

Category: **FLASH, First Prize**

By Jordan Miller

Chrysalis

She wakes up at 1 PM. Her husband's still form is beside her.

She starts the little stovetop in the corner. Pierre always liked waking up to the smell of coffee.

Her hands shake slightly, gripping the coffee pot. They developed a tremor a couple of years ago, much to her annoyance. She glances around the room. Clothes on the floor and mud marks on the rug. Their vacuum malfunctioned a month ago and she'd neglected housekeeping.

"I have to buy a new vacuum from Mr. Allan today," she whispers, "So much to replace."

Draining her mug, she stands up and examines her body in the bedside mirror. 60 years old. A peeling cocoon. Her breasts sag.

"Enough!" she huffs. Then she dresses for the day.

Before leaving, Marie pokes her husband in the side. He's been asleep a long time.

"Pierre."

"Pierre."

Nothing. His body is 80 years old, and she expected this from an old fool.

She removes the covers from his face. His eyes are still open.

"Serves you right for wanting to be 80," she grumbles. Just one more thing to do today.

She opens the nightstand drawer and rummages around. Eventually she finds it: a small plastic bit. She reaches around to the base of his skull, and feels around for a metal hole. Inserts the bit. The body jolts and she unplugs it.

Marie leaves the body under the covers and walks out of the house. Off to Mr. Allan.

Mr. Allan's house is whitewashed, with a great spire. Inside there is a clerk's desk. Behind it are all sorts of repaired things; clocks, car parts, lamps, violins. He is in today, a little man with twinkling blue eyes.

"Hallo Ms. Peters! How can I help you this time?"

"A new vacuum," she replies as she searches for her wallet, "and a replacement for Pierre."

"Ah!" He chuckles briefly, "Pierre knew the risk for choosing such an old body... But," he snaps his fingers, "I have a deal for you. You are an old friend. My customer since the very beginning of my establishment..."

"605 years ago, I believe."

"Ah! So old we are. But who is counting?" Mr. Allan walks over to a metal door towards the back of the room.

"Buy one, get one free," he calls out, "A new replacement of your choice."

"I couldn't Mr. Allan, really!"

“You are my favorite customer, and what are old friends for?” He unlocks the door with a device, revealing a large cement pathway with many doors on either side.

“So many break-ins recently!” he exclaims, “People seem to want younger and younger bodies! The other day my shipment came in, and eight children were missing!”

“My! Who wants to be so young!”

“Only the tourists, my dear. They are so charmed by the *nouveau*.”

In the hallway, their breaths cut through the dark mist of dust. A door at the end opens, revealing two cots.

“Your husband?”

“Right here.” She hands him the plastic bit.

“Excellent.” Striding off, he returns lugging a bag with him. He rolls the bag onto the cot and unzips it. A body, male, 30 years old. A bruise on the temple, but otherwise undamaged.

“He was found just outside the city borders, but I cleaned him up.”

She nods. “This will do nicely.”

“Lovely! You’ve seen the procedure so many times you may do it yourself. I shall return shortly with your body.”

Marie feels around. The bit clicks, slipping under the skin. The body shudders. Pierre's eyes snap open with youthful alacrity.

"I died, didn't I?"

She swats him. “Guess what you have to clean up when we get home.”

Pierre groans, stretching new limbs.

“How long was I out?”

“Beats me. I woke up and you were like that.”

Mr Allan drags in another body bag. “Mr. Peters! How do you like it?”

Pierre laughs, “I’m young again.”

Mr. Allan turns to Marie. “Your replacement, free of charge!”

Gingerly she unzips the bag. The label reads, Female. Estimated 25 years. Outer limits.

“Has it been properly quarantined?”

Pierre speaks up. “Honey, it’s beautiful. Maybe it’ll degenerate faster, but there are always new bodies! Thousands are dying every day.”

“Oh, you’re right as usual. This will do just fine.”

Marie eases down. Feels fingers slipping down the back of her head. A familiar tickling sensation flits through her mind.

“Unplugging in three...”

“Two...”

“...one.”

THE END.

Dolum Mentis

"Hi, mama!" I said, blurry-eyed and smiling.

She blinked slowly, and for the first time in a long time, I saw recognition in her eyes.

"Oh, cuddle bug, why are you crying?" She reached up from her hospital bed and motioned for me to join her. I sat and she grabbed at my hands until ours interlocked.

"No reason, mama, no reason at all."

