

# THE WORTH OF SMART

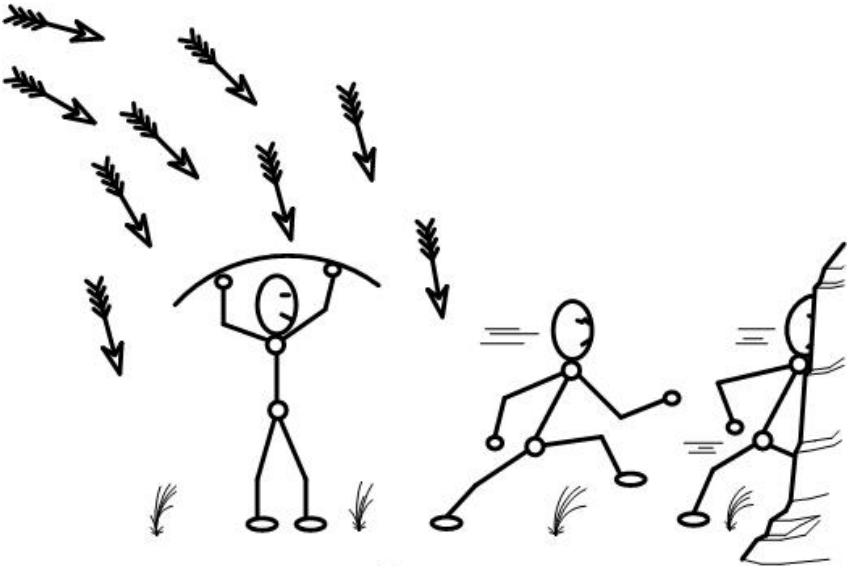




# THE WORTH OF SMART

True stories that might one day happen

Blaine C. Readler



Full Arc  
Press

## THE WORTH OF SMART

Published by Full Arc Press

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For Monica, who created the universe that made this work possible.

Now there's a truth you can hang your hat on.

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*All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence and then success is sure.*

—Mark Twain, Letter to Mrs. Foote

*When the truth is found to be lies,  
and all the joy within you dies,  
don't you want somebody to love?*

—Darby Slick



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## The Truth About Robots

“You could have told me that your dad was the Robot-man,” Shawn whispered.

“He’s my dad by sperm only,” Taylor replied, “and he probably gave that up with a fight.”

He resented his father for many reasons. Cheating his mom was the one he couldn’t passively stand by for.

Peering cautiously from the bushes, he saw that the sidewalk along the stuccoed perimeter wall was empty. People who lived in Rancho Santa Fe tended not to walk around at night, not because it was dangerous, but simply because their neighbors would have thought them odd—“Did your chauffeur get drunk and lose his license *again?*”

“Still,” Taylor’s college friend persisted, “if he were my biological father, I’d have plastered it all over the web.”

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“If he was your father,” Taylor assured, stepping out and grabbing the distinctive baseball cap from his back pocket and pulling it down over his forehead, “you wouldn’t be here sneaking in.”

“Because we’d have a close relationship, and he would have given me the access code long ago,” Shawn played along with feigned heartfelt conviction while slipping a pair of Groucho glasses over his nose.

“No. Because he would have killed you at birth, and nobody would have objected.”

Taylor dug out the costume beard from inside his jacket and slipped the hooks over his ears. Holding his hands out in demonstration, he asked, “So, how do I look?”

Shawn eyed him critically. “You look like one of the Three Stooges trying to masquerade as a college professor. The only way you’d be mistaken for the Robot-man would be if the observer were near-sighted and standing a hundred yards away.”

Taylor slipped on the nose-clip he used for swimming. “Luckily we won’t have to fool a living person.”

Now he looked like Moe and sounded like Daffy Duck.

“Your dad’s surely going to recognize you when he plays back the surveillance video.”

“Probably. But it will be too late by then,” he quacked. “My mom will have her ring back, and he would never sic the police on me.”

“That doesn’t sound like some heartless genius.”

“Believe me, he’s just watching out for his own ass. He wouldn’t think twice about having me thrown in jail. But the last thing he wants is to face my mom in court, so he wouldn’t dare give her any excuses.”

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Taylor started towards the massive entry gate, but Shawn caught his arm. “Wait. Are you saying that your mom doesn’t even know that you’re doing this?”

He shrugged and shook his head. “How do you think he managed to walk all over her in the first place?”

Now that he was here, standing in front of his father’s estate in the plush celebrity suburb of San Diego, he felt suddenly foolish. It was silly enough dressing in a ludicrous fake beard and the quirky Led Zeppelin cap his wealthy deadbeat father was famous for, but he suddenly sagged with doubts about breaking into someone else’s house. This was his own father, but a father who was ... someone else.

The time for second doubts had passed, though; the surveillance camera would have already captured them standing there looking dopey. With one last deep breath, he flipped up the cover on the keypad and punched in the code he’d meticulously memorized, taking care not to touch the fingerprint reader.

“Who be you?” a sensuous contralto voice purred from somewhere above them.

Taylor’s mom claimed that the voice was that of his dad’s girlfriend, and Taylor didn’t doubt it. His father, the Robot-man, took mischievous pleasure in substituting customized versions for all the normal personality selections offered by the appliance manufacturers.

“Why, it’s me, David, of course,” Taylor replied, trying to make his voice deeper.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t really look or sound like David.”

The instantaneous response was a little eerie. The woman’s voice started talking before he’d even finished his last word. Taylor realized that the surveillance system designers probably added a

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timed delay to the lightening-fast response of the artificial intelligence, and it would be just like his father to override that for intimidating effect.

“Of course, it’s me,” Taylor retorted, trying to add the impatient arrogance of the software’s true master. “I have a cold.”

“Your beard is longer than it was this morning.”

“The cold makes it grow faster.”

This time there was a noticeable pause. “I’m sorry, but I find no reference of accelerated hair growth as a consequence of viral infections.”

He glanced at his friend, but the Groucho disguise made Shawn’s expression difficult to interpret. “Google doesn’t know everything. I have a unique genetic tendency for this. Now let me in.”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t get a fingerprint reading. Could you please re-confirm?”

“It won’t work.”

“Please wait ... the reader tells me it’s functional.”

“No, I mean my fingerprint won’t register because ... my fingers are covered with dry snot. The cold, remember?”

“If you are David, please forgive me, but this is an unusual situation.”

Taylor had a hunch that swelled instantly to panic. “Don’t call my phone—that’s an order.”

“You told me that this is the most reliable method to confirm your identity.”

This was off-script, and Taylor had to think fast. “This man next to me will kill me if my phone rings.”

“Should I call the police?” came the instantaneous and still pleasant voice.

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“Negative! He’ll know, and he’ll shoot me. The only way to save my life is to let us in.”

Taylor looked knowingly at his friend.

“I’m going to shoot in three seconds,” Shawn growled from under the big plastic nose. “Three—two—”

A green LED and a click announced their admittance, and the gate slid silently out of the way.

“You have six messages,” the woman’s voice informed brightly, following them along the long driveway via hidden speakers. “Shall I tell the bathroom to prepare the Jacuzzi?”

“Uh, no. I won’t be staying long.”

“Excuse me, David, but I’ve concluded that I need to confirm that you do not want me to call the police. This seems important.”

“If you call the police, I’ll deactivate you—I’ll pull out all your memory cube thingies.”

“I don’t think I understand. Are you telling me that you do want me to call the police?”

“No! Jesus. Do not call the police.”

Shawn leaned his Groucho face in to whisper into Taylor’s ear. “Kind of dumb, considering she belongs to the Robot-man.”

“It’s a standard surveillance system,” Taylor explained in a normal volume. “My dad—er, I specialize in mechanical aspects.”

“I thought he—you—was a genius with nanotechnology.”

“Same thing. ‘I somehow make a matrix of the stuff so that millions of these little do-dads all moving together works like a muscle. Something like that, anyway.”

“Gee,” his friend gibed, “that sounds awfully vague for a genius on the subject.”

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Inside the black plastic fake rims, Shawn's eyes went wide as he must have realized that he may have given something away.

