the mirror. Only this time he saw right through his face.

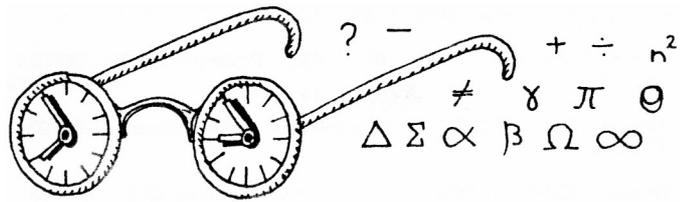
Time After Time

October 1989

Professor Daniel Zweistein
awoke with a flash.

“Of course!” he said.

“That's it! Of course!”



He leapt out of bed and slid a pair of glasses over his face. The clock read five minutes to eight – plenty of time to test the solution that had come to him so clearly as he had woken. Months of hard work had made him a leading scientist in his field, and everyone suspected he was on the verge of completing an invention that would win him the Nobel Prize ten times over. But for the last month, the invention had consistently failed to work. The theories were sound, the practice was perfected, but the results were zero. Time after time. But this time, he knew it would work. He knew he had that one answer that was the only possible solution. It seemed so simple – just a rearrangement of the parts – and yet it was a solution that had eluded him for so long.

Zweistein scribbled down the solution hurriedly onto a few scraps of paper, then threw on some clothes, and threw down some breakfast. He left his house and walked across the street to the campus laboratory. Once inside, there lay the invention. In the light of the solution, it was a hopelessly constructed machine. Nearly every part was in the wrong place. He madly refitted the parts until the machine stood together – neater and more compact than before. He'd never worked so fast before, but time didn't matter – soon, he would have all the time that ever existed!

Click. The machine came to life, purring blissfully. He smiled, then laughed. It worked! But now for the true test...

The professor entered a small space at the side of the machine where a chair stood waiting. He sat down and peered through his glasses at the range of assembled dials above a row of switches. He flicked over the switches and set a time display to read 7:55.

Zweistein was so confident that his invention would work, that he hadn't thought to test it first with an inanimate object – he'd test it himself! He could wait no longer.

He glanced at his watch, which read 8:55, then touched the final switch of the machine. A sudden fizzle of energy knocked him unconscious, but the machine had passed the test! And Zweistein had travelled back an hour in time!

He awoke with a flash.

“Of course!” he said. “That's it! Of course!”

He leapt out of bed and slid a pair of glasses over his face. The clock read five minutes to eight...

The Burning Man

1989

It all began one night in the warmth of a cosy living room. The year doesn't matter, nor the day. Judy lay comfortably on the leaf-green sofa, enjoying the heat of an open fire. She felt relaxed and easy after a busy day at the office. Her auburn hair fell down around her slim neck touching the cool pink dress she wore, with a lipstick red belt. Judy was in her early twenties yet she still maintained the youthful look she'd perfected at 19. She had never married and only dated occasionally. The relationships never seemed to last long. What did it matter, she thought, and stretched out, dropping off her white high heels into the carpet floor.

Flickering firelight softened the hues of the room, painting the walls with dancing shadows. Just right, she thought, smiling to herself. The fireplace roared and crackled, a small chopped log burning nicely on top of the glowing coals. Judy focused on the log, then the coals. How hot they burn, as hot as hell. The flames were an ever changing pattern, a play of fire and light. I can almost make out glowing shapes... thought Judy, studying the fiery flames from the coals. Different shapes, like animals, birds, a face...

A face. The face of a man. His eyes burning out at her, almost real. Too real, she thought. But the face didn't change. Judy blinked. Still a face. With a nose, and a mouth, lips on fire. The face grew clearer, the heat more intense? Judy watched flabbergasted as the face appeared to rise up from the coals into the lifesized head of a man.

