

A vibrant, detailed mural of a European town square. The scene is filled with people engaged in various activities: some are walking, some are sitting on a bench, and others are looking at a display. The architecture is diverse, featuring multi-story buildings with colorful facades (red, yellow, grey) and windows. A prominent stone archway in the center contains a scene with a horse-drawn carriage. The overall atmosphere is lively and historical.

Flash! Fiction 4

by Peter McMillan
with Adam Mac

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Dedication

For Mr. Greengrass

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Cecil was wheeled into the rec room where all the residents were passing the time 'til the evening meal.

His room was too small. Much smaller than what he was used to. At least it had cable. He just needed a TV. The nurse said one might be coming available.

This was the first time he'd seen any of his new neighbours. It was a lot to take in. Some were dressed to the nines. Others were singing showtunes while a woman wearing a cancer turban played the piano.

"Who's the old bird facing the corner?" he asked.

"One of our long-termers, Miss Annie. She prefers it that way, sometimes," answered the nurse.

"Kinda ruins the atmosphere, doesn't it?"

"Well, Mr. Snow, this isn't rehab."

"Don't I know it. My boy made that pretty clear. 'Here Dad, your new home,' he said. 'Nice,' his new girlfriend said."

"She doesn't have anybody—just us."

"No family?"

"Moved away soon after she came."

"What did she—"

"Real estate. Thirty years. Pretty successful I heard."

"Ironic."

"Lots of irony here, Mr. Snow. Would you like to take a tour of the gardens?"

“No thanks, saw it through the window in my room.”

“Alright then. I’ll leave you to mingle. By the way, those boxes—the boxes your son mentioned—need to be unpacked when they arrive. Boxes left in residents’ rooms will be removed after two days. Policy. Health and safety, you understand.”

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The Audition

She'd been in bed for three days — the entire weekend, so it had to be serious. It was a bad flu season, though the old family doctor, still making the occasional house call, said it was nerves most likely.

Stella had just turned 14, but she'd already shown signs of being like her Aunt Audrey. Both were actresses, in theory — high-strung and self-absorbed. Stella's mother recognized the resemblance most keenly, having shared a room with her younger sister Audrey when they were growing up.

Now, Stella was auditioning — just a school play, but for the time and place it was the biggest part of her life. The play had been adapted from an O. Henry story, and Stella knew, she just knew, she had to have the main role. It was only two days away.

They didn't let on but her parents thought it might be the best thing ... for everybody ... if she didn't win. Tony, her little brother, felt otherwise. He worshiped his big sister, even though she made him fetch and carry and come and go as she pleased.

From her upstairs bedroom, propped up on two big down pillows, Stella could see the side of the old vacant house next door. It was a large, old-fashioned house — a tear-down her parents said. The garage was nearest her view, and it was unobstructed by maple leaves this time of year. Past the skeletal branches of the maple, it was an almost blank canvas of brick with a single waist-high window that didn't appear to have seen a paintbrush in more years than she'd lived.

Later in the day, shortly after school let out, she was rehearsing her lines before her parents came home. Only Tony was in the room with her, but she knew he'd never betray her. He was busy watching the heavy equipment being unloaded next door, when suddenly he spun around and asked what was so important about a leaf anyway. She explained that it was the difference between getting the part and failure. She was cryptic that way, so it sometimes took him awhile to figure out what she meant.

The next morning before school it was a mix of drizzle and snow flurries, but that didn't stop Tony or them. He found a big red maple leaf on the ground — bigger and prettier than all the rest — then crawled through the construction fence and taped it to the garage window. Standing back to admire his work, he turned to see if Stella was there. She was — her surprised face pressed against the second-story window. He beamed at her just as a giant orange claw descended from the sky and tore into the wall, pulling it down behind him.

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Scooter hated his name, but he loved it, too. Traffic for him was a cinch though he'd had some close calls. He worked at the Reading Fair which was a Speaker's Corner-cum-virtual reality venue with computer-generated guest speakers from far away times and places. All presentations were fictional; however, character authenticity was crucial for audience recognition.

Scooter was a fact-check — obsessive-compulsive, green, control freak-certified — and his job was to make sure that the presenters' holograms were consistent with their body of work. He was indispensable. For example, he discovered the anomaly in Albert Einstein's military-style crew cut and prevented it from going live. He also intervened to can Lincoln's "I Have a Dream" speech. Perhaps, most memorably he fixed the glitch that erroneously programmed Neil Armstrong to utter the immortal words, "And now for something completely different," as he became the first man on the moon.

Scooter didn't actually scoot around in libraries or archives. After all, in the digital age, information came to you if you knew how to call it, and Scooter did ... very effectively. He had a knack for scooting in and out of places — just a crack was all he needed — and coming back with a trove of data, which he organized with the dexterity of an eight-armed conductor.

Unfortunately, most of what he managed was easily replicated by the technicians in Bangalore. Management seized an opportunity to save costs by eliminating equipment and personnel redundancies, like Scooter along with half the technicians who were absolutely incredulous on getting their notices.

Scooter and his doomed colleagues were kept on for two additional weeks owing to the big show the impresario had scored with the national museum. She had committed to a gallery of 25 personages, ignoring staff counsel that only 19 were fit for the occasion.

Six more had to be created. Moreover, they had to represent the fields of medicine, pop art, entertainment, business, literature, and Ancient Egypt. Scooter and his buddies set to work not the least intimidated by the ambitious timetable, all the more aggressive because two holograms had to be created for each one in the exhibit: one to pass internal inspection and the other to be triggered by a duplicate remote.