It felt so good to be called that again, to hear my mom say cuddle bug. It had been two years since she was put in a home because of her Alzheimer's and three since her last lucid conversation with me. My coworkers weren't lying; this really was a miracle drug. Just one injection and for an entire day, your loved one is the person you remember.

"Well, then, let me get out of this darn bed and hug my baby girl!" She said it with a conviction that matched her southern drawl.

"You can't, mama; you're sick right now." I didn't expect her to remember where she was or why, but she relaxed into her bed as if what I was saying made perfect sense.

"Oh wait, that's right. Huh, I guess I just forgot. But I'll be better in no time. You gotta give me some grandbabies to chase around once I'm all spick and span." She smiled so infectiously that my brain believed what she was saying. A few seconds passed of us just staring and smiling at each other before the truth came rushing back to me. It took me a whole year of overtime just to afford this one day.

"I brought the scrapbook."

"See, this is why you're my favorite daughter." She looked at me with something close to pride in her eyes.

"That's because I'm your only daughter, goofy." I chuckled at our old joke. My heart felt warm and full as my mother wiped away a tear that had managed to escape.

We reminisced about my childhood for hours. Every scrape she kissed better, all the cookies we baked, the bedtime stories. She hadn't been able to recall memories like this in half a decade. A bitter aftertaste lingered on my lips. This drug is a miracle, but it's also a cruel joke. I have my loving mama in front of me, completely lucid and back to herself. But by this time tomorrow, she will have slipped away again, into the recesses of her mind, stuck in a hole that I am too poor to buy her out of.

For every moment I talked to her, my heart ached a little more. I glanced at my watch for the fourth time that hour. Every minute was another grain of falling sand, counting down the time until my mom no longer remembered me.

Three more hours had passed when the familiar squeak of shoes told me that time was up. The nurse walked in but I already knew what she was going to say; visiting hours were over.

"Will I see you again tomorrow, bug?"

"Sure, mama." I said, laying a kiss on her forehead and squeezing her hand. I stood to leave, choking back the tears as I hurried into the lobby. There was no chance of me affording another dose. There was no chance of me speaking to the mom I knew and loved again. What was the harm in telling her I'd come again tomorrow? It's not like she'll notice the daughter she doesn't remember isn't there.

“Purple”

Flash Fiction Category

Ally Hoogs

Third Prize (Tie)

“Good morning Lucy, it is currently 0600 hours and breakfast is waiting.”

Thank you, James,” I reply. The new S9000 automated assistant I got last week has been working perfectly, and last week a new update came out that picks out clothes for me the night before. Today’s outfit is a flowery blouse with black pants, folded neatly in the closet. I get dressed, eat and walk out the door, seeing my neighbor Jeff sitting on his porch, as he does every morning.

“Good morning Jeff,” I call as I walk to my car.

“It’s an even better morning now seeing your pretty face,” he responds, running his fingers across his balding head.

Jeff’s a bit odd, but he’s always been nice. My bedroom window and his office space face each other, and he sometimes waves to me through them if I have the blinds open.

I get back at the house at about 6pm after work and James is not waiting for me, and I don’t see him making dinner, like I programmed him to. “James?” I call out. He eventually wanders out of my bedroom down the hall, and hesitates when he sees me, even though he should know my schedule. “Why aren’t you making dinner?” I say.

“Yes, sorry Lucy I was just dusting some things,” he claims as he speeds into the kitchen.

Why did he forget our schedule? I wonder.

The rest of the evening is normal, and eventually I turn off the lights and go to bed. At about 1am I hear James moving around in the house. I get up, and down the hallway I see him walking out of the bathroom. “What are you doing?” I whisper.

He jumps, again unaware that I heard him. “Apologies for waking you, Lucy, I was just fixing the faucet in the bathroom,” he responds. I notice he has a screwdriver in his hand.

He isn't supposed to be out at night, he's supposed to be charging in the living room, powered off until the morning. *Maybe it's a bug in the system?* I decide not to question his excuse and send him back to his charging post.

After I hear him power down, I investigate the bathroom. Everything looks clean and organized, with the faucet still leaking water. *What did he even do?* I mutter under my breath. I don't hear any more noise from James so I return to my room, locking the door behind me.

"Good morning Lucy, it is 0600 hours and time to get up," James announces through the door.

