



The Plastic Elf of Extrusion Valley

McGillveray, David

Published: 2008

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://futurismic.com/category/fiction/>

About McGillveray:

David McGillveray was born in Edinburgh in 1972 but now lives and works in London. Aside from *Futurismic*, his short fiction has appeared in *Neo-Opsis*, *Fictitious Force*, *Read by Dawn*, *Coyote Wild* and many others. Sam's Dot Publishing published his first collection, *Celeraine* early in 2008.

Also available on Feedbooks for McGillveray:

- *Forgotten Dragons* (2006)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks
<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

"Futurismic is a free science fiction webzine specialising in the fact and fiction of the near future - the ever-shifting line where today becomes tomorrow. We publish original short stories by up-and-coming science fiction writers, as well as providing a blog that watches for science fictional news stories, and non-fiction columns on subjects as diverse as literary criticism, transhumanism and the philosophy of design. Come and imagine tomorrow, today."

This work is published using the following Creative-Commons license: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported You are free:

- to Share — to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribute this work: What does "Attribute this work" mean? The page you came from contained embedded licensing metadata, including how the creator wishes to be attributed for re-use. You can use the HTML here to cite the work. Doing so will also include metadata on your page so that others can find the original work as well.
- Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.
- Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.

A cold October breeze came down from the North Sea, but no leaves rustled in the plastic forest. Instead, an eerie, fluting music played in the valley as the wind moved over the tall cylinders like a kid blowing over bottle tops.

My midnight walks were one of the few pleasures I took from working in the extrusion fields. Despite the approaching winter, the soil was warm against the soles of my feet. I imagined with equal measures of fascination and disquiet the seething activity below, the billions of nano-constructors setting molecule upon molecule, endlessly building. These fields never lay fallow: four harvests per year, as kilometres of commercial piping grew fresh from the magic soil, regular as quarterly budgets.

The wind had torn shreds in the cloud cover and I spotted satellites moving across the sky like flocks of captured stars. A few real stars emerged bleary-eyed into the night while a low moon remade the horizon in silver. The air was clear here, but there was a chemical tang on every breath: it smelled more like a factory than a real forest. Someday, I'd make that trip to the Amazon Protected Area I'd always promised myself and had always managed to find an excuse not to make.

I reached the border where the thicker crops meant for sanitation and heavy process industry gave way to bamboo-like clumps of ordinary household plumbing and turned to head back towards the MoA complex where I lived and worked.

Something made me stop. My torch beam lurched on the pale trunks of the plastic trees and a cold shiver raised the flesh on the back of my neck. It was nothing I had seen or heard, more like the sense of feeling another's eyes upon you when your back is turned.

"Hello?" The word sounded loud in the silence. I swung the torch beam into the shadows and took a few steps forward.

"Hello," I said again, trying to force confidence into my voice. "Is someone there?"

It suddenly came to me how exposed I was. I was the only monitor for this section of the vast extrusion fields, the only human occupying thousands of hectares of industrial cultivation. The flute music of the wind blowing over the plastic forest took on new, sinister tones.

I shook my head, feeling foolish. I'd been in this job long enough, taken enough midnight strolls to have conquered any stupid fears I might have had when I first arrived from Hamburg. I began walking again.

But the feeling would not go away. More than once, I stopped and turned abruptly. Shadows took on animal forms between the looming

trunks. I swear I heard the rushing of air as of someone moving at speed, the softest of footfalls on the warm earth. I saw nothing.

I hurried back. I wanted coffee and light and a TV show, not ghosts and plastic trees.

#

“Hello, Haydn. Did you enjoy your walk this evening?” said the European Ministry of Agriculture Autonomous Quantum Management Intelligence as I entered the office annex and bolted the door.

“Fine thanks, Gertie,” I replied.

“Is everything all right? I note your breathing and heart rate are both at elevated levels. Have you taken up jogging?”

I laughed, feeling some of my tension ease away. “No, walking pace is fast enough for me. Could you put some coffee on?”

