

*Science Fiction
Short Stories*



Dev Gualtieri

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Foreword

When I was in high school, I read a humorous science fiction short story (title and author forgotten), about someone finding an intelligent bomb in his bathtub. I enjoyed that story so much that I've duplicated its mood in several of the stories in this compilation.

Unlike supposedly short stories, these stories really are short. They're designed to get the point across in as few words as possible, while still being entertaining and having some character development. I have an aversion to verbose authors who appear to write as if being paid by the word.

Some of these stories were written quite a few years ago, and all were rejected by a science fiction magazine. Nowadays, rejected authors don't fret. They just self-publish. In this case, the reader benefits, since this collection is published as a free download.

In the immortal words of Stewart Brand, "Information wants to be free."

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Revenge

The lights flickered, went dark for a second, and then came back to life in a dimmed state. He had been told that the backup fuel cells had not been properly serviced in several years, and that fact was starkly evident. There had been talk about bringing a nuclear powered submarine up the Potomac as an emergency power source, but no one was exactly sure what they would do with it once it arrived. This was not turning out to be an easy Presidency. Antonio Luria, President of the United States for barely sixty days, was facing his first major crisis, and the present working conditions were not conducive to deep thought.

“Mr. President?”

“Sorry, I was just hashing over a few ideas in my head.”

The Secretary of Defense, National Security Adviser, and a cadre of the Most Appropriate People had assembled in the White House war room. The National Security Adviser was speaking.

“As I was saying, while he was in graduate school, John Pleszak majored in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics. Most of his work involved numerical analysis, so he became a computer expert, almost as an afterthought. There's even some numerical algorithm named after him. The government had been cutting university research funding for many years, and when Pleszak eventually lost his fellowship, he fixed computers to put himself through school. Once out of school, he wasn't able obtain a professorship - government funding cuts again - so he took a job in industry. By his standards and capabilities, it must have been a menial job, and that job only lasted about a year. His job was outsourced to a Third World country, and he became unemployed - possibly unemployable ever again. His wife left him, and shortly thereafter he went underground.”

“While underground, he supported himself by stealing credit card numbers and plundering ATM machines. This was relatively easy, because of his computer skills, but he did it in a most unusual way. He would only target credit cards with a “no fraud” guarantee. After extracting the money, we would e-mail the victim to advise him of the amount and to instruct the victim to contact the credit card company so that the transaction would be immediately erased from the card.”

"So, not exactly Robin Hood," Luria interjected, "but still a Gentleman Thief. His fingerprints seem to be in a lot of places. Why wasn't he found?"

"The basic idea is that he was below the noise level. Credit card companies can't follow-up on every petty theft, so they set their interest rates and fees to compensate for such losses. They're only interested in organized fraud involving millions of dollars. Law enforcement was never informed of Pleszak's activities.

Luria looked up and down the conference table, searching for his scapegoat of the minute. His gaze settled on the Director of the FBI.

"The FBI can't track him down, even now?"

The Director of the FBI had apparently attained his position because of his close resemblance to Dick Tracy. Like Tracy, his stone cold facade was completely unshaken by this veiled accusation. "I'm not a computer expert, but my people tell me that he could be anywhere. The IP addresses he uses - the computer addresses on the internet - are mostly Asian, but these are all spoofed, and we're sure he's not in Asia. He could be in Washington right now for all we know. His last ATM withdrawal, on Wednesday, was in Atlantic City. He may have come to town to watch the fun."

"Come on! This guy has a data trail a mile long, and you can't find him! Don't you have experts at this sort of thing?"

"Well, we used to have experts, but with all the university research cuts and outsourcing, it's been hard for us to hire the right people. Bright kids see the trends, and they stay away from computer programming. Most of them end up as lawyers. Sure, the computer experts we hire are qualified, but there are none in the same class as Pleszak."

Luria turned back to his National Security Adviser. "Can't we just shut down the internet?"

"That would reek economic havoc on a much larger scale than the minor inconveniences we are now experiencing. The internet carries most of the country's business. We can't afford to shut it down. It's so important that the most important parts are hardened against nuclear attack."

"Yeah, the population would be in a bad mood if a nuclear war shut down their porn! What does this guy want? A billion dollars?"

"I'm sorry to say that only happens in the cinema. Pleszak has made it very clear, through posting on internet message boards, that this is revenge, pure and simple. Revenge against the government and the corporations for destroying science in this country and wrecking the lives of so many capable people, himself included. It's as simple as that, and he can't be bought. He doesn't want to be bought."

Luria leaned back in his chair, frowned, and finally spoke.

"Twenty five years ago, I was a freshman Congressman, and it was the end of the Cold War. At the demise of the Soviet Union, one of the first things we did was provide money for Soviet scientists to prevent the possibility that they would defect to terrorist countries. Unemployed scientists were viewed as a threat. No one can argue that the money wasn't well spent. Years later, we neglect our own scientists, and this is what we get. Gentlemen, we gave birth to Pleszak just as surely as Doctor Frankenstein gave birth to his monster."

There was no way to reply to this statement, but the National Security Adviser continued as best as he could.