For Freud, they put in Jung Frankenstein. In place of Campbell's soup, they produced avant-garde art using Bush's baked beans. Instead of an exclusive tour of the Tutankhamen exhibit in Cairo, an effigy of King Tut was to be regaled by Steve Martin. Henry Ford's cameo was ousted by "Neutron Jack" Welsh, the brilliance of GE, who was to explain how he came to love the bomb. The world's greatest-ever footballer, Edson Arantes do Nascimento, had to step aside for Barry Bonds who was asked how he juggled being the home run king and a negative role model. The only two-time winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature refused to disclose his/her identities, so Adam Mac was added at the last minute to face the perennial literary question: how does a writer endure oblivion?

Scooter never got to know how the exhibit went off. The day before his last day at work, he was run over by a bus. Nuts and bolts, circuit boards, and shredded metal lay scattered all over the roadway. The bus, through the bike rack mounted on the front, seemed to smile.

They managed without him. The exhibition was a rollicking success, though regrettably not with the right people. Scooter would have been pleased.

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He wouldn't need this stuff anymore, though he'd hoped to take away something. USBs, like-new 3.5" diskettes, and everything in between, had to stay. If it was confidential, proprietary, copyrighted, trademarked, patented, or otherwise of importance or interest to the company, he had to turn it over. He knew that. What was a surprise was that it didn't matter that the USB was his and that it had his daughter's photography portfolio on it. Personal or not, his escorts confiscated all electronic media—even the mouse. That cut deep. It was his first.

Calendars—desk calendars and one-a-day calendars—annotated with idiosyncratically-coded messages, innocuous except to a trained eye. They relented only after he'd embarrassed himself by pleading that he be left with something to show for the years he'd worked for the company. Years of servitude, he wished he'd said. Five were returned to him, but they were so thoroughly redacted they would likely serve as a very different kind of memento.

Scraps of paper and post-it notes—he was a hoarder—bore the names of his colleagues and the places and times for getting together, usually after work. Shorney's, game 7 of the World Series; Toby's for the midday England-Germany match, Brattigan's, Stanley Cup Finals; a weekend matinee of *The Nutcracker* in honour of Penelope's daughter who landed the role of a sheep; the *Phantom* they forced themselves to see, because they had won tickets; and of course, Reilly's where they'd spent many evenings speculating about the company's latest restructuring, government investigation, or class action lawsuit.

The artificial plants, the inspirational pictures, as well as office supplies valued in excess of \$5 were tagged with asset numbers and had to be scanned back into inventory. What was left filled less

than half of a banker's box, and that he had to empty into a five-cent plastic bag when he got down to the information and security desk at ground level. Boxes they reused, he was informed.

#

Despite the way he had been treated, particularly at the end, a subconscious dependency lingered. For the entire next week, he awoke to false starts, a couple of times getting showered and shaved and out the front door with briefcase in hand. The worst was when he actually got to work and rode the elevator up with Penelope and Roger and Maurice. It was awkward for them, too. They promised to call. Said they were sorry and everything. That humiliation was the kick he needed, and the memory stayed raw for days, reinforcing his redundancy like nothing else could.

At home, he'd never really been interested in looking out the front window—hadn't spent much time in the apartment. In fact, his blinds were closed most of the time. But with nothing on TV and nothing worth reading, and no work to go to, he took to peering through, just to get some ideas from watching how other people passed the day, he told himself. Little by little, the blinds were raised.

He realized he'd stumbled onto something. Here was a world just outside his window—so near yet so distant and unknown. Having spent so much time at the office and after hours with his office friends, he'd never taken the time to see and consider what was served up daily on the streets and sidewalks below. The blinds stayed open night and day.

During the daytime, especially at rush hours and lunch, traffic was nonstop busy with people and cars and bicycles and skateboards and dogs. But for all the activity, it wasn't really inviting or entertain-

ing. It was chaotic and disorderly, disturbing—not at all like the structured world of his office. Worksickness? Really?

Right there on the sidewalk, dogs did their business. Cars jostled other cars to wedge into tight parking spaces or double-parked up to half an hour at a time. Bicyclists on the sidewalk yelled at pedestrians. The produce market down the street tossed its organic waste on the sidewalk to simmer in the sun or puddle in the rain. Young teenage girls from St. Joseph's—his daughter, Yvonne, would have been about their age—flirted with scruffy-looking twenty-somethings to get cigarettes from the convenience store. Everyday there was something new—some gross or indecent or stupid act you wouldn't believe could happen here.

A lot of the same scripts played out every day—like television reruns. The only difference was this was happening right outside his window. In HIS world, and it wasn't right. How could they infringe his right to enjoy peace and order? How could they think— Who did they think— Obviously, they didn't ... think. And what they did without thinking caused him enormous stress and anxiety. Hadn't they been socialized, normalized—just plain taught respect? Wasn't that the point of school?

He debated. Should he call the city about the smelly garbage from the fruit and vegetable market—make a public health complaint? And there had to be a number to call to report people selling cigarettes to minors.

But what would a bunch of bureaucrats downtown do? File a report, bury it, and at the end of the day, collect a pension.

Wouldn't it be better to carry a walking stick and, next time he saw a bicyclist parting the crowd on the sidewalk, shove it in the spokes of the front wheel? And if that little princess in the Lexus SUV dou-

ble-parked again, maybe he should take down the plate number and anonymously report a hit-and-run.

The phone interrupted his plotting. He let the machine answer.

“Hey Donny! It’s Roger. We’re taking in a doubleheader tonight. Interested? We’re gonna grab something to eat at the ballpark. Meet us around 5:30? Our usual seats down by third base. Cheers.”

He replayed the message.

What the hell was he thinking?

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