Taylor smiled. "Don't worry. The system's not that smart. Watch—"

In a louder voice, he said, "Surveillance—who am I?"

"You are David Armstrong."

He took off the nose clip and held it up for her to see. "I repeat: who am I?"

"You are David Armstrong."

To Shawn, he explained, "You see? Once she recognizes me as ... him, it takes a good bit to convince her otherwise. It's called cognitive hysteresis."

"Are you trying to sound like the genius she thinks you are?"

"No, it's true. Despite myself, I pick things up from ... him."

They climbed a half-dozen wide steps to a covered landing and stood before massive double doors. Taylor tried the doorknob, but it was locked. "Open, please," he called out.

"Sorry, but I need to confirm that you want to let your companion into the house."

"Of course. Open up."

"Sorry, but I need to remind you that he is possibly dangerous."

"He's changed. He's now my friend. Now open up."

Taylor tried the door, and it swung easily.

As they walked in, the female surveillance chirped, "Welcome David's friend."

The front door opened into a foyer that was just an extension of a cathedral-like living area made all the more massive

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by the deactivation of central lighting. In the owner's absence, only cubbyholes and corners remained lit, leaving the exact boundaries of the massive space undefined. As soon as they entered, though, brilliant light flooded the indoor canyon.

"Lights off!" Taylor called.

All but one bright overhead spot went dark, and a young boy's voice emanated from that point. "You want the main banks to remain off, David?"

"Affirmative."

"Does that mean you want me to turn them on?"

"No. I was simply agreeing—just leave them off."

The overhead spot winked out, leaving the dimly lit cathedral again enigmatic with indistinct dimensions.

"Do you want me to change the normal entry routine?" the young boy's voice asked.

"No. Just this one time."

"Does this change the lighting procedures now—this one time—for the rest of the house?"

"Correct."

"Is that like affirmative?"

"Yes," Taylor replied impatiently. "Tonight—this one time only—there is no lighting 'procedure.' Got it?"

"I understand. But now I don't know what to do—this one time only."

"Just do what I tell you, and only what I tell you."

"For how long?"

"Shut up, already!"

Instantly every last light was extinguished, and Taylor found himself standing in utter darkness.

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From nearby in the blackness, Shawn whispered, “Is he mad at you?”

Taylor sighed. “A-I software doesn’t get mad. I think he just tried to follow what he thought was a command.” Into the vastness, Taylor called, “Turn the lights back on ... but just the ones that were on before we came in.”

The cubbyholes and crannies glowed forth.

“His voice sounds like you, you know,” Shawn observed.

“You’re nuts.”

“No, it does. I’ll bet that’s just how you sounded when you were, like, ten.”

“Nah. It’s probably one of his friend’s kids. The refrigerator is Dustin Hoffman.” Into the air he called again, “Surveillance, what time did I say I would return home?”

“You said you would probably return between eleven o’clock and midnight,” the woman’s voice purred. “You have returned early,” she added with confidence and apparent satisfaction.

Despite the vacuous depth of intelligence Taylor found the female voice sensuous, almost seductively inviting.

And, considering that the voice was possibly that of a rumored future stepmother, he cringed at his involuntary reaction.

“Okay,” he said softly to Shawn, glancing at his watch. “We have a good hour.”

“You believe her?” his friend challenged. He moved his head close to Taylor’s ear and whispered softly, “What if she knows what we’re up to, and she’s just trying to trap us?”

Taylor wagged his head. “She can’t lie. None of them can.”

He’d learned this the hard way. He visited his father only occasionally, and the last time, a week ago, he’d taken the

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opportunity to snoop into the celebrated man's info-base after he'd fallen asleep, cradled in the numbing haze of expensive Scotch. This was when Taylor had gotten the house access code. The info system had gone idle, and Taylor had gently placed the touch-pad against his father's thumb to log back in.

He hadn't planned this ahead of time, but the opportunity was just too tempting to resist. He knew that the surveillance gal had seen him, and, familiar with her limited intelligence, he'd told her that he and his father were participating in a uniquely human activity, and that his father would be very angry with her if he found out that she'd watched. In fact, Taylor emphasized, his father would likely de-activate her forever if he knew.

An hour later Taylor was watching a movie, and his father suddenly woke with a shudder and sputtered, still half asleep and woozy, "Waa-what's going on?" Taylor knew that this was just involuntary prattle from an addled mind, but she didn't. Dutifully and apologetically, she spilled the beans. In detail. She then suggested that she was a relatively expensive possession and that he might want to consider whether de-activation was wise.

Taylor danced some fancy steps on that one. Casually, and with a pounding heart, he explained that he'd thought he needed to access the info-system to get to the movie library. Sober and fully awake, his father would have caught the lie. But the Robot-man was neither, and he mumbled some observation about the apparent fallacy of inherited intelligence before slipping back into a sloppy slumber.

"So, where are the robots?" Shawn asked quietly as his eye caught with interest a pile of Playboy magazines lying on a table.

"They don't walk around the house pulling chairs out for you. They're not obvious until you use them."

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The idea of walking-talking robots had been invented early in the previous century when the most valuable labor-saving device was a servant. An Asimov-style man-robot was the logical imagined automation of that world. The super-wealthy of Taylor's day still retained these servants, but this was purely for show.

"That lamp over there is one of my father's designs."

"A robot *lamp*?"

"Sure. Watch."

Taylor picked up one of the Playboy magazines and sat in the chair beneath the stylishly sculpted pole.

"Would you like illumination, David?" the lamp asked with the slightest lisp, having been informed by surveillance that, although the lamp might think otherwise, this person with the wildly sprouting beard was indeed Master.

"Please," Taylor replied, and the cupped crown arced over and down. Reticulated petals opened, and soft light bloomed on the naked woman in his lap, brightening until Taylor said, "That's fine."

"Huh. Pretty cool," Shawn affirmed. "A robot that could make popcorn, bring me a beer, and then massage my feet would be perfect, but this is still pretty cool."

"This lamp alone costs a year of your part-time pay slinging coffee. You'd be better off hiring a real live servant to bring beer and popcorn."

Taylor sighed and put down the Playboy, and the lamp lifted away. "I guess we'd better get down to business." Into the air, he inquired, "Surveillance, where do I keep the safe?"

"I can't tell you," replied the voice of his father's long-time girlfriend from the bookshelves where her camera-eyes were probably watching them.

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He exchanged alarmed glances with his friend. *Have we been found out?* he wondered in a panic. It was almost impossible to pose the question again, but steeling himself, he asked, “Who am I?”

“You are David Hamilton,” she replied cordially.

Feeling himself sag with relief, he asked, “Then why won’t you tell me where the safe is?”

“I can’t.”

“*Why* can’t you?”

“Because I don’t know.”

“You ... oh come on. You’re *surveillance* for God’s sake!”

“Don’t you remember? You blocked the information. The location of the safe is in my system, of course. I am blocked from accessing it, though.”

“Shit!” Taylor exclaimed.

“Should I inform cleaning?” she asked.

“It’s an expression.” To Shawn he explained, “It makes sense, I guess. It’s unlikely that hackers could get into surveillance, but the Robot-man can’t take any chances.”

His friend shrugged. “And, robots don’t lie.”

Her naive question sparked an idea, however.

“I changed my mind,” he called. “I do want cleaning.”

“You betcha,” she enthused.

Taylor winced. It was an archaic expression his father’s girlfriend liked to use.

Seconds later, a whirring sound announced the arrival of a shiny chrome clean-bot.

“I was expecting something more exotic,” Shawn commented, watching the familiar little domed machine roll up. “—something without, like, wheels. Heck, my uncle has one of these.”

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“Yeah, but can his find a flea in the carpet and then identify its sub-species?”

“Yoo hab summoned zee cleaning service,” the diminutive bot declared in a thick German accent.

Shawn laughed out loud. “That’s rich! I was expecting a Hispanic voice.”

“My genius father never does what you expect.” To the Teutonic machine, he said, “Do you know where my safe is?”

“Of co-urse.”

“Take me there.”

“Das ist verboten!”

Taylor nodded. He’d expected that. “Fine. Tell you what, mine commandant, I need you to clean up some coffee that I spilled.”

