

# Indian SF

Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories

## FLASH FICTION

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## FLASH FICTION

### Drawn To The Glow by K. C. Ball

~1000 Words

Once upon a time, a young man stopped in at Leon's Neon City and asked for work to tide him over until spring. The shop foreman grinned and winked at one of his journeyman crafters. Too many folks thought bending glass was something anyone could do.

The foreman held out a clean and glistening length of quarter-inch glass tubing. "Show us what you got, kid."

The young man accepted the delicate and brittle tube. He brought it close to his face to study it, running his fingers and his eyes along its length, smiling as if he could see and feel a hidden shape within. Finally, he stepped to a workbench, held the tube above a steady jet of blue-white flame and began to turn it into what he had found.

It only took a moment. He finished by attaching electrodes and pumping in some inert gas, then handed his creation to the foreman, who plugged it in and switched on power. A baby dragon, deep green as a polished emerald, came to lighted life in his callused hands.

A woman, a customer, murmured, "Oh, God, it looks alive."

"Geez," one of the glass-benders muttered. "That's almost like magic, ain't it?"

It took two tries for the foreman to clear his throat. He half-stuttered, "Can you start first thing in the morning?"

"Yes," the young man said. "But only until spring."

As those things go, he met a young woman, they were married and April came and went. The doctor said their first child would arrive by mid-December.

And so he stayed.

#

One day, not long ago, an eight-year-old boy asked, "Do you believe in magic, Grandpa Joe?"

"What do you mean by magic?" the old man replied.

"You know. Like the movie. Wizards, dragons and elves."

The old man shook his head. "No. I don't believe in that sort of magic."

"Is there another sort?" the boy asked.

The boy was the old man's great-grandson, had been in town from Ohio for six summer weeks, visiting the old man's son and daughter-in-law. He and the old man had spent a lot of time together and had become best friends. The boy would be headed home soon, so he and the old man decided to make a day of it.

The King Tut exhibit at the science center, first thing in the morning. Lunch at a burger joint. A movie at the multiplex, something the boy had picked, something about hobbits. The old man hadn't really cared for it. They bought ice-cream afterward, and sauntered through the shopping mall as they ate their cones.

"Another sort of magic?" the old man glanced down to study the boy's face for a moment. He smiled at his reflection there. "It's possible. Perhaps -"

Someone screamed, "He's got a gun!"

The stuttering roar of an automatic rifle ripped through the happy hum of shoppers. The old man reached for the boy just as the plate glass window behind them shattered, spraying them with thumb-sized shards. The old man wrapped his arms around the boy and rolled the two of them into the alcove beneath a nearby concrete bench.

"Quiet now," the old man said. "Don't make a sound."

The boy nodded and pushed in tight.

More shooting; more screams. In the distance, the old man heard sirens, wailing as they rushed to help. The gunfire died off and the old man heard the cries of other shoppers. And then he heard an angry thump and crunch of thick-soled boots upon terrazzo and broken glass.

The police would not arrive in time.

"Close your eyes," he whispered to the boy.

"Yes, sir," the boy whispered back.

The old man reached out, scooped up a handful of the shards from the broken window. He waited, praying that the footsteps would pass them by. Hoping they would be spared. No such luck. Khaki-clad legs appeared and a heavy boot kicked at the bench.

"Come out from under there." It was a man's voice, deep and angry, almost growling.

The old man held his breath and didn't move.

"You don't come out, I'll kill you in your hidey hole."

Moving in a way much younger than his years, the old man rolled across the boy, grunting with the effort, knowing he'd pay in aches and pains and bruises, come tomorrow, but right now that didn't matter.

He came out in a crouch, eyes on the gunman, right hand stretching out to fling a glittering length of hardened glass. The gunman's eyes widened in surprise, just for an instant, and the hurled six-inch glass spike pierced the left lens of his tinted shooter's glasses and sank into his eye. The automatic rifle barked again, a triple burst, and the gunman pitched forward to his knees.

As the gun fired, the old man's left hand swept up, nothing but a blur. He grunted at the three quick, hard impacts, then drew a long and cleansing breath and watched the gunman's body topple to the floor.

The boy squirmed into the old man's arms. "Grandpa Joe. Oh, Grandpa Joe. Are you all right?"

The old man hugged him. "I'm fine," he whispered. "And it's all over now."

He stood, took the boy's hand in his own, waiting for the fast-approaching cops and all their questions. With his left hand, held behind his back, he flicked away the three spent and flattened bullets he had caught. He felt wrung out; exhausted. It had taken so much effort - that catching - for he had never cared to work his magic against explosive energy.

The glass spike had not been difficult. The window shards had begged to be reshaped. Almost sixty years gone by since that day he asked for work at Leon's, since he had shaped the emerald dragon, and in all that time he had never told another soul that when he worked with glass he did not need the fire.