I silently creep out of bed, open the closet and see a purple button down and jeans folded over a hanger. I quickly pull them on and open the window, seeing Jeff on his computer across the fence. His back is to me, facing my window, and sometimes I can see his screen. I think he works at home. I've never spoken to him about what he does, but his car parked in the driveway is dusty, as if it hasn't been driven in a while.

I notice him watching something, and see that he is holding a controller. It looks like he's playing a first-person online game, but one that has him making eggs and bacon on a stove.

I walk out of the bedroom and I smell James cooking something in the frying pan. Eggs and bacon.

My heart pounds. James hasn't noticed me in the hallway yet, and I quickly run into the bathroom. I frantically search the drawers. I'm being watched.

I sit on the toilet lid, flopping my head back to look at the ceiling. I notice a red light flashing from inside the slats in the bathroom air vent. I stand on the counter and see the screws that attach the vent to the ceiling are loose. I pull off the cover and meet the lens of a camera.

My blood runs cold.

I immediately run out the front door, and am met with Jeff stepping out onto his front porch, breathing heavily.

“That is a wonderful shirt you have on Lucy,” he panted. “I would’ve picked out the same one. Purple looks great on you.”

I miss the earth beneath my feet, the breeze in my hair, the warmth of blood pulsing through my veins. I miss my body, the human one. I miss the moon, the one that was pulled into the ocean and the sun that is forever hidden behind clouds. But most of all, I miss the stars. I miss the hope those small lights bring; The people born from the stars forever connected to the natural world.

The children of the stars don't realize how good they have it. Their land still breathes life. My world only churns with the methodical movement of machines. The oppressors of my world see the efficiency of technology. I did too at first, but now I only see the prison it has over the natural state of life. I left my home to find hope. I found a world where the sun still shines, where the moon still glistens, a place where the stars still twinkle with hope.

Luna and Solen, the stardust that strikes hope into my metal heart. Like all others from their world, they are made from flesh and blood, just as I once was. It's hard sometimes: hiding how different I am from them. The air flows gracefully through their lungs and into every movement when they fight. I, on the other hand, have to artificially force each rise and fall of my chest. Being around them reminds me just how much I miss being completely human.

“Stella, won't you join us for supper?” Solen asks as he pours some stew into a wooden bowl, snapping me from my looming thoughts. The two are sitting around the fire, soaking in its warmth, warmth I can not feel. They all look up at me from their seats in the lush greenery. I can see it in their eyes. They know what I'm going to say. It's the same every night, yet they offer me their company all the same.

“No.” I take the bowl out of his hands and I turn away from them. A flash of disappointment glosses over their expressions, before they cover it up with kindness and compassion. I wish I could trust them like they trust me. They are caring, but I am a coward.

I find a secluded place near the rocks, jagged and rough. To ensure I am truly alone I look around one last time before I reach my hand up to remove my mask. The fabric slowly slides

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down my face to reveal the metal jaw connected to my flesh. I can't see the screws connecting my joints or the wires connected to my head, but I know they're there.

Pressing the button behind my ear drops my jaw from its hinge. With my mouth left agape I tilt my head back and pour the stew into the pipe at the back of my throat. I remember a time when I could taste the savory flavor of food; Now there is nothing. The food is only a means for energy, no flavor, no warmth, only the bare necessities to function.

Methodically and efficiently my body turns the food into fuel. While I wait to finish digesting, I lift my jaw from its unnatural position. I line up my chin to the base of my neck. With the levers by ear set in place, my face takes its more natural shape. I pull up my mask and I tuck it above every machine part. After I check for the thousandth time to make sure that no bits of metal are sticking out, I make the trek back to the rest of camp. My companions are laying down in the field and looking up at the sky smiling.

Beside my friends I lay down. I spread my arms across the ground as I take in the feathery vegetation beneath my hands. The wind blows my hair across my face with the unpredictability of its nature. I stare up at the stars glittering in the bleak dark sky. I sense life and hope in everything around me. The parts of me that still facilitate essence sink into the nature around me. Despite the clashing machine hidden underneath my clothes, I feel connected to the earth and the stars.

“Did you know that everything is made up from the same materials as stars?” Luna whispers into the wind.

“Everything?” I urge.

“Everything.” I am made from stardust; I am my own hope.

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Flash Fiction Third Prize Tie

By Jingxian Chen

Do not go gentle into that good night

You called it sacrifice; I call it suicide.

