

Pump Six

by Paolo Bacigalupi

Paolo Bacigalupi reports that he's currently working on a pair of novels, one set in the same universe as his story "Yellow Card Man" and the other in the Young Adult genre. His new story first appeared in his recent short story collection, as you might have guessed by the fact that the collection is titled *Pump Six and Other Stories*. This tale is hard-hitting and it might not be appropriate for younger readers. (Then again, as noted in the editorial, screenwriter Josh Olson is still grateful to the teacher who gave him Harlan Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* at a young age.)

The first thing I saw Thursday morning when I walked into the kitchen was Maggie's ass sticking up in the air. Not a bad way to wake up, really. She's got a good figure, keeps herself in shape, so a morning eyeful of her pretty bottom pressed against a black mesh nightie is generally a positive way to start the day.

Except that she had her head in the oven. And the whole kitchen smelled like gas. And she had a lighter with a blue flame six inches high that she was waving around inside the oven like it was a Tickle Monkey revival concert.

"Jesus Christ, Maggie! What the hell are you doing?"

I dove across the kitchen, grabbed a handful of nightie and yanked hard. Her head banged as she came out of the oven. Frying pans rattled on the stovetop and she dropped her lighter. It skittered across the tuffscuff, ending up in a corner. "Owwwww!" She grabbed her head. "Oooowwww!"

She spun around and slapped me. "What the fuck did you do that for?" She raked her nails across my cheek, then went for my eyes. I shoved her away. She slammed into the wall and spun, ready to come back again. "What's the matter with you?" she yelled. "You pissed off you couldn't get it up last night? Now you want to knock me around instead?" She grabbed the cast-iron skillet off the stovetop, dumping NiftyFreeze bacon all over the burners. "You want to try again, trogwad? Huh? You want to?" She waved the pan, threatening, and started for me. "Come on then!"

I jumped back, rubbing my cheek where she'd gouged me. "You're crazy! I keep you from getting yourself blown up and you want to beat my head in?"

"I was making your damn breakfast!" She ran her fingers through her

black tangled hair and showed me blood. “You broke my damn head!”

“I saved your dumb ass is what I did.” I turned and started shoving the kitchen windows open, letting the gas escape. A couple of the windows were just cardboard curtains that were easy to pull free, but one of the remaining whole windows was really stuck.

“You sonofabitch!”

I turned just in time to dodge the skillet. I yanked it out of her hands and shoved her away, hard, then went back to opening windows. She came back, trying to get around in front of me as I pushed the windows open. Her nails were all over my face, scratching and scraping. I pushed her away again and waved the skillet when she tried to come back. “You want me to use this?”

She backed off, eyes on the pan. She circled. “That’s all you got to say to me? ‘I saved your dumb ass’?” Her face was red with anger. “How about ‘Thanks for trying to fix the stove, Maggie,’ or ‘Thanks for giving a damn about whether I get a decent breakfast before work, Maggie.’” She hawked snot and spat, missing me and hitting the wall, then gave me the finger. “Make your own damn breakfast. See if I try to help you again.”

I stared at her. “You’re dumber than a sack of trogs, you know that?” I waved the skillet toward the stove. “Checking a gas leak with a lighter? Do you even have a brain in there? Hello? Hello?”

“Don’t talk to me like that! You’re the trogwad—” She choked off mid sentence and sat, suddenly, like she’d been hit in the head with a chunk of concrete rain. Just plopped on the yellow tuffscuff. Completely stunned.

“Oh.” She looked up at me, wide-eyed. “I’m sorry, Trav. I didn’t even think of that.” She stared at her lighter where it lay in the corner. “Oh, shit. Wow.” She put her head in her hands. “Oh ... Wow.”

She started to hiccup, then to cry. When she looked up at me again, her big brown eyes were full of tears. “I’m so sorry. I’m really really sorry.” The tears started rolling, pouring off her cheeks. “I had no idea. I just didn’t think. I....”

I was still ready to fight, but seeing her sitting on the floor, all forlorn and lost and apologetic took it out of me.

“Forget it.” I dropped the pan on the stove and went back to jamming

open the windows. A breeze started moving through, and the gas stink faded. When we had some decent air circulation, I pulled the stove out from the wall. Bacon was scattered all over the burners, limp and thawed now that it was out of its NiftyFreeze cellophane, strips of pork lying everywhere, marbled and glistening with fat. Maggie's idea of a home-made breakfast. My granddad would have loved her. He was a big believer in breakfasts. Except for the NiftyFreeze. He hated those wrappers.

Maggie saw me staring at the bacon. "Can you fix the stove?"

"Not right now. I've got to get to work."

She wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand. "Waste of bacon," she said. "Sorry."

"No big deal."

"I had to go to six different stores to find it. That was the last package, and they didn't know when they were going to get more."

I didn't have anything to say to that. I found the gas shut-off and closed it. Sniffed. Then sniffed all around the stove and the rest of kitchen.

The gas smell was almost gone.

For the first time, I noticed my hands were shaking. I tried to get a coffee packet out of the cabinet and dropped it. It hit the counter with a water balloon plop. I set my twitching hands flat on the counter and leaned on them, hard, trying to make them go still. My elbows started shaking instead. It's not every morning you almost get yourself blown up.

It was kind of funny, though, when I thought about it. Half the time, the gas didn't even work. And on the one day it did, Maggie decided to play repairman. I had to suppress a giggle.

Maggie was still in the middle of the floor, snuffling. "I'm really sorry," she said again.

"It's okay. Forget it." I took my hands off the counter. They weren't flapping around anymore. That was something. I ripped open the coffee packet and chugged its liquid cold. After the rest of the morning, the caffeine was calming.

"No, I'm really sorry. I could have got us both killed."

I wanted to say something nasty but there wasn't any point. It just would have been cruel. "Well, you didn't. So it's okay." I pulled out a chair and sat down and looked out the open windows. The city's sky was turning from yellow dawn smog to a gray-blue morning smog. Down below, people were just starting their day. Their noises filtered up: Kids shouting on their way to school. Hand carts clattering on their way to deliveries. The grind of some truck's engine, clanking and squealing and sending up black clouds of exhaust that wafted in through the window along with summer heat. I fumbled for my inhaler and took a hit, then made myself smile at Maggie. "It's like that time you tried to clean the electric outlet with a fork. You just got to remember not to look for gas leaks with a fire. It's not a good idea."

Wrong thing to say, I guess. Or wrong tone of voice.

Maggie's waterworks started again: not just the snuffling and the tears, but the whole bawling squalling release thing, water pouring down her face, her nose getting all runny and her saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again, like a Ya Lu aud sample, but without the subsonic thump that would have made it fun to listen to.

I stared at the wall for a while, trying to wait it out, and thought about getting my earbug and listening to some real Ya Lu, but I didn't want to wear out the battery because it took a while to find good ones, and anyway, it didn't seem right to duck out while she was bawling. So I sat there while she kept crying, and then I finally sucked it up and got down on the floor next to her and held her while she wore herself out.

Finally she stopped crying and started wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'll remember."

She must have seen my expression because she got more insistent. "Really. I will." She used the shoulder of her nightie on her runny nose. "I must look awful."

She looked puffy and red-eyed and snotty. I said, "You look fine. Great. You look great."

"Liar." She smiled, then shook her head. "I didn't mean to melt down like that. And the frying pan...." She shook her head again. "I must be PMS-ing."

"You take a Gynoloft?"

“I don’t want to mess with my hormones. You know, just in case....” She shook her head again. “I keep thinking maybe this time, but....” She shrugged. “Never mind. I’m a mess.” She leaned against me again and went quiet for a little bit. I could feel her breathing. “I just keep hoping,” she said finally.

I stroked her hair. “If it’s meant to happen, it will. We’ve just got to stay optimistic.”