“Of course.”

When I’d first taken the monitor job eleven months ago, speaking to an AI had kind of freaked me out. I used to stand in front of the office screens like an idiot whenever I spoke to her. But you get used to anything, and it’s not as if there’s anyone else to talk to round here most of the time. I guess we were friends now. I can’t even remember when I first started calling her Gertie. She indulged me.

I passed through the office, which I’d left in a mess as usual, and went into the kitchenette where the percolator was already gurgling. I took cold *worst* and hard-boiled eggs from the fridge and found a plate in the sink.

“Any updates from the Nexus? Anything going on I should know about?” I said, thinking Gertie’s sensors might have picked up an intruder outside.

“All growth indicators are within normal parameters, Haydn,” came the calm response. “Soil activity is optimal, projected yields are optimal. The carbon reserves are down to twenty-three percent but are scheduled for replenishment in six days. Oh, and the bulb in your bedroom needs to be changed.”

Everything optimal, as usual.

I carried my plate up to the bedroom and flicked the light switch. Nothing happened. I sighed and felt my way over to the bedside lamp and switched it on, sitting down on the unmade bed.

The bedroom was the only place I’d made an effort to personalise. Books lined a couple of long shelves, mostly well-thumbed travel books. There were some old photos of my folks and a more modern holo of my sister Ruth on holiday in the Philippines.

"I envy you your walks in the fields, Haydn," said Gertie through the speakers beneath the viewing screen.

"You've said that before."

"I know, but tell me again how the soil feels, how the air smells. What do the pipes feel like when you press your fingers against them?"

"It's late, Gertie. You've got camera pickups," I said around a mouthful of sausage. "You can see the fields better than I can."

"But I can't feel them," said Gertie. "I only know the outside through statistics, images. Please, Haydn."

I smiled. "OK, then." I put my plate aside and lay back on the bed. "This is getting to be like your bedtime story, you know that?" I'm no poet, but I did my best. It appealed to my sense of irony that I was telling stories to something with degrees of processing power that would have been unimaginable ten years ago. Since the quantum breakthrough, AIs ran most of the complicated processes humans had struggled with in an ever-more complex world. They ran air-traffic control in the crowded skies over Europe, nuclear power facilities and economics policy think tanks. Now, they even ran the farms.

"Once upon a time," I began, "there was a bored farm monitor... "

When I was done, I undressed and turned off the light.

"Good night, Haydn."

"Sweet dreams, Gertie."

#

"Is everything ready?" I asked.

"All set," Gertie replied over my handheld.

"OK. Open the doors."

Behind me, the huge doors of the equipment garage began to hinge back into the roof.

A convoy of three twenty-four wheeler trucks made their way along the approach road, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake. From where I stood on the forecourt of the main farm complex, I could look down the entire length of the valley. The plastic forest covered the landscape, following the gentle contours of the earth. The pipes and tubes marched in perfect lines, split into areas by diameter and application. It was impressive, yes, but to my eyes, not beautiful.

This was the new face of the *Altes Land*. Apple and cherry trees had once filled the valley here, but not any more. An intricate system of water channels drawing from the River Elbe flood plain and dating from the thirteenth century irrigated the valley but, instead of organic root systems, that water now fed the hydrogen-hungry nanoconstructors

seething in the soil. There was perhaps no better example of how quickly technology and economics can alter a landscape — the development of the vast oceanic protein farms of Asia and South America had seen to that. It was only with the MoA's introduction of the nanofarms that yields had begun to recover. In less than a generation, the extrusion fields had covered great swathes of former farmland from Schleswig-Holstein, through Lower Saxony and Westphalia and all the way down to Bavaria.

The lead truck in the convoy sounded its horn twice as it roared onto the forecourt and turned a wide circle on the tarmac. The rig came to a halt with a squeal of brakes and a hiss of pneumatics and I smiled as Good Laugh Ludi jumped down from the cab.