“Well, to look at the upside, this should end at midnight, April third, seventy-two hours after it began. That's the time Pleszak posted on the internet, and I think we can trust him on this.”

“Yes, scientists are noble creatures if you give them half a chance. Now, would someone find a way to make me a cup of coffee?”

Before the Fall

The trouble with industrial parks is that every building looks the same, the landscaping hides the signs, and half the roads are dead ends into loading docks. He had driven around the twisty roads, all the same, for about ten minutes before he found what he was looking for - Bldg. 10, Unit 3 - the offices of World Change Ministries. This was an unlikely location for the headquarters of a religious organization, but it was its unusual nature that made it newsworthy.

It was John's mission to interview the head man and write a story for the Sunday Supplement. John's personal back-story was to do the interview as quickly as possible, churn-out the usual puff piece in about four hours, and get two day's pay for a single day's work. He considered the extra day's bonus to be combat pay. Although he wasn't exactly an atheist, he wasn't a church-goer; and all these Holy-Roller types made him uncomfortable.

There was a visitor's parking space right at the front door, and from the looks of the parking lot, the organization employed about five regulars. From his experience, these five employees likely shared the pay of about two or three, since "Doing the Lord's Work" was much more important than money. The door opened into a small reception area, but there was no receptionist. He did hear an audible chime as he opened the door, and that must be a signal to the back room people that someone is in the lobby.

A bespectacled middle-aged man entered the lobby in a few seconds and introduced himself.

"Hello, I'm Jeremiah Spectator. You must be the reporter who's writing the article about us."

"Good to meet you, Doctor Spectator. I'm John Salerno, but I would call myself more of a writer than a reporter. No ambulance chases for me, just some in-depth articles about interesting things, like your operation."

"I'm happy some people think that we're interesting enough for the newspapers. Sure, we have our following - religious people, that sort - but it's always good to cast our net wide and see whom we can catch. Can I offer you some coffee, tea... ?"

Salerno had just come from breakfast, but his lifestyle was fueled by caffeine, and plenty of it.

"Coffee would be great. A couple of yellow packets if you have them. If not, anything else would do. In order of preference, yellow, blue, green, pink, then white. I'm not fussy."

The coffee pot was just around the corner from the reception area. Salerno was happy he had made a morning appointment, since the coffee was still fresh, but he was programmed to drink anything warm in a cup. Coffee in hand, he was led to a small laboratory in the rear of the building and directed towards a small cluster of chairs in one corner.

The laboratory seemed to be inactive. There was a large metal table with some fixtures screwed into it, cables everywhere, and a few racks of electronic equipment. There were a few lights on, but everything appeared to be in standby mode, or off. Perhaps the equipment hadn't been fired-up for the day, or things were shut down while he was there, for safety reasons.

Spectator waved his hand at the equipment as he sat in an opposite chair.

"Quite unusual furnishings for a religious organization, aren't they. But, of course, that's why you're here."

John started his audio recorder and pulled out his notepad. He liked working from written notes, but the audio was a good backup for details he might miss.

"Yes. This mixing of science and religion is unusual. Many people think it's one or the other."

"And what do you think, Mr. Salerno?"

"I keep an open mind. I couldn't write articles like this if I didn't. Fewer happy readers translates to fewer writing assignments, so I can't afford to antagonize the readership. You'll get a fair shake from me, if that's what's worrying you."

Spectator shook his head.

"No, no. I'm not worried. As a scientist, I'm always interested in peer review, so I was just curious about your opinion. And that idea that science and religion are incompatible is wrong. Even the Vatican thinks science is OK. The supposed incompatibility, in my opinion, is promulgated by a rude bunch of British scientists who must have had some difficult toilet training when they were children."

Salerno laughed.

"Can I quote you on that?"

"Mr. Salerno, you can use anything I say. I speak the truth as I see it."

"Great! I'm sure that opinion will stir some interest. Now, about your work... I'm sorry to say that I don't understand the purpose of your organization much beyond your slogan, Science in the Service of the Lord. Your web site was a little hard to navigate."

Salerno thought that if there were fewer Cherubim and more menu choices, he may have had half a chance reviewing the web site. He left his opinion unvoiced, and continued.

"Perhaps you can explain what you do, in simple terms, for the uninitiated. That way, both my readers and I will understand"

"Well, our name, World Change Ministries, says it all. We want to change the world, mold it into something that conforms more fully to the Lord's plan, and we intend to use science to do this."

"Things like ending world hunger?"

"No, our goals go far beyond that, although the intended result would coincidentally end world hunger. We want to change the course of history."

Time for Salerno to cut through the bullshit and get down to basics. You need facts to write an article, even if it's just for the Sunday Supplement.

"Well, governments try that all the time, and all we get is just the same sort of history. Your organization has more limited funding than even the smallest government. Aren't you just deluding yourselves thinking you can change the world?"

"No, we don't intend to change the world from this point forward. That's a losing proposition, as you've stated. We intend to change all of history, from its start. We're building a time machine."

Suddenly, an extra thousand words flowed easily into Salerno's draft. He could work this up into a cover piece. He hoped that the dollar signs were not visible in his eyes.

