



Redstone Science Fiction

January

2012



Rhiannon Held & Christopher Miller

Redstone Science Fiction #20
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(This story contains adult themes and descriptions. Seriously.)

Editor's Note – January 2012

by Michael Ray

We started Redstone Science Fiction two years ago because we saw that there were a limited number of professionally paying markets. A lot of good stories were going unpublished, or were being published in markets that did not pay at all. If you're not being paid, then one might as well publish it on your own website. So we created a professional market. (There certainly has been an explosion of excellent markets since then!)

We started Redstone SF to publish science fiction. Most of the professional markets were publishing a mix of urban fantasy and 'soft' science fiction. We enjoy these type of stories and many others. In fact, we are huge fans of epic fantasy. But, there were very few slots where one could be certain that specifically SF stories would be published. So we created a strictly SF market.

We created an online magazine because it was a financially reasonable proposition. We did not expect to make money, but the technology exists to create a quality market with a minimal investment. We found a way to underwrite the magazine that allows us a break-even operating budget as an online magazine. So we created a clean, professional website for RSF.

We focused on following SFWA guidelines so that all our authors would not only be paid professionally, but recognized by the 'guild' of our genre. We stuck to it and worked hard to treat everyone professionally. So in July 2011, after a year of publishing, we were recognized as a SFWA qualifying market.

We've had a great deal of help within the field and from friends. David Chunn's interview with Lou Anders gained us immediate attention in the SF world. Sarah Einstein's Accessible Future Contest in 2010 and Identity Crisis Contest in 2011 gave us exposure in the wider literary world and generated tremendous interest within the genre. Essays of SF literary criticism by Henry Cribbs helped establish our point of view that SF is serious writing and something to be examined and discussed from an academic mindset. Interviews with outstanding editors John Joseph Adams and Cat Rambo also gained us tremendous attention in our early months of trying to establish ourselves. Quality submissions from well-known writers like Cat, and Mary Robinette Kowal to a fledging market like us were greatly appreciated. Reprints of my favorite stories from recent years by Hannu Rajaniemi, Ken MacLeod, and the ubiquitous Cory Doctorow were also important factors in establishing our name and 'brand'. The support of SF social media mavens like Christy Yant, Samuel Montgomery Blinn, and Charles A. Tan, who have helped promote us to the online world, have been of substantial importance. We've even started creating story podcasts with Amanda Fitzwater, and are excited at the prospect of bringing the rest of our stories online. So we have become integrated into the SF world at large.

But where does that leave us now, in 2012? We've reached our central goals and have maintained our professional standards. What now must we do? We have decided to focus our efforts on the stories and the authors. We are very pleased to be the first professional publication of many authors and to have provided a forum for outstanding work that might not otherwise be

published and recognized. That is our reason for moving forward, to publish top-notch science fiction.

Two authors we are proud to have published in Redstone SF are [Rhiannon Held](#) and [Christopher Miller](#). Rhiannon's first story in RSF, Bloodtech, struck us with its quality, and it came as no surprise that she was soon signed by Tor to write a trilogy. We accepted two of Chris Miller's stories, very early in the development of RSF because they overwhelmed us with their hallucinogenic quality that seemed like Philip K. Dick was haunting our inbox. This month we have new stories from each of them that are simply outstanding. We are confident you will enjoy their work as much as we do.

Thank you for supporting Redstone Science Fiction. As we move into our third year of working on the magazine and publish our 20th online edition, we are as excited as ever to add something to the field we all love so much.

Your Friend,
Michael Ray
Editor
RSF

Ice in our Veins

by *Rhiannon Held*

He had the dragon's eyes. Artemisia didn't need to check for the telltale tint around her patient's nail beds or staining his teeth. Only Ice users of several years had irises that golden. His stood out against tanned skin in a narrow, sharp face, black hair left to fall into his eyes.

He moved like a user too, settling precisely onto the chair in her office. Some of her non-user clients slouched, angry or sulky; some perched, anxious and ready to escape. This man centered himself on the padded seat, pulled his cuffs down, and placed his wrists directly over the sensors in the arms. They were supposed to give her desktop a passive read on heart rate, blood pressure, and perspiration. Thwarted by insulating fabric, the program flashed a discreet red indicator on the desk surface.

Artemisia frowned. Not many besides other counselors and health professionals would know the sensors were in that particular spot. She might want to reconsider her approach and use more medically sophisticated language. She dismissed the sensor warning with the tap of a fingertip and opened the appointment file with another. It was a community referral appointment, short on details. No name, only an alias: "Stonewall". Some overworked social officer skimping again. "What brings you to me?"

"Our loyal social force." An unexpected note of humor threaded through his voice. Artemisia sat straighter, wondering if he'd dosed before he arrived. Long-term Ice users tended toward flat affect when not recently dosed. Like they had ice in their veins, they said on the street.

"Which is kind of them, but I can't help you if *you* don't want to quit." Artemisia circled her fingertips in a doodling program open to one side, making shimmering patterns. She hated this part of community referrals, finding out which people weren't going to let her help. "When did you last dose?"