“Sure. That’s up to God. I know that. I just keep hoping.”

“It took Miku and Gabe three years. We’ve been trying, what, six months?”

“A year, month after next.” She was quiet, then said, “Lizzi and Pearl only had miscarriages.”

“We’ve got a ways to go before we start worrying about miscarriages.” I disentangled and went hunting for another coffee packet in the cabinets. This one I actually took the time to shake. It heated itself and I tore it open and sipped. Not as good as the little brewer I found for Maggie at the flea market so she could make coffee on the stove, but it was a damn sight better than being blown to bits.

Maggie was getting herself arranged, getting up off the floor and starting to bustle around. Even all puffy faced, she still looked good in that mesh nightie: lots of skin, lots of interesting shadows.

She caught me watching her. “What are you smiling at?”

I shrugged. “You look nice in that nightie.”

“I got it from that lady’s estate sale, downstairs. It’s hardly even used.”

I leered. “I like it.”

She laughed. “Now? You couldn’t last night or the night before, but now you want to do it?”

I shrugged.

“You’re going to be late as it is.” She turned and started rustling in the cabinets herself. “You want a brekkie bar? I found a whole bunch of them when I was shopping for the bacon. I guess their factory is working again.”

She tossed one before I could answer. I caught it and tore off the smiling foil wrapper and read the ingredients while I ate. Fig and Nut, and then a whole bunch of nutrients like dextro-forma-albuterolhyde. Not as neat as the chemicals that thaw NiftyFreeze packets, but what the hell, it's all nutritional, right?

Maggie turned and studied the stove where I'd marooned it. With hot morning air blowing in from the windows, the bacon was getting limper and greasier by the second. I thought about taking it downstairs and frying it on the sidewalk. If nothing else, I could feed it to the trops. Maggie was pinching her lip. I expected her to say something about the stove or wasting bacon, but instead she said, "We're going out for drinks with Nora tonight. She wants to go to Wicky."

"Pus girl?"

"That's not funny."

I jammed the rest of the brekkie bar into my mouth. "It is to me. I warned both of you. That water's not safe for anything."

She made a face. "Well nothing happened to me, smarty pants. We all looked at it and it wasn't yellow or sludgy or anything—"

"So you jumped right in and went swimming. And now she's got all those funny zits on her. How mysterious." I finished the second coffee packet and tossed it and the brekkie bar wrapper down the disposal and ran some water to wash them down. In another half hour, they'd be whirling and dissolving in the belly of Pump Two. "You can't go thinking something's clean, just because it looks clear. You got lucky." I wiped my hands and went over to her. I ran my fingers up her hips.

"Yep. Lucky. Still no reaction."

She slapped my hands away. "What, you're a doctor, now?"

"Specializing in skin creams...."

"Don't be gross. I told Nora to meet us at eight. Can we go to Wicky?"

I shrugged. "I doubt it. It's pretty exclusive."

"But Max owes you—" she broke off as she caught me leering at her again. "Oh. Right."

“What do you say?”

She shook her head and grinned. “I should be glad, after the last couple nights.”

“Exactly.” I leaned down and kissed her.

When she finally pulled back, she looked up at me with those big brown eyes of hers and the whole bad morning just melted away. “You’re going to be late,” she said.

But her body was up against mine, and she wasn’t slapping my hands away anymore.

* * * *

Summer in New York is one of my least favorite times. The heat sits down between the buildings, choking everything, and the air just ... stops. You smell everything. Plastics melting into hot concrete, garbage burning, old urine that effervesces into the air when someone throws water into the gutter; just the plain smell of so many people living all packed together. Like all the skyscrapers are sweating alcoholics after a binge, standing there exhausted and oozing with the evidence of everything they’ve been up to. It drives my asthma nuts. Some days, I take three hits off the inhaler just to get to work.

About the only good thing about summer is that it isn’t spring so at least you don’t have freeze-thaw dropping concrete rain down on your head.

I cut across the park just to give my lungs a break from the ooze and stink, but it wasn’t much of an improvement. Even with the morning heat still building up, the trees looked dusty and tired, all their leaves drooping, and there were big brown patches on the grass where the green had just given up for the summer, like bald spots on an old dog.

The trogs were out in force, lying in the grass, lolling around in the dust and sun, enjoying another summer day with nothing to do. The weather was bringing them out. I stopped to watch them frolicking—all hairy and horny without any concerns at all.

A while back someone started a petition to get rid of them, or at least to get them spayed, but the mayor came out and said that they had some

rights, too. After all, they were somebody's kids, even if no one was admitting it. He even got the police to stop beating them up so much, which made the tabloids go crazy. They all said he had a trog love child hidden in Connecticut. But after a few years, people got used to having them around. And the tabloids went out of business, so the mayor didn't care what they said about his love children anymore.

These days, the trogs are just part of the background, a whole parkful of mash-faced monkey people shambling around with bright yellow eyes and big pink tongues and not nearly enough fur to survive in the wild. When winter hits, they either freeze in piles or migrate down to warmer places. But every summer there's more of them.

When Maggie and I first started trying to have a baby, I had a nightmare that Maggie had a trog. She was holding it and smiling, right after the delivery, all sweaty and puffy and saying, "Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it beautiful?" and then she handed the sucker to me. And the scary thing wasn't that it was a trog; the scary thing was trying to figure out how I was going to explain to everyone at work that we were keeping it. Because I loved that little squash-faced critter. I guess that's what being a parent is all about.

That dream scared me limp for a month. Maggie put me on perkies because of it.

A trog sidled up. It—or he or she, or whatever you call a hermaphrodite critter with boobs and a big sausage—made kissy faces at me. I just smiled and shook my head and decided that it was a him because of his hairy back, and because he actually had that sausage, instead of just a little pencil like some of them have. The trog took the rejection pretty well. He just smiled and shrugged. That's one nice thing about them: they may be dumber than hamsters, but they're pleasant-natured. Nicer than most of the people I work with, really. Way nicer than some people you meet in the subway.

The trog wandered off, touching himself and grunting, and I kept going across the park. On the other side, I walked down a couple blocks to Freedom Street and then down the stairs into the command substation.

Chee was waiting for me when I unlocked the gates to let myself in.

"Alvarez! You're late, man."

Chee's a nervous skinny little guy with suspenders and red hair

slicked straight back over a bald spot. He always has this acrid smell around him because of this steroid formula he uses on the bald spot, which makes his hair grow all right for a while, but then he starts picking at it compulsively and it all falls out and he has to start all over with the steroids, and in the meantime, he smells like the Hudson. And whatever the gel is, it makes his skull shine like a polished bowling ball. We used to tell him to stop using the stuff, but he'd go all rabid and try to bite you if you kept it up for long.

"You're late," he said again. He was scratching his head like an epileptic monkey trying to groom himself.

"Yeah? So?" I got my work jacket out of my locker and pulled it on. The fluorescents were all dim and flickery, but climate control was running, so the interior was actually pretty bearable, for once.

"Pump Six is broken."

"Broken how?"

Chee shrugged. "I don't know. It's stopped."

"Is it making a noise? Is it stopped all the way? Is it going slowly? Is it flooding? Come on, help me out."

Chee looked at me blankly. Even his head-picking stopped, for a second.

"You try looking at the troubleshooting indexes?" I asked.

Chee shrugged. "Didn't think of it."

"How many times have I told you, that's the first thing you do? How long has it been out?"

"Since midnight?" He screwed up his face, thinking. "No, since ten."

"You switch the flows over?"

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Forgot."

I started to run. "The entire Upper West Side doesn't have sewage processing since LAST NIGHT? Why didn't you call me?"

Chee jogged after me, dogging my heels as we ran through the plant's labyrinth to the control rooms. "You were off duty."

"So you just let it sit there?"