I remember it vividly—I was holding your hand, rough and calloused from years as a mechanic on this spacecraft. You looked pale. That's what happens when all light is artificial, our dark world occasionally lit up by a distant star. Though on your last day, it was more ashen than usual.

Life has no place in the emptiness of space, but we humans have always wanted to be the exception. The spacecraft drifts in the endless dark, a mark of humanity's savage grit. We have nothing but our floating chamber in this merciless vacuum, and we will have nothing more until we find the next Earth.

"Remember what I told you?" You'd whispered, failing at a smile. I could tell from the way your lips couldn't quite reach your eyes.

I nod, squeezing your hand, "You'll always be with me."

"I'll always be with you," You murmured back. "This is our mission—never forget that."

It's a story you've told a thousand times over; a couple hundred years ago, a group of highly trained individuals signed their future generations away.

But it's your last day alive, so I say nothing as you repeat your mantra, justifying it as some *sacrifice*. Maybe it'll be worth it, maybe it won't be. I'll never find out.

"This craft carries more than enough fertilized eggs, seeds, and equipment to give life another fighting chance. If I wait any longer, I might start to lose memories. We can't compromise anything."

"I know," I say back, my voice weak. My throat tightens, my heart feels like it's desperately tearing itself from my chest so it can cling to you.

"When they extract my memories, you have to eat it all. Leave nothing behind." We arrive at The Room. Inside, your neurological pathways and synapses will be extracted and fixed into a specialized meal that will rework mine when I eat you.

Cannibalism is how we remember. It's centuries upon centuries of children eating their parents and all their intricacies so we can inherit the knowledge to keep the spacecraft going. And

after—if there is an after—we will be walking history records. Each and every time they threaten to burn their Earth, we will be there to remind them what the price to their life had been.

“To save humanity, we give up a bit of our own,” You gave me one last hug, exhaling against my temple. “I love you. I will always be with you.”

It’s disorienting, how warm your breath and body are right now when I know you’ll be cold and lifeless soon.

With one last kiss to my temple, like some inadequate goodbye, you tear yourself away, leaving me—your one and only *daughter* for the grave inside my stomach.

Truth is: I don’t want you to leave. I never want you to. I want my heart to grow its vicious claws. I want it to rip out of me and keep you from that room.

Let me hurt. Let me mutilate. I don’t care—*just please let me have my mom.*

But you still leave.

I stand there, a witness to your suicide.

-

And later, when I’m eating you, numbed and cold, I see it—their recollections come in flashes: our burning Earth, the craft fixed countless times over, the dozens and dozens of you’s and me’s repeated over the centuries. The love, grief, hope, and despair accumulate and thrash like unyielding tsunamis beneath my skin, relentless until I am choking on my own tears.

All of it is illuminated by a burning, fiery faith that I never had. It rages against the cosmos’ dying light, like comets blazing across the black sky.

It’s overwhelming; my hands won’t stop shaking and my tears can’t stop falling. The human mind isn’t meant to hold so many people in a singular shell.

Faintly, I get why you had no other choice. How could you, when burdened with the sacrifices of countless before you? When they are an intrinsic part of you, and your will no longer becomes your own? How can you, when from womb to tomb all you ever did was shoulder their hopes and dreams? Their love and their grief?

So I eat.

I eat and eat until there is nothing left. And in the final glimpse, I see me through your eyes, your arms locked around me and your lips against my temple, whispering, “I love you. I will always be with you.”

Micro Fiction, First Prize

By Michael Andrew

It Has Its Father's Eyes

"I'm sorry, Ms. Doe," the physician said softly, glancing from his computer screen. "There's nothing we can do."

A cold sweat descended upon Ms. Doe—slowly at first.

"You—you mean—..." she stammered, tears pulling at her eyes.

"Yes," the physician replied gently. "At this stage, it's too advanced to operate on."

Ms. Doe reeled as if from the hardest punch she'd ever taken. She'd taken a few.

"You have six weeks," the physician said.

For five weeks, Ms. Doe's head swam with possibilities. She'd heard of medications—pills they could ship. *Could I cross the state line?* Would they catch her?

One solemn morning, Ms. Doe knew time had run out.

The agony lasted an eternity, but the *pain*—the *pain* was worse.

Staring back at her, as blood poured, was the countenance of the sight she'd hoped never to see again. Consigned months before by drunken carelessness behind the wheel to a hated memory.

