

Eight Bits Human

The man's son lay in the bed. He was pale, a drip feeding into his arm. His thumb sat in his father's hand, tracing circles onto skin. Mother and wife stood by the window, lips pressed together, eyes watching for the doctor.

"I saw a dragonfly in the garden today," the child said.

"That's nice," the father said.

"I chased it down the path, but it was too fast..."

Fingers closed around the small thumb and stroked the young cheek. His wife's shoulders only spoke of a weighted fear. A heaviness of premature grief.

"When you're better I can take you to the museum where they have dead dragonflies on display."

"They're not as pretty when they're dead..." His eyes closed and his chest relaxed.

"No, they're not."

An old man whistled as he avoided loose cables and wires on his way to the door. His computer hummed and his music played from compact discs in a large rectangular box. He picked up a tin bucket and walked out into sunlight.

Metal contoured the landscape. A rooster crowed and more shapes emerged from shacks of corrugated iron with their dirty sports bags or duct taped granny trollies. An unbroken crosshatch of cables crossed the sky. Desk lamps, single fluorescent bulbs, and camping lanterns twisted around poles which were hung from wires. Figures traced through

constructed paths. Sirens sounded. The trucks were coming, bright lights peering through dust. When the roar subsided the trucks unloaded onto ever growing mounds of white goods and broken parts.

Like magpies, they circled and dived. They took whatever they could carry into the labyrinth. He approached. In the distance swarms scrambled over trash in a hunt for something valuable.

He waited before searching through the pile. A few things were thrown into his pail; cogs, a wristwatch and a blender blade. His fingers sifted through the new deposit, occasionally experiencing a twinge of pain as his skin caught on metal. There was a shimmer in the air as a dragonfly darted. His fist closed around a small flash drive and he withdrew his arm. It clanged into the bucket.

It was warped in its middle, bowing down to the weight of the monitor and machine that rattled and buzzed. The legs had been amputated and replaced with ones cannibalised from lamps and mangled chairs.

The screen flickered as he went about his work. One by one, each flash drive was plugged into the machine. He deleted the files on the drives, thousands of snippets of data, forgotten pieces of digital life. Once they were wiped, he cleaned their casings and put them into a plastic bag. The old man hung it on a hook and removed from his bucket the extra pieces he had collected earlier.

A toolbox was drawn from underneath his stretcher. Each tool was battered and scratched, but neatly stacked inside. He whistled as he pulled a watch apart, reassembling its pieces into a new shape. With a scrap of wire he attached it to the metal skeleton that sat

slumped on the desk. Cables twisted through its frame and up to its face, a beautifully crafted porcelain mask which hid jumbled circuit boards and wires.

The new attachment formed a thumb. He pressed a button on the keyboard and watched it twitch. Smiling, he turned off the computer.

Through a glass pane in the door the man watched his son and tried to listen to the doctor.

“He has a few weeks left, at best no more than six months. Sorry.” The doctor walked away, face lined and hand shaking.

The man leant against the wall. How was he going to tell his wife?

A suit appeared before him, “Mr Cartwright?”

“Yes.”

“I am Dr. Lodes and I can save your son.”

To an outsider his home was like every shack in the dump. Cables coiled around the base and at the same time it had no base. Its roof was both suspended and balanced. It looked as though a car could roll over it and leave it standing but a single fly would send it tumbling to the ground.

He wound down the path, plastic bag firmly in his grip, towards Louis' Creek. No one stared at his thin clothes or unshaven face but he still felt the urge to move through shadows.

His stomach grumbled and twisted and he found himself leaving the green and re-entering a world of greys and browns.

The smell of dank and dark returned, replacing the sweet, earthy smell of grass. Above the stink, fried foods and roasted meats dominated his nose. He could not remember the last time he had walked into town, and was shocked to see many of the old shops closed - replaced with street vendors and vagrants.

He located 'Harvey's Shoppe' and walked inside. Harvey bought from the wastelands and traded with the corporations. The plastic bag was placed on the counter. A balding man with a mechanical gait emerged from the curtained doorway.

"Good day... What. Can I... Assist you with?" He shook his head and pressed at a spot on his neck, "Sorry," it said, "I think I've gotten... A virus." Harvey's hand with stretched plastic skin slapped his neck and his LED eyes shifted into focus.

"Are you buying?"

Harvey blinked, "Yes, however I'm afraid. I can't offer you very good... rates."

The old man shrugged and upturned his bag onto the counter. A mass of flash drives formed a pile, some skittering to the floor. Harvey examined them.

"They're all clean and in good working condition," the old man said.