Stonewall flicked a fingernail against the chair's sensor surface. "It sounds completely different if you know what to listen for. It's amazing what they put sensors in, nowadays. I designed some of them. Once upon a time. You have medical Ice you can give people, don't you? Start weaning them off?"

It took Artemisia a moment to catch up with the abrupt switch in topic. An engineer, then, not someone in medicine. Still more educated than most users she saw. "Yes and no. I can prescribe a synthetic serotonin substitute, but it suffers from many of the same problems as the drug sold on the street as Ice. Since it doesn't allow the brain to return to its normal serotonin production, one remains stuck in the cycle of requiring higher and higher doses. It's good in low doses for depression, but for anything else it's really no better than a pure form of the drug, without the staining from the materials street cooks use to cut it." Artemisia touched the corner of her eye.

"I need some of that 'synthetic serotonin substitute'." Stonewall stood, his little game with the chair sensors apparently done.

Artemisia allowed him the position of greater power if that made him feel better. She tilted her head up. “You’ve given me no reason to prescribe you any. I’m not here to provide you a purer source to feed your addiction.”

“It’s easy for you to judge, isn’t it? Don’t you ever think people might have reasons for getting addicted?” Stonewall spoke with a characteristic cool tone. Artemisia could never quite get used to the lack of emotional body language to accompany users’ words. He should have been gesturing or clenching his hands, but he stood with them loose by his side.

Artemisia drew a straight path across her doodle pad and stood. At least he was still talking to her. That was hopeful, though she had to be careful of hope. She couldn’t get invested in the cases she had to bounce right back. “Everyone has a reason. My job isn’t to tell you that reason is wrong. My job is to find something else to help.”

Stonewall brushed his hair from his eyes and ended with a rub at the back of his neck. The hair fell right back again. “Which is why I need the pure stuff. You don’t understand, and I don’t think I can safely tell you.” He started pacing, stopping to flick his fingers against the display surface that filled one wall. Artemisia had it set to a field of wildflowers at dusk. “The risk may be necessary, however.” Flick, flick.

“The risk?” Artemisia trailed a finger over his file. No medical history had magically arrived to suggest a previous condition he’d been self-medicating with Ice that might cause paranoia.

“Our darling government.” Stonewall returned to stand before her desk, expression flat. “Remembers a predecessor of Ice: Ecstasy.”

He raised his eyebrows at Artemisia and she nodded. They’d covered that briefly in school. “With Ecstasy, the user often crashes into anxiety, instead of into flat emotions, as with Ice.”

“Exactly. When the target is loyal, reward them with a dose of pleasure. When they’re not, let them crash into depression. Make them need the next dose, until they’ll do anything you say. Build yourself a corps of brainwashed slaves.” Stonewall leaned forward, hands on her desk.

An indicator flashed in alarm, detecting input from fingers with the wrong vitals. Artemisia verified the default lock-out of those vitals without really looking. Definitely paranoid, damn. That made helping him more complicated. What had caused it? “Why do you think they’re after you?”

“They did it to everyone in my department. We built the next generation of their little spies. We know how many places they hide their sensors to keep track of everyone.” Stonewall pushed back and straightened. “Only I discovered that if I started using, I didn’t need their dose.” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I was my own man again. If I never feel anything again—well, so be it. They want to squash Ice production, of course. Make us all loyal slaves again. I need a prescription for the medical stuff. Dragon’s eyes are too noticeable. They get you swept up.”

Artemisia chewed on her lip. “How do you think they dose you?” Keeping him talking had gotten her this far, and maybe she could unpack his delusions a little. Conspiracy theories were common enough, but she’d always wondered how they persisted given the country’s useless elected officials in an equally ineffectual system.

“I don’t think anything.” Stonewall rubbed the back of his neck. “I know. I don’t have time to explain this to you. Even though I refused to give my real name, they’ll have noticed the arrest record by now.” He glanced around as if government agents would burst through the walls at any moment.

Artemisia hovered her fingers over the command to summon security, then pulled them back. He didn’t seem violent, just scared. As scared as a user could be. “I can’t force you to stay, but I really would like to help you. If someone’s dosing you, maybe we can figure out who and do something about it.”

Stonewall barked a laugh. “You don’t believe me. Well, I don’t blame you. I hope for your sake you don’t discover otherwise.” He disappeared into the hall.

“Wait.” Artemisia followed, hurrying after him. She would normally have let him go, but something about him had snagged her attention and wouldn’t release it. Maybe it was that he knew about the sensors, maybe it was that he knew about a drug that had vanished from the street half a century ago. She really only remembered it because of a classmate, Jem. He’d specialized in older serotonin-related drugs, legal and illegal. She’d asked a lot of questions about them as an excuse for conversation before she met his husband at a party and realized her mistake.

Stonewall pushed through a side door into the building’s garden, then turned back and looked at her in silence. He showed neither suspicion nor interest, but at least he was listening.