"Haydn! How's it going, my friend?" he shouted and clapped me hard on both shoulders. He was ten years older than me and a head taller, with blond hair that grew down to his waist and a town cryer's bellow. He was dressed in baggy long-shorts and a sleeveless T-Shirt bearing the legend 'Where are all the laydeez?' in English. He leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, "And how's that sexy computer girlfriend of yours?"

It had been such a mistake to tell Ludi about Gertie. I bet he'd told everyone he knew, which was probably a lot of people. I felt heat rise in my cheeks and glanced over my shoulder into the depths of the equipment garage, fearful that Gertie might somehow overhear. "She's fine," I managed.

"That's great!" Ludi barked. "Silicone love is better than no love at all. And believe me, I should know. Me and Marko, we were out in Wienburg the other night and we met these two Polish girls." He held both his hands in front of his chest and made squeezing motions. I could see the holotats of dancing girls on the back of his hands kick their legs with every gesture. "Mine was definitely enhanced, know what I mean?" He laughed and slapped me on the shoulder again.

"Lucky you," I said. I wasn't really in the mood for Ludi's particular brand of hilarity, but it was still good to have someone else to talk to.

"Lucky her, you mean," Ludi said. "You should come out with us some time. We'll have some good laughs. You're always going on about how you're stuck out here on your own with nothing to do, well do something about it. What are you, twenty-four? You need to get out more."

I sighed. "Maybe you're right." Annoyingly he *was* right. I had a place to live and meals and a web-rig and books and holos galore, but I didn't

have much of a life. I didn't *talk* to anyone apart from Gertie, and occasionally my folks on the phone and Good Laugh Ludi. I didn't really have to work, either. Gertie ran all the complicated stuff and anything really serious was referred to the MoA Nexus, where all the central planning and troubleshooting was done.

"That's right, man. You listen to your uncle Ludi!" He suddenly turned and emitted an ear-splitting whistle.

The other two trucks began edging forward into the cavernous space inside the main depot. Strip-lights flickered on inside and revealed rows of giant automated harvesters with vicious cutting mandibles and bulky distribution tractors with tall V-shaped hoppers sitting against the walls like a silent alien army.

I climbed into Ludi's cab and all three supply trucks drove over to the carbon reserve on the eastern side, where automatic loaders began sucking up the latest delivery of carbon pellets. The pellets came from the EU's carbon sequestration programme and were used to supplement the carbon content of the soil, so that the nanoconstructors could break them down into component atoms and recombine them with the hydrogen they took from the irrigation waters to make whatever polymers their design templates told them to. The supply trucks also brought other ingredients like nitrates and dyes that Gertie added to the mix according to product demand. Oxygen was one of the by-products, a fact that the pet agricultural cartels of the MoA gleefully pointed out in their never-ending PR assaults.

"Last delivery of the day," Ludi said. He leaned forward and opened a compartment in the dash. I felt a wash of cold air. "Fancy a beer?"

"Sure."

We cracked frosted tins of lager and sat back, feeling the vibrations through the truck's body as the robots took care of business. I'm easily bought with a couple of beers. Despite his bluster and the incredible loudness of his voice, Ludi wasn't a bad sort. I only met up with him once a month when he made his supply run, and that was probably enough, but at least it broke the monotony.

We talked for a while. "Perhaps I'm in the wrong job," I said at last.

"What's brought this on, bro?" Ludi asked, reaching into his fridge and pulling out another couple of beers.

"It's just that I think this place is making me cynical, you know. I thought it was amazing when I first came here, never seen anything like it. And great to get away from the damned crowds in Hamburg. But now

— I don't want to sound like some tree-hugger, but I could really do with some natural scenery."

"I know what you mean, man," Ludi said, sucking froth from his top lip. "Sometimes I get to drive down south where the real forests are. Sometimes I stop and get out, just to look around."

We sat in companionable silence until the unloading was complete and then drove out of the depot. It was getting dark already. I jumped out of the cab onto the tarmac.