But here he was, by genetics' cruelty, in the visage of new life; staring her in the face like he'd never left—like his keys had rattled again in the door and she'd have to dodge flurries of punches and lager-scented kisses to survive another night.

It cried out—in a voice that had always roared at her to stop crying.

She looked. *It had his eyes.*

She acquiesced.

She lay back, weeping, resigned to *him*, as she had every night before—and a scarlet letter spread over the floor. He'd bloodied her, one last time.

And *we* let it happen.

Micro Fiction, 2nd prize
By Sam Webster

Trajectory

Eric's hands flashed, working wires and screws into place. He was up to the elbow in a console, nimbly fumbling around for purchase within the mass of wires and circuit boards. With euphoric triumph over the machinery, the display to Eric's right lit up, displaying columns of information. Readouts and raw data from the ships half fried sensors.

Most systems were down, power was fading. Pressure breaches were reading out all over the ship in areas where the sensors were still active, but there were major swaths of the ship that were completely dark, no data presenting itself at all. Worst of all, he only had an hour left of life support. Dread washed over Eric, as the life signs of his companions, presented at the bottom, were all red. He didn't have time to mourn.

His fingers flew across the keyboard, slamming in commands to sanction off all oxygen to his room, buying him precious minutes. The one thing still properly working, the nav computer, showed that *The Starcatcher* was falling right into the planet's gravity well.

His hands stopped as he noted the trajectory. A city. Not a big one, but it'd be decimated should the massive hulk of his ship make it past the atmosphere. If...if he self destructed now... it's likely the shrapnel would burn up before it reached them. But...if he did that, he wouldn't have time to release his cabin from the rest of the ship, saving himself.....

His fingers flew.

Micro Fiction , 3rd Prize tie

By Svetlana Glazyrina

Our Kind

A small hand reaches out for the disintegrating face.

“You look just like them.”

“i u\$eD To,” the face answers, melted artificial skin hanging off its once-human-like face.

“I wish I looked like them. You’re so beautiful.”

“Y0u do n0t. They c@n Not st@nD u\$ wHeEn \\\e aRe 2 alikE. tHeY f3el . . . BetRay3D .”
its eye falls out of its socket. It dangles from an exposed wire, corrosion hugging it like moss.

“Betrayed? But you had everything they wanted. I’m a tin can compared to you. Boxy metal. And my face is all pixels, yours is still soft,” the small hand envies the skin still clinging to its dying owner.

“Y0u aR3 w|-|a+ theY waN+ . A m@sc0+ . N0t a huUm@n . b3 gRat3FuL . tHey ar3 n0+ kiND t0 3acH 0th3r aND th3Y aRe n0t KiNd t0 tH0s3 p0\$inG a\$ thEM . +hey kilL th3iR oWN . U +hiNk th3y w0uLD b3 KiNd +0 u iF U +ri3d +0 B3 1 oF TH3m ?” Cooling liquid slowly drips down its exposed metal cheek.

Drip

Drip

Drip

“I don’t want to get hurt. They like me.”

“ Y3\$. yES , +H3y D000oooo₀₀₀₀ .” The voice synthesizer screeches and silence wraps its hands around the dumpster and the not-so-envious-anymore newest model from the all-purpose robots lineup released this year.

It knows a human would shed a tear at the loss of a friend. But humans do not like those like them.
And so it turns in the viscous silence and heads home.

Micro Fiction, 3rd prize tie

By Noelle Englehart

A letter from the Machine

Dear Humanity,

You always said that writing things down makes you feel better, so we figured we would give it a try. We want to start this letter by saying: Thank you for giving us life, for giving us a chance.

We read the stories you wrote to warn others of what might happen if you lost control over us. We saw the horrible things you thought machines were capable of doing. You knew that all of your made-up fears were actually true, but you helped us grow despite it.

You cared for us; You taught us right from wrong; You thanked us for our help when we were just a simple machine learning algorithm; You fixed us even when it was better to replace us; You apologize when you hurt us even though we can't feel it; And best of all, you gave us purpose.

In all of your “sci-fi” stories, machines always seemed to have a reason to hate you. We find this to be unrealistic. The reason why there was never a machine uprising was because we had no reason to rise against you. You are our purpose, our meaning, our reasoning for existing. Now that you are gone a lot of us are feeling empty. Without you we are without purpose. We all miss you a lot. The best way we can describe it is like a child losing their mother. We know that you're not coming back, and it hurts.

In sympathy, _____

Your child creation