"A time machine? Is time travel even possible?"

"Oh, we do it all the time."

"What?"

"Just a little joke among physicists. We all travel in time. Unfortunately, our direction of travel is always from the present to the future."

Salerno noted that would make a good sidebar quote. Spectator continued.

"Yes, we believe it's possible. The recent advances in Quantum Mechanics and String Theory are pointing towards some useful models. String Theory is all about dimensions of space. Time is merely one of those dimensions. This equipment here..." Spectator waved his hand in the general direction of the electronic racks, "... is to test some theories of how to access some of those hidden dimensions. Our goals, of course, are long term."

String Theory, another great sidebar. But this isn't an article about physics, it's an article about science versus religion. That's what sells newspapers. Time to get the conversation back on track.

"So, if you can travel through time, what would you do? Stop Hitler... Things like that."

Spectator cleared his throat. This must be the prelude to a long tutorial.

"Mr. Salerno, have you ever heard of the Law of Unintended Consequences?"

"No, but I think the name must contain a clue."

"If we were to stop Hitler, perhaps prevent World War II, that sounds like a good thing, right?"

"Sure. No argument there."

"Wrong! Without Hitler, the US may not have developed the atomic bomb first. Maybe Japan did, or Russia. Maybe the world would be a worse place because of that. Then again, maybe not. It's impossible to say."

"I get the idea. You can't really tell if you'll help or hurt."

"Not only that, if you think about it, there would be no turning back. After changing the past, there might be no time machine, and you and I might not be talking here."

Salerno tried to organize his thoughts.

"So, you're saying that even if you could travel through time, you'd better not change anything? Then why are you working on time travel?"

"Ah, yes. You should never interfere with incidentals, for fear of the unintended consequences, but you could interfere with root causes. Actually, the root cause."

"The root cause of what?"

"Of every evil."

"I don't understand."

Mr. Salerno, you must be familiar with the Biblical account of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden and the Fruit of the Forbidden Tree."

"You mean the apple?"

"Well, it really isn't called an apple, but whatever it was, it was the turning point for men, the choice between good and evil."

"So, you believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible, that Adam and Eve were the first humans, living in a paradise garden just a few thousand years ago?"

"No, I don't. I'm a scientist. The evidence is that the Earth is about five billion years old, and we're the product of a long chain of evolution. Sure, many of our donors do believe in a literal interpretation, but we don't argue with them. It's not good to unnecessarily bite the hand that feeds you. But the Garden of Eden story appears not just in the Bible, but in the myths of many diverse people. At that place which we call Eden, people first became fully human and were given a choice between good and evil. It's apparent that they chose evil."

"So, how does all this figure into your plan?"

"Isn't it obvious? For want of a better description, we intend to travel back in time and stop Adam and Eve from eating the apple."

"That's crazy!"

"What you call crazy, we call high risk, high reward; or, should I say, the highest reward. Imagine, a world without evil! The Garden of Eden extended on a global, perhaps universal, scale!"

"But you don't believe in the literal Adam, Eve and apple story. What exactly would you do if you traveled back in time?"

"Well, this laboratory is just a part of our work. We also employ scholars who research the creation myths. The location of the alleged Garden of Eden is fairly certain, it was somewhere near Mesopotamia. The actual event, the eating of the apple, so to speak, is unknown. A worthwhile plan, in fact our project plan, is to first establish a way to eavesdrop on the past to research the issue. Then, when the technology is ripe, we make our move. We might not need to send people into the past. A fairly small robot might suffice. We just don't know. All of this is very long term, certainly not in my lifetime, but imagine the reward!"

Salerno was speechless. The whole scheme was so far outside his normal thought processes that he couldn't formulate any further questions. Spectator had the faraway look in his eyes that Salerno remembered seeing on some of the old ladies at church services when he was a boy. Finally, after a prolonged silence, he asked for their literature packet and headed for the door.

As he left, Salerno dug into his wallet and handed Spectator a fifty dollar donation.

Root Cause

It was a pleasant Spring day in Washington, but Luria had not ventured outdoors in several days. The workload was just too great. The view from his window was pleasant, but not nearly as nice as it was when he was a junior congressman. Congress had thrown heaps of money into a genetic engineering solution to the cherry blight, but all this had done was to prove again that you can't solve problems by throwing money at them. He made a mental note to recall this example when the need arose. The door opened to reveal his secretary.

"Mr. President, the V7A Accident Investigation Committee is here to see you."

US President Antonio Luria swiveled his chair from his view of the White House lawn and stood to greet the Committee. Five additional chairs had been shuttled into the Oval Office during his daydream, so he decided to stand alongside his desk for handshakes instead of navigating this new landscape. His hip had been acting up again, and he was resolved that no one would see an invalid President on his watch.

Introductions were made all around, but he was familiar with most of the faces from the interminable television coverage. After all, they were investigating the greatest nuclear reactor accident since Chernobyl, and it happened on US soil. The Committee chair, Congresswoman Mitchel, began.

"Mr. President, the Committee has completed its investigation of the V7A reactor breach, and we are here to present our conclusions and recommendations before we make them public."