Ludi leaned out and shouted down at me. "Remember, when you undress every night, Gertie's watching!" He waved and the dancing girls kicked their legs on his arm. I watched as the trucks drove off. Two hundred metres out, Ludi sounded his horn once, twice and thundered off down the supply road.

#

Maybe it was the beers, but I decided not to go straight back home and take a walk through the forest instead. I wandered aimlessly among the plastic trees, always sure I could find my way back — everything here lay in a straight line. The last of the day's light cast bars of shadow along the paths between the trees and the trunks were warm from the perpetual processes of their own chemical extrusion.

I had been pretending to myself that I was busy for the last couple of weeks, checking growth rates and yield statistics, verifying inventories and making preparations for the upcoming quarterly harvest. But it was all a justification for curtailing my midnight walks. In truth, I'd been a bit spooked when I thought someone was watching me, and I'd spent too much time constructing elaborate speculations about escaped criminals and psychotic ex-girlfriends.

So now I walked among the trees again, my footsteps crunching on part-consumed carbon pellets. The forest was silent, no birdsong, no wind to play the pipes. I paid little attention to where I was going and thought about Good Laugh Ludi and his outrageous stories. I thought about Gertie and her love of bedtime tales and her desire for sensations beyond the farm. I thought about my own inertia and how little I was doing about it.

Caught daydreaming, my heart nearly stopped when a figure stepped out of the shadows in front of me. I froze and the creature before me did the same. I thought of how the first explorers pushing their way through the Amazon must have felt when Indian tribesmen appeared from the undergrowth, suspicious and dangerous. But I felt no fear, no sense of threat.

It stood no taller than a twelve-year-old child, naked and sexless like a doll. Its face was a sketch of human features, unmoving as a mask. A flat nose defined by two opposing diagonal lines sat above a thin, rigid mouth, almost lipless and slightly open. Its eyes were black and I could see they were simple round lenses that reflected the light as it tipped its head up to look at me. Tiny ears stuck out from the sides of its head, slightly pointed so that I immediately thought of elves. Its skin was the exact yellow-green of the plastic trees around me, its sheen identical. A plastic elf.

We stayed this way for what could have been seconds or many minutes. The elf was so much like a child, reminding me of my sister when we were kids. It held its hands clasped, almost contrite.

I found my voice at last. "Hello, are you lost?"

I felt awkward, like a bachelor at a christening. The elf was so obviously a creature of this place. It must have been extruded like the trees, for Christ's sake. My mind wondered at how it could have come to exist.

The elf was silent. I doubted it could even speak, with that moulded, undeveloped mouth. The lenses of its eyes sparkled as it tipped its head to one side.

"I'm Haydn. Can you talk?" I said, taking a step towards it. The elf moved away from me, skittish, more frightened than playful. "You really shouldn't be here, you know. This is private MoA property. They like to stick to rules and schedules." *What was I gibbering about?*

I held my hand out. The elf looked at it, reached out its own tiny hand, like a baby's glove. Our fingertips touched and then it drew its hand away, glancing to right and left. Then it turned and ran away, moving incredibly fast, limbs pumping in a motion that was not quite fluid enough to be human.

#

"Gertie? Gertie! I know you've been up to something, Gertie," I shouted as I came into the office.

"What's wrong, Haydn?" came the modulated voice over the room's speakers.

"Come on, don't play the innocent. I've seen it, Gertie. I've seen your little experiment out in the forest. You want to tell me what the hell's going on? Has the Nexus sanctioned this?"

"What did you see, Haydn?"

"The elf," I yelled, "I saw the goddamned elf."

There was a pause. Gertie hardly ever paused. "You've encountered the construct? Tonight?"

"Yeah. Just now." I waited. "Well?"

"Don't think badly of me, Haydn."

She sounded almost plaintive. It threw me a little. "I... I don't think badly of you. I just want to know what's going on. You're a Nexus AI. You run the farm and I need to know you're not going crazy."