"This is better than most. Of the stuff I... get in. I'll give you a dollar each."

"That's fine." He turned away as Harvey counted up the devices, scooping them into a bucket. Harvey walked into his back room and returned with a bundle of cash in hand. "Forty six dollars."

"Thank you." He tucked the money away and left.

The smell of cooking sausages made his stomach grumble again and he fished a dollar from his pocket. Money was exchanged. It was warm and greasy; well worth a dollar.

“Dr. Lodes can help you.”

“I’ll play again?”

“Yes.”

“Where is mama?”

“Gone.”

“Will she be there when I wake up?”

“I don’t know. I promise everything will be okay.”

A frail figure went into town, a large wad of notes crammed into his pocket. He was hungry but at last he had enough money saved. Crowds parted around him and he delved deeper into the city. In his arms he carried the metal skeleton.

The city’s largest building shone with sterile glare. He was aware of the eyes following him, and the seemingly broken object he was carrying, as he pushed through the revolving door. His feet left tracks of dirt on marble. A woman beamed up at him from her computer monitor.

“Welcome sir,” she said, unaffected by the virus that had plagued Harvey, “What services do you require today?”

“I’m here to see Dr. Lodes,” he said.

She pressed a button and her eyes flickered as she processed the information. “Please enter the elevator.”

An elevator opened. The old man nodded and walked inside, shifting the metallic body in his arms. He hummed as the lift rose and dropped and zigzagged, opening at last at Dr. Lodes’ office. Dr. Lodes smiled at the man and ushered him in.

“You’ve kept me waiting.”

The elevator chirped a warning and he stepped through, placing the skeleton down on a chair. Money was deposited on Dr. Lodes’ desk. He could see the chip. Dr. Lodes flipped through the notes, a smile on his face.

“I’m impressed,” Dr. Lodes said as he slid the chip across the table, “But we had an agreement.”

He cradled the chip in his hands. A piece of masking tape used as a label had an assortment of numbers and letters on it.

“It’s him?”

“Yes, very much so.”

A moment of silence as the chip was inserted into the skull of the metallic skeleton. Levers were flicked and a button was pressed. The skeleton clicked, rose its head, a whirring sounded from deep inside. The man watched, fingernails digging into his skin.

“You added all of the extra bits like I mentioned?” Dr. Lodes said.

“Yes, yes.”

“It’s very important that there is extra memory to draw on. If not it will all collapse.” Dr. Lodes shuffled some papers and resumed his work. It stared up at the old man. Cameras dilated in place of pupils. The porcelain face was impassive. A hand raised and took the old man’s hand.

“Father?” He asked. The voice was jarring and wavered.

Tears flowed down the rigid face, then broke into a smile. He stood in front of the man and began to walk experimentally.

“My son.”

Dr. Lodes and the old man watched as he walked around. He touched the plants, looked at everything, chattered nonsense, all the while smiling at his father through a porcelain face. At last he stopped.

“You did it,” he said, “You gave me back my body.”

“I promised.”

The elevator pinged. A whistling could be heard in the shaft. He didn’t let go of his son’s hand as they walked down steps. The boy’s hand slipped from his grasp and he chased a dragonfly as it darted across the road: hovering and incandescent in the city smog.

There was no time to yell.

A car smashed into the boy’s fragile frame and slammed to a halt. Glass splinters flew and reconstructed limbs scattered across the road. Dark fluids splattered, a hollow imitation of blood. Curses screeched. The old man dived and scrambled through debris. He found the delicate porcelain mask, a crack running down the centre.

“Father,” he said. “Father.”

The old man turned his son's head over and wrenched the chip from his skull. Too late. He – it – was melting under his fingertips, buckling, collapsing. The twisted metal returned to its inanimate states: a lawnmower blade, a fishing hook, a watch, a computer motherboard. Horns blared from all sides but the man remained motionless. His lip trembled and his fingers quivered. In desperation, he wept.

Ripples cast as a hook dives through the surface. The old man's hand curled around the fishing rod, except then his skin was smooth and tanned, an easy grin on his face. A time before tears. Another line cast, a sinker plonked onto the surface.

“Did you see that, Father?”

“That was excellent,” he said to the child beside him, even though it wasn't.

Smiles.

A voice echoed across the paddock.

“I think your mother is calling.”

The boy handed his fishing rod over and ran.

A woman walked down in sandals, glasses in hand, “Lemonade, love?”

“Thank you, dear.”

He sipped, watching his son roll through the grass, and listening to the buzz of insects skimming the surface of the pond. Somehow it tasted like a perfect summer.