“I have a friend who studies that class of drugs. He could help you prove you have Ecstasy in your system, rather than just Ice, if you wanted to take that to the authorities.” Artemisia looked around the garden rather than fruitlessly search his face for a reaction. It was one of her favorite things about the building. The city mandated such spaces for air quality, and most were overgrown with the easiest species to tend. This one had distinct plantings in the shade of several decades-old trees.

The man remained silent for several moments, looking up into a tree. “Is it far?”

“Not at all. A short MassTran ride.” Artemisia turned to head back into the building since the MassTran stop was outside the front entrance, but Stonewall coughed. He put his hand on the gate into the alley behind the garden.

“I need to—” He touched fingertips to his mouth, and Artemisia got it after a second. “I can meet you out front if you can’t stand to be around.”

Artemisia shook her head and followed him out the back way. Giving up Ice cold turkey at this stage rarely worked. If she'd been treating him, she'd have prescribed something else to take the edge off. So standing by and letting him dose wasn't precisely unethical, was it? Illegal, yes, but Artemisia found herself curious what the dose's immediate effects would look like. She'd never had the opportunity to study patients as they dosed before. Or maybe that was just as bad, objectifying the man as nothing more than something to study.

It became moot before Artemisia exhausted all her arguments. Stonewall slipped something from pocket to mouth with a stage magician's smoothness. He leaned with the side of his wrist against the wall. Artemisia sneaked closer, trying to watch his face.

"It'll be a minute or two," he said, voice already richer in intonation. Artemisia watched for anyone approaching as they waited. A laugh from him startled her. "I didn't notice you're so attractive." He touched her shoulder and his hand lingered a beat longer than necessary.

"You're my patient," she reminded him, distracted by his smile. It lit his face and matched the humor she'd heard lurking even at his flattest in the office.

"Not anymore. So where are we going? Where's your friend?" When Artemisia named the MassTran stop nearest Jem's office, Stonewall caught her hand and tugged her to the stop.

She allowed him the hand when he didn't try anything more. His tone and body language were animated and positive as Artemisia paid his fare and they boarded the line, but he clung to her. And chattered. He explained how it was safe to talk because the line was so noisy sensors had trouble, and how he'd disabled other sensors "they" had set to spy on him. It was compelling, and Artemisia filed it all away for when she could consider it without his charisma turned on her.

The building directory showed Jem in his office, undoubtedly plowing through his data. Artemisia sent a greeting and a request to consult about a patient through the directory's internal mail system, typed one-handed, and only had to wait a minute or so before an invitation to come up arrived. She smiled, recalling how glad she sometimes was of distractions from her own data.

Jem had more paunch than she remembered, with gray sprinkled in his hair. He still looked attractive, but worn, with bags under his eyes and a sallow tinge to his chocolate skin. Artemisia pried off Stonewall's hand so she and Jem could embrace.

A second later, she realized Stonewall had pulled away more than she'd pried. When she looked back, Stonewall had stumbled back from Jem. "You," Stonewall whispered. "I remember you. You checked my levels, early on. You told them how to use their poison." His gaze turned to Artemisia. "You're working with him?"

Jem clasped a comforting hand to the side of Artemisia's neck, then stepped back. "You shouldn't associate with this kind of guy," he said, flat. "He's delusional. Especially if he thinks the expert on control can't be controlled in the same way. Chemical effects are chemical effects."

Stonewall's eyes darted to the skin where Jem had touched her, then back to Jem. "I thought the doses you reported seemed higher than what I was feeling." He gave a quick nod, almost a salute, then grabbed at Artemisia's wrist. "We need to get you out of here."

Artemisia slapped away Stonewall's hand only to have Jem nudge her into the hall from the other side. "You should go, but I'd forget about him if I were you," Jem said. "You have more deserving patients to see than some shelter rat whining about decreased libido." He stepped back into his office and shut the door on her.

Artemisia stared at it in shock for a couple seconds before whirling back on Stonewall. "What was that?"

"His sensors will still be working." Stonewall took off down the hall. Artemisia glared after him in frustration for a moment, and then hurried after. She wasn't going to let him get away before she had some answers.

Outside the building, she followed Stonewall into the mandated green space for this building complex, slipping between anemic trees. "Go back to work," Stonewall said as her feet touched dirt. "Forget I exist. If you run, it'll make you look more suspicious. Better you continue to not believe."

"What the hell is this?" She pressed into the man's personal space, arms crossed. Everyone telling her to forget made her that much more determined to figure out what was going on. What Jem had said didn't make sense. Artemisia had never been a sex therapist. Jem knew that. Clearly, he'd been trying to get rid of her. Because he was being controlled?

Instead of answering, Stonewall dug into his pocket and came up with something like an analog pocket watch. Engraving showed faintly on the tarnished surface. He punched a button and the lid sprang open. "Remember: you don't believe. But keep these by, in case you need them."

Artemisia held out her hand automatically and looked down when he set the case on her palm. Half a dozen golden pills with stylized eyes stared up at her. She slapped the lid closed. Dammit, illegal substances were the last thing she needed to be dealing with right now. "Take them back—" Artemisia looked up to empty space. Stonewall had seized the opportunity to disappear through the garden's other exit.