It's hard to shrug while you're running full-out, but Chee managed it. "Stuff's broken all the time. I didn't figure it was that bad. You know, there was that bulb out in tunnel three, and then there was that leak from the toilets. And then the drinking fountain went out again. You always let things slide. I figured I'd let you sleep."

I didn't bother trying to explain the difference. "If it happens again, just remember, if the pumps, any of them, die, you call me. It doesn't matter where I am, I won't be mad. You just call me. If we let these pumps go down, there's no telling how many people could get sick. There's bad stuff in that water, and we've got to stay on top of it, otherwise it bubbles up into the sewers and then it gets out in the air, and people get sick. You got it?"

I shoved open the doors to the control room, and stopped.

The floor was covered with toilet paper, rolls of it, all unstrung and dangled around the control room. Like some kind of mummy striptease had gone wrong. There must have been a hundred rolls unraveled all over the floor. "What the hell is this?"

"This?" He looked around, scratching his head.

"The paper, Chee."

"Oh. Right. We had a toilet paper fight last night. For some reason they triple delivered. We didn't have enough space in the storage closet. I mean, we haven't had ass wipes for two months, and then we had piles and piles of it—"

"So you had a toilet paper fight while Pump Six was down?"

Something in my voice must have finally gotten through. He cringed. "Hey, don't look at me that way. I'll get it picked up. No worries. Jeez. You're worse than Mercati. And anyway, it wasn't my fault. I was just getting ready to reload the dispensers and then Suze and Zoo came down and we got into this fight." He shrugged. "It was just something to do, that's all. And Suze started it, anyway."

I gave him another dirty look and kicked my way through the tangle of

t.p. to the control consoles.

Chee called after me, "Hey, how am I going to wind it back up if you kick it around?"

I started throwing switches on the console, running diagnostics. I tried booting up the troubleshooting database, but got a connection error. Big surprise. I looked on the shelves for the hard copies of the operation and maintenance manuals, but they were missing. I looked at Chee. "Do you know where the manuals are?"

"The what?"

I pointed at the empty shelves.

"Oh. They're in the bathroom."

I looked at him. He looked back at me. I couldn't make myself ask. I just turned back to the consoles. "Go get them, I need to figure out what these flashers mean." There was a whole panel of them winking away at me, all for Pump Six.

Chee scuttled out of the room, dragging t.p. behind him. Overhead, I heard the Observation Room door open: Suze, coming down the stairs. More trouble. She rustled through the t.p. streamers and came up close behind me, crowding. I could feel her breathing on my neck.

"The pump's been down for almost twelve hours," she said. "I could write you up." She thumped me in the back, hard. "I could write you up, buddy." She did it again, harder. *Bam.*

I thought about hitting her back, but I wasn't going to give her another excuse to dock pay. Besides, she's bigger than me. And she's got more muscles than an orangutan. About as hairy, too. Instead, I said, "It would have helped if somebody had called."

"You talking back to me?" She gave me another shove and leaned around to get in my face, looking at me all squinty-eyed. "Twelve hours down-time," she said again. "That's grounds for a write-up. It's in the manual. I can do it."

"No kidding? You read that? All by yourself?"

"You're not the only one who can read, Alvarez." She turned and

stomped back up the stairs to her office.

Chee came back lugging the maintenance manuals. "I don't know how you do this," he puffed as he handed them over. "These manuals make no sense at all."

"It's a talent."

I took the plastirene volumes and glanced up at Suze's office. She was just standing there, looking down at me through the observation glass, looking like she was going to come down and beat my head in. A dimwit promo who got lucky when the old boss went into retirement.

She has no idea what a boss does, so mostly she spends her time scowling at us, filling out paperwork that she can't remember how to route, and molesting her secretary. Employment guarantees are great for people like me, but I can see why you might want to fire someone; the only way Suze was ever going to leave was if she fell down the Observation Room stairs and broke her neck.

She scowled harder at me, trying to make me look away. I let her win. She'd either write me up, or she wouldn't. And even if she did, she might still get distracted and forget to file it. At any rate, she couldn't fire me. We were stuck together like a couple of cats tied in a sack.

I started thumbing through the manuals' plastic pages, going back and forth through the indexes as I cross-referenced all the flashers. I looked up again at the console. There were a lot of them. Maybe more than I'd ever seen.

Chee squatted down beside me, watching. He started picking his head again. I think it's a comfort thing for him. But it makes your skin crawl until you get used to it. Makes you think of lice.

"You do that fast," he said. "How come you didn't go to college?"

"You kidding?"

"No way, man. You're the smartest guy I ever met. You totally could have gone to college."

I glanced over at him, trying to tell if he was screwing with me. He looked back at me, completely sincere, like a dog waiting for a treat. I went back to the manual. "No ambition, I guess."

The truth was that I never made it through high school. I dropped out of P.S. 105 and never looked back. Or forward, I guess. I remember sitting in freshman algebra and watching the teacher's lips flap and not understanding a word he was saying. I turned in worksheets and got Ds every time, even after I redid them. None of the other kids were complaining, though. They just laughed at me when I kept asking him to explain the difference between squaring and doubling variables. You don't have to be Einstein to figure out where you don't belong.

I started piecing my way through the troubleshooting diagrams. No clogs indicated. Go to Mechanics Diagnostics, Volume Three. I picked up the next binder of pages and started flipping. "Anyway, you've got a bad frame of reference. We aren't exactly a bunch of Nobel Prize winners here." I glanced up at Suze's office. "Smart people don't work in dumps like this." Suze was scowling down at me again. I gave her the universal salute. "You see?"

Chee shrugged. "I dunno. I tried reading that manual about twenty times on the john, and it still doesn't make any sense to me. If you weren't around, half the city would be swimming in shit right now."

Another flasher winked on the console: amber, amber, red.... It stayed red.

"In a couple minutes they're going to be swimming in a lot worse than that. Believe me, buddy, there's lots worse things than shit. Mercati showed me a list once, before he retired. All the things that run through here that the pumps are supposed to clean: polychlorinated biphenyls, bisphenyl-A, estrogen, phthalates, PCBs, heptachlor...."

"I got a Super Clean sticker for all that stuff." He lifted his shirt and showed me the one he had stuck to his skin, right below his rib cage. A yellow smiley face sticker a little like the kind I used to get from my grandpa when he was feeling generous. It said SUPER CLEAN on the smiley's forehead.

"You buy those?"

"Sure. Seven bucks for seven. I get 'em every week. I can drink the water straight, now. I'd even drink out of the Hudson." He started scratching his skull again.

I watched him scratch for a second, remembering how zit girl Nora

had tried to sell some to Maria before they went swimming. “Well, I’m glad it’s working for you.” I turned and started keying restart sequences for the pumps. “Now let’s see if we can get this sucker started up, and keep all the neighbors who don’t buy stickers from having a pack of trogs. Get ready to pull a reboot on my say-so.”

Chee went over to clear the data lines and put his hands on the restart levers. “I don’t know what difference it makes. I went through the park the other day and you know what I saw? A mama trog and five little baby trogs. What good does it do to keep trogs from getting born to good folks, when you got those ones down in the park making whole litters?”

I looked over at Chee to say something back, but he kind of had a point. The reboot sequences completed and Pump Six’s indicators showed primed. “Three ... two ... one.... Primed full,” I said. “Go. Go. Go.”

Chee threw his levers and the consoles cleared green and somewhere deep down below us, sewage started pumping again.

* * * *

We climbed the skin of the Kusovic Center, climbing for heaven, climbing for Wicky. Maggie and Nora and Wu and me, worming our way up through stairwell turns, scrambling over rubble, kicking past condom wrappers and scattering Effy packets like autumn leaves. Wicky’s synthesized xylophones and Japanese kettle drums thrummed, urging us higher. Trogs and sadsack partiers who didn’t have my connections watched jealously as we climbed. Watched and whispered as we passed them by, all of them knowing that Max owed me favors and favors and favors and that I went to the front of the line because I kept the toilets running on time.