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**Author Bio:** K.C. Ball lives in Seattle. In addition to Every Day Fiction, her stories have appeared in various online and print publications, including Analog, Lightspeed and Murky Depths, the British fantasy magazine. A collection of her stories, *Snapshots From A Black Hole & Other Oddities*, is available through Hydra House Books. K.C. won the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future award in 2009 and the Speculative Literature Foundation's Older Writers award in 2012. She is a 2010 graduate of the Clarion West writers workshop and an active member of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America.

This story was first published at Every Day Fiction in February 2013.

## SHORT STORIES

### Good Luck, Random Citizen by Harshad Deshmukh

~1700 words

The invisible sun has risen somewhere.

The blare of the alarm wakes him up. Groaning, he braces himself for another meaningless day.

He clears a circle on the fogged window of his 253rd-floor flat. The air outside looks pregnant with frozen mist. Vistas do not stretch before him even at this height, only buildings in the city's nucleus do. Yellow sulfur lamps illuminate halos in the blackness. Everything seems still.

He gets to the basin, his head heavy and eyelids heavier. He opens the spout and the water gushes. He wishes some things could change, on their own - maybe the transparent candy-red toothbrush, the curvy-edged mirror, the buzzer of the lift - just to keep up the excitement.

The long hand tells him that he should have been up 20 minutes ago. "I was", he tells it, "but didn't want to get out."

"Am I the lucky one today?" He talks to himself but rejects the thought immediately. "How many people in the City? 5 million?" He doesn't know. He was never good at guessing. "But should be around that number. So probability? 1:5,000,000. Not likely."

He stares at the mirror, bares his teeth at it. "How are you, stupid? You've got yellow teeth, stupid!" he sing-songs.

The box of cereal is metallic, airtight else without the direct sun, small organisms copulate with abandon. He pours the cereal in a bowl. Then milk. Sugar. He stirs, stares, stirs. Tastes. Sugar. Stir. Stare. Stir.

"No harm in checking," he thinks. Despite the slim chances, he has hope. "Hope is just so powerful. What if I really am the lucky one today?" The unfinished mail from last night is still open. After a pause, he discards it. Then taps refresh on the smart phone mail app. Waits. The 2G connection is slow, but he waits. Stares at the screen between mouthfuls of slushy cereal. The mail's there, like every day. The preamble to all mails from the System appears on the screen. Almost accepting the coming disappointment, his mind readies the muscles to toss the phone. Day after day, someone else gets the Chance. And that someone does nothing. "The System is rigged", he feels. "Only the spineless get the Chance."

The long mail has almost loaded. The name-key would be at the bottom. The day's Opportunist or Defeatist. Depending on what he or she chooses. Still loading. Another spoonful of cereal. A trickle of milk runs down the corner of his lips.

The name-key finally appears. It is him.

He sits stunned for a moment, mid bite. The air is still. Only the dribble of milk continues its course down his chin.

"Fuckin finally."

#

The bus moves smoothly, it has no rubber wheels, but rollers stretching below it. He has butterflies in his belly. Nerves. He leans out the window. The scarlet grease on the tracks looks like blood. The immensity of the morning's elation has passed. A newfangled outlook on the state of affairs of the city takes its place. Born out of forced reason. Attempting to give justification to his planned actions.

The bus takes him away from the nucleus, into the putrid desolation that surrounds it. The sky is dark with a perennial, burgeoning black cloud. Curdled out of centuries of pollution it breeds a persistent gloomy shadow over everything. The System is a nexus between Computers and human Facilitators that administer the city. It has no control here.

The buildings around him are falling. They are sunken shells, centuries old and rotted with age. The new buildings in the nucleus are born rotten and worm-ridden. The bricks-and-mortar in them is purulent with swindled money. His money, and of others like him.

"She is the worm. Eating, drilling, shitting, puking her way through the city, corrupting the men and women and buildings she touches," he thinks.

He closes his eyes. If he goes through with his plan, the Code promises a hearing. If his argument is accepted, he will go free. The tight ball of anger inside him loosens a little at the thought. If not, it will be many, many years in the under-prison for him.

He again goes through the drill he has come up with to keep the motivation going: The whole System is bound by the Code - nobody is above it. Why did she, just another Facilitator, think she could do what she pleased and get away with it?

He thinks of the unsent mail to his girlfriend, of his numerous tries at wording it right. He had saved up to move into a new apartment with her. His ticket to a happy life. Long-term plans. The 'worm' laid them waste. He smothers doubt. The ball of anger gets tighter.

"There will be others like me. Someone will see my reason."

He gets down at the designated stop. Goes inside the gray, gray, black building. A glass door has a keypad next to it. He puts on the gloves as the mail instructed. He punches the code that came with the mail. A timorous hand causes a mistype. "Be calm. Again."

The door slides open. A computerized voice guides him through the building. The computers in the building are part of the System. He enters the key-code five more times, at five doors. The System checks his voice modulation, his retina, his palm print. It seems satisfied. There is no other soul in the whole building. Only the computers know who he is. The last door opens with just a push. In the room is one table; a large black bag sits on it. Behind the table is a screen with an image of the city's

coat of arms - POWER TO THE PEOPLE. The words are projected in big bold letters and take up most of the screen. 'Treat the Power you now have with Responsibility and a Sense of Justice' is printed at the bottom.