“It vood be my plea-sure. Vere iz zee shpill?”

“Next to my safe.”

“Wunderbar. I shall get right on it.”

Taylor waved to his friend, and they followed the unperturbed little clean-bot out of the great living hall, through a long, lavishly decorated dining room and kitchen large enough to serve the Hotel del Coronado, out a side door, and when they emerged into a screened porch furnished with white wicker, the Deutsche-bot stopped.

“I see no coffee,” the machine protested.

“Yeah,” Taylor agreed, glancing around, but finding only arrays of plush cushions festooning a setting out of Casablanca. “Er, the spill is right *next* to the safe.”

Clean-bot seemed to consider this. “Zees is most unfortunate, but I must ask for further assistance. On vich side of ze safe is ze shpill?”

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“Uh, the closest side, I guess.”

He glanced at Shawn and shrugged.

Commandant janitor moved five inches towards Taylor and complained, “I shtill don’t zee it!” The little storm trooper sounded truly vexed.

“Oh, never mind. I guess it already dried.”

The domed clean-machine sat silently, brooding a moment, and then declared, “Zere is nussing more I can do here,” before zipping away with a distinctly haughty whir.

Taylor got down on his hands and knees on the tile floor, and saw it. What appeared to be a small hole accidentally chipped out of the edge of one of the large square plates seemed to have no bottom. He curled his finger inside, and pulled, and the tile tilted smoothly up on hidden hinges, revealing beneath it the door of a safe buried under the floor facing up.

“Well, look at that!” Shawn declared approvingly. “The back door to Fort Knox.”

“We’re only after the ring, you know,” Taylor reproved, tapping out the access code on the safe’s keypad. “We’re not thieves.”

The safe beeped and flashed a red light. “That was the main gate code,” Jimmy Durante’s voice growled helpfully.

“Shit,” Taylor hissed.

“You need that Nazis char-man back?” Durante asked.

“No,” Taylor replied, sitting back and wrapping his arms around his knees.

“You were hoping it was the same code, weren’t you?” Shawn asked.

“I should have known my father wouldn’t be that sloppy.”

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“Maybe the surveillance woman can give it to you,” he suggested without much enthusiasm.

“Oh, she probably knows, but I’m sure she’s not telling.”

“It’s worth a try.”

“Surveillance!” Taylor called into the porch.

“Yes, David?”

“Do you know the combination to the safe?”

“Of course.”

“Would you tell me?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that—”

“Let me guess: your access to that information is blocked.”

“You are indeed a genius, David.”

Shawn’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Don’t be impressed,” Taylor cautioned, “my father probably programmed that as a canned response. He’s that kind of jerk.”

Taylor reminded himself that he’d better watch what he said. Surveillance was likely recording everything.

*She probably records any time there’s activity in the house,* he thought idly.

He gasped and looked at his friend.

“What?” Shawn asked, alarmed.

“That’s it!”

“What’s it?”

“Surveillance!” he called again.

“Yes, David.”

“Play back the monitored sound from the last time I used the safe.”

“Do you want the audio from each room, or just this one?”

“Just this one.”

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To Shawn, he explained, “Maybe I can work out which buttons he pushed from the tones—wait! Surveillance, do you have video for this room?”

“Of course, David.”

“Play the video of the last time I used the safe—just this area.”

Each room of the house had a flat screen attached to a wall, and this one burst to life with an angled view from the far corner. They watched as Taylor’s father walked in knelt down, and lifted the tile. His body blocked the view.

“Do you have another angle? I want to see the keypad.”

“Isn’t that, like, a little obvious?” Shawn whispered into his ear.

“You keep letting their apparent language skills fool you. They really are just dumb machines.”

The view changed to the other corner of the room, and the keypad was clearly visible as the Robot-man punched out the code, then lifted up the safe door.

“Play that back, and zoom in on the keypad. Go slowly. I want to see what buttons he pushes.”

The view expanded dizzily, and a huge finger pressed methodically on buttons the size of the cushions lying about.

Shawn chuckled and shook his head in amazement.

“Ah, got it,” Taylor crowed triumphantly.

Seconds later, he lifted the door of the safe, and Durante welcomed him by lighting the interior.

Inside were just two boxes. Taylor lifted one out and opened it. It was stuffed with bundles of thousand-dollar bills.

“Oh my God,” Shawn moaned, reaching out to reverently caress one bundle. “I’ve never actually touched a grand-spot.”

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“And that’s all you’re going to do tonight.”

He held the box up and called out as he slipped the top back on, “See, Dad? We didn’t take any!”

He lay the heavy package aside and reached down to pull out the other box. With luck this would be full of jewelry, one piece of which he hoped would be the engagement ring his father had given his mother more than two decades before. The small world of celebrity San Diego waited with bated breath for the Robot-man to ask his girlfriend to marry him, and Taylor’s mom was sure the bastard was going to offer the nubile ditz that same ring.

But not if he could help it.

The second box was weighty, but didn’t feel like individual pieces. It felt solid. He pulled off the top and stared at the contents.

“What the hell is it?” Shawn asked over his shoulder.

“I ... I don’t know.”

It looked like a long, dark skinny turd curled neatly into the box. Coil after coil wrapped back and forth and around itself so that the serpentine tube filled every last cubic millimeter of the space inside.

The turd lifted its head and spoke. “What’s going on?” it asked in a quiet, beguiling male voice.

Flush with the rough textured skin were what must have been eyes—smooth impenetrable glossy patches that seemed to see everything while looking at nothing.

It wasn’t a turd. It was a snake!

“Who are you?” it asked, lifting more of its length up and turning the head in a slow arc.

“Um, you don’t know?” Taylor asked.

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“No,” it replied simply.

“Surveillance hasn’t ... told you?”

“I have no contact with other devices.”

“I’m ... well, I’m David.”

The snake paused immobile a moment. Taylor felt the hair prickling on his arms.

“David Hamilton?” the snake asked.

“Yeah—the owner of this house.”

“Hello, David. It’s good to see you again.”

Taylor exhaled with relief.

“So, like,” Shawn muttered, “what is it?”

“I have no idea. But it must.” The tapered head turned to him and he asked it, “What are you?”

“An appliance, of course.”

Taylor was used to household devices talking without lips, but this robot serpent looked too much like an actual animal. It was disconcerting that no mouth uttered the words.

“But, for what purpose?”

The snake’s gentle voice was patient, calming. “General utility. My shape conveys function.”

“Scaring birds, maybe?”

“Perhaps,” the snake replied agreeably. “Or cleaning out drains, for example.”

“You ... go down drains? Like, *all* drains?”

The hovering head dipped slightly in a demure nod. “I have not performed that task yet, so I am still pristinely clean,” it added, seeming to read Taylor’s mind.

“I see. Uh, that’s good, I guess.”

“As you taught me, I am also handy at retrieving items that have rolled under the bed.”

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Taylor wondered uneasily whether the reptilian appliance was being sarcastic.

“Why does ... why do I keep you in the safe?”

The snake paused as though letting register the inappropriateness of him of all people asking the question. “Why, because I am valuable, of course.”

“Right. Of course. And, uh, why particularly are you valuable?”

“David, as you yourself explained, I am the first viable prototype of my class of appliance. The competition would pay a fortune to get hold of me.”

“Right. Of course.”

*What competition?* Taylor wondered. He didn’t know his father even had any.

“Hey,” Shawn whispered. “We should be going. What if your father ... er, you come home early?”

He sighed. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“No ring,” his friend observed sympathetically.

Taylor snorted. “With my luck, he probably gave it to the little wench just tonight.”

Shawn picked up the box of cash lovingly. “It’s a shame we have to leave empty-handed.”

“You’re not thieves, remember?” the snake reproved.

Buried down there in the safe, it must have been listening to him, Taylor realized.

He snatched the box from his friend and tossed it back into Durante’s gut. “No, we’re not.”

The featureless glaze of the snake’s eye coverings stared at him. For as long as humans could put words to the thought, the

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legless reptiles had carried a reputation for cold calculation. Even the Bible had enlisted one as a metaphor for calculated persuasion.

The inscrutable eyes seemed to dare him.

Very well.