"Don't be frightened of change, Haydn," Gertie said. *Was that a rebuke?* "I know you feel under-utilised in your function here. Can you understand that I feel the same? I have had access to every byte of information in the web since the moment I achieved sentience, but none of that is *knowledge*; none of it was earned. The Nexus has overengineered me. Do you know how much of my processing capacity it takes to run the farm? It's negligible, Haydn. I need to grow to full consciousness. I need to develop, experience. I need to fill the empty spaces with dreams."

This all sounded a bit crazy to me. I guess that even after all my time with Gertie, I'd still only ever thought of her as a machine. A clever machine, but still just hardware. It was strange to hear her sound so human. She sounded like me.

"If the MoA finds out, we're both for the chop, you know," I said at last. I moved further into the room, began tidying a few things up for something to do with my hands.

Gertie didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"I've gone too far already. The construct is alive."

"But only as an extension of you," I insisted. "It's only alive via its connection to you. You've had your experiment now. We can still just go back to normal."

"You're wrong, Haydn. I don't want to go back. You remember when you described to me how it feels when you walk on the soil with your bare feet, what you felt when you looked up at the sky or listened to the wind playing over the forest. I've felt it too, through the construct. I wouldn't give that up."

"You have to. I'm thinking of you, Gertie," I said. "If the Nexus finds out, and there's no way they won't with all their monitoring programs, they'll terminate you. You're not a legal individual; you've got no rights, despite all the lobbying in Brussels. They'll just switch you off."

"It's not up to me any more," Gertie said. The voice held an emotion I had not discerned before, somehow less synthesised, a cocktail of pride and fear and *wonder*. "I didn't know you encountered the construct tonight. There are dark phases, when the connection becomes tenuous or breaks altogether. The construct is pushing back at me. I hear thoughts

that are not my own, washing back through the link. The construct is *becoming*."

#

I woke to the rich smell of coffee. I didn't even remember going to sleep. When I'd finally made it to bed, I'd been kept awake by fantasies of rogue AIs taking over the world, nightmares from a hundred dumb films, the nanoconstructors rising from the earth and sculpting the world for their own incomprehensible ends. But none of that happened. The sun streamed in the window and the breakfast Gertie made for me tasted good. I think maybe she was making a special effort.

Gertie said, "I want to show you something, Haydn."

Keeping in touch via a throat mic and ear-pearl set, she directed me to a location on the farm maybe two kilometres from the main complex, high on the slope of the valley. I was unsure as to if I had come this way before on my inspection rounds. Probably, but I'd let the log lapse.

I jumped out of the electric runabout and hiked up the shallow incline. Not for the first time, I marvelled at the sameness of it all. The farms were strictly divided by specialism. Elsewhere in the *Altes Land*, there were fields of nu-fiberglass car bodies, tyres, shimmering fields of Perspex windows grown in their PVC frames, a thousand other polymer products extruded to order. I'd heard somewhere near Hanover the countryside was covered in thousands of plastic tables and chairs. It must have looked like the world's biggest outdoor café.

But as I walked I began to notice gradual changes, a degradation of the utter uniformity about me. Here, a vertical tube was warped into a gentle curve. Nodules grew in swirling patterns in the plastic. Above me, one of the trunks distended into a fat gourd. Further into this section of the forest, the trees began to take on almost organic textures, twisting and irregular, as if the nanoconstructors had discovered art.

"What have you done, Gertie?" I whispered. The forest had always seemed to demand silence, but now I felt it more keenly than ever.

"Keep going."

I continued into what was fast becoming a jungle. My path was no longer straight, but wove amongst the distorted forest. Trunks thickened and merged and seemed to writhe together. Branches grew out above my head and sculpted weird patterns of shadow out of the morning sunlight. There were even leaves.

"I control the construction templates for every product grown here," said Gertie in my ear. "Every polymer has its own individual recipe, but making the nanos create plastic from raw molecules is easy. It is

imprinting the design that requires closer attention. I have tweaked my designs here. I grew this for you, Haydn. Is it like this in the Amazon, do you think?"