"Do not fear me, young lady." spoke the fiery head, with a rough tone. "There is nothing to be scared of. You are a pretty sight." The head rose up, revealing shoulders that soon gave way to arms and a chest, until the blazing figure of a whole man appeared at the fireplace. His body burnt with a ferocious heat, great flames licking his entire body from head to foot. Judy lay transfixed upon the sofa, not daring to move, yet she felt strangely unfrightened by the figure before her. He held out a hand, its fingers lost in the engulfing rage of heat sizzling in the air.

"Come with me, young girl." asked the burning man. "You will know what I know..."

"And... and what is that?" she asked the man on fire, caution in her voice. Was she now dreaming?

"My life is the life of fire, the life of eternal heat. See this hand, this body? It is on fire, yet I do not burn away. I am proof that I exist, forever to live enflamed."

"Where... where do you come from?" she asked him fighting a desire to leap from the sofa and run, yet there seemed to be no reason to be afraid.

"Ah... that is a long story. I was once a human being, existing like yourself, with the inability to withstand strong heat, for I would suffer great pain from burns. But one day I was at home, sat in comfort, when I thought I could hear a

noise outside the room like that of a bonfire, and I realised the house was indeed on fire! I struggled to reach the door and escape, but I let in the flames and the heat forced me back. I fell over, and tried to reach the window, but the fire had leapt to the curtains and the whole room was ablaze. I knew I was trapped. Hot flames licked at my flesh as smoke clouded into my lungs. I collapsed and was burnt to death. But now I stand here, still burning. When you lit the open fire behind me, I was given a chance to reform my body here, in the strength of the flames. Fire was once my enemy, now it is my friend. For, you see, when I died, my soul was not allowed into heaven, but sent straight to hell. You want to know what hell is really like?" Judy remained silent, feeling a mixture of suppressed sympathy and fear.

"I'll tell you what hell is really like." he said burning to tell her. "Hell is... death. A constant death. However you die on Earth, you are kept dying in hell, never allowed to complete your death, your soul never to pass on to heaven. I died in fire, so hell for me is this fiery shape that you see before you. I am forced to burn like this forever... But hell is like any other place, it has a way in and a way out. I searched for many years to find a way out, in the hope that I could complete my death elsewhere. Eventually I came upon a tiny hole – an opening in hell that led down a deep corridor to where I knew not till now. That corridor led me here, to your fireplace, and yet still I do not finish dying. It seems I will always be the burning man." He stopped and peered down at his legs, the melting flesh that never melted away, engulfed in flames. A moment of sadness fell over the room.

"Perhaps it is not good that I have come here," he pondered out loud, "I'm afraid my presence has a rather nasty consequence for you." Judy sat up on the sofa.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"It is possible for me to remain on fire like this, but you are still a living being. Flames do not burn me, but they burn the things around me. Have you not noticed the carpet is on fire near my feet? Within seconds the whole floor will be alight, and your sofa surrounded by flames. There is no hope for your survival now. I'm sorry, it is too late." He looked around the room as the flames spread across the floor and up the curtains. Judy screamed and leapt up in the sofa as fast as she could, but her dress was alight, flames and smoke driving up her body. Within a minute she was burnt to death. When the flames had engulfed the entire room, the burning man returned to the fireplace and stepped back inside the corridor to hell. He did not wish to return, but he could do no good on Earth. Yet he thought it might not be as bad in hell as it had been before... At the end of the corridor he saw her, on fire just like himself. Judy took his hand and they walked through hell together.

Grave New World

20th July 1988 - A cyberpunk-inspired sci-fi thriller.

Suzi was a Japanese girl who had married America at an early age. She'd flown to Nyork, chasing the dragon's dream of the promised land. In the ruby lit streets, she'd sold herself, to ease the pain of the shattered dream. Nyork had become the Grave New World of city wastelands and disused factories; urban decadance marked by broken glass from a thousand windows. Car windows, tubetrain windows, skyscraper windows. Walls had lost their brickwork under explosions of multicoloured graffiti. It had become a national pastime to decipher the forgotten meanings of the slogans and the abstract crazy lettering. When the walls were full, the spraycans had been turned upon the sprayers, daily changes of your favourite tattoodles.