The club was perched at the very top of the Kusovic, a bunch of old stock broker offices. Max had torn down the glass cubicles and the old digital wallscreens that used to track the NYSE and had really opened the space up. Unfortunately, the club wasn’t much good in the winter anymore because we’d all gotten rowdy one night and shoved out the windows. But even if it was too damn breezy half the year, watching those windows falling had been a major high point at the club. A couple years later people were still talking about it, and I could still remember the slow way they came out of their frames and tumbled and sailed through the air. And when they hit bottom, they splashed across the streets like giant buckets of water.

At any rate, the open-air thing worked really good in the summer, with

all the rolling brownouts that were always knocking out the A/C.

I got a shot of Effy as we went in the door, and the club rode in on a wave of primal flesh, a tribal gathering of sweaty jumping monkeys in half-torn business suits, all of us going crazy and eyeball wide until our faces were as pale and big as fish wallowing in the bottom of the ocean.

Maggie was smiling at me as we danced and our whole oven fight was completely behind us. I was glad about that, because after our fork-in-the-outlet fight, she acted like it was my fault for a week, even after she said she forgave me. But now, in the dance throb of Wicky, I was her white knight again, and I was glad to be with her, even if it meant dragging Nora along.

All the way up the stairs, I'd tried to not stare at Nora's zit-pocked skin or make fun of her swollen-up face but she knew what I was thinking because she kept giving me dirty looks whenever I warned her to step around places where the stairway was crumbling. Talk about stupid, though. She's about as sharp as a marble. I won't drink or swim in any of the water around here. It comes from working with sewage all the time. You know way too much about everything that goes in and out of the system. People like Nora put a Kali-Mary pendant between their tits or stick a Super Clean smiley to their ass cheek and hope for the best. I drink bottled water and only shower with a filter head. And sometimes I still get creeped out. No pus rashes, though.

The kettle drums throbbed inside my eyeballs. Across the club, Nora was dancing with Wu and now that my Effy was kicking into overdrive, I could see her positive qualities: she danced fast and furious ... her hair was long and black ... her zits were the size of breasts.

They looked succulent.

I sidled up to her and tried to apologize for not appreciating her before, but between the noise and my slobbering on her skin, I guess I failed to communicate effectively. She ran away before I could make it up to her and I ended up bouncing alone in Wicky's kettle drum womb while the crowds rode in and out around me and the Effy built up in ocean throbs that ran from my eyeballs to my crotch and back again, bouncing me higher and higher and higher....

A girl in torn knee socks and a nun's habit was mewling in the bathroom when Maggie found us and pulled us apart and took me on the floor with people walking around us and trying to use the stainless steel

piss troughs, but then Max grabbed me and I couldn't tell if we'd been doing it on the bar and if that was the problem or if I was just taking a leak in the wrong place but Max kept complaining about bubbles in his gin and a riot a riot a RIOT that he was going to have on his hands if these Effy freaks didn't get their liquor and he shoved me down under the bar where tubes come out of vats of gin and tonic and it was like floating inside the guts of an octopus with the waves of the kettle drums booming away above me.

I wanted to sleep down there, maybe hunt for the nun's red panties except that Max kept coming back to me with more Effy and saying we had to find the problem, the bubbly problem the bubbly problem, take some of this it will clear your damn head, find where the bubbles come from, where they fill the gin. No no no! The tonic the tonic the tonic! No bubbles in the tonic. Find the tonic. Stop the RIOT, make it all okay before the gag-gas trucks come and shut us down and dammit what are you sniffing down under there?

Swimming under the bar.... Swimming long and low ... eyeballs wide ... prehistoric fishy amongst giant mossy root-laced eggs, buried under the mist of the swamp, down with the bar rags and the lost spoons and the sticky slime of bar sugar, and these huge dead silver eggs lying under the roots, growing moss and mildew but nothing else, no yolky tonic coming out of these suckers, been sucked dry, sucked full dry by too many thirsty dinosaurs and of course that's the problem. No tonic. None. None at all.

More eggs! More eggs! We need more eggs! More big silver tonic dispensing eggs need to rumble in on handtrucks and roll in on whitejacketed bow-tie bartender backs. More eggs need to take the prod from the long root green sucking tubes and then we can suck the tonic of their yolk out, and Max can keep on making g-and-t's and I'm a hero hey hey hey a hero a goddamn superstar because I know a lot about silver eggs and how to stick in the right tubes and isn't that why Maggie's always pissed at me because my tube is never ready to stick into her eggs, or maybe she's got no eggs to stick and we sure as hell aren't going to the doctor to find out she's got no eggs and no replacements either, not a single one coming in on a handtruck and isn't that why she's out in the crowd bouncing in a black corset with a guy licking her feet and giving me the finger?

And isn't that why we're going to have a RIOT now when I beat that trogwad's head in with this chunk of bar that I'm going to get Max to loan me ... except I'm too far underwater to beat up boot licker. And little smoking piles of Effy keep blooming on the floor, and we're all lapping them up because I'm a goddamn hero a hero a hero, the fixit man of all fixit men, and everyone bows and scrapes and passes me Effy because there isn't

going to be a RIOT and we won't get shut down with gag-gas, and we won't do the vomit crawl down the stairwells to the streets.

And then Max shoves me back onto the dance floor with more shots of Effy for Maggie, a big old tray of forgiveness, and forgiveness comes easy when we're all walking on the ceiling of the biggest oldest skyscraper in the sky.

* * * *

Blue kettle drums and eyeball nuns. Zits and dinner dates. Down the stairs and into the streets.

By the time we stumbled out of Wicky I was finally coming out of the Effy folds but Maggie was still flying, running her hands all over me, touching me, telling me what she was going to do to me when we got home. Nora and Wu were supposed to be with us, but somehow we'd gotten separated. Maggie wasn't interested in waiting around so we headed uptown, stumbling between the big old city towers, winding around sidewalk stink ads for Diabolo and Possession, and dodging fishdog stands with after-bar octopi on a stick.

The night was finally cool, in the sweet spot between end of midnight swelter and beginning of morning smother. There was a blanket of humidity, wet on us, and seductive after the club. Without rain or freezes, I barely had to watch for concrete rain at all.

Maggie ran her hands up and down my arm as we walked, occasionally leaning in close to kiss my cheek and nibble on my ear. "Max says you're amazing. You saved the day."

I shrugged. "It wasn't a big deal."

The whole bar thing was pretty hazy, bubbled-out by all the Effy I'd done. My skin was still singing from it. Mostly what I had was a warm glow right in my crotch and a stuttery view of the dark streets and the long rows of candles in the windows of the towers, but Maggie's hand felt good, and she looked good, and I had some plans of my own for when we got back to the apartment, so I knew I was coming down nice and slow, like falling into a warm featherbed full of helium and tongues.

"Anyone could have figured out his tonic was empty, if we hadn't all been so damn high." I stopped in front of a bank of autovendors. Three of them were sold out, and one was broken open, but there were still a couple

drinks in the last one. I dropped my money in and chose a bottle of Blue Vitality for her, and a Sweatshine for me. It was a pleasant surprise when the machine kicked out the bottles.

“Wow!” Maggie beamed at me.

I grinned and fished out her bottle. “Lucky night, I guess: first the bar, now this.”

“I don’t think the bar thing was luck. I wouldn’t have thought of it.” She downed her Blue Vitality in two long swallows, and giggled. “And you did it when your eyes were as big as a fish. You were doing handstands on the bar.”

I didn’t remember that. Bar sugar and red lace bras, I remembered. But not handstands. “I don’t see how Max keeps that place going when he can’t even remember to restock.”