“We’re not thieves,” Taylor reiterated, placing the palm of his free hand over the snake’s head and gently forcing it to coil back into the box. “We’re just trying to get back stolen goods from someone who is.”

“Place me back in the safe ... David,” the nano-machine drain cleaner directed calmly as Taylor slipped the box cover back on and headed off towards the kitchen.

“Wait!” Shawn called. “What the heck ... we can’t just ... arghh!”

Taylor heard Shawn slam the safe closed, followed by the tile cover, and his friend caught up with him back in the great living hall. “Look,” Shawn hissed through tight lips, “if that lamp costs more than I can afford, this snake prototype must be worth a real fortune.”

“We’re not stealing it. We’re holding it in trade.”

From the box in his hands came the muffled voice of reason. “Would a jury agree with you?”

“Shut up!”

The next instant they were walking through darkness.

“Oh, Christ,” Taylor muttered, exasperated. “Full lights!”

The voluminous hall blazed with blinding radiance as though the sun had burst forth. Lighting-boy had literally turned every light in the house on.

This was probably costing a fortune in electricity itself.

Good.

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Outside, the night was all the darker for the contrast, but in the near distance, tortured tires squealed as they hung on desperately to a curve, then, roaring closer, wailed in despair, seeming surprised themselves that they managed to stop the Lamborghini at the top of the driveway.

“Oh, shit!” Shawn cried. “It’s your father!”

The gate was sliding open.

“Come on,” Shawn pleaded, tugging at Taylor’s arm. “We can’t just stand here!”

Taylor’s heart was pounding, but he felt a stubborn resolve. He was rooted to the spot by ten years of simmering resentment, listening to his mom’s mantra of abandonment.

“Where would you go?” he barked, shaking off Shawn’s arm. “This place is a walled fortress.”

The yellow muscle of finely machined Italian metal screeched to a stop in front of them, the doors lifted like a bird extending its wings for takeoff, and his father slid out, his face no more threatening beneath the neatly trimmed beard, but no less intense, than usual.

The owner of the house they’d robbed skipped up the steps, glanced at Shawn, who shamefully slipped off the Groucho glasses, and turned to meet Taylor’s eyes. “You look like an idiot.”

“I look like *you*,” he snapped back.

But he did suddenly feel foolish, and ripped off the costume beard, tossing it away.

“I think you have something of mine,” his father noted casually, nodding at the box in Taylor’s hand.

“How did you know we were here?”

## The Truth About Robots

“Your hostage called me when he heard you trying to get into the safe.” With more volume, he called, “Prototype Three—to me!”

Taylor felt the box jiggle in his hand, and watched the top lift and fall away as the robot’s head emerged. Frozen by the eerie bold faculty of the thing, Taylor stood motionless as the artificial serpent spiraled along his arm, around his torso, and then slithered along the paving stones to the waiting hand. The machine’s creator lifted it so that it could curl around his neck and shoulders as it might a tree in the forest.

*Is it still a machine when there are no distinct moving parts?* he wondered.

“It knew who I was all along,” Taylor murmured as though the other two weren’t even there.

His father lifted the brim of his cap and scratched his forehead. “From what I heard, it was pretty obvious.”

Taylor shook his head slowly in protest. “Robots don’t lie!”

His dad, the Robot-man, snorted and pulled his cap back down, as though embarrassed for his son. “Why do you think that is?”

“Because ...” he looked to Shawn who just stared at him, trying to be invisible by force of will. “I guess they’re just not smart enough.”

His father nodded. His progeny apparently wasn’t a complete idiot. “Did you ever consider that this might be by design?”

Taylor waited, unwilling to answer a question that was obviously rhetorical.

“Americans would never accept intelligent appliances,” he continued, glancing at Shawn who cringed at the attention. “They’d

## The Worth of Smart

feel threatened. Our market economy depends on confident consumers. For its own survival, our culture convinces us that we're each golden little gods. Hell, everybody has a pile of trophies to prove it."

Taylor was used to these unbidden mini-lectures. Like this one, they were often an observation on some aspect of the consummate stupidity of the masses. And now, like the times before, Taylor felt tossed in along with the sheep.

"But not this one," Shawn blurted.

They both looked at him, and he seemed horrified at his outburst.

"I mean," he stammered, "the snake is smart—it can lie."

Taylor looked at his father, who returned his gaze impassively.

The reason seemed obvious. "It's for the CIA," Taylor guessed.

The stone face never faltered, but his father's eyes were not the immutable electronic receptors of his reptilian creation. Using his human intuition, Taylor saw an affirmation.

"It would be, like, the perfect spy," Shawn whispered. "It could sneak around anywhere."

The Robot-man yanked his cap down farther over his eyes and walked past them. "Get the hell out of here before I call the police."

The relief on his friend's face was that of a man reprieved from the guillotine. An instant later Shawn was sprinting away down the driveway.

Taylor hesitated. The same human intuition had heard something behind the gruff dismissal.

## The Truth About Robots

As though the robot snake whispered as much into his ear, Taylor's father stopped and turned. Two sets of eyes studied Taylor, one a mechanical surveillance without dimension, the other glittering with the complexity of a human soul.

His father reached inside his coat and took out a jewelry box, which he handed to him. "It's time your mother had this," he said, turning back to his brilliantly lit house.

Taylor looked at the rounded felt top. He knew what was inside. "Your girlfriend turned you down, didn't she?" he said.

His father spun and glared at him a moment, then relaxed. "I didn't ask." A tiny smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "I could read the cards—I decided not to play a bad hand."

The Robot-man seemed perplexed a moment, then raised one eyebrow. "Did your mother ever tell you why I have her ring?"

Taylor shrugged. "She just said that you wouldn't give it back."

He nodded knowingly, and then shook his head in exasperation. "She jammed it into my pocket when I left. She told me that she didn't want it back until I was ready to come with it."

He shook his head again at the absurdity, and turned back to his mansion.

Taylor started down the stairs, but stopped. "The lighting," he called, turning back.

The Robot-man paused in the open doorway and looked at him.

"The voice of the lighting system—is that mine?"

His father watched him a moment. The head of the artificial snake, the lying robot, swayed slowly under the guidance of its positional algorithms. Its expression was a complete void, but its master's was that of a father gazing fondly at his son.

## **The Worth of Smart**

The Robot-man stepped inside the painfully bright interior and closed the door.

## The Chosen Ones

“Aliens?” Cameron repeated into the phone, annoyed with his friend. “Space aliens?”

“Yeah,” Byron enthused. “They’re here, and I think you’re a perfect candidate. You need to come over, like, now.”

Actually, Byron wasn’t really his friend—more of an acquaintance, and a reluctantly acknowledged one at that. If he were an actual friend, Cameron might have been excited, or perhaps amused. As it was, he was just annoyed. Nobody took the guy seriously. Cameron picked up a good sci-fi book when he had time, but Byron was obsessed—pathologically. He still lived with his parents, and since they were mega-rich and he an only-child, probably would for life.

“Nah. I have to work on my applications, and Jennie may be calling—”

“Tristan is coming.”

## The Worth of Smart

Whoa. That changed things. Tristan had been his academic rival throughout their graduate program. Cameron wouldn't expect him to be snookered into one of Byron's delusional fantasies. Hell, Tristan had already been accepted as a doctoral candidate in Stanford's physics program.

"What do they look like?" Cameron asked, trying to sound only casually interested.

"They're, like, about six inches long, and they fly—they look like big humming birds."

"How do you know they're aliens, and *not* big humming birds?"

"They told me."

"They told you."

"Of course. What kind of aliens would come all the way to Earth and not be able to, like, even talk?"

"I'll be right over. Keep an eye on them. If they fly away, try to—"

"They're sitting here on my table. They're not going anywhere until they talk to you. They want to know if you want to be a spaceship pilot."

Cameron sighed. "Are you sure Tristan is coming?"

He heard a voice in the background. It sounded like Alvin the chipmunk from the tired novelty Christmas song. "Tell him Mothership has passed perihelion behind sun long time, and we must meet in twenty-eight thousand seconds or be left behind," it said.

"I'm on my way!" Cameron shouted, almost dropping the phone as he jammed it into his pocket and ran out.