Nyork was Suzi's mistake. She had blown her family with an injection of Time's Up in the soup. Supper's Ready, she'd told them grinning. Her father's Osumi yen had seen her good to the airport, taking off into the honey-orange sky she thought she'd never see again. Better than the broken paving stones of the redlight pantomime she now performed in, night to night. Hard American in wet Japanese. But they paid in dollars. The yen had gone a long while back.

I met her on the job one night. Her hair was short black, her eyes pearl grey. The eyelids had been angled and she'd lost her Japanese face. The quick exchange of dollars from my jeans pleased her, maybe more than what else I had there. But when my time was up, I couldn't leave. She pulled the silk blankets off the bed and I fell to the floor in a heap. I succumbed and headed for Jo's. Could a drink forget her?

Then I returned the next night. Not for sex, but for talk. I still payed her. Okay, let's talk, she said. I peered into those pearl grey eyes and I could see she was more than the job. What would it take to persuade her to tell?

Not much.

I fetched the soft she asked for. Suzi fed it into the comp, the bulk of her luggage from Japan. It purred for minutes, chewing the luscious new data with delight. Then she told me she had a plan. I was in on it. The comp was our portable control centre, her flat our HQ. She'd picked up on a guy named Falcon. He had the dollars. Locked tight in Fort Nyork, the city Netbank. She'd caught a few contacts in the Net, prime fishes for infiltration. But would her plan work? I helped her as much as I could. Maybe I was beginning to love her.

At first we tried a simple hack through Netbank's security. If the Net was stretched enough, it just might start to open, unmesh, and we could stick our hands through the holes. But it didn't. The cops were round the Net with their own Net, so we'd have had to go too deep. Our hands weren't long enough, the Nets were too taut. But we still had Falcon.

Suzi cast around for a month, hungry for further leads, but there were few to catch in the rain of information around us. It all seemed straight wiring, A to B

connexions, barely any junctions where a name, or a number might lurk. I tracked Falcon as best I could. He was a top notch in the Netbank's infrastructure of accounts that span the State. I dreamt of tying knots in the wiring, trapping accounts until the wires were heavy with millions of dollars. Then I'd cut the wires, and the money would fall like paper rain into Suzi's lap. But Falcon was a tough one. His status kept him from us for a long year.

Then Suzi made a breakthrough. Falcon had grassed on a friend twelve years ago. The friend had been sent on a permanent holiday to New Alcatraz for rape. Falcon had joined in the rape too, and helped clear up afterwards. But then he'd turned to the cops, son of a bitch. The friend was called Snowey, an albino from Okloma. You couldn't miss him, so the police had found him easily. But Falcon had cleared himself. The woman had recognised Snowey, but her descriptions of the other man involved were vague. The room had been dark and the man tall who had used her like a sperm bank. When Falcon turned to money banking instead, the woman had had Snowey's child. Or was it Falcon's? Time had given the case a layer of dust that was obscuring the details. Wipe it clean, I told Suzi, clear Snowey and Falcon will look pretty awkward. Then nail him, and while he's out of the Net, we'll step in with his key to the untold dollars they hide in Fort Nyork. Suzi had his key already. She was a smart hacker. But could we pull it off? If we failed we'd be under. Over.

A friend of Suzi's kept us supplied with the right gear. The soft was no problem, standard stuff from Swizland. Then there was the gun - a simple unimould pink shape, phallic and deadly. I turned it over in my hands, admiring the feel of the dimpled plastic and the ribbed handle. We thought we might need it.

The scene was set. An envelope of papers would mysteriously arrive at the Nyork Police Dept. The papers contained forged genetiprints. Undeniable evidence that the woman's child was Falcon's too. We'd hacked his medical records to ensure this. They could double check all they liked. Then we'd wait until Falcon was gone.