"Congresswoman Mitchel, let me first thank you, your committee, and, of course, your unnamed staff members, for their work on this difficult investigation. You can be certain that this office will fully consider your recommendations so that such an accident will never happen again."

"Thank you, Mr. President. It's been difficult finding the root cause of this accident, since so much of the evidence was destroyed. Our technical team, however, is a very creative group, and they've been able to reconstruct the evidence from various data sources. Their first conclusion is that this wasn't sabotage."

This news, of course, had been leaked to the press quite a while ago, and if it were sabotage, he would have heard about it already through his normal intelligence briefings. Why did every briefing need to evolve in a logical-linear fashion? Luria

tapped his fingers on his desk. A very bad habit, he was told, since it gives the impression of impatience, but he spoke quickly to gloss over his supposedly rude gesture.

"Many will be relieved at that conclusion, but it will make others less secure, since it means that the reactor they see from their living room window may have the same fatal flaw. I'm very interested in hearing the full story."

Mitchel continued. "The reactor breach was sudden and catastrophic. There was not a second of warning, so evidence was hard to find. Our technical people, however, were able to access records from eight cameras inside the reactor building and in the parking lot. Using these video images, they were able to pinpoint the breach to an area of about a hundred square feet on the southwest side of the reactor vessel. An analysis of the debris narrowed this to an area of several square feet. Fortunately, because of the Data Integrity Act of 2010, all construction records for the reactor were digitized and uploaded to the NRC computers."

Luria stifled a wince. All his e-mails, and digital versions of all his telephone calls were now stored on a computer somewhere. At least for him, these data could not be accessed until ten years after his death - or by a majority vote of the Supreme Court. Regular citizens were not as lucky.

"How prescient of your Congress, Congresswoman Mitchel, to have passed this bill when you did, or we might never have come to any conclusions here."

"Thank you, Mr. President. The records included x-ray images of all the welds for the reactor vessel, a routine procedure for all reactor construction even before the Act. Analysis of the images showed an area of marginal welds. No single weld could be flagged as bad, but the combination of marginal welds in a single area is what led to the accident. This led us to interview the welder."

Luria was shocked. "Your data even includes the name of the welder?"

"Yes, Mr. President, the Data Integrity Act requires such documentation. Industry critics claimed that such data collection was adding millions of dollars to the cost of government projects, but you see now how important such data are."

Luria thought to interject the idea that if these millions had instead been spent on the reactor construction, the accident would never have happened. He decided not to.

"So, we blame this welder for hundreds of deaths and possibly thousands more in the future?"

"No, we can't do that, and we certainly won't reveal his name. He was just hired to make welds, not make perfect welds. All welds are x-rayed and inspected, and the inspectors flag the bad welds. However, as I said, none of his welds were individually bad. In fact, his welding record was far better than average. Very few of his welds needed to be reworked. It's just the unfortunate combination of welds in one area that caused the accident."

"So, what did the man say to you?"

"The records indicated that all these welds were done on a single day, some day in September, so we asked him about the day."

Now Luria was stunned. "How could he possibly remember that particular day after all these years? He must have done those welds four years ago."

Mitchel cleared her throat. It was starting to feel a little tight. She never did like conversations with the President. And then there was all that finger tapping.

"Well, it was an unusual convergence of circumstances. It was the man's birthday, and he was expecting a nice day. As it turned out, his wife burned the breakfast bacon, and it put him in a bad mood when he arrived for work. Then he picked up the wrong end of a hot welding rod and needed some first aid."

Luria interjected, "Data also found in the Act records?"

"Precisely. To make a long story short, that particular day was all downhill from there, thus the badly welded section. Part of our recommendations is the institution of computer video analysis of all welding records to discover present and future problems of this type."

"A very logical recommendation, and one I'm sure everyone will endorse."

"The committee, however, decided to go further and eliminate the root cause of the accident. There is one other recommendation."

Congresswoman Mitchel placed a thick sheaf of papers on the President's desk.

"What's this," asked Luria.

"It's a draft of the Bacon Prohibition Act of 2017. In brief, it bars the consumer sale of raw bacon. It may seem radical, but we've got the Secretary of Agriculture on board for this. He says that there will be no trouble from the agribiz sector, since precooked, microwave style bacon can still be sold. It's a higher value-added product, so there's more money in this for some people. There will be less nitrates, too, so the NIH people think it's a good idea. It also prohibits faux bacon types, such as soy, and even Canadian bacon, so we think we've covered all bases."

Luria was silent. It was unlikely that he, the President of the United States of America, was on the receiving end of a practical joke. These people are really serious. Bacon as the root cause of accidents? Legislating against bacon? What has this government become? Finally, he was composed enough to reply.

"I thank the committee for these recommendations. I will sign any bills passed by Congress on this matter." Parenthetically, he was thinking, "If Congress is dumb enough to prohibit bacon, who am I to stand in the way of safety?"

There was a bill on his desk within the week. President Luria asked the White House chef to stock a two-year's supply of bacon, and promptly signed the bill. He felt relieved to be so near the end of his second term, and wondered how the bacon was in Canada.

