

Earth

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I put my finger in the hole; I have no need to ask, our contract allows me. Deep within the folds of loose back skin, I trace a mountain range of keloid scar tissue along a winding path, its passage blocked at irregular intervals by stitches struggling to craft what is missing and mend damaged wiring. As I feel my way, a model of the unseen space builds in my mind. It is clear as noon here in the dark, where knowing is tactile and mystical.

"I never knew."

"I don't talk about it much. People don't see it much either," they say quietly.

"How did it happen? When?"

"Was in the war. Flying metal cut right through me. There're bits in there still. They play up sometimes; let me know when a storm is coming." They smile, pulling their weight up; the radiation from the south-facing window, gives shape to their form, a loose structure of skin, bone and shadow.

Naked from the waist up, their breasts hang, nipples grazing the top of their belly roll. On their head, a peaked red cap, faded and worn, a symbol of bloody and failed revolutions. News crackles from the radio: ... CloudCom has made its first successful landing on Jupiter, beating its competitors. Their cargo ships return from Mars this week with new penicillins. Production is up 1,000% against last quarter. Same as yesterday, same as every day.

"It must hurt."

"It does."

I ask which war.

"The Hybrid Wars. The world was so unstable and full of conflict, there were so many I don't remember and I forget the reasons, though many were economic, fought at a distance by children recruited at gaming conventions to kill digitally." They turn to face me. "We were fighting back. We were

changing the world.”

I try to imagine the past from their point of view; to understand their naïve revolutionary optimism.

“But nothing changed! It’s the same, but different. Normal.”

“There is no normal. You’re wrong. It is transformed. I don’t know this world.”

I see their bio-hacked body tense. They cry slow tears, and with melancholy say, “Perhaps I was on the wrong side.”

“Maybe you were.”

“What would you have done if you had to fight? My parents had to fight, like their parents, and their parents before them. It is written in our block-chain. Everything was thrown at us. It was political, emotional, cyber and biowarfare. You see the world differently to me. You live in a different world to the one I know.”

I look at the badge I am wearing: the small white flower of a conscientious objector that proclaims that I am a pacifist, opposed to this violent world. I like to think that I would have refused to fight, but the truth is that I don’t know what I would have done. I don’t reply.

They lie back, asleep in moments. I cover them with a blanket and sit back also, to watch and listen to the secret language of things. Settling into the high-backed chair, my own body sags from the burden and I use the time to charge and update my software. On the wall opposite, a family photo of our younger selves looks on.

The décor resonates a tangible brown hum; the colours and hues vibrate at different frequencies and manifest beige and shabby pink and orange. The texture of the bedspread’s weave makes a light rasping noise as their body rolls. I log a photogrammetry of ornaments and personal effects, placing each object in the room relative to all the things in my mind. Cup rings on the bedside table mark its life span and tell me they have taken in liquids and medicine today. I am interested in their meal – I need to determine if

they have eaten and what.

I return to the dark space and watch the phosphenes swirl, and ebb and flow. Imagining that I am swimming in aquatic forests amongst shoals of fish and symbiotic organisms, I drift in the swell and the rhythm of crowds. I sit like this for hours. Suddenly, a break in the rhythm of exhalation. I panic, and rush to check they are still drawing air. As I lean over, they twitch and an arm flies up, lashing out. A well-aimed fist catches my jaw. Anticipating further blows, more pain, I duck and reel away. In my mind, I see a small figure running to a closed door, trying to escape the violence that happens in the family, the oppression of the private neo-nuclear home, with no safeguards. I recoil, remembering sleeping in shadows, as bruised tissue repaired, and violence and grief came to live in my body. They sleep undisturbed. At my station, my jaw throbs and I slow my racing heart.

On a tide of outgoing memory, I travel far away from here, from the confines of our smart-home prison. Their social credit score is zero. I ignore the feelings of shame and remorse bubbling to the surface of my thoughts.

I am my mother's keeper. As I have been all my life. Watching, tracking and protecting the family production unit, surveilling their privacy – human software living with its customer, serving advertisements and selling product updates, spying on them for our great Corporate State.

I feel their electricity pulse as they open their blue-grey eyes. The left eyelid sticks with age. Inhaling their pheromonic hydrocarbons, I am simultaneously comforted and repelled by the strong earthy smell. Soiled; vulnerable; in pain. I feel a strong sensuous urge to hold them close.

"Mummy." I repeat. "Mummy. Are you awake?"