Artemisia stuffed the case into her pocket before someone passed and saw it. She'd have to turn it in on her way past the police post tomorrow morning, tell them a patient had surrendered it as part of his treatment. Tonight, she needed to think. About what she believed.

* * *

All Artemisia's thinking on the ride home got her nowhere. If there really was something going on, who was behind it? And did she want to get involved? But Jem was a friend, and she still wanted to help Stonewall, same as any other patient.

She remembered to take the Ice with her the next morning, but on one cup of coffee, her commute was too ingrained and she missed the police post stop completely. Frustrated, Artemisia tossed the case in her bottom desk drawer when she arrived at her office.

The day was overscheduled as always and Artemisia had no time to think about anything except the patients in front of her. She saw people until forty-five minutes after her official office hours ended, and that still left her all the paperwork to do.

By the time she opened the forms on her desk, all the data techs had packed up and gone home, the lucky dogs, and only a few scattered counselors remained around the office. The hall lights snapped into energy-save mode, leaving Artemisia with a pool from her desk lamp surrounded by gloom. In the quiet, all her questions about Stonewall and Jem came crowding back in. She swept her hand across the surface to save and close the half-finished forms, opened her drawer, and drew out the metal case. It didn't look as much like an antique analog watch on closer examination: no real room for gears. She pressed the button and the lid sprang open again.

What if it *was* some secret government conspiracy? On fourth or fifth examination, the idea seemed no less ridiculous. "Imagine the years of red tape to approve a committee to research how best to form the committee to approve the financing of a behavior modification program," she told the woodgrain sleep mode on her desk as she tossed the metal case back in the drawer.

"We're not affiliated with the government, actually. A common misconception."

Artemisia's heart slammed into her throat and her hands shook in startled reaction as a person's shadow separated from the sharper lines cast by walls out in the hallway. "Smaller, private organizations are so much more nimble, and able to respond to changing circumstances," the man said.

"Christ, you surprised me. Who are you?" Artemisia stood to draw attention from her fingertips' frantic tapping on the desk to wake the surface and allow her access to the security call button.

"You have no particular need to know that." The man took a few steps into the office, revealing a device on his wrist he was manipulating. Her desk stayed stubbornly wood. The device must be a jammer.

She scrambled back as he advanced. Somewhere on a chair behind her was her jacket, and in the pocket a handgun she kept for traveling on public transport late at night. She couldn't look, though, or she'd telegraph her intention and he seemed close enough to hit her first. Her last self-defense class suddenly seemed long ago.

"We could use a counselor on the payroll. All she'd need would be a little discretion, know when to keep her mouth shut about what she's been told. How about it?"

The back of Artemisia's knees smacked into the chair with her coat a split second before the man launched himself at her. Artemisia lashed out with a few kicks, felt them connect, heard him grunt, but it didn't seem to help. He dragged her to the desk by the hair and slammed her cheek

into the surface, holding her down with his weight against her legs and one hand on her shoulders. He twisted the hair off her neck and smoothed down something sticky. A meds patch, Artemisia realized. On the back of the neck. Where Stonewall had fidgeted, and Jem had checked. Of course the back of the neck. Her whole body flushed hot and then ice-cold at the thought, leaving her shaking.

“Now, I should warn you. This will register as Ice in your system on your department’s usual drug test.” The man patted Artemisia’s neck. “And if you don’t do what we say, don’t show up for your next patch when this runs out, they *will* test. You’ll be arrested and lose your job, your credit to rent your apartment or live anywhere else—well, you know how it goes. We’ll contact you with orders, but for now remember that if you tell anyone, the sensors will pick it up and we’ll remind your department it’s time to check their employees. Enjoy the ride.”

His weight lifted, but Artemisia was floating too high to notice anything more. This was the best feeling in the world. She could do anything, weather anything, it didn’t matter that Stonewall had been right, she didn’t care. The professional corner of her mind tagged the feeling as euphoria, but that didn’t encompass it. She wanted to sing, she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, but mostly she wanted to lie here and revel in this feeling forever.

She couldn’t tell how long it lasted, but when it was gone, Artemisia slid off the desk and curled beneath it. Her chest felt too tight to breathe. She couldn’t do this. Tears smeared her cheeks with salt and snot dripped to cover her upper lip as she sobbed. She was stupid, stupid, stupid. How could she not have done something earlier? Escaped, told someone. Stonewall and Jem had given her all the evidence she needed. This was her fault. She was going to end up a slave. She couldn’t even do anything about it, and the hopelessness of that realization crushed her.

The crash lasted a thousand times longer, or maybe about the same length of time as the high. Crawling back to herself was a long process. She shook all over, cheeks raw and eyes stinging. Some part of the drive that had gotten Artemisia through the worst of seemingly impossible exams at school, through the grief after her parents’ deaths, reminded her firmly that she had to do something.