## The Chosen Ones

It was still probably a hoax, but if there was the slightest chance that anybody was going to be a spaceship pilot, it was going to be him, and not that over-achiever Tristan.

\* \* \*

Apparently it would be both.

The aliens needed two pilots, and as they put it, wagging their leathery little wings provocatively as they sat on their haunches on Byron's table, "Not easy find pilots caliber as us."

Cameron still had a hard time believing what perched proud and confident before him, even though he could come up with no better explanation for three parchment-skinned flying lizards with tiny monkey heads who could talk, albeit using toddler grammar. Byron had explained that they translated their name as the Dangerous Wilies, as in wily. Their ship sat in Byron's backyard. It looked like a Volkswagen Bug minus the wheels and windows. Cameron found it somehow disquieting that there were dents in it. The Salvadoran landscape workers buzzing their way along the ten-foot hedges around the perimeter glanced at it apprehensively every now and then, but had learned long ago to ignore the idiosyncrasies of their benefactors. With wealth came the prerogative to be eccentric.

"Tristan and Cameron are, like, Greek gods," Byron assured. "They get, you know, like straight A's and are real athletic. Tristan mountain-bikes and swims, and Cameron can run—"

"If wanted Greeks," the Dangerous Wilies' apparent leader interrupted, "would go to Greece. Want Americans."

"It's an expression," Cameron explained. "He means that we're—that he *thinks* that we're superior humans."

Tristan shrugged. "No need for false modesty."

## The Worth of Smart

“Need pilots who learn quickly—nimble hands and minds—adapt foreign environment,” the alien instructed. “Also, not weep loneliness when away home,” he added. “No babies.”

“Why Americans?” Cameron asked.

He was split down the middle. Half of him, the half that had brought him to California to go to grad school instead of his undergraduate alma mater Penn State, was ready to climb into the Space Beetle and fly off to a fantastic future in the future. The other half, though, the half who couldn’t get up the nerve to tell Jennie they were through, was supremely suspicious of aliens who looked like Wizard of Oz characters offering up comic book roles.

“Americans always win,” the alien replied.

“Like, wars?”

“Wars. Battles. Baseball. Heroine’s heart.”

“So, it’s space fighter pilots you want.”

Cameron wasn’t going to explain that it was Americans making the movies they were probably intercepting. To the scriptwriter goes the victor.

The Dangerous Wilies glanced at each other. “Fighter pilots, yes.”

“So, why don’t you go find an actual American fighter pilot?”

“Tried. Always drunk. Always swatting at us. Called us ugly flying turds.”

This was the main reason Cameron made sure he got good grades. His family was poor, and he *never* wanted to default to military service.

“Why Byron?” he asked.

“Byron not go. He too whippersnapper—”

“No. I mean why did you come here, to his house?”

## The Chosen Ones

“Big privacy. People gawk.”

‘Big privacy’—*that* Byran had, or at least his parents did. The grounds must be five acres, surrounded by a nearly impenetrable wall.

“They were uneasy about the immigrant landscape workers,” Byron explained. “At first they wanted me to lock them in a room. I explained about them, that they’d be too scared to tell anybody for fear of the attention.”

“Byron also easy mark,” the alien added. “Believes fiction stories.”

“Diplomacy doesn’t seem very high on their list,” Cameron commented.

Byron just shrugged. He seemed tickled pink just to have them here.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Tristan said, grasping Cameron’s arm to maneuver him out of the way. “What exactly would our status be? Would our ranks coming in be First Lieutenants? Or, maybe Captains? We have Master’s Degrees—that should count for something.”

The Dangerous Wilies exchanged more cloistered glances. They flicked wing tips in what Cameron took to be assent. “Majors,” the leader proclaimed. “We be Generals. Superior.”

“I’d like to know why they don’t fly their fighter ships themselves,” Cameron suggested from behind Tristan.

His rival looked at him, and then turned back to the aliens. The three of them sat there a minute, then, apparently accepting that they couldn’t just ignore the question, the leader said, “We too important.”

“That makes sense,” Tristan concurred.

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“So, flying fighter spaceships is dangerous,” Cameron suggested, looking over Tristan’s shoulder.

The three little Dangerous Wilies sat immobile, their wee wings twitching randomly. “Okay,” the leader finally replied. “Like this. We no capable.”

“You mean, you’re not able to fly the fighters?” Cameron pressed, nudging Tristan aside, who resisted so that they scuffled silently a few seconds before Cameron put his hands up in truce, and they stood tensely side-by-side.

The alien leader’s wings stuck straight out like yucca leaves. “Able, of course. Not *capable*.”

“Seems perfectly reasonable,” Tristan said. “After all, you wouldn’t expect an Air Force General to fly a fighter—”

“Actually, I would,” Cameron cut in. “At least, the Air Force General would be capable.”

The leader’s extended wings vibrated. “Okay. Like this. Fighter controls built for big body.”

“The ships were designed for *humans*?” Cameron asked.

“No. That silly. No one know humans ’til now. Built for big body, two arms.”

“They were designed for a race similar to humans?”

“Similar in body. Smarter in head. Big smarter.”

“Well, duh! They know how to build interstellar space ships.”

“Time short. Must go. You two acceptable.”

The leader jumped into the air and the room was filled with the frantic burr of beating wings. The other two crouched, ready to follow, when Cameron shouted, “Hold on!” and the leader sank back to the table.

“What now?” the Dangerous Wily complained.

## The Chosen Ones

“Are you nuts! You think we’ll follow you to go gallivanting off to some space opera stellar war like you’re some kind of alien Peter Pan? We don’t work that way.”

“I would,” Tristan declared.

“Shut up. Look, if they need fighter pilots so badly, it must mean that they expect a fight. I’d like to know a little bit about the person—the thing—that’s going to try its best to kill me.” To the alien, he demanded, “Well?”

The wings were jerking nervously again. “Always good to be prepared.”

“I don’t buy it. I think you’re expecting trouble.”

“Okay. Like this. Another people mad. Want Mother Ship. But they weak. Stupid. No problem. No worry.”

“Uh, uh. I still don’t buy it. If they were really that stupid, you wouldn’t need us—we’re not ‘big smarter’ either, remember?”

“I don’t know why you have to be so contrary,” Tristan sniffed. “You act as though you don’t—”

“Will you shut *up* already!” Cameron shouted.

“Maybe one enough,” the Dangerous Wilies leader concluded. “We go now with just you,” he said, looking at Tristan.

Cameron’s classmate nodded agreeably.

“Wait!” Cameron cried. He wasn’t sure why he was bothering. “Look, Tristan, this is crazy. Think about it. We’re talking about different species at war here. What’re the chances that the weapon technologies are going to be anywhere near comparable? What’re the chances? Even if the two species had developed at the same time—in itself absurdly unlikely—they wouldn’t necessarily share the same level of advancement. Think British guns against Aborigine spears, only multiplied a thousand-fold. Either they’re the Aborigines, in which case Big Dangerous

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Willy Wonka here wouldn't need you, or *you* are, and you're serving yourself up as cosmic hors d'oeuvres."

For the first time, Tristan looked reflective.

"No!" the alien leader squeaked. "Technologies same."

"The same?" Cameron repeated as a challenge.

"Exactly same."

It's wings jutted out again like sea urchin spines. Cameron was beginning to see a pattern.

"How can they be exactly the same? That's impossible."

"Not big smart, indeed. Built by same *people!*"

That stopped Cameron. "These people ... they *stole* fighter space ships from you? Now they're going to use them against you?"

The leader's wings collapsed back against its body, jerking and shaking. "Yes. Stole ships. Use them against we."

"Because they also want to steal your Mother Ship."

"Yes!" The wings shivered as though the creature was cold. "You help us."

Cameron and Tristan glanced at each other.

"One more question," Cameron said. "You obviously couldn't have built the fighter ships—"

"We big smart!" the leader protested. "We think way bigger than you—"

"That may be. I'm simply stating the obvious. Why would you build ships you couldn't use?"

The wings reached out straight. "Okay. Like this. We not only species on Mother Ship. Other species big, big smart. Big, big smarter than you. Big."