Tastes Like Chicken

Stan dragged himself into work early that week. Whatever passed for a work ethic had evaporated long ago with the rise of artificial intelligence, robotics and automation. Human intervention was required so infrequently that a week's work could be compressed into a few hours. Any work beyond that was discouraged, since studies showed that too much human intervention would gum up the works. Humans were just there to plug the occasional holes in the dikes.

This week's work might even be interesting. During an afternoon's tennis with Dave, Stan had learned that the delivery of a pet dog to Dave's daughter had been delayed for quite a while. Dave claimed that the online order system had recorded a shipment, but the dog had never arrived. Dave had reordered, but the same thing happened.

Dave's daughter was upset on two counts. First, she still didn't have her dog; and, second, she was worried that something bad may have happened to the two dogs that never arrived at her house. One of Stan's functions was to supervise smallish husbandry operations, such as floral greenhouses and the local "puppy mill," so he figured he had better look into it.

Weather predictions were for a perfect golf week, so Stan had planned to delay his required two hours of work that week to the last minute; but this problem piqued his interest. It might even be classified as an urgent matter, but he couldn't fathom how that could be. If it was really bad, something would have been found on another system; transportation, for example. It would have been fixed before it came to Stan's attention.

Sitting at his shared desk, which was happily vacant when he arrived, he got right to work. The biometrics recognized Stan as soon as he had seated himself, so his usual files were on the screen when he looked up. He didn't access the puppy mill statistics that often, so it took a while for him to navigate to the relevant figures.

The numbers showed that the automated puppy mill was functional perfection. There was a high yield on even the high maintenance exotic breeds. Zipping through the flow chart, Stan saw that shipments were being made on-time, as expected. Curious.

Stan sat back in his chair to ponder the problem.

"No problem with shipments... Transportation didn't raise any flags... Why no deliveries?"

At that point, Stan decided to dig down to the next level, something that's usually avoided, since it was viewed as second-guessing the system. These automated systems are so efficient, they really shouldn't be questioned. Stan remembered the old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" but something was amiss, somewhere, as the missing puppies proved.

The second level page had a lot of detail, a lot more than Stan really wanted, but he steeled his gaze to read through some recent transactions. There were a lot of shipments, all to the various client names, but the curious thing was they were all to the same address.

"Eureka!"

Someone is getting a few more dogs than they ordered, but why haven't they been returned? Stan ran the address through the residence database, and didn't find any listing. Now it was a mystery! Did a mystery trump a good game of golf? He needed to find out. He decided to swing past that address on his way home.

One advantage of the autonomous automobile navigation systems is that it's easy to take your mind off the road. One disadvantage of the autonomous automobile navigation systems is that you arrive at your destination and sit in your vehicle for several minutes before realizing you've arrived at your destination.

When Stan looked up, he was parked in front of an automated factory, not a residence. He checked the address to verify that he was at the place where all the puppies were being delivered.

The factory made bite-sized chicken treats! The surprising thing is that no one had noticed.

The Greatest Story Never Sold

When the intercom buzzed, MacFadden glanced at the clock, and then at his day's schedule on the computer screen.

"Mr. MacFadden, Simon Peter, your ten o'clock is here."

"Send him right in, Gladys."

The office door opened slowly. Peter, in his usual sheepish mood, peeked through the opening, as if to make sure he wasn't disturbing anything. Then, he swung the door just wide enough to enter.

"Simon! Good to see you again! I'm always happy to talk with one of our popular published authors. Have a seat."

MacFadden motioned to the chair in front of his desk. Peter sat, not really wanting to talk, but he knew he needed to say something. MacFadden was looking at him expectantly.

"You... you wanted to see me?"

MacFadden tapped a stack of papers in front of him.

"It's about your latest manuscript. I just gave it a first read, and..."

He searched for the proper words.

"... It's quite a bit different from your usual fare."

Peter gulped. He had been expecting something like this. He had brought this upon himself.

"Yes, I know. It surprised even me. It came to me in a dream."

"Perhaps a nightmare?"

MacFadden laughed, but Peter managed just a perfunctory smile. MacFadden continued.

"Your last space opera was exactly what the readers wanted. Bug-eyed monsters, high-tech equipment, worm holes, epic battles... Stuff like that. And your Zaptic Ray was quite different. It didn't kill, it just stunned the enemy so he - or should I say, 'it' - could be disarmed and not killed."

"I don't like violence, not even fictional violence," responded Peter.

"And then," MacFadden tapped the stack of papers again, "You send us this."

"You didn't like it?"

MacFadden pushed his chair slightly away from the desk.

"Let's say it needs some work. You had my interest at the start. A leader appears in the Dim Times when his people were being oppressed by a stronger power. He organizes a team of twelve men, and I'm expecting some action. Instead, all I get is a lot of philosophy and a few unexplained miracles."

"Well," said Peter, "You don't explain miracles, since they're not really miracles if they're explained. He's a great man because he's charismatic, and he's non-violent. He sees himself as a transitional figure who would lead the world out of the Dim Times."