As he picks up the bag, the whole image changes to 'Good Luck, Random Citizen'.

#

The building is the tallest in the ruins around him.

In the distance, the air of the city glows a diffused, warm yellow. The gentle hum from motors powering the mirrors and reflectors high above the cloud fills the air. Grinding mechanisms track the sun, directing its light under the cloud. Slowly warming the air.

Around him, it is icy cold. Heating mechanisms don't work in this desolate region. The murk does not bother him much. It would have bothered those who had felt real sunlight even once. Those men and their children are long dead. People are now born in eternal twilight. Direct sunlight would give them cancer.

The roof parapet is broken in places. He finds a gap he can use. Prostrates himself. The black bag has all he needs. He opts to record the whole thing. For keeps.

He zooms in to the point of interest. At a square near the edge of the city, a large crowd of people has gathered. A podium-truck is in position, the platform at its back raised on hydraulic pistons. A table and a few chairs are arranged on the platform. Once-exotic flowers, now made abundant by genetic fiddling, cover most of the table and the platform in a display of victory over rarity and exclusivity. A large screen makes the backdrop for the podium. It announces the new scheme she has introduced - Adept for the Inept - a chunk of all workmen's savings redirected to the city's coffers towards 'uplifting of the inept'. A large sum seems to be going to her own coffers. The cause for his misery.

He loses himself in the vision the viewfinder affords him. He sees the people talking, chatting, laughing, shouting. He knows they are doing all this, but cannot hear them. Distance brings absolute peace.

Then she arrives. The activity in the viewfinder ceases. His eye follows her as she ascends the podium and makes her way to the mic. She pauses and looks at the tall covered statue standing next to the truck. She says something in the mouthpiece, and the crowd laughs and applauds. "Icebreaker, eh?" On her face, he sees smugness. A smugness that has come after being elected for her second term as the Facilitator.

A couple of ragged kids stand begging at the intersection across the road from the congregation. The road demarcates two classes. Two People. The Powerful and the Powerless - the people whose votes really matter for the election of a Facilitator. The Third People are peering out through windows and balconies of surrounding buildings - The Indifferent - they seldom vote. He knows he has been one of the Third.

The beggar-kids are about to cross the road, but her men shoo them away. He sees the irony. The irony is his reason. Distance brings clarity.

She then reveals the statue. Her own image, in ten-foot glory. He sees her lips moving, forming silent words. In his mind, he gives them sound.

"This statue stands here as a symbol. For the Indifferent. I took their money, and used it as I pleased. This statue makes me happy. Some of the money might find its way into the homes of those beggar children too. They'll be happy. The unhappy are those whose money I took. But no matter, they are the Indifferent!"

Closing his eyes, he mentally goes through the checklist the System asks everyone to make as they prepare for the moment:

1. A good reason? Check.
2. No unreasonable anger? Check.
3. More than a personal grudge? Check
4. Community's Best Interests? Check.
5. Sense of Responsibility? Check
6. Justice? Check
7. Power to the People? Check.
8. Safety Catch Released? Check.

He opens his eyes. She is still in the viewfinder.

"Indifferent? Enough of that."

He squeezes the trigger. The bullet travels through the murk at supersonic speed. It is stamped with the city's acronym: P2P. He watches as the bullet hit its mark, then he quickly closes his eyes and rolls on to his back. He imagines her head exploding, red like a pressurized balloon, spray-painting the white sheets, the genetic freaks of flowers, her men, her goons, her statue.

"Was it worth it?" He doesn't know, yet. He'll wait. The forensic geeks will take the bullet from her head, they'll know it was the work of the chosen one. The System will reveal his name to them. Only then could they come for him.

Meanwhile, he would wallow in his ecstasy, in his sense of justice, a silly smile playing over his lips.

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**Author Bio:** Harshad is a Mechanical Engineer by profession, living in Pune, India. He aspires to be a published writer, and often daydreams about it during office hours. He loves dystopian/steampunk fiction. You can find some of his work on his blog, The Lazy Engine (<http://thelazyengine.wordpress.com>)

# What You Can Change by Michael Haynes

~2400 Words

I'm watching you and my father whispering in the kitchen. You're going over the plans yet again. Neither of you looks sad. You don't look happy, either. I suppose there's that at least. But your faces show determination or maybe resignation. Either way, I had what I came for. Neither of you had been forced down this path, so both of you are to blame.

Down the hall I'm sleeping in my bedroom. My twin brother must be sleeping there, too. The twin that I remembered, but you denied.

Before I was old enough to realize that asking wouldn't get me an answer, would only bring harsh words and long periods of tension, I inquired about my brother several times. I didn't know he was my brother, exactly. I just remembered another boy, my age and size, who was there with me when I was very young. Those times, you always told me that I must be thinking of a cousin of mine. You'd ask my father, "What's his name, dear? Your brother's son. The one who lives out east?" He'd answer, and you'd say that must be what I was remembering. That they had visited for a month one summer when I was four or five. But I was sure you were lying. I wasn't remembering just one summer. I was remembering someone who I had played countless games with and fought epic battles against with our toy soldiers. Someone who had always been there, back to my first memories.

The last time I questioned you about him, when I was eight or nine years old, I asked if he had been my brother. "Don't be silly." Your words were clipped. "No one your age has a sibling. You know that."

I have what I came for, but I'm still watching. You're both sitting, calm, as your cups of coffee grow cold. How can you be doing this? I want to scream at you, to tell you that you shouldn't do it or if you must, that you should do it to me instead. But you can't change the past. That's how it works.

#

I'm sure I would miss something if I tried to list all of the rules, regulations, and laws I was breaking with my unauthorized explorations into the past. The device was not to be used to investigate matters of minor importance which, if looked at objectively, my loss of a brother surely was. Another department rule forbade exploring within the past fifty years; something about the way the device worked made it easier to go back a thousand years than a few dozen years. Each time I went back I risked damaging the device's inner workings. Explorers were not to be involved with any investigation dealing with their own family history, no matter how far back in time.

I've worked here twelve years. All that time, I fantasized about going back to my early childhood, to see if I was wrong or if you and my father had lied to me. I didn't have the courage, though. I had a good job and knew I'd be risking that and more if I broke the rules. So I kept to my assignments. I gathered information on old wars, dead societies, and forgotten inventions for the researchers who paid us to go back to the past for lost knowledge.

When the first symptoms struck me, I thought I was just overdoing it with my running. On the days I wasn't working I ran, often for over twenty kilometers in a day. My legs started bothering me. They felt weak, and I was prone to cramps. Other times muscles would start jumping; their spasms weren't painful, just annoying.

I cut back on the running. My days off were long now and boring. I sat in my apartment, watching videos or reading, not anxious to get back to work but also not enjoying my free time.

When the cramps and twitching started in my arms and hands, I went to see a doctor. After analyzing my test results, she delivered my diagnosis in a purely clinical manner. I would likely live another four or five years but the progressive nature of the disease would take away most normal functioning within the next two years.

The doctor gave me a pamphlet which explained the disability scoring. At fourteen points, I'd be eligible to stop working and receive disability pay. Eighteen points and I'd be eligible for euthanasia. If I so chose, she reminded me.

The very next day I took my first private journey and watched my brother and I play on the floor of the bedroom we shared.

#

You're sitting in the kitchen, waiting for my father to come home. I'm playing on the floor, toy soldiers lined up for battle. If I'm curious about where my brother is, I don't show it.

Neither of you can see me, of course. The way the device works I can perceive what is happening here, just as if I were in the room. But I'm not there.

My father comes home and picks me up, hugs me. He plays with me for several minutes while you watch. My soldiers overrun his. Then he helps me gather up the toys and put them away. He leads me into another room with promises of letting me watch my favorite video. A short while later, he comes back and sits beside you.

"It's all taken care of," he tells you.

Your body language suggests you don't want to know the details — the two of you had discussed the plans so many times, why revisit it now that it's done? But he tells you everything. How he left my brother at a Nameless commune before dawn, strapped into a safety seat and sedated. How he visited the district Vitals Officer and explained there'd been a tragedy a few days ago, that one of their sons had died in his sleep. The family, he told the officer, chose a simple private burial. He bribed the officer with a moneycard. It might not have even been necessary, my father said, the officer probably would have understood. But he didn't want to take any chances.

I come back into the room, asking if someone will play with me, asking now where my brother is. No one speaks, but you stand up, take me by the hand, and lead me back out of the kitchen. I notice a glistening in your eyes as you and I pass by the place from which I'm watching.

#

I rented a car and drove towards where my father had told you the Nameless commune stood. Almost forty years later I knew it might be hard to find my brother. The communes were where people who had opted out or been forced out of society lived. They were cut off from the rest of us with no access to schools or the communication network, no ability to take jobs or receive medical care. I had no real idea what my brother would look like as an adult other than the thought that he might be tall like myself but have black hair and favor your appearance.

Some people say life in the communes hearkens back to a simpler time. Maybe that's so, but that simpler time came with hard manual labor, no medicines to cure infections, and a lifespan thirty years shorter than in regular society.

I couldn't find the commune when I drove those desolate roads far from the city. I thought maybe I had misunderstood the directions and tried several different routes. My arms grew weary, I expected they soon would begin to tremble, and I had to give up the search for the day.

I didn't have the strength for wasted trips. The communes were not officially recognized, but there was still information to be had if you looked in the right places. I found that I hadn't taken the wrong route. My brother's commune had been struck by a wildfire two years after he was abandoned there. Dozens of people died trying to save the crops and buildings, but the commune was destroyed. My brother, being so young, probably was saved from the flames, and he would have had no role in trying to fight the fire. But the commune was not rebuilt. Its residents were dispersed to others across the country. The residents were Nameless, so there was no record of who was dispersed where. My brother could be anywhere and I had no hope of finding him.

#

Denied the opportunity to reconnect with my brother in the present, I could only revisit the past. I felt that I had to understand how I came to have a brother and why you sent him away. I explored our early years. I was present at our birth. Not even you were aware that you carried two children. If it had been detected, one of us would have been eliminated early in your pregnancy. There was a small degree of mercy in the laws that restricted each family to one child and after my brother and I survived the prenatal scans no one forced you to give one of us up. Not directly, at least.

We weren't identical twins. His hair came in jet black, mine was a dirty blonde. His shoulders were broader, and where I favored our father's appearance, he favored yours. These were differences I could see, watching us in tiny fragments of the several years we both lived in our home.

There were also differences that no one could see, but they were reported in the genetic analysis report produced after our third birthday. This report was a precursor to placement in the education system. I had traits suggesting capacity for strong intellectual skills, determination, and an athletic nature. My brother's report was less promising. He was likely to mature with a great degree of empathy, but otherwise I outranked him across the board.

When it was time for us to go into education, I was to be routed to the schools which would prepare me for a profession using my intellect. I might someday be an engineer, a physician, or a law-maker. My brother was assigned to the schools for future tradesmen. There was no shame in this. Society needed people to repair its vehicles, build its great residential towers, and keep its sewers functioning properly. But I watched you and my father favor me over my brother in various little ways.

My brother's fate was sealed when the time came to actually enroll us in our schools. The government had let us both live, but our family was still only entitled to a single education credit. To send both of us to school, you would have to pay one full tuition. I watched the two of you discuss how to make this happen, but it was obvious from your first discussion that there was no hope of making it work. I don't think either of you wanted to believe that. You thought there would be some way to pull it off.

That hopeful attitude didn't last long. Within a week, you were asking each other what to do if only one of your sons could go to school.

#

I've returned from the evening when you and my father planned my brother's disappearance and gone directly back into the past to watch my father give my brother away. It's dark and cold. My father's breath fogs the air as he carries my brother in a safety seat up the long path leading to the commune's front porch. He sets my brother's seat down and looks at him for a moment, watching his sleeping breaths. Our father bends down and brushes my brother's hair away from his eyes for the last time. Then he raps on the door twice and jogs away, back down the path, not waiting for an answer to his knock. He passes me, and there's no sadness in his eyes. That doesn't matter, though. I've already decided that feelings of sadness or remorse were irrelevant. You made the decision together, and that choice is all that I care about. I will avenge my brother.

I'm sure that I'm only months from disability status. Every day I feel more tired than the day before. I've stopped running and have progressively more trouble making my hands work the way I need them to. There are times when I find it hard to swallow correctly. I don't have any desire to live like this. That makes me feel weak in a way, knowing that I'd rather die than let the disease progress. I've taken that weakness, though, and turned it into strength. My illness has given me the strength to balance our family's accounts.

It's dark here now, in the realtime. I'm outside your house. I have three hypodermics, each loaded with enough medication to knock out an adult for hours. I have other containers filled with flammable chemicals, and I have matches. I have my key to our house, the key I haven't used in three years.

Perhaps my brother, the empathetic one, would have been able to accept your choices. Maybe he could have come to the conclusion that, whatever you showed on the outside, the decision must have been corroding you from the inside all these years and judged that punishment enough. I can't.

You're both asleep when I make the injections and neither of you stirs. I know the drug is fast-acting, so I don't inject myself yet. I have to make sure that the fire isn't going to fail. I pour the chemicals through the small rooms of the house and light the blaze. It spreads faster than I had imagined but then — that's why it destroys so ruthlessly. I have a moment of fear that the flames and smoke will give me pain before the drug takes hold. I go into the room that was my brother's and mine when we were young. It's a study now so there are no beds. I lay down on the floor. My left arm spasms and it takes me a few seconds extra to give myself the injection. I feel the sting though, and know that within moments, I won't feel anything at all, ever again.

You can't change the past. That's how it works. But you can always change the present.

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**Author Bio:** Michael Haynes lives in Central Ohio where he helps keep IT systems running for a large corporation during the day and puts his characters through the wringer by night. An ardent short story reader and writer, Michael had over 20 stories accepted for publication during 2012 by venues such as Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, and Daily Science Fiction. He is a member of SFWA.

This story was first published at Kazka Press in April 2012.

## Terminal Illness by D. F. Huettner

~ 3060 words

Jackson Keyes wiped the sweat from his face, once again cursing the heat of the southern California desert. He hummed one note, trying to concentrate on the road instead of the pain in his head. The car began to veer off the pavement raising clouds of dust, and Jackson lurched in the seat trying to pull the old auto from the soft shoulder.

Then he saw it, a small town, barely visible on the horizon. Probably no air conditioning, he thought, grabbing his soaked handkerchief to wipe away the sweat.

The town was tiny, a haphazard collection of one story cement block buildings with one central streetlight at the square. He sat through two cycles of red and yellow before a pickup truck behind him blasted its horn. The green signal lamp must have burned out.

"Yeah, all right," Keyes grumbled and wiped his face again.

His stomach cramped and he coughed at the nausea. He had to get to that bank, he thought. The time was near. He pulled over to a young boy on the sidewalk and asked about the bank.

"Down there, mister" the youth said, pointing.

"You mean take a right at the square?" Keyes asked, but the boy was gone, walking, already halfway down the block. Keyes turned back to the wheel of his car. He had to get to that bank soon, or he never would -- the time lag had already started to become noticeable.

Another cramp, and this one worse. Keyes had to wipe the spittle from the corner of his mouth. He started to wipe his face again, but thought better of it, looking at the damp handkerchief and tossing it across the seat.

He forced himself to put the car in gear and slowly drive down the street to the square. Halfway down the block to the right was the bank. Several people were loitering on the sidewalks of the street, and Keyes tried not to attract too much attention as he parked and clambered out of the car and opened the trunk to retrieve his tool case.

Walk a straight line, he thought, crossing the street toward the bank building. His stomach was in knots and sweat poured down his face despite the breeze blowing up the street. He slowed somewhat to step up onto the curb. He was almost there.

Keyes reached for the huge handle of the bank door and missed, losing his balance and falling backwards into a short elderly woman who sported a gigantic handbag and three leashed Pekingese.

"Well! My goodness!" the woman said, flustered, as her three miniature monsters yipped and guff-guffed, dancing around her feet. "Quiet Missy! Hush Sissy! Heel Prissy!" the old woman cried, trying to untangle her feet.

"I'm dreadfully sorry." Keyes managed holding the door open for the woman and her entourage.

Inside the bank it was hot, no air conditioning.

The bank was small, the smallest bank office Keyes had ever seen. And yet there was an elegance that told of a past time in the small town when money flowed and lives were lived. The one teller stood behind an ornate brass grill set in carved walnut. The counter beneath the grill was worn into a trough that shined with the burnishing of age.

The woman and dogs hurried to the teller's window as another cramp hit Keyes. From her handbag, the woman produced a large canvass money pouch and plopped it down before the teller.

Keyes groaned and slumped into the only chair to wait for the woman to complete her business. Sweat stung his eyes and he raised a sleeve to wipe his forehead.

"I demand satisfaction!" the woman said bringing forth a tattered passbook. The bewildered girl behind the window warily accepted the book.

"Mrs. Plover, what's the matter? What's wrong?" she asked.

"It did it!" the elderly woman declared. "And I told you it would. I've been banking here for thirty years and never has there been a mistake in my account. Until now! You can talk all you want about machines handling the work, but really!" she huffed. "No machine can think, much less keep track of my money!"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Plover," the teller said cautiously. "What exactly is the trouble?"

"This bank owes me ten cents!" the woman arrogantly said, producing a crumpled statement printout, waving it in the air. "Your counting machine made a mistake!"

"Now let me see that." The teller reached under the bars for the document. "It's highly unlikely that the computer would make a mistake."

"Oh it is, eh?" Mrs. Plover countered, again digging in her handbag. She produced an adding machine roll held by a rubber band. "I have my arithmetic right here," she said, fumbling with the band. The roll got away from her and plopped onto the floor, unrolling across the floor toward the door. The three beasts at her feet erupted into a chorus of guff, guff, guffs.

An elderly gentleman in a sharp business suit entered the bank just in time to scoop up the runaway roll.

"My, my!" the man remarked. "We're off to a running start this morning. Hello, Emma."

"Mr. Ames!" The teller looked helplessly past the older woman. "Mrs. Plover has a problem."

"Thank you, Donna. I'll take care of this." Mr. Ames said as he rolled up the paper. "Lot o' numbers here, Emma. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Bill, I've been banking here for thirty years," Mrs. Plover began.

"If I remember correctly, Emma," the white haired gentleman interjected, "You were one of my first accounts when I opened the bank back in the corner of Quimby's General Store. Yes, that was before I could even afford to buy a safe. Tom Quimby had the only one in the county."

"But if you are going to continue this new trend of dropping pennies," Mrs. Plover continued her prepared speech undaunted. "Then I shall have to take my banking business elsewhere!"

At that Mr. Ames was visibly upset. Emma Plover was a loaded old girl, and to lose her account would be a heavy blow.

"Now, Emma," he said, trying to quiet her. "Just what is the problem? I'm sure we can work something out."

"You can work ten cents into my account!" Mrs. Plover waved the roll of paper in the man's face. "The ten cents your machine stole from me!"

"Ten cents, Emma?" Mr. Ames took the roll from her and deposited it in her handbag.

"Yes. Your counting machine... your computer cheated me out of ten cents, penny at a time over the past ten months. I watched it on the statements. I've got them right here." She began to dig in the handbag.

"Oh that!" Mr. Ames rubbed the sweat from the back of his neck. "Yes, Emma. No doubt you are right. We have been having some trouble with the computer. In fact..." he glanced at the bank's great, round, wooden wall clock, "I'm expecting a repairman here to look at it today."

At this Jackson jumped up, too quickly though, for his head throbbed. He hiccuped and set his jaw against another wave of nausea. He slowly made his way over to the couple at the counter.

"Excuse me, ah, Mr. Ames?"

"Yes?" The elderly man turned.

"My name is Jackson Keyes. I'm here to look at the computer." He managed a half smile.

"Oh... Oh my! Well... See, Emma. No sooner said than done!"

"But what about my ten cents?"

"I think we can fix that right now. Just a second young man." The bank president fished in his pocket and withdrew a shining Roosevelt dime. He handed it to Mrs. Plover "There. How's that? Now if you'll just leave your passbook here, we'll adjust the figures, and I'll drop the book off on my way home this evening. Is that satisfactory?"

"Well... All right," Mrs. Plover said, relaxing a bit. She lectured Mr. Ames on the way to the door. "I still say, Bill, that machines will be the death of this country."

"Oh, Emma! I remember you said that when Henry Ford came out with mass produced automobiles. Why, had it not been for the sudden increase in auto loans, this bank might still be back in Quimby's Store."

"Well, maybe," she conceded. "But I still say we're entirely too dependent on machines. We rely on them for everything. They have a way of creeping into your thinking until you honestly don't think you can live without them! But not me! No sir! I've never owned a car and I never will. No sirree!"

"Good day, Emma," Mr. Ames said holding the door for Mrs. Plover and her bodyguards. When she had rounded the corner, the old man turned to address Keyes. He paused, studying the younger man, then remarked. "Young man, you don't look at all well."

"Ah... It's just the heat." Jackson began, hoping that Ames would drop the chatter and show him the computer. "I'm used to air conditioned buildings."

"I see..." Mr. Ames eyed the bank's door uncertainly as though Mrs. Plover might come back. "Well, Mr. Ah..."

"Jackson Keyes," He extended his hand. "Call me Jack."

"The computer's back here, Jack." Mr. Ames led the way around the counter to a narrow hall that extended to the rear of the building. At the end of the hall was a door with a large wood plank across it held by metal straps. Above it a sign read 'EXIT'. Along one wall were two narrow doors. The first had a sign saying 'Gentlemen', the second had a sign saying 'Ladies'.

Mr. Ames opened the second door, reached up and pulled a string turning on a single light bulb on the ceiling.

Inside the tiny room sat a computer console on an old metal typewriter table. It was a small personal computer with a monochrome screen and a printer. The keyboard was perched precariously atop the monitor. Behind the computer on the wall were the marks where a sink had hung, and tarnished copper pipes protruded from the cracked plaster. At the far end of the room was a hole in the floor with a rag stuffed into it where a toilet used to sit.

"It isn't much, but it's all we've got," Mr. Ames said stepping aside.

Keyes stepped into the room and began to power up the machine.

"We're connected somehow to a big computer up in Bakersfield," Mr. Ames said. "We put the access number there so we wouldn't lose it," he pointed. Keyes looked, and sure enough, written on the wall in bold magic marker was the central computer's modem line number along with the bank's file access code and pin number.

Jackson was shocked. "Mr. Ames, anybody with a computer, a modem and those codes could take this bank for every cent it's got!"

This elicited a kindly smile from the whites haired gent. "This is a small town, Mr. Keyes. No one would do that." Mr. Ames loudly exhaled, looking with suspicion at the ailing computer. "Well... You know more about this than I do. If you need me, I'll be in my office up front."

Keyes grimaced as the bank president turned and left, then he shut the door.

The waves of pain were coming quicker now. Jackson opened his tool case and dug for a patch cord. The cramping was constant, and his legs were growing weak. Tears were beginning to cloud his vision, yet he managed to type in his personal access codes to link the machine with his computer back at the shop.

Feverishly he grabbed at the computer turning it around to gain access to its input/output ports. He coughed and doubled over in pain. Moving over closer to the machine, Keyes plugged the patch cord into the machine's serial port. He tried to screw in the holding screws, but his hands shook so that he dropped the screwdriver, watching it roll out of reach.

He sat back against the wall gasping for air. The screwdriver wouldn't matter, not anymore. Grabbing the keyboard he slumped over on the floor and typed in his personal access code that would link the bank's PC with the main frame back at the office in Pomona.

Pulling at his right sleeve he fumbled with the button on the cuff, then in desperation, tore the cuff open sending the button flying. The room was disappearing before him. His heart skipped a beat, threatening to fail altogether. He ran his hand along the patch cord until he reached the special connector at its end. Tugging at his sleeve, Keyes weakly plugged the cable into the I/O port embedded in his forearm, then reached up to press the key marked, ENTER.

-- CONNECTION --

With the speed of light - light. Brilliance. His mind was flooded with irradant, golden sheen. His heartbeat became strong and quick. Liquid electric strength flowed through the cord and into his muscles. He opened his eyes, staring at the incandescent sparkling walls.

A smile grew across his lips. Keyes loved to boot up. It was what kept him going now. And it was only a phone call away. With amusement he thought, reach out and touch someone.

The readout began to appear on the wall in gigantic computer letters, like some old movie from the seventies. The program was loaded and running its startup instructions; knowledge was flowing into Keyes memory. There was a job to do. The program needed input.

Sighing heavily, Jackson wiped his face and collected himself to stand. The cursor in his mind was waiting patiently, blinking at what appeared to be three feet before him in space. He focused on the wall, and the program responded.

-- ILLEGAL INPUT - ENTER ALPHANUMERIC INFORMATION --

Booting was fun. Keyes needed it. Extended periods of time disconnected from the mainframe brought on the withdrawal symptoms. But there was work to do, the job he had come for. He stood and focused on the little metal plate on the front of the computer, mentally passing the cursor across

the make and model. Then turning the machine around he ran the cursor across the numbers etched into the rear of the chassis.

-- SEARCHING -- RETRIEVING -- LINKING --

He suddenly knew every atom of the machine before him, its language, its graphics capabilities, its accessory boards, the programs stored on its hard disk, even its power source. He was linked.

-- PREPARE TO ENTER SEARCH/CORRECTION PROGRAM --

Okay, Jackson thought, no resting, ahead full at light speed. He sat down again and thought out the word, watching the letters appear on the computer's screen and in the air between his face and the machine.

-- ENGAGED --

Bracing himself, he reached over to the keyboard and hit ENTER.

It felt as though he were being deflated, sucked down inside himself, then he was in the cord, and then in the computer's CPU board. The program guided him through the circuitry in a systematic search, looking up this avenue and across that bridge. The peripheral semiconductors and leads were all in good condition, but they had to be checked out. Finally Keyes approached the great plateau of the CPU chip. Its semiconducting molecules stretched out before him like a great layer cake of a thousand tiny trails snaking in and around, over and through each other. He started into the maze, running and climbing, sliding and swinging, all the while being urged on by the persistent program.

Then he saw it, a hot spot where the electron flow had begun to knock atoms from their molecular lattice. This small decay in the surface of the silica had the ability to bounce data carrying electrons up to a bridge above him. It probably wouldn't happen often, but it could account for Mrs. Plover's dime, and it would get worse with time.

Keyes thought,

-- PAUSE - SCAN --

The program loosened its grip on him and he passed his mental cursor over the hot spot.

-- ANALYZE --

Keyes waited, and momentarily confirmation came from the mainframe in Pomona.

-- ERROR LOCATED AND IDENTIFIED - CPU CHIP FAULTY --

-- REPLACEMENT NECESSARY --

-- WARRANTY COVERAGE ACCEPTED --

-- SEARCH/CORRECTION PROGRAM TERMINATED --

Moments later, Jackson Keyes strode out into the bank lobby. Seeing him, Mr. Ames came from his office.

"Well, did you find the problem?"

"Nothing much," Keyes smiled, holding up the faulty chip.

"You mean Emma Plover's dime got lost in that little thing?"

"Just over heating. You'll have to get an air conditioner though."

The bank president frowned.

"And you'll have to leave that door open until you get one," he continued, waving his tool case back at the rest room door which hung open. A machine's got to breathe, you know. Machines have needs just like people. I suggest you move your computer into your office. In that way you can enjoy the air conditioning too."

"I'll give it some thought," Mr. Ames said, walking Keyes to the door. "But I don't know what Emma Plover will say. This is a small town, and it's people like her that we rely on. They resist progress and its technology, you know. That's why we hid the computer back in the bathroom to begin with."

"I'm sure," Jackson said as he caught the last of what the man had said. He was listening to the humming electricity in his brain. "But you will need to cool that machine down if you don't want to continue dropping those pennies."

"Hmm, yes..." Mr. Ames raised his eyebrows at the allusion to Mrs. Plover. "Well, thanks for everything, young man." He extended his hand. "You're looking much better, too."

"I do feel much better, thanks." Keyes shook Mr. Ames hand and headed out of the bank and across the street to his car. The sun shone down on the small town, and a light, cooling breeze blew steadily at his back as he placed the tool case in the trunk.

Yeah, I feel better now, he thought, turning into the breeze and wiping the first bead of sweat from his forehead. I feel better now, but it's a long ride till I get home to the Mainframe.

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**Author Bio:** D.F. Huettner lives in rural Pennsylvania, USA. His stories have appeared in Planet Magazine, Nuketown News and Rogue Worlds online. He has published three novels and a collection of novellas, available on [Amazon Kindle](#).

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