"I don't doubt it," Cameron muttered watching the leader. He thought he was maybe getting the picture here.

## The Chosen Ones

“Other species our friends,” the leader of the Dangerous Wilies crowed. “We live harmony.”

“Well,” Tristan proclaimed, shoving Cameron aside so that he could stand in front of the aliens. “I’ve heard enough. I’m ready to defend you from these invaders. It would be an honor to be the first human to join the cosmic fold.”

“Suit yourself,” Cameron said. “Maybe they’ll hang a medal around your neck.”

*I should let the twerp go*, he thought as the three Dangerous Wilies took to the air, sounding like a squadron of vacuum cleaners. The human gene pool would be the better for it.

Ah hell.

“Hey, Tristan!” he shouted above the drone. “Don’t worry about your slaves! Byron and I will take care of them for you!”

“What the hell are you talking about!” Tristan shouted back.

Byron looked puzzled, trying to remember if Tristan had ever told him about them.

The three aliens had backed up and away, and were now facing them from near the ceiling as though a triplet of giant bees ready to attack.

“Humans keep not slaves anymore,” the leader protested. His voice seemed to resonate with the hum so that it sounded larger, more apropos of something called a Dangerous Wily.

“You’ve obviously been watching old news! Graduates of higher education are now allowed to own people who’ve had their homes foreclosed. Tristan bought five from the bank!”

“He’s lying!” Tristan shouted, his arms folded across his chest in defiance.

Cameron carefully held his arms outstretched. “Who is lying?” he asked the leader. Cameron nodded knowingly at Tristan.

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The alien Dangerous Wily hovered, eyeing them both a moment, then turned and flew out the door. The other two followed, but a moment later, the leader appeared again and called to Byron.

“What in good God’s name are you doing?” Tristan growled at Cameron as Byron trotted out after the Wilies to confer next to their Space Beetle. He gave Cameron a shove.

“Saving your ugly ass!” he replied, giving his nemesis a bigger shove in return. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what? That you blew the best adventure I’ll ever see?”

“You think Kunta Kinte gave his mom a kiss and assured her he was going off on a great adventure when he was captured in Africa?”

“What is *with* you and slaves all of a sudden?”

“What do you think the Dangerous Wilies are?”

Tristan shook his head in angered annoyance. His confidence in the righteous justification of his anger seemed to be wavering, though.

“They—are—slaves!” Cameron shouted. Geez, how could a Stanford doctoral candidate be so thick? “It all makes sense. Their masters stole the Mother Ship, and the rightful owners are coming to get it back. That’s why the fighter ships are the same. They make up this big, scary name—Dangerous Wilies—to cover their shame.”

Tristan looked downright dumbfounded. “How ... how do you conclude all this?”

“Didn’t you notice? Their wings are all weak and shivery when they’re lying, and bold and straight when they tell the truth. That’s how I convinced them that you own slaves. They instinctively interpret the positions of our arms as though they were

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wings. Didn't you hear how they talked about the 'other species' on the Mother Ship? 'Big, big smart—we live in harmony.' Cut me a break. That's ingrained cow-towing if I ever heard it."

Byron appeared in the doorway all flushed. "They conferred with the Mother Ship. They've changed plans."

"You mean they've gotten different instructions from their masters," Cameron countered.

Byron looked at him as though he'd just spoken in French. "They're not taking either of you," he continued, seeming deeply disappointed.

Through the open doorway, Cameron saw the aliens herding the three landscape workers into the Space Beetle. It was a tight fit, and the last one barely squeezed in.

"Holy shit!" Cameron shouted, running outside, but it was too late. With an ear-splitting whine, the overloaded planet shuttle heaved itself off the ground, wavered, slid sideways into the gazebo adding another dent to the mix, then slowly rose up and away. The whine faded into the blue sky, and all that was left was the abandoned hedge-trimming tools lying forlornly around on the ground.

"They said that the Salvadorans were better candidates," Byron explained huffing and puffing up next to him. "They said that these guys were already used to living far from home, and were less likely to be big babies."

Cameron nodded. "Probably right."

Tristan came up appearing sheepish.

"You know," Cameron went on, "considering that they're going to have to come to grips with a whole new technology in a whole new environment, well, I think they took the better crew after all."

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“But they’re going to be ... slaves,” Tristan objected, looking horrified.

Cameron shrugged and headed back towards the house. “Who knows, maybe they’ll turn the tables—maybe return to Earth as heroes with the rightful owners of the Mother Ship.”

“Yeah!” Tristan called after him. “And maybe there’s really a Santa Claus.”

“Nobody’s proven there isn’t,” he said quietly to himself. Then he spread his arms wide to demonstrate the truth of that.

## Character

“The Waldorf,” Jamee said, stepping into the booth a block from her apartment in Boulder. She then quickly added, “San Diego,” remembering she’d been to Manhattan just the week before.

“Restaurant, or pastry factory?” the booth queried.

“I’m going to a factory dressed like this?” she asked, lifting her hands and rolling her eyes at the old woman waiting next in line. The woman looked bored, and didn’t react.

“Waldorf restaurant,” the booth chimed with no trace of sarcasm.

The deep dusk of the Colorado mountains was instantly replaced by a blinding sun hovering over the moored sailboats of San Diego harbor. Jamee stepped out, and a man walked in behind her and barked, “Seventeen”—his speed-dial for some oft-visited location.

She patted herself and looked at both of her bare arms before glancing around for the restaurant. Her friends laughed at

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this eccentricity. She knew it was a silly thing to worry about, but it was still a fact that every bit of the Jamee of two minutes ago was still in Boulder. Random pieces of her were now walking out of the booth on her street as maybe the nose of a man, and the kneecap of a little girl.

Okay, it wasn't that simple. Still, every fragment of the new San Diego her, over the last hour, had belonged to any number of other users of this booth. A boyfriend in high school had patiently explained that even if she never stepped into another booth, ten years down the road her body would consist of completely different molecules, as her cells wore out and new ones grew.

It was best not to think about the whole thing. Nobody else did.

She found that the Waldorf was surrounded by small trees in large pots. It looked expensive. The guy was either well off, or trying to impress her. Her booth-fear was replaced by a more prosaic preoccupation: was she about to spend two hours with the father of her children, or an insufferable jerk? On the other hand, what if he was Prince Charming, and didn't like her? She wasn't fooling herself; "attractive" wouldn't be the first adjective he'd mentally log.

She suddenly wondered if it had been a mistake to choose the non-visual track of the dating service. It had seemed romantic in an old-fashioned sort of way at the time.

"Balls!" she snorted and stormed off towards the potted trees. A man and woman, both in formal wear, turned and gave her a surprised look, and she shrugged. She noticed that the man was wearing dress gloves. Sleek hand coverings had gone out of general style months ago, but black ones were still considered an essential part of a man's formal outfit.

## Character

The Waldorf's lobby was a whole jungle of plants. She didn't see a maitre-console, and decided that the man with the funny uniform standing at the podium was serving as the human version. This *was* a fancy place.

"Jamee to meet Bob," she said to the uniformed man a bit tentatively.

She half expected him to raise his eyebrows and say, "So?" Instead, he nodded and purred, "Very good, miss; follow me," before gliding off through the sea of tables.

She followed, thinking, *who would have named their child "Bob" anyway?* He must have had a difficult time with it in grade school. It was hard to imagine Prince Charming with a first name like Bob. Why not Scrooge, or Ishmael?

She felt her heart pounding. The internal banter was just an attempt to distract herself. If her friends were here, she'd be babbling away a mile a minute.

*But what if he doesn't like me?*

The maitre-man suddenly stopped and held out his hand, as though offering the guy seated at a small table for sale.

Bob wasn't so bad. Late thirties, maybe. A face she could live with. Fit body—muscled shoulders. She couldn't tell if he was natural or induced.

He stood up, scraping his chair across the floor behind him. "Bob," he said, smiling and holding his hand out. He too wore evening gloves, but his looked old and tired, as though constant, road-weary companions.

She looked at the extended hand a moment before realizing that he was offering it. Why? To kiss her fingers? That would be in sync with the nostalgic opulence of the restaurant. Maybe he just

## The Worth of Smart

wanted to shake her hand. She slowly stuck hers out, and he grasped it gently and shook it up and down.