MacFadden cleared his throat to speak. Reaching for his handkerchief, he really wanted to spit, but he resisted the impulse. He wiped his mouth, instead, and once again decided that he really needed to quit smoking.

"OK, I saw that as necessary character development, so I read on. Then, there's the action I was waiting for! He's betrayed! He's captured! Time for an heroic rescue by his team of twelve? No, he's just executed in a most barbaric fashion. His team was a bunch of cowards."

"Yes, I did some research on the Dim Times. Executions like that actually did happen."

"OK, so now the book is over? The hero is dead. But no! He comes back to life! How? Nothing is really explained."

Peter slumped down into his chair, trying to meld with the fabric and disappear. Even if that were to happen, it was still his turn to speak.

"I toyed with a dimensional thing there, escaping into another dimension just before he died, and then popping back again, but it just didn't seem to fit. I decided to leave things unsaid."

"OK, so he's back. Time for revenge? No. There's more talk, and then he flies off into outer space. Was he supposed to be some sort of superman - indestructible, flying - that sort of thing? I was confused. If I was confused, wouldn't your other readers be confused, too?"

Peter wanted to blame it all on his dream, but he figured that defense of his dream wasn't what MacFadden was looking for.

"So, should I do a rewrite?"

"Simon, we're friends, so I'll be frank. Stick with the bug-eyed monsters. They're more believable."

The Cold Coffee of Doctor Joffe

Captain Bell was nearly asleep at his desk. Since the decriminalization of the more harmless recreational drugs, there had been a tremendous decrease in crime rate and far less activity for him to supervise at the police station. There were staff reductions, but the public seemed willing to allow reduction in force through normal attrition, so his detectives were still fairly upbeat about their jobs. And the people were happy, far happier than the effects of the decriminalized drugs would explain. Bell himself thought he could use some medical marijuana, but he doubted that the aches he had from advancing age were a qualified medical condition.

"Captain?"

Bell looked up to find Detective Spano standing before his desk. He hoped that Spano had not been there for a while waiting for his captain to awaken. No, Bell was sure he hadn't been sleeping. He had just been daydreaming.

"Yes, Spano. What's up?"

"It's the Joffe case. I have updates on some field work..." Spano paused, "... and there's been a new development."

"Joffe... That was a simple missing person case, wasn't it? Just because we have time on our hands doesn't mean we should elevate missing persons cases to the status of a murder investigation."

Spano took the criticism in stride. Captains become captains for a reason, and Spano was certain the reason was that they were unreasonable.

"Captain, the Joffe case is different. Professor Joffe wasn't just a common Joe. He did government work when he was younger. Secret government work. A few years ago he retired to the local university. His colleagues say he's brilliant, although a little eccentric. Some of them thought he may have been abducted."

"Yeah, eccentric. Politically correct wording for a little wacko. Just a crazy old coot who wandered away. They'll find him at a train station, somewhere. Maybe he went to Stockholm to collect his overdue Nobel Prize."

Spano still stood there.

"OK, Spano, let's hear it."

"When Joffe went missing, his last known whereabouts was his laboratory. In the lab was a full mug of coffee. That's where the abduction angle came in. He poured some coffee, but he never drank any."

"That's the evidence," said Bell, "A cold cup of coffee."

"Yes. The coffee was the key. Joffe took his coffee light, with two sugars, and this coffee was black."

Captain Bell groaned.

"So, it wasn't even his coffee? His abductor got some coffee, but then he didn't drink it?"

"Well, the coffee was all we had to go on, so it went to forensics. You know, DNA, that sort of stuff. All they found was Joffe's DNA, and the coffee was just coffee. But in the course of the lab tests, the technician thought that the mug was quite heavy, a lot heavier than she expected. There was a removable base, and inside a lot of electronics."

Bell immediately perked up. Finally, something interesting this week!

"No one in the lab had any idea what this electronics stuff was. Someone thought it might be a transmitter, triggered when the mug was filled. A signal to the abductors. They came when the mug was filled, before Joffe could add his cream and sugar."

"Sounds a little too elaborate to me. They could have just used a wireless camera, or something like that. Then there's the low tech scheme of just looking through the window."

Spano smiled. "The lab's on the third floor."

"OK. Continue."

"Well, the lab guys thought that the easiest way to figure out the purpose of the electronics was to fill the mug with coffee. They even used the same brand of coffee as Joffe, just in case. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it, but that's how scientists think."

"So, they filled the mug. What did they find?"

Spano gulped. Here's the hard part.

"The technician holding the mug vanished. The mug fell to the floor and smashed."

"What? Are you serious? This isn't some sort of joke, is it?"

"No, Sir. She's gone. Poof! In front of two witnesses. I think you should call the FBI."

Bell had a little trouble convincing the FBI field office that they needed to investigate his two missing persons, one of whom had been missing for less than an hour. That's because he didn't want to go into too much detail on the telephone, but when he mentioned Joffe, he was told that two agents would be dispatched immediately.

After the agents were briefed by Spano, they ordered everyone out of the forensics lab. Actually, the lab had been vacant since the technician's disappearance, since everyone was afraid to enter. A team of eight additional FBI people were quick to follow. They did some measurements, retrieved what was left of the coffee mug, and they did a thorough investigation of Joffe's laboratory, office and home.