They yawn. "You're still here."

"Of course. That's what I do." I smile. "Tell me again. About when I was small. About when I was a baby."

They manoeuvre their immobile bulk to face me. "When you were a baby?"

It was a lifetime ago. I hardly recall.”

“Try. Tell me the story.” We run through the old routine, for what may be the last time.

“We grew you.”

“Grew me?”

“Yes. In a bag.”

“In a bag?”

“Yes. In a plastic bag. That’s how all rescued children are grown outside of the womb. You are no different from the others, though we chose you. We used a DIY kit: a homemade lung and pumps that fed you nutrients and extracted your waste. Every day we watched you grow. Looking in at you and your beating heart. A little shrimp swimming in salt solution. The happy product of our labour. Our own little commodity; our treasure. We wouldn’t exchange you for anything.”

I have a memory of the water, and a time when I had no feelings of fear towards the world. Floating in patches of sun-warmed liquid, sensing light refracted through the surface. Then quickly, violently, air rushing into my lungs, as I am made to breathe outside. My throat constricts and rage bursts from my chest.

“You’re no earth mother. I didn’t choose this. I don’t choose to be here.” I shout. “We should be manufacturing one another with joy, not like this. Why on earth would you do such a thing? It isn’t fair.”

“Life isn’t fair,” they reply bluntly, bracing to turn away. They always turn away. “We thought the more there are of you, grown locally by many people, the more resilient we would be. We couldn’t risk just one point of failure. We needed backups.”

“Do you know how that makes me feel?” In truth, I feel vaguely reassured to know there are more of me. But I feel anger, hatred even, rising in my voice.

“You weren’t raising children. You were subcontracting. Building an army

for your own protection. It was a machine pregnancy. Machines don't nurse, can't love. It was commercial state surrogacy. You were manufacturing life. I want out."

"You can't. It's in our contract. We surrendered our freedom to have you. Anyway, you receive more than we were given. You're our property; registered to us when we broke the seal. We own your labour, and we give it to the State. It's in the Terms and Conditions, in the Service Agreement." Their cold, dry words resonate with bile.

"I didn't know about the T&Cs. I didn't sign up to this."

"We did. We thought we were doing the right thing. We wanted reproductive equality. We wanted to stop the oppression of women and children and to remove the gender divide." They pull themselves up. "I wanted a child, and I couldn't do it any other way. My womb was so badly damaged by microplastic."

"What about my genetic mother? What about her labour - her oppression? Did she have a choice? You removed her from the process. Protect the foetus at all costs. The foetus has a cost. I pay the price." I scream, overriding my obey commands. "Divorcing your partner is emancipating. Divorcing your parents is a crime."

They turn fully away from me now.

I look at my parent's back, at the place I now know a weakness lies, and then at the anklet that binds me to the house, and without thinking, I take the cup of old coffee from the bedside table, and pour its contents over their exposed wiring. With surprising speed, their electronics sizzle and short, and their body flops. As their head rolls backwards towards me, mouth silently open, my hand catches their cap as it falls.

Walking quickly to the door, I hear beeps sounding rapidly and run out into the street, forwards through streams of driverless traffic, navigating between perfectly sequenced cars. Reaching the other side, I stop to catch

my breath, enveloped in human noise and autumnal air that feels dense and polluted. A circle of shadow rings my feet. The anklet has signaled my location.

“Attention, Employee. You must return to your workplace immediately. You need to return to the house.”

Turning I look up to find a drone spinning around its axis to aim its camera directly at my face; its live facial recognition logging my age, gender, political and sexual orientation, ethnicity and emotion from my expression. It knows who I am.

The disembodied voice continues, “Employee 8491154, you do not have permission to leave the house. I am authorised to arrest you. Your mother is wanted for war crimes. As part of the machinery of death, they are charged with 2,132 counts of accessory to murder. They must be watched at all times. You must return to your duty.”

I have a few seconds to decide before the information travels, before the State Police are alerted. They do not know I have killed my mother, only that I have left the house.

I look down at the cap in my hand, throw it over the camera and run.

Earth is the first of a collection of short stories designed around the alchemical elements – building blocks that built the world the way it is – that could just as easily built it differently. Alchemy the project of the past, is of the future too. Set in a near future of corporate nation states, toxic supply chains and environmental collapse, hope, like lifeblood runs through, and the smallest act of resistance can have global effect. Welcome to the Great Transition.

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