The rest was tricky. We couldn't move until Falcon was up for trial, so we had to stay low. A month passed, and me and Suzi spent the time with nothing better to do than... but the cops got wise. How I'll never know. Our control centre went. Marooned at the police station. The American all-in-one comp units just weren't the same. They were still using CDs! Suzi eventually scrounged a flat-shaped model, but we had to rig it up to her TV to use it. By the time we were cleared for lack of evidence (the charges were hacking, of course) the cops had turned their attentions to Falcon. Fort Nyork was open at last!

We punched slowly into the Netbank security. This time, we didn't need to stretch the Net. Falcon had left us a nice big hole in the fabric. Falcon's key fitted perfectly and we were in. I'd never seen so many names - we must have gone through almost every citizen in Nyork - all their accounts were there, like big fat juicy fruit, just waiting to be picked. Suzi used Falcon's own account to transfer

the funds to. Suddenly Falcon had all the dollars in Fort Nyork in his account! If he got free again, they'd do him good for this!

We got out the way we came in. It was easy for us not to leave any traces on the Net.

Next up was Lacity. It had been rebuilt completely since the Quake and looked like some kind of playground for architecture. Colourful and geometric. I helped Suzi feed Falcon's account slow-wire into the Lacity Netbank. She knew a quiet little island in the Net that had been kept safe for years, abandoned until the owner would return. But we returned instead. We'd bought the island off the owner, a friend of a friend of a friend of mine. You can buy anything with the entire Fort Nyork finances at your disposal.

But the island became a continent. The dollars were stacked so high that people had started to notice. Someone must have spotted the slow-wires to Nyork and we were traced. It's a hard lump to swallow when you're traced like that so easily, after all your oh-so-clever tricks getting as far as we'd got. No lack of evidence this time, Suzi dear.

Falcon meanwhile did some time. But the bastard wormed his way out on bail. The Netbank must have taken pity on him. He's now back with them, while I'm sitting here in my cell. I get on well with Snowey. He tells me lots of things about Falcon. Maybe I'll have another shot at him one day. Suzi's hiding in Japan somewhere. I bet she's had her eyes reangled. Japanese again.

Adam

5th November 1985 – July 1988

The sun-soaked horizon melted into the distance as a cool wind blew across the front of the Whitehouse. In a darkened room sat the President of the United States of America, accompanied by a dozen officials. Infront of them a large screen flickered into life with a warm wave of iridescent colours that flushed over the faces of the seated group. The image of a thinly-faced newsman in a black suit and tie shone out against an orange background wall onto which the letters ANTV were written.

"This is American News TV with the evening news." spoke the newsman, in a deep rich voice. "My name is Ted Corell. Today saw a remarkable step forward in the field of robotics. The leading expert, Dr. Rush, has announced that he has achieved a perfect replica of a human being in a unique robot he calls Adam. With realistic flesh and hair, the robot is able to carry out a wide range of tasks, without the slightest evidence that it is not a human being at all, but a robot."

The President glanced sideways at his officials, then back to the screen.

"It is claimed that Dr. Rush is presently working on another robot, named Eve, which is to be a perfect female replica. Yet little is known about Adam, and few can claim to have witnessed it in action. Even less is known about the history of Dr. Rush, who has worked over the last five years with a highly skilled team of electronic and genetic experts, who all remain unknown. Dr. Rush is of course famous for the 'Butler' personal robot that has been a huge success, relieving countless families of their housework."

The newsreader paused, and the camera moved in a little.

"It is hoped to bring you further news on this story as soon as we have more information. Meanwhile, here is the rest of today's news. In Chicago, it was reported that..."

The President stood up and turned off the screen. The room fell dark again until a click flooded the room with a warm bright light. He cleared his throat.

"Get me this Dr. Rush." he demanded quickly as he strode towards the door. "And run a check on his background."

The group of men followed the President out of the room into a well-lit corridor.

Across a silver-grey morning sky flew a fast swallow over a large white domed building. A black limousine drew up at the side and a middle-aged man climbed out in a dark jacket, sided by a couple of sombre guards.

"This way, Dr. Rush." one of the guards ordered as the three men entered the white building.

The President sat waiting at a grand redwood desk on which were piled various papers. The American flag draped across the wall behind the desk, like a bold curtain without a window.