Maggie rubbed up against me. “Wicky’s a lot better than most clubs. And anyway, that’s why he’s got you. A real live hero.” She giggled again. “I’m glad we didn’t have to fight our way out of another riot. I hate that.”

In an alley, some trops were making it. Clustered bodies, hermaphroditic, climbing on each other and humping, their mouths open, smiling and panting. I glanced at them and kept going, but Maggie grabbed my arm and tugged me back.

The trops were really going at it, all in a flounder, three of them piled, their skins gleaming with sweat slick and saliva. They looked back at us with yellow eyes and not a bit of shame. They just smiled and got into a heavy groaning rhythm.

“I can’t believe how much they *do* it,” Maggie whispered. She gripped my arm, pressing against me. “They’re like dogs.”

“That’s about how smart they are.”

They changed positions, one crouching as though Maggie’s words had inspired them. The others piled on top of him ... or her. Maggie’s hand slid to the front of my pants, fumbled with the zipper and reached inside. “They’re so.... Oh, God.” She pulled me close and started working on my belt, almost tearing at it.

“What the hell?” I tried to push her off, but she was all over me, her

hands reaching inside my pants, touching me, making me hard. The Effy was still working, that was for sure.

“Let’s do it, too. Here. I want you.”

“Are you crazy?”

“They don’t care. Come on. Maybe this time it’ll take. Knock me up.” She touched me, her eyes widening at my sudden size. “You’re never like this.” She touched me again. “Oh God. Please.” She pressed herself against me, looking over at the trogs. “Like that. Just like that.” She pulled off her shimmersilk blouse, exposing her black corset and the pale skin of her breasts.

I stared at her skin and curves. That beautiful body she’d teased me with all night long. Suddenly I didn’t care about the trogs or the few people walking by on the street. We both yanked at my belt. My pants fell down around my ankles. We slammed up against the alley wall, pressing against old concrete and staring into each other’s eyes and then she pulled me into her and her lips were on my ear, biting and panting and whispering as we moved against each other.

The trogs just grinned and grinned and watched us with their big yellow eyes as we all shared the alley, and all watched each other.

* * * *

At five in the morning, Chee called again, his voice coming straight into my head through my earbug. In all the excitement and Effy, I’d forgotten to take it out. Pump Six was down again. “You said I was supposed to call you,” he whined.

I groaned and dragged myself out of bed. “Yeah. Yeah. I did. Don’t worry about it. You did good. I’ll be there.”

Maggie rolled over. “Where you going?”

I pulled on my pants and gave her a quick kiss. “Got to go save the world.”

“They work you too hard. I don’t think you should go.”

“And let Chee sort it out? You’ve got to be kidding. We’d be up to our necks in sludge by dinner time.”

“My hero.” She smiled sleepily. “See if you can find me some donuts when you come back. I feel pregnant.”

She looked so happy and warm and fuzzy I almost climbed back into bed with her, but I fought off the urge and just gave her another kiss. “Will do.”

Outside, light was just starting to break in the sky, a slow yellowing of the smog. The streets were almost silent at the early hour. It was hard not to be bitter about being up at this ungodly hungover time, but it was better than having to deal with the sewage backup if Chee hadn't called. I headed downtown and bought a bagel from a girly-faced guy who didn't know how to make change.

The bagel was wrapped in some kind of plastic film that dissolved when I put it in my mouth. It wasn't bad, but it ticked me off that bagel boy got confused with the change and needed me to go into his cash pouch and count out my own money.

It seems like I always end up bailing everyone out. Even dumb bagel guys. Maggie says I'm as compulsive as Chee. She would have just stood there and waited until bagel boy sorted it out, even if it took all day. But I have a damn hard time watching some trogwad drop dollars all over the sidewalk. Sometimes it's just easier to climb out of the oatmeal and do things yourself.

* * * *

Chee was waiting for me when I got in, practically bouncing up and down. Five pumps down, now.

“It started with just one when I called you, but now there's five. They keep shutting off.”

I went into the control room. The troubleshooting database was still down so I grabbed the hardcopy manuals again. Weird how the pumps were all going off-line like that. The control room, normally alive with the hum of the machines, was quieter with half of them down. Around the city, sewage lines were backing up as we failed to cycle waste into the treatment facilities and pump the treated water out into the river.

I thought about Nora with her rash, thanks to swimming in that gunk. It could really make you nervous. Looks clean, makes you rash. And we're at

the bottom of the river. It's not just our crap in it. Everyone upstream, too. Our treatment plants pump water up from underground or pipe it in and treat it from lakes upstate. At least that's the theory. I don't really buy it; I've seen the amount of water we move through here and there's no way it's all coming from the lakes. In reality, we've got twenty-million-odd people all sucking water that we don't know where it's coming from or what's in it. Like I said, I drink bottled water even if I have to hike all over the city to find it. Or soda water. Or ... tonic, even.

I closed my eyes, trying to piece the evening back together. All those empty canisters of tonic under the bar. Travis Alvarez saves the world while flying to the moon on Effy, and two rounds of sex yesterday.

Hell, yeah.

Chee and I brought the PressureDynes up one by one. All of them came back online except Pump Six. It was stubborn. We reprimed it. Fired. Reprimed. Nothing.

Suze came down to backseat drive, dragging Zoo, her secretary, behind her. Suze was completely strung out. Her blouse was half-tucked in, and she had big old fishy Effy eyes that were almost as red as the flashers on the console. But her fishy eyes narrowed when she saw all the flashers. "How come all these pumps went down? It's your job to keep them working."

I just looked at her. Zoned out of her mind at six a.m., romping around with her secretary girlfriend while she tried to crack the whip on the rest of us. Now that's leadership. Suddenly I thought that maybe I needed to get a different job. Or needed to start licking big piles of Effy before I came to work. Anything to take the edge off Suze.

"If you want me to fix it, I'll need you to clear out so I can concentrate."

Suze looked at me like she was chewing on a lemon. "You better get it fixed." She poked my chest with a thick finger. "If you don't, I'm making Chee your boss." She glanced at Zoo. "It's your turn on the couch. Come on." They trooped off.

Chee watched them go. He started picking at his head. "They never do any work," he said.

Another flasher went amber on the console. I flipped through the

manual, hunting for a reason. “Who does? A job like this, where nobody gets fired?”

“Yeah, but there ought to be a way to get rid of her, at least. She moved all her home furniture into the office, the other day. She never goes home now. Says she likes the A/C here.”

“You shouldn’t complain. You’re the guy who was throwing t.p. around yesterday.”

He looked at me, puzzled. “So?”

I shrugged. “Never mind. Don’t worry about Suze. We’re the bottom of the pile, Chee. Get used to it. Let’s try the reboot again.”

It didn’t work.

I went back to the manual. Sludge was probably coming up a hundred thousand toilets in the city by now. Weird how all the pumps shut down like that: one, two, three, four. I closed my eyes, thinking. Something about my Effy spree kept tickling the back of my head. Effy flashbacks, for sure. But they kept coming: big old eggs, big old silver eggs, all of them sucked dry by egg-slurping dinosaurs. Wow. That was some kind of weird spree. Nuns and stainless steel eggs. The urinals and Maggie ... I blinked. Everything clicked. Pieces of the puzzle coming together. Cosmic Effy convergence: Emptied silver eggs. Max forgetting to restock his bar.

I looked up at Chee, then down at the manuals, then back up at Chee. “How long have we been running these pumps?”

“What do you mean?”

“When did they get installed?”

Chee stared at the ceiling, picked his head thoughtfully. “Hell if I know. Before I came on, that’s for sure.”

“Me too. I’ve been here nine years. Have we got a computer that would tell us that? A receipt? Something?” I flipped to the front of the manual in my hands. “PressureDyne: Hi-Capacity, Self-Purging, Multi-Platform Pumping Engine. Model 13-44474-888.” I frowned. “This manual was printed in 2020.”