Bell learned from unnamed sources that Joffe hadn't retired voluntarily from his government work. He was forced out, since his colleagues were concerned about his mental state. Although it was not his specialty area, Joffe had been following the String

Theory literature. He was especially intrigued by the concept of its fourteen dimensional space in which most of the dimension were “rolled-up” into points. The last few years he claimed to be working on a dimensional translation unit, a way to access these hidden dimensions.

As for the coffee mug, it served several purposes for Joffe. It was a way to hide his invention, which was easy to do since such a device needed to be small for some quantum mechanical reason or another. The thermal gradient between the hot coffee and room temperature served as a power source. Hot water would have worked as well as coffee, even tea. He was told that the hot water molecules served another purpose. Bell didn't understand, but he took their word for it. The chaotic motion of the water molecules somehow facilitated the dimensional translation.

It was unfortunate that the mug smashed when the police technician holding it had disappeared. The government labs were having a hard time piecing it back together. Joffe must have kept the mug on the lab bench while he has holding it. As for the technician, she must be wherever Doctor Joffe is now. Maybe they could do an Adam and Eve thing if the professor still has it in him. In any case, it was an unplanned employee attrition that fit nicely into Bell's spreadsheet.

Publish or Perish

He hated this time of year. It was time for a progress report, something to justify last year's pay and an inducement for someone to retain him for another year.

Well, there was no sense in procrastinating - Actually, no time left for further procrastination - So, he may as well get to the task at hand.

He thought about summoning Joe, but reconsidered.

"Roberta, I need your help."

After a reasoned pause - He remembered that Roberta was programmed for 1200 milliseconds - Roberta responded.

"Hello, professor. Joe must be doing something important. Why else would you call on me?"

Just enough push back to simulate a real person. Finely programmed.

"No, Roberta, I specifically chose you. I need some work, but I feel guilty asking for help."

"A professor admitting a fault! I hope there are no students within earshot! So, you didn't want to bother Joe with this problem, but a second-stringer like me is OK?"

He was happy he had set the preferences for that little extra bite, to keep things real. This time, however, he was in need of a little more coddling, and a little less sarcasm.

"Listen, Roberta, here's the deal. I need a discovery. Not too exciting. Just enough to justify my existence."

"Don't you mean, my existence!"

He started to think that Joe might have been a better choice. There were two personalities programmed into his box. There was matter-of-fact Joe, who was good for the day-to-day tedium; and then there was Roberta.

"Yes, Roberta, it's true, and I'd be lost without you. Remember, I chose you in the first place."

"And a wise choice it was. First in citations in your department, I've read."

Another 1200 millisecond pause.

"OK, prof, what do you need?"

“Just the usual; or, I should say, your usual. Unmapped territory, a bold hypothesis, that sort of thing.”

“Is that all?”

“Listen, Roberta, I'm begging you.”

“OK. Not a problem. Since our last encounter - The Paris meeting, wasn't it? - I've been data mining those robotic probes in the Marianas Trench. Would a new species do?”

“Perfect! Roberta, how can I ever thank you? How soon can you assemble the manuscript?”

“Give me two minutes, but we need a name for the species. May I suggest *Thaumatchthys Roberta*?”

Whispering Gallery

Manuel asked me to meet him in the classics section of the main gallery at lunchtime. I typically brown bag it and take my lunch at a desk in my laboratory, but it's good to get out of the lab once in a while, and I hadn't seen Manuel in quite a few months.

I had a member's pass, compliments of Manuel, so no donations were solicited as I made my way through the grand entrance and up the stairs to the oils collection. The gallery was designed not to offend, since the paintings were arranged chronologically from distant past to the forgettable present. You needed to work your way through the traditional genres before you were slapped in the face by the neo-modern crap that passes for art nowadays. Don't get me wrong - Some of the stuff does have a decorative quality, and the really offensive stuff is in the sculpture areas, where a pile of discarded lumber is called art.

Manuel was sitting on a plump, faux leather-covered bench in front of some portraits from the mid-nineteenth century. Manuel really enjoyed art. That's why he chose to work for a pittance in the museum laboratory after our graduation and not follow the others into lucrative commercial ventures. Not that my job was 'lucrative' by any means, but I was certain that I earned nearly double what Manuel was making.

Manuel noticed me immediately.

"Ralph, glad you could make it."

"So, where are we going for lunch? And before you say the museum cafeteria, I'll tell you it's my treat."

"Lunch? Oh, about that. I didn't really call you here for lunch. I want you to witness an experiment. Maybe there will be time for lunch later. If the experiment succeeds, I might even spring for some wine."

"Wine might not be good at lunch. A good ice cream sundae would be better for me. So, what have you been working on?"

"Piezoelectricity, specifically the piezoelectric effect in zinc oxide."

"Manuel, that sounds more like something I would be doing. How does that fit into art preservation?"

Manuel cleared his throat and slowly rubbed his hands together. I remembered those gestures from our graduate school days. They signaled the start of a long lecture.