A sudden knock sounded at the wood-panelled doors of the room.

"Let them in." said the President to a guard stood silently nearby. The guard reached for the large brass handles and pulled open the doors. A thin man and two guards entered the room and the doors were closed solid behind them. The guard to the left of the thin man moved forward.

"This is Dr. Rush, sir." announced the guard.

"Good..." began the President, spreading his hands across the desk. "Tell me Dr. Rush... I hear that you have developed a robot that is indistinguishable from a human being. Is that so?"

Dr. Rush felt nervous, but replied quickly.

"That is correct, sir." He spoke with a clear voice.

"How long have you worked in robotics?" The President stared into Rush's wide face, with its thin light hair and small reddish eyes.

"Exactly five years this week." replied the Doctor.

"And yet little is known about you. I've had your name run through our computer files and it's given me a report of only the last five years of your research." The President took a sheet from the top of a pile on the desk and held it gingerly between his hands. "It is a most commendable record of work." he said, glancing hurriedly across the report.

"Thank you, sir." replied Dr. Rush unsmiling.

"But the report fails to give me any information about what you have done before your research." He paused a second, then dismissed the sheet from his hands. "Tell me then, Doctor. Just what were you doing before?"

Dr. Rush looked down defeatedly.

"I cannot reveal that information." he replied. The President was aghast at the refusal.

"Are you turning down a demand from the President of the United States? Tell me why you can't reveal this information. And how is it that you have been able to accomplish so much in such a short time? I do not find other people in your field making similarly rapid advances."

"Again, I am afraid that I cannot reveal such information."

"Dr. Rush. Do you continue to refuse a direct request of the U.S. Government? If you do then I can easily arrange to have your work terminated. Perhaps you are hiding something? I demand that you reveal your history immediately!" The President flushed with anger.

The Doctor paused, eyeing the draped American flag as the President sat waiting. He felt he could sense the two guards ready to grab hold of him at the slightest order.

"If..." he spoke slowly, "...I have no choice..."

"You have no choice!" shouted the President. "Your past, Dr. Rush. Now!"

"...then so be it." Dr. Rush walked up to the desk and the guards moved closer by his side. He stood firm and thought for a while. "So be it." he repeated, scratching at the base of his neck, beneath his white shirt. But he wasn't scratching, he was pulling, strongly at the skin, until it tore upwards in a sheet. As the President watched on speechless, the sheet of skin pulled loose from the Doctor's face, until a rubbery mask slipped off over the eyes, taking his hair with it. The eyes were now ruby sockets, oases of neon, for underneath the skin was revealed the shining chrome head of a robot.

Light Armageddon

Date unknown

Contrary to popular belief, the President cannot 'push the button down' to initiate a nuclear attack. The 'button' is in fact two switches at separate locations. These can only be activated together, at the direct command of the President.

We crashed into the corridor and blasted the guards away. They vapourised nicely. This was it – the last of the two switches that could spell doom for Mankind. Recent events on the world stage by unstable countries had put the world on edge. Public pressure had failed to prevent the President from giving a threatening speech, clearly indicating he was prepared to strike first. This was to “preserve world peace” of course – in reality, to obliterate the enemy before they could attack. Such was the confidence in his new system to destroy incoming missiles that he was now willing to provoke anyone – like a kid with a gun, who felt he had the perfect bullet-proof vest.

It felt like the future of the whole planet could be in our hands. If we could deactivate both nuclear switches, the President would be forced to decline from the aggressive position he had taken up and peace would have a chance. The first switch had been successfully deactivated already, but that left us in the dangerous state where it would only take the second switch to launch a nuclear attack.

The sweat poured from our brows – we had the right location, but where was the second switch? After blasting down the door in front of us, we entered a dark room. Inside all we could see was the shape of the walls lit by the outside light. Perhaps this switch had been disguised to stop anyone like us from finding it. Perhaps... perhaps there was only one switch after all...

We pressed on through an open door at the far end of the room. This led to a room in total darkness.