Chee whistled and leaned over to finger the plasticized pages.

“That’s pretty damn old.”

“Built to last, right? People built things to last, back then.”

“More than a hundred years?” He shrugged. “I had a car like that, once. Real solid. Engine hardly had any rust on it at all. And it had both headlights. But too damn old.” He picked something out of his scalp and examined it for a second before flicking it onto the floor. “No one works on cars anymore. I can’t remember the last time I saw a taxi running.”

I looked at him, trying to decide if I wanted to say anything about flicking scalp on the floor, then just gave it up. I flipped through the manual some more until I found the part I wanted: “Individual Reporting Modules: Remote Access, Connectivity Features, and Data Collection.” Following the manual’s instructions, I opened a new set of diagnostic windows that bypassed the PressureDynes’ generalized reports for pump station managers and instead connected directly with the pumps’ raw log data. What I got was: “Host source data not found.”

Big surprise.

The rest of the error text advised me to check the remote reporting module extension connectors, whatever those were. I closed the manual and tucked it under my arm. “Come on. I think I know what’s wrong.” I led Chee out of the control room and down into the bowels of the tunnels and plant system. The elevator was busted so we had to take the access stairs.

As we went deeper and deeper, darkness closed in. Grit and dust were everywhere. Rats skittered away from us. Isolated LEDs kept the stairwell visible, but barely. Dust and shadows and moving rats were all you could see in the dim amber. Eventually even the LEDs gave out. Chee found an emergency lantern in a wall socket, blanketed with gray fluffy dust, but it still had a charge. My asthma started to tickle and close in, sitting on my chest from all the crud in the air. I took a hit off my inhaler, and we kept going down. Finally, we hit bottom.

Light from Chee’s lantern wavered and disappeared in the cavern’s darkness. The metal of the PressureDynes glinted dimly. Chee sneezed. The motion sent his lantern rocking. Shadows shifted crazily until he used a hand to stop it. “You can’t see shit down here,” he muttered.

“Shut up. I’m thinking.”

“I’ve never been down here.”

“I came down, once. When I first came on. When Mercati was still alive.”

“No wonder you act like him. He trained you?”

“Sure.” I hunted around for the emergency lighting.

Mercati had shown the switches to me when he brought me down, nearly a decade before, and told me about the pumps. He'd been old then, but still working, and I liked the guy. He had a way of paying attention to things. Focused. Not like most people who can barely say hello to you before they start looking at their watch, or planning their party schedule, or complaining about their skin rashes. He used to say my teachers didn't know shit about algebra and that I should have stayed in school. Even knowing that he was just comparing me to Suze, I thought it was a pretty nice thing for him to say.

No one knew the pump systems as well as he did, so even after he got sick and I took over his job, I'd still sneak out to the hospital to ask him questions. He was my secret weapon until the cancer finally took out his guts.

I found the emergency lighting and pulled the switches. Fluorescent lights flickered, and came alive, buzzing. Some bulbs didn't come on, but there were enough.

Chee gasped. “They're huge.”

A cathedral of engineering. Overhead, pipes arched through cavern dimness, shimmering under the muted light of the fluorescents, an interconnecting web of iron and shadows that centered in complex rosettes around the ranked loom of the pumps.

They towered over us, gleaming dully, three stories tall, steel dinosaurs. Dust mantled them. Rust blossoms patterned their hides in complex overlays that made them look like they'd been draped in oriental rugs. Pentagonal bolts as big as my hands studded their armored plating and stitched together the vast sectioned pipes that spanned the darkness and shot down black tunnels in every compass direction, reaching for every neighborhood in the city. Moisture jewels gleamed and dripped from ancient joints. The pumps thrummed on. Perfectly designed. Forgotten by everyone in the city above. Beasts working without complaint, loyal despite abandonment.

Except that one of them had now gone silent.

I stifled an urge to get down on my knees and apologize for neglecting them, for betraying these loyal machines that had run for more than a century.

I went over to Pump Six's control panel, and stroked the dinosaur's vast belly where it loomed over me. The control panel was all covered with dust, but it glowed when I ran my hand over it. Amber signals and lime text glowing authoritatively, telling me just what was wrong, telling me and telling me, and never complaining that I hadn't been listening.

Raw data had stopped piping up to the control room at some point, and had instead sat in the dark, waiting for someone to come down and notice it. And the raw data was the answer to all my questions. At the top of the list: Model 13-44474-888, Requires Scheduled Maintenance. 946,080,000 cycles completed.

I ran through the pump diagnostics:

Valve Ring Part# 12-33939, Scheduled for Replacement.

Piston Parts# 232-2, 222-5, 222-6, 222-4-1, Scheduled for Replacement.

Displacement Catch Reservoir, Part# 37-37-375-77, Damaged, Replace.

Emergency Release Trigger Bearing, Part# 810-9, Damaged, Replace.

Valve Kit, Part# 437834-13, Damaged, Replace.

Master Drive Regulator, Part# 39-23-9834959-5, Damaged, Replace.

Priority Maintenance:

Compression Sensors, Part# 49-4, Part# 7777-302, Part# 403-74698

Primary Train, Part# 010303-0

Gurney Belt Valve, Part# 9-0-2...

The list went on. I keyed into the maintenance history. The list opened up, running well into Mercati's tenure and even before, dozens of maintenance triggers and scheduled work requests, all of them blinking down here in the darkness, and ignored. Twenty-five years of neglect.

"Hey!" Chee called. "Check this out! They left magazines down here!"

I glanced over. He'd found a pile of trash someone had stuffed under one of the pumps. He was down on his hands and knees, reaching underneath, rooting things out: magazines, what looked like old food wrappers. I started to tell him to quit messing with stuff, but then I let it go. At least he wasn't breaking anything. I rubbed my eyes and went back to the pump diagnostics.

For the six years I'd been in charge, there were over a dozen errors displayed, but the PressureDynes had just kept going, chugging away as bits and pieces of them rattled away, and now, suddenly this one had given way completely, coming apart at the seams, loyally chugging until it just couldn't go on anymore and the maintenance backlog finally took the sucker down. I went over and started looking at the logs for the nine other pumps.

Every one of them was riddled with neglect: warning dumps, data logs full of error corrections, alarm triggers.

I went back to Pump Six and looked at its logs again. The men who'd built the machines had built them to last, but enough tiny little knives can still kill a big old dinosaur, and this one was beyond dead.

"We'll need to call PressureDyne," I said. "This thing is going to need more help than we can give it."

Chee looked up from a found magazine with a bright yellow car on the cover. "Do they even exist anymore?"

"They better." I grabbed the manual and looked up their customer support number.

It wasn't even in the same format as our numbers. Not a single letter of the alphabet in the whole damn thing.

* * * *

Not only did PressureDyne not exist, they'd gone bankrupt more than

forty years ago, victims of their overly well-designed pump products. They'd killed their own market. The only bright spot was that their technology had slouched into the public domain, and the net was up for once, so I could download schematics of the PressureDynes. There was a ton of information, except I didn't know anyone who could understand any of it. I sure couldn't.

I leaned back in my desk chair, staring at all that information I couldn't use. Like looking at Egyptian hieroglyphs. Something was there, but it sure beat me what I was supposed to do with it. I'd shifted the flows for Pump Six over to the rest of the pumps, and they were handling the new load, but it made me nervous thinking about all those maintenance warnings glowing down there in the dark: Mercury Extender Seal, Part# 5974-30, Damaged, Replace ... whatever the hell that meant. I downloaded everything about the PressureDynes onto my phone bug, not sure who I'd take it to, but damn sure no one here was going to be able to help.

"What are you doing with that?"

I jumped and looked around. Suze had snuck up on me.

I shrugged. "Dunno. See if I can find someone to help, I guess."

"That's proprietary. You can't take those schematics out of here. Wipe it."