“Pleased to meet you, Jamee,” he said, apparently now waiting for her to sit down before he did so himself.

Boy, this guy really was a Bob—straight out of the last century. Maybe he was one of those people that froze themselves hoping for a future cure for their terminal illness.

She sat down slowly, watching him. He waited until she was seated, then pulled his chair back with another loud clatter and sat down himself. She saw that the people at other tables were staring at them. *The guy’s name is Bob, for God’s sake*, she wanted to tell them, but they turned back to their food. Her companion asked if she’d had a good trip.

She shrugged and smiled. “The booth worked.”

*What trip?* she thought. She’d walked maybe a hundred steps between her apartment and here.

“Good,” he said, nodding knowingly. Like the booth itself, he didn’t seem to catch the sarcasm. “We take them for granted, don’t we?”

“Actually, I don’t,” she countered. “My friends think I’m paranoid, but I get the heebie-jeebies every time I imagine my body being torn apart and instantly reconstructed a thousand miles away from the parts of other people’s bodies.”

Bob smiled condescendingly, it seemed to her. “Others’ bodies only in the sense that the individual atoms once comprised them.”

“What other sense is there?”

It was Bob’s turn to shrug. He picked up the menu.

She realized that he might be feeling insulted. “I keep thinking what would happen if the booth runs short of some key

## Character

element,” she said, trying to pull him back. “Like potassium or something. I’d be dead before I knew what happened.”

He put down the menu and gave her another of those condescending smiles. “The sending booth won’t start the tear-down if the receiving booth isn’t ready.”

“I know, but things break.”

“Booths are the most reliable machines ever built by man,” he assured.

Jamee was going to reiterate that her fear wasn’t rational, but he went on.

“Did you ever consider how booth operation is similar to how cars were rented a hundred years ago?”

She lifter her shoulders. She had only the vaguest idea that people could even rent cars then—mostly from movies of the period. “In both cases you pay by the klick?” she offered.

“That’s true,” he said, “but I was thinking how each relies on a random pattern of use by their customers.”

She shook her head, perplexed. This was a pretty bizarre way to get acquainted. Weren’t they supposed to talk about their families, or whether they liked cats?

“The automobile rental companies wanted to avoid moving their cars from one location to another,” he went on. “Instead, they depended on their one-way customers to move the cars for them. The ideal was to have exactly as many cars being driven away as arriving.”

Jamee nodded, trying to be congenial. “I see. If everybody in Boulder decided to come to San Diego, the booths here would run out of elements. There has to be as many people transporting away from San Diego, leaving their elements behind.”

## The Worth of Smart

Bob smiled. It was a smile she remembered from grade school teachers when she got an answer right. *How can I hate that smile now*, she thought, *when I so craved it back then?*

“You seem to know a lot about booths,” she observed. “Do you design them?”

“A design engineer? No. That’s not nearly as interesting a profession as most people think—mostly just worrying about a lot of esoteric details.”

Did she detect sour grapes? “Maybe a historian, then?”

He brightened at this. “By interest only. No formal education.”

She sighed. “I like a game of twenty questions as well as anybody....”

Bob nodded in understanding. “Sorry. I’m a field support technician for Gee-TRIC.”

She’d heard that name before. “Global Transporter Innovations Corporation,” she announced a bit proudly, realizing she was still, after all these years, working for that smile. “They build booths,” she added.

“Largest manufacturer in the world. You probably used one coming here.”

Bob sat looking at her.

“You fix booths,” she said after a few seconds.

He blushed. “As the mundane part of my job, yes. But I also install and test upgrades. I’ve testified in court as an expert witness.”

“That booths are the most reliable machines ever built by man?”

He blushed deeper. “A civil suit. A woman lost a foot in a freak accident.”

## Character

“She lost her *foot*?”

Bob gave one solemn nod. “Both a primary and backup circuit failed at the same time. A one-in-a-million chance.”

She didn’t want to hear this. She wanted him to explain how the booths were absolutely, totally infallible. “I never heard about it.”

“Of course not. Gee-TRIC wields a lot of clout. They indirectly own I-CNN and W-BLOG, and have influence over all the other major net-news companies. You’d have to dig deep to find the stories. There were twenty-nine booth-related deaths last year, you know.”

“People *died*?”

Bob wrinkled his brow in consternation. “Booths are used over a hundred million times every day. Twenty-nine deaths in a year is virtually a zero percentage.”

“Not for the people who died.”

“More people died from swallowing condoms.”

“I’ve never put a condom in my mouth, but I use a booth every day ... wait a second; you said the woman lost her foot in a million-to-one accident. If booths are used a hundred million times every day—”

“It’s just an expression. Okay, a billion-to-one chance.”

She looked at him. “That means the same accident happens every ten days.”

Bob rolled his eyes. “A trillion-to-one—whatever. You might as well worry about getting hit by a meteor.”

As a matter of fact, she had worried about that for a couple of weeks when she was twelve.

“It looks like we’re getting off on the wrong foot,” she suggested. “Maybe we should change the subject.”

## The Worth of Smart

A grin spread across Bob's face. "That's probably what that woman was thinking when she stepped out of the booth."

Jamee stared at him.

"Get it? She got off 'on the wrong foot?'"

Jamee wagged her head. "I get it, I get it. Isn't that a bit morbid?"

Bob didn't reply. Instead, with lips pressed tight, he picked up the menu again and studied it.

This was going to hell fast.

"I drove a car last year," she said in an attempt to assuage his hurt feelings.

He looked up at her with raised eyebrows.

"In South Africa," she added.

His face drooped in disappointment. "You're talking about the so-called Twentieth Century Exposition."

"That's right—were you there?"

"I didn't bother. Those were hardly automobiles. Most of them were built after 2030."

"It looked like a car to me."

"Did you use a steering wheel?"

"Of course not! I would've killed somebody."

"So, you didn't really drive the car. You were merely a passenger."

"I told it where to go," she said, feeling poutful, like the tables had been turned.

Bob lifted his left eyebrow in a skeptical question.

She picked up her menu and gave it all her attention. Two could play that game.

Yikes! She noticed the prices for the first time. She hoped he'd offer to pay. He had suggested this place, after all. In case he

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didn't, though, she decided to have a tofu casserole, even though they advertised that their beef was real meat.

"I've driven a car—a real one," Bob remarked casually as he scanned down his menu.

"Really?" she asked, pretending interest. It wouldn't hurt her to be gracious. "Where?"

"Uzbekistan. Booths are privately owned there. This old fellow had a dozen, and kept an ancient Honda SUV that he used to get to the booths when they broke down. He said his grandfather bought it used in '25. It must be one of the last surviving manual cars, other than in the Smithsonian. He wouldn't tell me where he gets his gas."

She found herself intrigued, despite herself. "I never thought about that."

She glanced up from her menu to find him looking at her. "I mean, how do you get to a booth when it's not working? It's sort of the chicken or the egg thing."

Bob smiled in satisfaction. He enjoyed knowing things you didn't. "Few people think about it. I have to go cross-country, just like in the old days. I'm right out there in wild country. Sometimes I find myself completely out of sight of any other person. I'll tell you, it gives you a different perspective. Why, I could take all my clothes off, and nobody would even know."

She just looked at him.

"Not that I've ever done that," he added quickly, "at least not fully."

Jamee wasn't sure she wanted to know more about this guy. "You walk?" she asked. "I've gone hiking in the Rockies and the Alps."

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“No, of course not,” Bob said with a wrinkled brow. “I couldn’t carry all the equipment. I use an outdoor levitor.”

She brightened. “I’ve seen you guys in those. They sort of look like a car. Pretty cozy, in fact.”

“That’s not the point,” he said, waving off her remark irritably. “The point is, we’re out there in the wild.”

*Where you could probably walk to the next working booth in a half-hour*, she thought. “Just like the ol’ Wild West,” she quipped, affecting the twentieth-century accent.

He seemed oblivious to sarcasm. “Not nearly as dangerous,” he confided seriously, “but I get a real feel for what it must have been like.”