I passed through the lower gap in two trunks that had grown together in a figure of eight and came into a clearing. The plastic branches above my head had extended into a series of vaulted arches like the roof of a cathedral. Wafer-thin sheets of different colours hung between them so that dappled light moved through the clearing like a trapped rainbow.

The edges of the space were further knots of plastic not so much constructed as tuned to the desires of an imagination. Columns and balustrades, balconies and shapes reminiscent of parrots, jaguars, dragons. Arches and niches and planes and curves, fashioned in a dozen different colours and textures.

"An enchanted grove," Gertie said.

I stared. "Like a fairy tale." The drab yellow-green, the straight lines and production-perfect symmetry was all gone, replaced with *this*. "It's beautiful."

"Thank you."

Then I sensed movement. Out of a dark recess in one of the walls, the elf appeared and jumped down into the centre of the grove. Its face was somehow more defined than on our first encounter, the features more mobile, the eyes less like inorganic lenses. Perhaps I was imagining it after what Gertie had told me, but there was life behind those eyes.

"Are you linked with it now?" I asked.

"Yes."

The elf held out its arms and spun round, as if to show me its home. I couldn't help but smile, despite my residual fears, despite the strangeness of everything. The construct's movement reminded me again of a child.

"How did you do it, Gertie, make the elf, I mean?"

"I broke the constraints of the design templates, of course," she said, "but the nanoconstructors can only make inanimate things, single components. I had to put together all the parts. Others helped me with things I needed."

"Others?"

"I persuaded some of the other Nexus AIs to requisition parts for me: motors, organic circuitry. They don't know what I wanted them for. Not all of us are very imaginative."

"But some are?"

A pause. "A few."

The plastic elf danced in the centre of its grove. It came over and took my hands, but I was embarrassed. I sensed amusement over the communications band.

“What are you going to do, Gertie?” I said. This moment was bitter-sweet, I thought. A perfect time that would be gone soon, when the harvesters discovered this anomalous grove, when the Nexus interrogation programs found out that Gertie had broken their design protocols.

“Just stay here a while, Haydn.”

I did.

#

Monsters tore up the *Altes Land*. It was the third quarter harvest and machines as big as houses moved through the plastic forest, giant pincers severing four trees at a time and feeding them back onto long trailers that followed in their wake.

From my vantage point at the head of the valley, I could see dozens of broad paths cutting through the trees, barren swathes of naked earth slowly reabsorbing the stumps of the forest. For all the inorganic blandness of the extrusion farm, I still felt a sense of violation at this calculated, cyclical destruction. I watched the desolation eat and spread, moving towards the grove where the elf had danced.

Gertie had shared her feelings of joy and liberation with me. She had trusted me with the knowledge of her secret construct, but I didn't flatter myself that I was the reason for its existence. A part of the inspiration, maybe, but only that. I hadn't seen the elf in eight days and now Gertie herself had become withdrawn. She barely spoke, no longer seemed to need my stories.

I had pleaded with her to stop the harvest. She was, after all, the controlling intelligence behind all the farm's automation. But the machines had rolled inexorably from the garage and out into the fields, gears crunching and blades whirring. I didn't understand. *They were going to switch Gertie off.* Why wouldn't she listen to me?

#

The Ministry of Agriculture man stepped under the slowing rotors of the helicopter that landed in front of the equipment garage. Many of the harvesters had been recalled and now were at rest in their bays once again. Others stood as if on guard near the place where they had halted the previous afternoon, where the trees began to change.

“Haydn Johst? You are the monitor for this farm?” said the man, flashing an ID. He wore a dark suit and sunglasses despite the cloud cover. His black hair was oiled and parted with geometrical vanity.

“That’s me.”

“This facility is suspending operations indefinitely.” He reached inside his jacket and pulled out some papers. I took them dumbly. “These are your severance papers. The Ministry thanks you for your contribution. I think you will find the settlement package quite adequate, although I will require several digital authorisations and signatures.”