She knew things about these drugs, things Stonewall didn’t. Jem had given her the clue: libido loss. Older antidepressants had been known for that. They were rarely used nowadays, with the availability of synthetic serotonin, but they worked by keeping serotonin already in the system from being broken down, rather than introducing new. Blocking the reuptake of the serotonin they dosed her with would probably be even better than flooding her system with more and more of the synthetic stuff.

Artemisia hugged herself. She had to get some, though. Had to stop shaking, get up, figure out a way to send in the prescription without triggering any alarms, and look normal when she picked it up. Had to find Stonewall and make him teach her how to disable sensors, take her with him. They had to get out of here, stay clear of the social force, and find someone else who would believe them and could do something. All that seemed insurmountable. She couldn’t. She was too stupid, she’d make a mistake, and she could hardly breathe through the fear that had settled in her chest.

Atremisia gasped in anger with herself and slammed her fist into the inner side of the desk beside her head. A drawer jumped out slightly. She stared at it, recalling a small metal case. He was right; not feeling seemed like a pleasant alternative to how she felt now. But it wouldn't take many. Just one or two to get her through.

Bless that man.

The End

*When she's not writing, Rhiannon is a real live lab archaeologist. The "lab" part means that her job of analysis begins when the others come back from playing in the dirt. The "real" part means that fedoras, bullwhips, aliens, and dinosaurs are in short supply. Saying she helps her employer assure that developers are in compliance with federal and state cultural resource management laws might not have the same ring, but she's happy to indulge her imagination in her own worlds instead. Her debut novel, *Silver*, the first in an urban fantasy series from Tor, will be out in June 2012.*

Motherhood

by Christopher Miller

7:47 am (email: 22 seconds ago)

From: Tom Powers

To: Richard Hobbs

Subject: Project Pristine

Hey Rich,

I hate to say it, but I think we might be SOL on this one. Am passing along relevant real-time journal excerpts and communications of Sally's in chronological order as per your request.

Just by way of locking the barn door behind the horses, I recommend we re-screen all high level training personnel at this time, and keep a closer eye on their "creative" endeavors.

Cheers, Tom

1:03 am (journal: 59 days ago)

There is often a taciturn or non-vocal period with new subjects. The longer it is, I've found, the more telling their first words. Prissy has just broken a 29 day speech fast with a vengeance:

"I only know Chester every since he shit hisself on the bus. But Chester say I be makin his skin tight fo long as he can member. An he say if that's all what it done take to bring it to my intension, he shoulda shit hissef long, time, ago."

She plays with herself. She tends to do this when she's nervous or bored. In the early 20th century heyday of barbaric surgical socializations, even though her manipulations are more akin to thumb sucking than masturbation, she'd have been treated with a clitoridectomy, i.e. via the excision of her clitoris.

I hold my arms out to her. "Do you like Chester?"

Prissy stops her diddling and blushes, an ebony cloud cover gathering. "He make me hollow." Like a baby's, her eyes seem too large for her face. She takes my hand in hers and squeezes. "My head hurt. Stupid. Every since I wake up, my head hurt."

I free my hands to massage around the nineteen electrodes that fan across her skull in three rows converging on her temples. Even though there's no need for such caution, I work around the tiny implants as though they are rare seedlings rooting in a field.

Released, her fingers creep back to resume their unconscious consolation. I let her be. She closes her eyes and sighs. Her hair's growing back soft and frizzy. When I kiss her on the forehead as an excuse to breathe her in, she lulls forward. Floral scented oils hover atop a smell that's human and pure. Only her vest restraint keeps her from falling.

"Stupid. Every since I wake up, my head hurt." Her voice is softer now, almost raspy.

I continue to gently furrow along her scalp. Soon she will be asleep.

6:51 am (journal: 59 days ago)

Prissy clenches her jaw in her sleep, the sound of her teeth grinding together coming as if from far away like a platoon of foot soldiers marching, marching over gravel to the drum of her temporal lobe's augments/stimulator tuned to coincide with the EKG's U-wave's calm swells, to juxtapose the beating of her heart, to fill its silences. She breathes through her nose, a bubble of clear mucous expanding and popping with each breath. Each is beautiful. She is beautiful. I study one tiny crystal balloon. In it I can almost see the future, before it bursts.

There is nothing wrong with her genome. It has made many a lab geneticist whistle, been described by the sardonic as "the upside of a good gangbang," one in which the seeds of many donors race for their lives. That her mother was able to live below social radar on the hard streets of South Chicago as a freelance prostitute and lace addict testifies to her adaptability and survivability—hallmarks of superior genetics. And so even though she was too old for the Program and probably too ill to rehabilitate, her mother's post-partum euthanatization struck me as something of a waste and a shame.

Born dependent on Lido-4-methoxy-7-diamphetamine (lace) and gasoline and with 37 percent cognitive brain atrophy, Prissy was adopted and reared by a government group Farm in upper Wisconsin where, in spite of her rehabilitations, she was always described as "something of a shit disturber," as one who, "never quite fit in." So when we discovered her, we were able to acquire her for (as they say) a song.