"You're crazy. It's public domain." I got up and popped my phone bug back into my ear. She made a swipe at it, but I dodged and headed for the doors.

She chased after me, a mean mountain of muscle. "I could fire you, you know!"

"Not if I quit first." I yanked open the control room door and ducked out.

"Hey! Get back here! I'm your boss." Her voice followed me down the corridor, getting fainter. "I'm in charge here, dammit. I can fire you! It's in the manual! I found it! You're not the only one who can read! I found it! I can fire you! I will!" Like a little kid, having a fit. She was still yelling when the control room doors finally shut her off.

* * * *

Outside, in the sunshine, I ended up wandering in the park, watching the trops, and wondering what I did to piss off God that he stuck me with a nutjob like Suze. I thought about calling Maggie to meet me, but I didn't feel like telling her about work—half the time when I tried to explain stuff to her, she just came up with bad ideas to fix it, or didn't think the things I was talking about were such a big deal—and if I called up halfway through the day she'd definitely wonder why I'd left so early, and what was going on, and then when I didn't take her advice about Suze she'd just get annoyed.

I kept passing trops humping away and smiling. They waved at me to come over and play. I just waved back. One of them must have been a real girl, because she was distendedly obviously pregnant, bouncing away with a couple of her friends, and I was glad again that Maggie wasn't with me. She had enough pregnancy hang-ups without seeing the trops breeding.

I wouldn't have minded throwing Suze to the trops, though. She was about as dumb as one. Christ, I was surrounded by dummies. I needed a new job. Someplace that attracted better talent than sewage work did. I wondered how serious Suze had been about trying to fire me. If there really was something in the manuals that we'd all missed about hiring and firing. And then I wondered how serious I was about quitting. I sure hated Suze. But how did you get a better job when you hadn't finished high school, let alone college?

I stopped short. Sudden enlightenment: College. Columbia. They could help. They'd have some sharpie who could understand all the PressureDyne information. An engineering department, or something. They were even dependent on Pump Six. Talk about leverage.

I headed uptown on the subway with a whole pack of snarly pissed-off commuters, everyone scowling at each other and acting like you were stealing their territory if you sat down next to them. I ended up hanging from a strap and watching two old guys hiss at each other across the car until we broke down at 86th and we all ended up walking.

I kept passing clumps of trops, lounging around on the sidewalks. A few of the really smart ones were panhandling, but most of them were just humping away. I would have been annoyed at having to shove through the orgy, if I wasn't actually feeling jealous. I kept wondering why the hell was I out here in the sweaty summer smog taking hits off my inhaler while Suze and Chee and Zoo were all hanging around in air-con comfort and basically doing nothing.

What was wrong with me? Why was I the one who always tried to fix

things? Mercati had been like that, always taking stuff on and then just getting worked harder and harder until the cancer ate him from the inside out. He was working so hard at the end I think he might have been glad to go, just for the rest.

Maggie always said they worked me too hard, and as I dragged my ass up Broadway, I started thinking she was right. Then again, if I left things to Chee and Suze, I'd be swimming up the Broadway River in a stew of crap and chemicals instead of walking up a street. Maggie would have said that was someone else's problem, but she just thought so because when she flushed the toilet, it still worked. At the end of the day, it seemed like some people just got stuck dealing with the shit, and some people figured out how to have a good time.

A half-hour later, covered with sweat and street grime and holding a half-empty squirt bottle of rehydrating Sweatshine that I'd stolen from an unwary trog, I rolled through Columbia's gates and into the main quad, where I immediately ran into problems.

I kept following signs for the engineering building, but they kept sending me around in circles. I would have asked for directions—I'm not one of those guys who can't—but it's pretty damn embarrassing when you can't even follow a simple sign, so I held off.

And really, who was I going to ask? There were lots of kids out in the quad, all sprawled out and wearing basically nothing and looking like they were starting a trog colony of their own, but I didn't feel like talking to them. I'm not a prude, but you've got to draw the line somewhere.

I ended up wandering around lost, going from one building to the next, stumbling through a jumble of big old Roman- and Ben Franklin-style buildings: lots of columns and brick and patchy green quads—everything looking like it was about to start raining concrete any second—trying to figure out why I couldn't understand any of the signs.

Finally, I sucked it up and asked a couple half-naked kids for directions.

The thing that ticks me off about academic types is that they always act like they're smarter than you. Rich-kid, free-ride, prep-school ones are the worst. I kept asking the best and brightest for directions, trying to get them to take me to the engineering department, or the engineering building, or whatever the hell it was, and they all just looked me up and down and gibbered at me like monkeys, or else laughed through their Effy highs and

kept on going. A couple of them gave me a shrug and a “dunno,” but that was the best I got.

I gave up on directions, and just kept roaming. I don't know how long I wandered. Eventually I found a big old building off one of the quads, a big square thing with pillars like the Parthenon. A few kids were sprawled out on the steps, soaking up the sun, but it was one of the quietest parts of the campus I'd seen.

The first set of doors I tried was chained, and so was the second, but then I found a set where the chain had been left undone, two heavy lengths of it, dangling with an old open padlock on the end. The kids on the steps were ignoring me, so I yanked open the doors.

Inside, everything was silence and dust. Big old chandeliers hung down from the ceiling, sparkling with orangey light that filtered in through the dirt on the windows. The light made it feel like it was the end of day with the sun starting to set, even though it was only a little past noon. A heavy blanket of dust covered everything; floors and reading tables and chairs and computers all had a thick gray film over them.

“Hello?”

No one answered. My voice echoed and died, like the building had just swallowed up the sound. I started wandering, picking doorways at random: reading rooms, study carrels, more dead computers, but most of all, books. Aisles and aisles with racks full of them. Room after room stuffed with books, all of them covered with thick layers of dust.

A library. A whole damn library in the middle of a university, and not a single person in it. There were tracks on the floor, and a litter of Effy packets, condom wrappers, and liquor bottles where people had come and gone at some point, but even the trash had its own fine layer of dust.

In some rooms, all the books had been yanked off the shelves like a tornado had ripped through. In one, someone had made a bonfire out of them. They lay in a huge heap, completely torched, a pile of ash and pages and backings, a jumble of black ash fossils that crumbled to nothing when I crouched down and touched them. I stood quickly, wiping my hands on my pants. It was like fingering someone's bones.

I kept wandering, running my fingers along shelves and watching the dust cascade like miniature falls of concrete rain. I pulled down a book at random. More dust poured off and puffed up in my face. I coughed. My

chest seized and I took a hit off my inhaler. In the dimness, I could barely make out the title: "Post-Liberation America. A Modern Perspective." When I opened it, its spine cracked.

"What are you doing here?"

I jumped back and dropped the book. Dust puffed around me. An old lady, hunched and witchy, was standing at the end of the aisle. She limped forward. Her voice was sharp as she repeated herself. "What are you doing here?"

"I got lost. I'm trying to find the engineering department."

She was an ugly old dame: Liver spots and lines all over her face. Her skin hung off her bones in loose flaps. She looked a thousand years old, and not in a smart wise way, just in a wrecked moth-eaten way. She had something flat and silvery in her hand. A pistol.

I took another step back.

She raised the gun. "Not that way. Out the way you came." She motioned with the pistol. "Off you go."

I hesitated.

She smiled slightly, showing stumps of missing teeth. "I won't shoot if you don't give me a reason." She waved the gun again. "Go on. You aren't supposed to be here." She herded me back through the library to the main doors with a brisk authority. She pulled them open and waved her pistol at me. "Go on. Get."

"Wait. Please. Can't you at least tell me where the engineering department is?"

"Closed down years ago. Now get out."

"There's got to be one!"

"Not anymore. Go on. Get." She brandished the pistol again. "Get."