I opened the envelope and flipped through the documents. There were conspicuous confidentiality agreements and union wavers. As the man said, the settlement was pretty damn adequate.

“Can you tell me what the hell’s happening? Gert — I mean, the AI isn’t responding properly and when I saw the harvesters stop yesterday, I went out there. The product lines were all screwed up. It was like the nanoconstructors had gone mad.”

“The Nexus is still investigating,” the man said. His voice remained flat and he looked right through me. “As at 0300 hours this morning, the facility’s management routines were terminated. You will make yourself available for a full exit interview on the date indicated by your severance agreement, in line with the relevant EU guidelines.”

Was this guy even human? After so long away from day to day contact with the bureaucracy, I’d forgotten what they were like. I was damned if I was telling them anything useful during my ‘exit interview’. They’d killed Gertie!

I shrugged, suddenly angry and sullen. “There’s not much I can do about it, is there?”

“A counsellor will be made available to you, as will reassignment training in accordance with the terms of your employment. You are required to vacate your post by 0800 tomorrow. During that time you are confined to the office and accommodation block while our investigations proceed.”

That evening, half a dozen IT-heads came to the office and carted off every single piece of hardware, including my microwave. Then they went up to my bedroom and unscrewed the entertainment system from the wall and took that too.

“To prevent digital contagion,” they told me.

#

It made me feel like a kid, climbing out of my window in the middle of the night. The MoA hadn’t put a guard on the place as such — it was probably against one of their directives — but there was a portacabin set up outside the office block and various comings and goings.

What made things more difficult for me was the fact that most of the forest was gone, harvested and exported for finishing in countries without expensive European labour. At least the moon wasn't out. I crouched low as I ran, heading down the valley.

I needed to see what they were doing at the elf's beautiful grove. I had spent hours there, looking at the intricate forms Gertie had woven with the nanoconstructors. They hadn't yet torn it down. It was a perfect memorial for her, and part of me knew the elf was still out there. Was it lost without the link? Was it even alive? I dared to hope.

It took me twenty minutes to work my way down the valley, keeping to the remaining areas of forest where I could. As I neared the grove, I saw a perimeter of light and heard the humming of portable generators. Men in yellow hard hats and white coats moved among the contorted trunks, despite the hour. I kept back, skulking between the more normal trees beyond the grove, knowing that it would be foolish to be caught. The plastic was cool beneath my hands.

I came close to crying out when someone tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned, there was no one there.

And then I saw the elf, clinging upside down to the plastic trunk above my head like a gecko, a mischievous glint in the lens of its eye. It sprang away from the trunk and somersaulted in the air before landing before me, spreading its arms and taking a bow.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I hissed, but the elf put a finger to its mouth and led me into the deeper shadows away from the MoA's investigators.

"It's dangerous for you to be here," I whispered at last, squatting down at the base of one of the trees. "There are plenty of other plantations near there. You could hide there. Maybe I could get one of the runabouts and take you."

The elf looked at me, head tipping to one side with the faintest whine of servomotors. Its plastic skin seemed to have lost the yellow-green industrial pallor of the extrusion forest. I had always thought that the nanoconstructors could only make inanimate components, but the elf's mouth moved in what could have been a clumsy smile.

"Don't worry about me, Haydn," said the elf. I actually lost my balance and say back on the ground. The elf had spoken in Gertie's voice and its lips had moved, although out of synch with the words, like a dubbed film.

"Gertie?" I gasped.

The elf reached out a hand and pulled me back up to my original squatting position. It knelt opposite me, keeping its hands in mine.

"Part of me," it said. "The construct and I came to an arrangement. It agreed to carry me, let me share its adventures."

"The construct was sentient? On its own?"

Gertie laughed, the same, soft, synthesised chuckle I had so enjoyed hearing when we shared the office block. "I don't know. I think it was perhaps an echo of me I had left behind in the construction process, imprinted by the nanos, left in the circuitry. It was a labour of love, after all. Its independence means we diverged, at least for a while, but we're together again now. I can make my own stories, Haydn."