7:08 am (journal: 59 days ago)

Activity in the visual cortex predicts a REM flash. Prissy squirms in her restraint. "Doan you cry Chester. Y'all jus back the fug off. Who aint never shitted theysself? You hole still Chester. I helpin you. Get them pants off you boy. Doan you cry Chester. I cleanin you up. Here, you can have my unners too... Whoa, Chester... what happen to yo piece?"

I stroke her cheeks while the probes tickle speech centers and exercise memories.

4:30 pm (journal: 52 days ago)

Prissy wears elbow splints to prevent her from reaching and thus yanking on the complex bidirectional ventricular shunt bundle through which excess cerebrospinal fluid drains and through which stem cells and neurogenerators feed into the corpus callosum and surrounding cerebral cortex. It looks like a translucent orange millipede burrowing its way into the base of her skull. It will be disengaged when CSF production stabilizes and her brain stops growing.

7:15 pm (journal: 52 days ago)

She just woke. Her face tilts upwards, her expression both beatific and confused. Metronomically, almost imperceptibly, she begins to pan back and forth, as though watching a tennis match taking place on some faraway hill. Even though her eyes remain closed, she appears rapt. Her hands have found her groin again.

9:35 am (email: 38 days ago)

***From: Martin Jacobin
To: Sally Genesee
Subject: project 20390712:8869CX***

Hey Sally baby!

Just wanted to heads-up you on your little “Pissy Prissy” product in the making. I’ve been shopping around her preliminary Alison-Gilmore Puerility Index scores and a few clips of her snoozing (love that thing she does with her hands btw) on the DL to a few of our bigger brokers, and, to put it mildly—THEY WENT APESHIT!

I mean it. We could pull down like 50-60 m right now for a first rights, six month contract! Bring that little puppy up out of imbecile land and, I shit you not, we are looking at this year’s Golden Companion, maybe even a Nobel Consort! And the money, all the goddamn money—so listen, go easy with that shit in her head. Please. I’m begging you. It’s not like we need another brain surgeon or a rocket scientist or something. You following me doll?

Love Marty

9:36 am (journal: 38 days ago)

An internal email has just arrived from one Martin Jacobin. I'm surprised to be its sole recipient. It's unusual for marketing types to contact developmental services' technical staff. We tend not to speak the same language. But I do my best.

9:37 am (email: 38 days ago)

From: Sally Genesee

To: Martin Jacobin

Subject: RE: project 20390712:8869CX

Hey Marty!

You are an asshole.

FYI: her AGPI results were skewed by a crush she has on a boy named Chester. And what is she supposed to do with her hands? Her arms are in splints. You are the imbecile.

Also, from now on, please go through the proper channels.

Dr. Genesee

9:36 am (journal: 24 days ago)

Technical indoctrination has begun.

A lanky Arab in a flowing white dishdashah smiles down at Prissy. His eyes sparkle, though not in a kind way. He's already removed his gutrah headdress. Now he peels off the lacy, underlying thagiyah and places this intricate, bowl-shaped, skull doily in the hands of a servant as though it were something sacred. His hair is coarse and greasy. There's a dermal mole on his upper lip which he touches obsessively with the tip of his tongue, and a sebaceous growth almost between his eyes. He has wide nostrils that flare when he forces himself to again smile. Were it not for his teeth, he could almost pass for forty. When he extends a hand to Prissy, activity in her hippocampus and thalamus suggest revulsion. When she turns to look at me, I freeze the holo.

The dials beckon. But I am ambivalent. Prissy might associate increased current to her brain's punishment centers with having looked away and thus pay better attention. But she might also construe it as guilt for having watched the Arab undressing in the first place and form an aversion to such presentations. It is an uncertain call. The surest course would be to stimulate the reward centers of the septal area and amygdala as soon as she resumes viewing, and to continue to do so intermittently—to let him give her pleasure.

“What he gonna do?” she asks.

“He’s going to take a bath.”

“Then what he need me fo?”

“Christ if you only knew.” I mumble this without thinking. And now it is part of the session record. An explanation will be required.

“Huh?” Prissy studies the frozen Arab. I don’t need the monitors to see that her revulsion has transformed itself into curiosity. I can see it on her face. My little girl is growing up.

I thaw the holo. Servile hands hold the shoulders of the dishdashah as the Arab steps out of it. Prissy’s eyes widen and her lips seem to reach out with some unspoken question. Because of her splints, it’s hard to tell if she’s gesturing toward his genitals, or trying to shield herself from them. Low amplitude spikes throughout the amygdala, hippocampus and midbrain tegmentum suggest both.

His gonads hang in their rubbery scrotum like a pair of bungee jumping ball bearings at the nadir of their descent. His penis tapers in an abrupt and premature way that, coupled with its hypoxemic discoloration, suggest vascular atrophy and erectile dysfunction. Protocol dictates positive abetment now.

“Shit,” says Prissy.

I begin with a 20 microampere current through the septal nuclei and gradually increase. At 220 microamperes Prissy smiles; at 340 she gasps; at 415 she groans; at 625 she squeezes herself and shudders. She whines when I shut it off and kill the Arab. Shit is right.