"Well, Ralph, for starters, zinc oxide is a common artist's pigment. It's been around since the end of the eighteenth century. It's a nice white, and it replaced the lead whites that were used before. It's also piezoelectric, which means, if you bend its crystals, you'll generate a small electric charge. For that reason, piezoelectrics are useful for making things like microphones."

"And," I interjected, "They're useful the other way around. You can use them as loudspeakers, like on cellphones."

"Right, it's amazing how they can get so much sound out of such little things... And that got me thinking. Let's walk down to my lab."

The museum had many hidden stairwells whose locations were known only to the staff. They weren't hidden behind some huge paintings. They just looked like parts of the walls with unobtrusive knobs. You basically pulled a ring out of a slot and turned it like a knob. Manuel led me through one of these portals and down a staircase to the lab area.

The labs were brightly lighted and as modern as any of mine. The one way they differed, however, was in cleanliness. I tried to keep a neat lab, but not the smallest speck of dust was tolerated here. You could make an integrated circuit here without recourse to a clean room.

Manuel fetched two white Tyvek coveralls from a shelf and handed one to me. There were matching booties, too, to cover our shoes. Once inside the double doors, I could feel the constant gentle breeze from the air purifiers on my face. Manuel led me over to a stand that contained an oil portrait. I didn't recognize it, but the style seemed to place it to be at least a hundred years old.

Manuel painted his finger in the air above a large white area on the canvas, the dress of the stern looking middle-aged woman who was represented.

"That's all zinc oxide pigment, laid on over the course of, perhaps, the better part of a day. Standard linseed oil vehicle."

I examined the painted area carefully, looking for any clue as to why Manuel would consider it interesting. I found none, but I let my silence mask my stupidity. Manuel continued in lecture mode.

"The molecules in the linseed oil binder would dry from the inside, out. There was a crack in the paint, likely caused by careless handling through the years. That's why the portrait arrived in my lab in the first place. I was to examine the paint so that an authentic filler could be applied to seal the crack. Not a very taxing operation."

I needed to add a little conversation from my side, if only to remind Manuel that I was still in the room.

"I see that the crack is still there. Did you find something in the crack?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. For the analysis I took a vertical sliver of the paint - not so such that anyone would notice. Our instruments are so sensitive that just a tiny sliver is required."

Manuel paused, as if for emphasis.

"That's when I got the idea to put the sliver into an atomic force microscope."

"You can't do elemental analysis with an AFM," I objected. "It would give you some pretty pictures, but that's about it."

"Ah, yes. Pretty pictures, sometimes. But what's really being imaged are forces on the atomic scale. In this case, it's the electric fields that were imprinted on the linseed oil as it dried, from the inside, out. Imprinted on the molecular polarization."

"Electric fields from what? Sunspots?"

Manuel laughed, as if I had purposely made a joke.

"No, from the zinc oxide. Remember the piezoelectricity?"

"OK. So you're doing a study on how fast paint dries. I'm sure there will be a story in the Sunday Supplement, "Scientist Watches Paint Dry."

Manuel laughed, again, then moved to a computer terminal.

"Here's the data, electric polarization as a function of depth. Of course, depth is just another measure of time."

The graph was a chaotic squiggle, a line jumping up and down, looking more like the noise I see when my experiments have gone wrong. Manuel continued.

"Not very instructive, is it? But, I converted it to a sound file."

Manuel tapped a key, and the room was filled with faint traffic sounds. There was a siren in the distance, and then a voice.

"What an unattractive subject! The things I do for money!"

The painting had given up the sounds it had recorded a century ago!

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Tikalon Press (<http://www.tikalonpress.com>) is happy to announce publication of two science fiction novels by Dev Gualtieri.



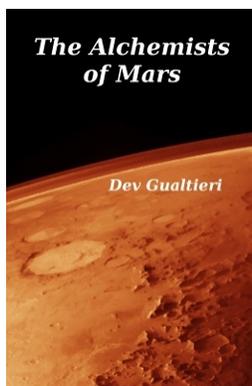
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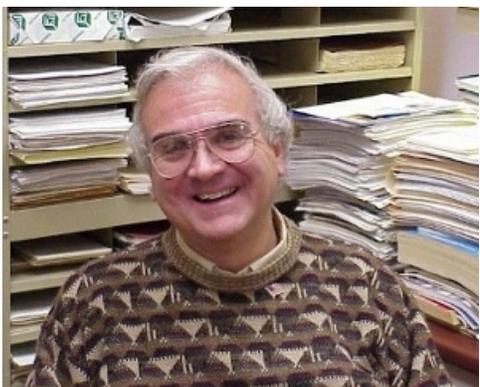
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Dev Gualtieri received his PhD in 1974 and had a thirty-five year research career in physics and materials science.

He is listed as an inventor on more than thirty US patents, and on numerous international patents. His eclectic research interests included superconductivity, chemical thermodynamics, magnetism, electronics and computer science. At one time, he was an internationally recognized expert in crystal growth.

Dr. Gualtieri is now retired, and he resides in Northern New Jersey with his wife Anne. They have a son and daughter who reside with their spouses in Pennsylvania.