It was no use. My colleague had had enough. It had been a tiring mission for us all. He wanted it over fast. Moving across the walls with his hands, he eventually found something protruding in the darkness.

“Hold on while I turn on the light,” he said. “I can feel the switch on the wall here...”

The Listener

Date unknown

Listen.

Do you hear it?

The "thud thud thud", like an animal approaching underground. I feel scared for a moment that lasts too long. Then... nothing.

Elements of light cascade around my room. I am still alone. Suddenly, sound begins to tremble through the walls, threatening to shake the very foundations. Then it stops. Again... silence.

When the noise awakes like an angry beast disturbed once more, it is yet louder and firmer than ever. I can now make out a voice, a human voice, but not yet words. I am the listener, yet to what I'm listening to I am not yet sure. The sound is forming now into patterns. I begin to hear instruments playing in tune and time. It is like a primordial tantra that goes on and on. My mind is shocked by the intrusion on my privacy, yet my ears are strangely attracted to the music, if that's what it is. Music of a different kind than I have heard before. More concentrated and yet also more relaxed. I am becoming accustomed to it by the second and haven't stopped to notice just how loud it has become. In a moment of acceptance I begin to enter a trance like state... the sound envelops my senses completely - I can no longer see. I reach a climax of intensity and ecstasy. After a blissful second I succumb completely to everything and pass slowly but surely into a deep and impenetrable void.

Listen.

I can no longer hear... anything.

Tony & Bonnie

2003 – A comical piece not to be taken seriously...

When the night came, the red turned to black on the rusty street signs, the crackled white plastic of the street lights turned to bright orange. But enough of that. You, the reader, are dying to get to the juicy bits, so here goes.

He slid inside her as she groaned for more. Oh wait, I haven't introduced anyone yet. There's Bonnie, a middle-aged woman, with faint brown streaks and black roots in her shoulder-length straight blonde hair. Her face is smooth and curvaceous, like she was carved from butter that never melts. Sounds a bit sickly if you ask me.

Then there's Tony, the streetwise guy who thinks he knows all the answers. His low-shine greased-back hair and elliptical black shades make him every bit the dude that women can't resist. Women like Bonnie.

On the day they met he was strolling casually past the hair salon where she works. At least I think work is the right word. Most of the time she waits for customers to walk in asking for a haircut or a styling or a dye, whatever. The rest of the time she catches up on the gossip reading the weekly glossy magazines with more pictures of celebrities than words. She easily gets bored, so when she sees Tony pause for a moment outside her window, he catches her eye. She catches his too.

Life wouldn't be the same without romance, but of course it doesn't happen straight away. But you know they end up having sex as I gave you a little spoiler early on. Or was I just kidding? Read on and see. No answers here mate.

So the scene is set. But now what? For a start, Tony can't see a bleeding thing with his shades on, so he slowly takes them off (acting cool, you see) and slides them into his top shirt pocket. He forgets why he paused now - it doesn't matter - his entire world is suddenly captivated by Bonnie, smiling back at him with a half-smile. That's enough for him to know she likes him. Oh boy. Could be his lucky day.

Tony suddenly gets the urge to have a haircut. He doesn't need one of course - it's just an excuse to meet Bonnie. So in he walks.

The salon is mostly refurbished in dark wood panels with a few tall plants in the corners. It makes it quite a dark depressing place, but this adds to the contrast with Bonnie's bright face and blonde hair. She doesn't wear much makeup. From a distance you'd think she wore none at all. Tony couldn't care less. He thinks a woman looks great without any makeup at all, even if she's only just woken up and her hair's in a mess. Which some women find impossible to believe, like they are doomed without umpteen layers of mascara and lipstick.

Tony's face by comparison is dark and mysterious. Or rather his jet black hair makes it seem that way. His small eyes are the kind you could look at for a long time, probing for some deeper meaning yet to surface. While his thin nose makes him feel insecure, he feels he is quite attractive. This gives him the

confidence he needs. But first he likes to suss his women out. Often the most beautiful ones he is attracted greatly to turn out to be the type he'd least like to date when he gets to know them. But Bonnie is different. To him, she has a casual manner that seems to radiate confidence back at him. He knows instantly that she is his type.