9:37 am (email: 10 days ago)

From: Christine Jorgensen

To: Sally Genesee

Subject: WIP review

Dear Sally,

I have been reviewing your sessions with the young black female (a.k.a. project 20390712:8869CX) as I am required to do with all of our high profile developments in progress. May I first say that I am very impressed with the warmth and empathy that you project. It is of no surprise to me that the little girl has taken quite a shine to you even though, looking through her records, I see that she is not one to open up easily to others. I notice that her speech patterns and vocabulary have also improved dramatically as has her ability to interact socially (albeit almost all of her social interaction is with you).

Although I don't claim to understand all the data, it seems her augmentation (gosh I hate that word) is proceeding spectacularly. It's really none of my business, but perhaps you could explain to me (in layman's terms) how there can be such a big discrepancy between her standard problem solving IQ which seems quite normal and her measured mental acuity levels which appear to reach right off the end of the curve. Could there be a malfunctioning in the diagnostic equipment?

Also, I would be remiss in my duties if I did not mention that I am just the tiniest bit concerned that you are becoming overly attached to the child. I know how important it is to exhibit trust and understanding and even feeling to make progress and produce a psychologically viable result. And believe me I know from personal experience just how difficult it is not to fall in absolute love with these little charges. I mean, their innate adorability is a big reason they're here, isn't it? And so I suppose some transference is inevitable. Of course I know you won't let your fondness for her affect the program (I like that word much better) because you are a consummate professional. I would just hate to see you hurt when it comes time to let her go.

Gosh, all I meant to do was compliment you on the wonderful job you are doing, and congratulate you on your progress and on having established such a robust and heartwarming connection with the girl.

Sincerely, Christine Jorgensen – VP HR

9:40 am (journal: 10 days ago)

Prissy's curled in my lap playing with my fingers and watching a middle-aged Taiwanese man with a spherical, Buddha-like physique engage in an energetic coupling with a prone, possibly post pubescent, stoic, possibly Filipino girl when the email arrives. Even though I've been expecting it, I feel weak.

"What's wrong Sally?" Prissy glances at the text the way a careless driver might glance at an intersection before pulling out into it.

"You mustn't read my messages, honey. It's not polite."

"Don't worry, I didn't see nothing... anything." She's lying. From the flash of activity on the monitors, I'd guess she not only read it, but committed it to memory.

"It's just office politics, honey. Human Resources has nothing better to do than meddle in our affairs." With her enhanced sensitivities, Prissy can tell when I'm lying from my voice and the feel of my skin better than I can tell when she's lying using advanced and specialized biometric hardware plugged right into her brain.

The man appears to climax. Prissy slides a silver band on and off my ring finger. She appears distracted. I should be tweaking her attention.

“That Jorgensen woman’s full of shit you know. That bitch got... she has no business to threaten you like that.”

Prissy’s protecting me. It makes me want to cry.

12:04 pm (email: 10 days ago)

***From: Sally Genesee
To: Christine Jorgensen
Subject: RE: WIP review***

Dear Ms. Jorgensen – VP HR,

Thank you so much for your kind words and for your concern. It is comforting to know that there are qualified people like you looking out for me, people who can see the big picture and yet know how hard each of our small roles can be.

I am happy to try to answer your question re Prissy’s intelligence. IQ as measured via the revised Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale test battery is indicative of motivation and education more than innate problem solving ability. In other words, it requires the full cooperation of a literate test subject. Also, there are many types of intelligence or creativity of which the SBIS only covers a very few. The “mental acuity levels” you mention pertain to a more objective diagnostic analysis of the brain’s “hardware” if you will. Prissy has taken very well to our treatments. Frankly, I’ve never seen anything quite like it and, like you, am not quite sure how to interpret or extrapolate on it. Although I think it safe to say that she has genius potential.

Like you (and I am reading between the lines here), I worry that I do not apply enough negative conditioning during our sessions, or positive either for that matter. It is not my intent to “spare the rod,” but I believe that excessive “artificial” anguish can give rise to numerous psychopathologies by inuring subjects to guilt and fear and other natural motivators, jamming their own self-programming if you will. Excessive artificial pleasure can be equally spoiling and debilitating and reduce their usefulness and truncate their already extremely short careers. But I will revisit my thinking in light of your subtly expressed concerns.

I apologize for taking so long to get back to you. You have given me a great deal to think about. Thank you again for your praise, help and consideration.

Sincerely, Dr. Sally Genesee

3:03 am (journal: 3 days ago)

The splints are gone. The internal ports and shunts will remain a part of her, but all external catheters and filaments have been disconnected, severed and capped like so many vestigial umbilici.

Prissy sits on my lap facing me, her legs around my waist, her arms around my neck, clinging to me like a marsupial, and I her. Neither of us watches the final-stage indoctrination material running on the holo. From its projections can be heard a repetitive slapping sound which causes me to imagine a lone patron standing in a darkened theater applauding, slowly, artificially, without enthusiasm, without pleasure, almost apprehensively, waiting for some inevitable encore. We gaze into each other's eyes. Neither of us speaks; words are not needed now. Neither of us blinks; our eyes require no lubrication. Grunts and cries punctuate hollow claps.