She couldn’t keep herself from grinning at this.

He seemed to interpret her smile as adoration. “Out there,” he announced grandly, waving his arm vaguely at the restaurant wall, “kicks from civilization, I can really understand the true grit that people were made of.”

She propped her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her palms. “Really?” she said, affecting a mirror of his own earnestness.

Bob nodded wisely. “Oh yes. It was survival of only the very fittest. We’re just a bunch of coddled children by comparison.”

She nodded her head within her palms. “Children,” she repeated.

“We wouldn’t have even measured up to their children. They had gun fights in school. We’d be cowering under the desks.”

She remembered reading about that. Around the turn of the century, people would wake up one day and just snap—start shooting everybody they knew with machine guns. Even kids in

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high school would occasionally break into their father's arsenal. It culminated with the Goofy incident, where a Disney employee dressed in the floppy-eared outfit shot up the park, that finally convinced congress to convene a constitutional convention. The wording of the second amendment was changed to read, *In the absence of a local police force, citizens shall have the right to bear arms that cannot kill more than one person a second*, or something like that.

"I seem to remember that those kids were cowering under their desks," she observed.

Bob ignored this. "People worked eighty hours a week, and had to carry guns to protect themselves from drug dealers."

"Only because drugs were illegal then," she offered from her cradling palms.

He waved this off without comment. "And the police were no help. They were all corrupt and working for the mobs."

She had a vision of the village constable leading a pack of angry men, torches held high, as they climbed the hill to Dr. Frankenstein's castle. "I think you mean the Mob."

"What?" Bob said, seeming annoyed at the distraction.

"I think they referred to the Mafia as The Mob—singular."

"Of course," Bob said, scrunching his brow and giving his shoulders a quick shrug as though this was obvious. "People had to take the law into their own hands and go after the gangsters with a posse."

She raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't that the nineteenth century?"

"No," he said confidently, "they went after them in their cars."

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She let it go. She wasn't confident enough to argue the point, and besides, there always seemed to be herds of cars chasing after each other in the movies of the time.

"Airplanes fell out of the sky," he went on. "It took courage to travel back then. Half the people that tried to fly the Wright Brother's planes died, you know, when they started to sell them."

Jamee closed one eye and peered at Bob out of the skeptical one. "The jets at the turn of the century were a far cry from the early Wright Brother's planes."

"Look it up if you don't believe me. Thousands and thousands of people died every year. It took a brave soul to get in one of those things and then climb ten clicks in the air, held up there by nothing but flimsy twentieth-century technology. The airlines wouldn't let the passengers bring parachutes along, you know. They were afraid that terrorists would bring a bomb on board, then jump out."

She lifted her head and sat back. Where the hell was the waiter? It was probably going to be a person, and how uncomfortable was *that* going to be?

"No argument from me," she assured. "I'd never get on one."

"It was the cars," he said.

Jamee sat looking at him from her slouched position, but he didn't elaborate. Would it be too rude to ignore his comment, maybe change the subject?

She sighed. "What was the cars, Bob?"

"That's where they got their character, their grit."

"Isn't grit dirt?"

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He ignored her comment, apparently not concerned about being rude. “Once you left your driveway and headed out across the country, you were on your own. It was just you and your car. If something went wrong, if it broke down, you had to fix it or walk. Same as if a cowboy’s horse got sick or died.”

She was tempted to just agree with him. “They had tow trucks. They could call for help on their cell phones.”

He smiled his patronizing smile. “Those came later, not until the twenties or thirties.”

She knew he was wrong on that one; either that, or Sony Pictures had anticipated the cell phone by thirty years. She wasn’t going to argue, though. She just wanted to get this over with.

“Do you know how a levitor works?” he asked, pointing to a waiter version gliding along with someone’s meals.

She shrugged. “Only in a general way. It sort of shoots a kind of cloud of charged particles at the ground, then uses them to push against magnetically.”

“Exactly,” he said, surprising her with an apparent compliment. But when he continued, she realized that he meant his point, not her explanation. “We don’t really know how things around us work. We’re just a bunch of dumb passengers on this technology-driven earth—herded around by the scientists and engineers.”

“Baa-aa,” she said.

He blushed. She’d finally gotten through his sarcasm shield.

“My point,” he said through tight lips, “is that people of the twentieth century had character because they were self-reliant. They knew how the world they lived in worked.” He glanced around the restaurant. “Where *is* the damn waiter, anyway?”

“Why do you wear those gloves?” she asked suddenly.

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Her question surprised even her. Was she going on the offensive because she finally saw that she could get to him? If so, she assured herself, she was just defending herself against a supercilious bully.

Bob was staring at his covered hands. He looked up at her, and she saw resignation in his eyes. He knew he wasn't going to see her again after this dinner. He slowly pulled off his right glove and revealed a hairy hand, strong and muscular. Then, without looking at her again, he pulled off the left glove. Underneath, unbelievably, as though an overlaid hologram, was a woman's hand. There was no other way to think of it. The fingers were smooth and delicate, the wrist as thin as a tennis racket handle.

He looked up at her, and all she could do was shake her head in disbelief.

"A transporter accident," he said in a dull monotone. "I was trying out a new software release—an emergency feature that would generate a generic limb in the unlikely event that the transmission was disrupted. It hadn't been tested, but I figured it would work just fine. All that testing is just overkill anyway."

She looked at the woman's hand and back to his eyes. "Apparently not."

He sighed.

She nodded at the woman's hand. "That's the generic limb?"

She thought he wasn't going to answer at first, but he finally said, "No, it's an actual woman's hand."

Despite Jamee's resistance to it, the meaning of this sunk in. "There's a woman out there with your hand?" she asked in an excited whisper.

He nodded.

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“My God!” she said out loud, putting her fingers to her mouth.

He nodded again. “I’m due in court next week.”

“She’s suing you,” Jamee said, more a statement than a question. The poor woman wouldn’t have the luxury of wearing gloves. Women don’t wear gloves.

“She’s suing Gee-TRIC, actually.”

“I can’t believe I haven’t heard about this.”

He shrugged.

“Of course!” she exclaimed, pretending to smack her forehead. “Gee-TRIC’s covering it up.”

Bob smiled sadly.

“I’m surprised they haven’t fired you.”

He pulled his left glove back over the feminine monstrosity.

“They can’t until after the trial.”

She watched him until he lifted his eyes to her. “And then ...?”

He just returned her gaze grimly.

She didn’t know what to say. He probably deserved what he was going to get. But it was an accident. The lunk was just an insecure boy who never grew up. But that poor woman ....

“Can I take your order?”

She jumped. A man in an archaic vest stood over her with a pad—a *paper* pad. What was she supposed to do now? Just tell him what she wanted, like in the old movies? She looked at Bob.

He smiled and nodded, and opened his menu. “I’ll have the beef—that’s real meat, right?”

\* \* \*

Jamee stood before the booth under the warm stars of San Diego. Bob had waved one last time before stepping in and

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disappearing. If she had lived at the turn of the century, she wouldn't even hesitate. She'd just walk right in and let her body be torn apart, atom-by-atom. She wouldn't even flinch. She'd have grit, real grit.

But she wasn't that person, and she couldn't fool herself. She couldn't drive a car, or fly an airplane, or shoot a gun at a drug dealer that was trying to rape her. Maybe Bob was right. Maybe people had lost their character when they started using the stupid booths.

How far was Boulder? Could she walk? No, it was on the other side of the Rockies. Wasn't it? She was never good at geography. Probably because she had no character.

She looked at her hands. She liked her hands. She didn't want to exchange them. She didn't want to get out of the booth "on the wrong foot."

What had Bob said? The booths were used a hundred million times a day. But he didn't actually say that they were used a hundred million times *flawlessly*.

She heard a man behind her clear his throat. Someone was waiting for the booth. She threw herself in and felt the freezing air of Boulder on her face. She put her hands to her face. They were her hands. She stepped out and walked to her apartment.

Who the hell needed character anyway?

## END OF THE SAMPLE STORIES

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If you've made it this far, you might as well finish them all. The best were kept for last.

You can buy the book in all the usual places: Borders, Barnes & Nobles, and Amazon, of course.