Sitting down in the chair, she throws a used cape over him to catch the hairs when she cuts them off his head. She can't help admiring the sharply cut edges of his well-trimmed hair above his neck at the back. It doesn't even cross her mind that this guy does not need a haircut. There's something fascinating about him that she feels needs to be discovered.

Now Bonnie has had a few guys take her out before. She likes being wined and dined but she always loses interest later on. For the life of her, she can't figure out why. The guys have all been nice, done all the right things, but there's always been a missing ingredient. No spark that set her alight with passion.

At first she knows this guy is just another maybe. She thinks about caressing the back of his neck with her shiny pearl painted fingernails but dismisses the thought the moment it happens. She's at work, it's a business, time to start then.

She asks Tony politely how he would like his hair cutting. She asks him in the same way she would with any other customer. He turns to face her and asks her just to trim it gently on all sides. No numbers or style names, just a quick trim.

They exchange light conversation as she sprays his hair wet and combs it down. Her voice is warm and friendly, her words clear and precise. His voice is slightly musky, he needs to repeat some words now and then for her.

There are gaps in the conversation when both parties think of something more to say. They also consider the possibility that they've blown it with any potential relationship. If they don't speak soon, they'll come across as a total bore. But somehow they each find something new to say, so the conversation, call it chat, continues.

As he gets out of the chair at the end of the session, he realises he hasn't taken in fully what she's been wearing. A black sleeved top and a long black skirt. It doesn't sound sexy does it? But trust me, it looks great on Bonnie. The material of her top has a very faint shine, not your everyday black cotton. While her skirt is so thin that it waves easily as she moves. When she walks ahead of him to the till, he can't help but eye her up. He notices a glimpse of black pantyhose under the skirt leading to a pair of immaculate matt black shoes with a subtle yet enticingly attractive heel. Now don't get too turned on, we've not reached the sex chapter yet.

After he pays, he tries to carry on the conversation. But his words stumble. Halfway through a sentence he stops, laughing at his weak attempt at chat. But to his delight, she laughs back with him and completes the sentence with a question he was hoping to ask next: when she can see him again. She means around town, on the street, but it's a question laden with promise and seductive overtones.

He blushes. Not cool. Tony's reply is quick and devastating. He thinks of the first thing that comes into his head - definitely not a good idea - he'll see her when he sees her. Someplace. Somewhere. Sometime. After that, there's nothing else to say.

He leaves smiling but inside he is so hurt. Why did he say such a stupid thing, he says to himself. A flurry of self-abusive cursing enflows in his mind. He considers going back in to ask her out on a date. Hey it worked for Tom Waits. He remembers thinking the same way as he did, that if he doesn't go back, he'll never see her again. Ever. Never.

So he goes back, asks her out, and six months later they're happily married. What!? I don't think so. Come on, a story is never that simple now is it. Had you fooled though.

Instead, Tony walks away in shame. His coolness has evaporated. He doesn't even put his shades back on, nor look ahead incase a babe might walk by. He hates missing any hot babes, which he glances at when they pass him by. But now he looks down. Jennifer Lopez could walk by and he wouldn't even look at her.

Soon his mind starts to formulate a plan. He'll hang out at all the cool places in town. That's it, he thinks, she's bound to turn up there. No wait. She's not that young. Nobody but teenagers hangs out at those places he reckons. And the music's so loud - no chance of an easy chat there, what with his musky voice.

Maybe, maybe he'll hang around outside the salon. Pretend to be walking by when she closes up. Hello, fancy bumping in to you again! No way. Too obvious.

Of course you've got to work at being cool. But not just cool but successful. Some of the most successful guys definitely aren't that cool. Look at Bill Gates. Maybe it's time to ditch the cool dude approach, he wonders, and start a new image. His hair is now even shorter than ever, too short to grease back and look convincingly cool. A plan. There has to be a plan.