8:00 am (email: 3 ½ hours ago)

***From: Michael King
To: Sally Genesee
Cc: Tom Powers***

Subject: excursion protocols

Dear Ms. Genesee,

It has been brought to my attention that trainee 20390712:8869CX is currently flagged "Out of Compound" and that because you have not submitted a monitored excursion request (MER) form (f.237.02) as per company policy and as per your previous outings with this trainee, we cannot fix her whereabouts. We trust that she is secure and safe at your home in Northbrook, but authorized taps into your surveillance system have not yet verified this. Needless to say that with the amount invested in and potential value of this project, this warrants significant concern.

Be advised that we have forwarded this communication without prejudice and pursuant to article 10.6.2 of your collective agreement on to your association rep, Mr. T. Powers, to be filed as a written reprimand on your employment record pending satisfactory explanation and return of said trainee.

Have a nice day, Michael King – Senior Counsel, Chief of Security

10:34 am (email: 53 minutes ago)

***From: Sally Genesee
To: Michael King
Cc: Tom Powers***

Subject: RE: excursion protocols

Hello Michael (and Tom)

When I was a little girl growing up on the Farm, one of my brothers caught a large gray rat and kept it in a steel bucket with a piece of wire mesh over the top. We gave it chicken feed and water and considered it happy. It began to gain weight in its new environment. At first we thought we were making it fat. Then, a week or so later, it gave birth to approximately 16 beautiful pink babies. I say approximately because by the time the last were delivered, it had already eaten the first, nibbling them down headfirst.

I still think about her sometimes. When did we begin to eat our young?

Prissy is safe and secure. The net has holes in it, holes through which a child can still fall. And there are still people who want children for unselfish reasons, people who still have hope for the future.

Do not bother to try to recover her. Yes, the world is very small. But it is also very large. Did you know that there are almost 20 million people in Calcutta, and even more in Mexico City? I will give you some hints: she is not in Calcutta; she is not in Mexico City. (Also, it might be unwise to try to track her down. She is already more intelligent than any of us, and I am not sure we have been forgiven.)

Are you surprised to learn that my own temporal ports are still accessible with the proper adapters? I will give you one more clue while I can still remember: she is with people who love her now.

Sally

From: Richard Hobbs

To: Tom Powers

Cc: Michael King, Christine Jorgensen

Subject: Sally Genesee

Tom, thanks for compiling this, though not sure I appreciate your flippancy given the gravity of the situation. We've lost a capable technical trainer. And I'm sure it will sadden you to learn that euthanasia seems the best option. Sally's brain-spike trauma is complete and irreversible.

Michael, I'm looking for you to smooth the way in this regard. Although she's surely beyond suffering, we owe it to her dignity not to prolong the matter.

Christine, this might create something of morale issue. I'm sure you'll handle it with tact and firm compassion. I leave it to you to organize the memorial service once Michael has cleared the

legal hurdles. This is unlikely to wash as an unfortunate lab accident. Records of Sally's difficult childhood, from before she came under our guidance, are now at your disposal.

Finally, I'm sure you are all concerned as I am for the beautiful little girl and that you fear as I do for her wellbeing out in the world beyond our control. But the situation is far from hopeless. It is, after all, our business to discover children. One of our augmented Psychics claims to have pictures forming: mercuric worms disgorging vermicula, an ocean view of such panoramic splendor that the curve of the earth is discernable, all superimposed by the dim reflection of an Asian girl and a Down's boy laughing. The Psychic is certain she's alive, that these are her images.

New corporate humanity is organized less along national and civic boundaries than globe-spanning strata of privilege. The AIs do not believe Sally would have delivered her into the masses at the impoverished, static core. And inhabitants of the outer layers, where opportunity and freedom dwell, though motile, are few. An Intuitive has contemplated the Psychic's visions and feels the girl is in Japan, possibly atop one of the new tectonic wonders that are the thermo-plastic polymer and poly-graphite super-rises of either Osaka or Shinjuku, that the worms depict the packed commuter trains below, that she may have undergone racial modification, and the boy, just an unfulfilled wish, just a thing from the past.

Richard Hobbs – CEO Global Companions

The End

Bio

*Born on the cusp of the first hydrogen bomb's test detonation, Christopher Miller's formal education includes a university degree and a college diploma. His legitimate professions (of longer than a day, in no particular order) include stock boy, paper boy, pot washer, baker's helper, geriatric orderly, union rep, painter (of apartments, not canvases), farm hand, technical writer, baby-sitter, software developer, line cook, dish washer and restaurateur. He has two sons, one granddaughter, and has always wanted to be a writer. His stories have been published in *Cosmos*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Nossa Morte*, and elsewhere. He was recently [nominated for a Pushcart Prize](#) for his story in *Decomp*.*