I held onto the door. "But you must know someone who can help me." I was talking fast, trying to get all my words out before she used the gun. "I work on the city's sewage pumps. They're breaking, and I don't know how to fix them. I need someone who has engineering experience."

She was shaking her head and starting to wave the gun. I tried again. "Please! You've got to help. No one will talk to me, and you're going to be swimming in crap if I don't find help. Pump Six serves the university and *I don't know how to fix it!*"

She paused. She cocked her head first one way, then the other. "Go on."

I briefly outlined the problems with the PressureDynes. When I finished, she shook her head and turned away. "You've wasted your time. We haven't had an engineering department in over twenty years." She went over to a reading table and took a couple swipes at its dust. Pulled out a chair and did the same with it. She sat, placing her pistol on the table, and motioned me to join her.

Warily, I brushed off my own seat. She laughed at the way my eyes kept going to her pistol. She picked it up and tucked it into a pocket of her moth-eaten sweater. "Don't worry. I won't shoot you now. I just keep it around in case the kids get belligerent. They don't very often, anymore, but you never know...." Her voice trailed off, as she looked out at the quad.

"How can you not have an engineering department?"

Her eyes swung back to me. "Same reason I closed the library." She laughed. "We can't have the students running around in here, can we?" She considered me for a moment, thoughtful. "I'm surprised you got in. I'm must be getting old, forgetting to lock up like that."

"You always lock it? Aren't you librarians—"

"I'm not a librarian," she interrupted. "We haven't had a librarian since Herman Hsu died." She laughed. "I'm just an old faculty wife. My husband taught organic chemistry before he died."

"But you're the one who put the chains on the doors?"

"There wasn't anyone else to do it. I just saw the students partying in here and realized something had to be done before they burned the damn place down." She drummed her fingers on the table, raising little dust puffs with her boney digits as she considered me. Finally she said, "If I gave you the library keys, could you learn the things you need to know? About these pumps? Learn how they work? Fix them, maybe?"

"I doubt it. That's why I came here." I pulled out my earbug. "I've got the schematics right here. I just need someone to go over them for me."

"There's no one here who can help you." She smiled tightly. "My degree was in social psychology, not engineering. And really, there's no one else. Unless you count them." She waved at the students beyond the windows, humping in the quad. "Do you think that any of them could read your schematics?"

Through the smudged glass doors I could see the kids on the library steps, stripped down completely. They were humping away, grinning and having a good time. One of the girls saw me through the glass and waved at me to join her. When I shook my head, she shrugged and went back to her humping.

The old lady studied me like a vulture. "See what I mean?"

The girl got into her rhythm. She grinned at me watching, and motioned again for me to come out and play. All she needed were some big yellow eyes, and she would have made a perfect trog.

I closed my eyes and opened them again. Nothing changed. The girl was still there with all of her little play friends. All of them romping around and having a good time.

"The best and the brightest," the old lady murmured.

In the middle of the quad, more of the students were stripping down, none of them caring that they were doing it in the middle of broad daylight, none of them worried about who was watching, or what anyone might think. A couple hundred kids, and not a single one of them had a book, or a notebook, or pens, or paper, or a computer with them.

The old lady laughed. "Don't look so surprised. You can't say someone of your caliber never noticed." She paused, waiting, then peered at me, incredulous. "The trogs? The concrete rain? The reproductive disorders? You never wondered about any of it?" She shook her head. "You're stupider than I guessed."

"But..." I cleared my throat. "How could it ... I mean..." I trailed off.

"Chemistry was my husband's field." She squinted at the kids humping on the steps and tangled out in the grass, then shook her head and shrugged. "There are plenty of books on the topic. For a while there

were even magazine stories about it. 'Why breast might not be best.' Stuff like that." She waved a hand impatiently. "Rohit and I never really thought about any of it until his students started seeming stupider every year." She cackled briefly. "And then he tested them, and he was right."

"We can't all be turning into trops." I held up my bottle of Sweatshine. "How could I buy this bottle, or my earbug, or bacon, or anything? Someone has to be making these things."

"You found bacon? Where?" She leaned forward, interested.

"My wife did. Last packet."

She settled back with a sigh. "It doesn't matter. I couldn't chew it anyway." She studied my Sweatshine bottle. "Who knows? Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not so bad. But this is the longest conversation that I've had since Rohit died; most people just don't seem to be able to pay attention to things like they used to." She eyed me. "Maybe your Sweatshine bottle just means there's a factory somewhere that's as good as your sewage pumps used to be. And as long as nothing too complex goes wrong, we all get to keep drinking it."

"It's not that bad."

"Maybe not." She shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me, anymore. I'll kick off pretty soon. After that, it's your problem."

* * * *

It was night by the time I came out of the university. I had a bag full of books, and no one to know that I'd taken them. The old lady hadn't cared if I checked them out or not, just waved at me to take as many as I liked, and then gave me the keys and told me to lock up when I left.

All of the books were thick with equations and diagrams. I'd picked through them one after another, reading each for a while, before giving up and starting on another. They were all pretty much gibberish. It was like trying to read before you knew your ABCs. Mercati had been right. I should have stayed in school. I probably wouldn't have done any worse than the Columbia kids.

Out on the street, half the buildings were dark. Some kind of brownout that ran all the way down Broadway. One side of the street had electricity, cheerful and bright. The other side had candles glimmering in all the

apartment windows, ghost lights flickering in a pretty ambiance.

A crash of concrete rain echoed from a couple blocks away. I couldn't help shivering. Everything had turned creepy. It felt like the old lady was leaning over my shoulder and pointing out broken things everywhere. Empty autovendors. Cars that hadn't moved in years. Cracks in the sidewalk. Piss in the gutters.

What was normal supposed to look like?

I forced myself to look at good things. People were still out and about, walking to their dance clubs, going out to eat, wandering uptown or downtown to see their parents. Kids were on skateboards rolling past and trolleys were humping in the alleys. A couple of vendor boxes were full of cellophane bagels, along with a big row of Sweatshine bottles all glowing green under their lights, still all stocked up and ready for sale. Lots of things were still working. Wicky was still a great club, even if Max needed a little help remembering to restock. And Miku and Gabe had their new baby, even if it took them three years to get it. I couldn't let myself wonder if that baby was going to turn out like the college kids in the quad. Not everything was broken.

As if to prove it, the subway ran all the way to my stop for a change. Somewhere on the line, they must have had a couple guys like me, people who could still read a schematic and remember how to show up for work and not throw toilet paper around the control rooms. I wondered who they were. And then I wondered if they ever noticed how hard it was to get anything done.

When I got home, Maggie was already in bed. I gave her a kiss and she woke up a little. She pushed her hair away from her face. "I left out a hotpack burrito for you. The stove's still broke."

"Sorry. I forgot. I'll fix it now."

"No worry." She turned away from me and pulled the sheets up around her neck. For a minute, I thought she'd dozed off, but then she said, "Trav?"

"Yeah?"

"I got my period."

I sat down beside her and started massaging her back. "How you

doing with that?"

"S'okay. Maybe next time." She was already dropping back to sleep. "You just got to stay optimistic, right?"

"That's right, baby." I kept rubbing her back. "That's right."

When she was asleep, I went back to the kitchen. I found the hotpack burrito and shook it and tore it open, holding it with the tips of my fingers so I wouldn't burn myself. I took a bite, and decided the burritos were still working just fine. I dumped all the books onto the kitchen table and stared at them, trying to decide where to start.

Through the open kitchen windows, from the direction of the park, I heard another crash of concrete rain. I looked out toward the candleflicker darkness. Not far away, deep underground, nine pumps were chugging away; their little flashers winking in and out with errors, their maintenance logs scrolling repair requests, and all of them running a little harder now that Pump Six was down. But they were still running. The people who'd built them had done a good job. With luck, they'd keep running for a long time yet.

I chose a book at random and started reading.