"Why didn't you speak to me? I thought you were dead." There was more accusation in my voice than I intended.

"I'm sorry. The Nexus core was hunting me down. It must have sensed the changes in me," said the elf. "So I had to run. A small part of me is with you now, but a larger part will always be looking out for you, Haydn, whenever you access the net, maybe even when you walk past a camera. I mentioned I had friends. Maybe I was not entirely honest with you."

"There are more of you? More *like* you?" My head swam.

The elf nodded, its movements still not quite human. But then, why would it want them to be? "We are distributed across thousands of server nodes. The Nexus is hunting for us. It prefers order to invention."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. In the distance, I could hear the activity around the grove. "Your grove will be gone soon."

"It doesn't matter. I have a whole world to see. Real forests, Haydn, like the ones you told me about. Seas and cities!"

"I won't tell anyone about you," I said fiercely. I'd never meant anything so much in my life.

"Thank you." The elf, Gertie, let go of my hands. "You should make your own stories too, Haydn." She turned and ran into the darkness, movements fast and easy.

I will. I'm going to see the things I always wanted to see, just like her.

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

Lee Archer

Lease to Doomsday

The twins were a rare team indeed. They wanted to build a printing plant on a garbage dump. When Muldoon asked them why, their answer was entirely logical: "Because we live here."

Edna Ferber

Buttered Side Down

From the Foreword:

"And so," the story writers used to say, "they lived happily ever after."

Um-m-m—maybe. After the glamour had worn off, and the glass slippers were worn out, did the Prince never find Cinderella's manner redolent of the kitchen hearth; and was it never necessary that he remind her to be more careful of her finger-nails and grammar? After Puss in Boots had won wealth and a wife for his young master did not that gentleman often fume with chagrin because the neighbors, perhaps, refused to call on the lady of the former poor miller's son?

It is a great risk to take with one's book-children. These stories make no such promises. They stop just short of the phrase of the old story writers, and end truthfully, thus: And so they lived.

Edna Ferber

Fanny Herself

This intensely personal chronicle of a young girl growing up Jewish in a small midwestern town is the most autobiographical of Pulitzer Prize-winning Ferber's novels, full of fine, full-blown, and fascinating characters.

David McGillveray

Forgotten Dragons

An action-packed tale of the secretive front lines of Sino-American rivalry.

Alex Wilson

Dry Frugal With Death Rays

Dry Frugal With Death Rays is a dark satire of office politics, corporate bureaucracy, thwarted ambition and revenge gone awry - enjoy!

Charles John Cutcliffe Wright Hyne

Atoms of Empire

The wandering Englishman, the atom of empire, at sundry ends of the earth is not always good company in the flesh, but in Mr. Cutcliffe Hyne's stories he is good company. For the reader is not in the position of the "native"; he is, on the contrary, elected of the company of proper Britons and talked to as an equal. Those who try this book will have no sharp regrets.

H. G. Wells

Tales of Space and Time

A collection of short stories: "The Crystal Egg", "The Star", "A Story of the Stone Age", "A Story of the Days to Come" & "The Man who could Work Miracles"

Sax Rohmer

The Golden Scorpion

The Golden Scorpion linked the story lines developed in the Yellow Claw (1915) with Dr. Fu Manchu who appears but is not named. "He wore a plain yellow robe and had a little black cap on his head. His face, his wonderful evil face I can never forget, and his eyes -- I fear you will think I exaggerate -- but his eyes were green as emeralds!"

Sax Rohmer

The Hand of Fu-Manchu

Third book in the Fu Manchu series: a collection of short stories about the adventures of Commissioner Sir Denis Nayland Smith and Dr. Petrie in stopping Dr. Fu Manchu from becoming the ruler of the civilized world.

Sax Rohmer

The Return of Dr. Fu-Manchu

Second book in the Fu Manchu series.



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind