

E-Children

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Along the tunnel vision of a gun barrel, six year old Frankie Dalton traced a point between the slabbed shoulder blades of a frantic giant, pacing the bedroom floor of his parents, shouting, 'Where's the cash?' and waving a hunting knife at his mother and father huddling in their bed, holding each other; waiting for it to be over.

To Frankie's way of thinking, the fact that the big man had broken into their farmhouse intending to rob them said much about his intelligence: so dwarfed by rage at finding only dusty papers in his father's strongbox, that it must starve for oxygen in such a simple head as would expect cash to be found on hand in a prairie farmhouse, during the driest growing season on record.

He hitched up his pyjama bottoms and wished the big man would stop pacing around so much. Please God, make him hold still for a minute. The man hesitated. Frankie's finger tightened on the trigger of the shotgun he'd taken from his father's gun cabinet where it had stood peacefully for as long as he could remember.

BAM!

The shot went high, up through the base of the big man's skull and into the ceiling pushing him forward and splashing his brains across his back, as he crashed down on Bill and Rose Dalton, pinning them to the mattress with his awful bulk. Frankie flew backwards into the bureau, cracked his head and slid to the floor.

A long thin squeegee sound squealed out as the man farted and thrummed his ankles against the bed frame. The fart mingled with the smoke from the shotgun and hung like a ghost over the bed filling the room with the odour of sulphur. It gagged Bill and Rose as they struggled out from under the heavy corpse and rushed over to Frankie who lay unconscious on the floor.

"Frank! Are you listening to me? Frank! If you don't send me cash,

A.S.A.P., to help support us, I'm taking you to court. I'm sure your work is going to be thrilled to hear they have a dead-beat dad on staff. How will that help their image, aren't they the ones who produce those horrid child robots? How anyone can possibly love a robot is beyond me. Aren't they always breaking down?"

Frank, a man in his thirties, but looking closer to fifty with a complexion pitted and scarred like wallpaper and premature grey hair, shook his head to clear the daydream. He glanced around the barren lunchroom of the research hospital where he worked the graveyard shift, then at his cell phone and said, "How did you get this number? Don't call me at work again. I'll get you the money, just don't call me again, Odette!"

He snapped the cell closed. Immediately it rang again and he flicked off the power button with a shudder of disgust.

The call from his ex-wife reminded him of his parents and their marriage. It was perverse, his was such a failure and theirs was such a success - despite the family's poverty and his father's failed insurance scam.

It turned out that the man Frank killed was working a scam with his father who was to convert mom's jewelry into cash and then buy an insurance policy. Then the big man would steal the cash, Dad would make the claim against the insurance, and later they would split the entire amount. But Dad could never bring himself to sell mom's jewels, he hid them instead. He went to jail for conspiracy to commit a felony and Frank didn't see him again for five years. By then it was too late.

Frank blamed himself for everything, which is what six year olds do. He grew up angry, got in fights, and dropped out of school. With time on his hands, he began stealing cars. At first, it was simply a way to meet his girlfriend who lived outside of town, but he soon found the cars brought easy cash by selling them across the line.

It wasn't long before U.S. Customs became suspicious of this Canadian kid who drove expensive, but outlawed, classic gas guzzlers across the line and rode back the next day on a Greyhound bus, flush with cash. On his final ride through, they demanded his ownership papers, which he didn't have of course, and wound up in a Manitoba prison for grand theft auto.

When he got out, he travelled back to the States where the sunshine of the South put a warmth in his heart that he rarely felt in Canada. He smuggled himself across the line in a hidden compartment on a tractor trailer stuffed with dope. He laughed when he told the story of sharing that ride with the best buddy he could have picked, BC Bud.

Frank settled in San Diego where he met and married the woman on the cell phone, Odette Simpson. He believed she was the hardest bitch he would ever fall in love with. When he leaned in to kiss her, on their wedding day, she turned her head so that he missed her mouth, and one night, shortly after they were married, she held a flare gun

to his head while he pretended to sleep. He left after two years, and now she had found him and was demanding money for support. He didn't know how he was going to come up with her Easy Cash. This frightened him.

He thought about the expensive equipment the hospital stockpiled, most of it nobody used and it just collected dust in the storerooms. One of his jobs was delivering the equipment to the various labs and wards around the hospital, the rest he packed neatly into the dark storage compartments in the basement. He remembered how this guy, Andy Biggs, from his prison days turned up in the bar one night; he runs a pawn shop and wants to do business with him, but Frank brushed him off. Maybe he should take him up on the offer and turn some of that forgotten equipment into Odette's Easy Cash. Amazing how opportunities often lay at your feet, just waiting to be picked up.

Frank got up from the cafeteria table with a new sense of hope, he deposited his tray on the rack and retrieved his hot-pink wagon to begin making his deliveries. He had stops to make in Geriatrics, Pediatrics and the research lab. It was after 2 AM and it would be quiet, only the night nurses to chat up --tough work. In spite of his worries, he smiled to himself and wheeled the wagon, loaded with heavy parcels, out to the bank of elevators.

Frank liked the hot-pink wagon. It was his idea, in fact, to paint it that colour in order to protect it from turning up 'lost'. In the six months he'd been at this job, he'd already 'lost' two wagons. He suspected the guys down in shipping/receiving were swiping them but couldn't prove it, and he didn't want to stir up any trouble. So he decided to paint this one because few people would be caught dead pushing anything in public that was hot-pink. It didn't bother him though. He smiled to himself again and whistled as he waited for the elevator. When it arrived, he stepped aboard and said "Geriatrics."

"Thank you, Frank Dalton," the elevator replied, in a sexy female voice, as it authenticated his voice print and confirmed his access privileges to the geriatric ward.

"You're welcome babe. Now be sure and pick me up in an hour, and don't be late!" It always made him feel important when the elevator allowed him into restricted zones. He had been lucky to get his criminal record expunged, otherwise he would never have passed the security bond that was required for this job.

Frank's deliveries took less than an *hour in both the G & P wards, but he still had the research lab to do. He noticed the smell of newborn baby that clung to his clothes as he rode the elevator down to the basement level where the lab facilities were. It was like inhaling a summer day, after breathing in the antiseptic-treated air that hung like cheap perfume over the rotting smell of near-death in the geriatric ward. The weather panel embedded in the smoked glass mirror of the elevator wall caught Frank's attention as it blinked over from a cartoon of rain storms to one of a smiling sun. He sighed--it was going to be another hot one. It was hard to get used

to this new weather, it felt like the seasons had been dialled backwards three months. Frank hated running the air conditioning in his apartment--power from the grid was hideously expensive. He would upgrade to a model that ran on fuel cells, one day soon, but right now he was, as they say, 'so broke he squeaked.'

The doors slid open and the elevator announced, "Advanced Research and Special Production Lab." Despite being awkward, the elevator-girl made the name sound sexy. He pushed the wagon out of the elevator and started down the long access tunnel. Soft music played and his rubber soles squeaked meekly in a false rhythm. Light followed him as he moved, emanating from the walls in a twelve foot radius. He saw himself as a firefly flitting through the night, avoiding the predators lurking in the dark.

When he reached the main lab entrance, Frank took out his master key and unlocked the heavy doors. As he pushed his wagon inside, and the lights came on, he was startled by a strange sound. He stopped and held his breath, listening. His heart thumped. He heard it again from the far side of the lab. It sounded like a baby crying. Pacing slowly around the room, trying not to make a sound, he cursed his meek rubber soles as they announced themselves. He passed long, black, Arborite benches piled with gently humming electronic equipment, but still heard nothing. He walked around the lab again, and then he heard it.

"DA-DA!"

It seemed to be coming from one of the computers. Frank was immediately suspicious that it was a practical joke on the part of the techs. The lab workers were always doing something goofy. Once they glued the toilet rolls in the staff washrooms, so you couldn't get a decent handful of paper off the roll. Pretty irritating. Maybe this was a joke aimed at him. He knew well enough to leave the gear alone, and they weren't going to trick him into losing his job. He turned around and started for the office area to drop off his parcels. Behind him, he heard a small electrical whine and then again,

"DA-DA?"

This time it was more plaintive, talking to him. He felt as if someone or some *thing* was watching him. It was unnerving. What the hell was it? And where was that whining sound coming from? It sounded like an electrical motor--he bent down and peered under the bench, then moved across the room, heard it again. He moved back and spotted it--a small camera, mounted on top of a shiny black box, was tracking him. Damn! Were they recording him? What would they think of next--he'd made a G.D. fool out of himself, and they had it on tape! At least he hadn't been scratching his balls...or had he? Well, too late to do anything about that. Better to leave immediately and ignore the whole matter. Whatever the hell the thing was, it wasn't his concern.

Frank turned around and stormed out of the lab. The demanding cry, "DA-DA!" whistling behind him. In the hallway, he realized his wagon, with deliveries waiting, was still back in the lab. So, back

he went. The computer was still crying that silly phrase "DA-DA!" It was enough to drive anybody crazy.

"It's okay boy, it's okay! Go back to sleep," Frank pleaded. Then a song from his childhood came to mind and he sang: "Hush little baby don't say a word, Dada's going to buy you a mocking bird... and if that mocking bird don't sing, Dada's going to buy you a diamond ring..." Immediately the crying stopped, but the moment Frank tried to push his wagon out the door, the voice began calling again. So Frank spent the remainder of his shift reciting all the nursery rhymes and songs he remembered his parents singing to him on the many nights when he couldn't find sleep.

Several days later, Frank was back with his pink wagon delivering parcels to the lab--big, heavy, and probably expensive parcels, wearing Canada Customs stickers, country of origin Japan. A bundle of techs were gathered around the bench where he'd spent most of that night. They were talking rapidly, some chewing their nails, others waving their arms. He was as good as invisible, so he moved closer to see what was going on. Jim, one of the senior techs, was talking to the shiny black box and looking meaningfully into a tiny camera mounted on its top. He sounded as if he was talking to a child "Rodney? Can you say hello? Hello?"

And then Rodney spoke, "EELLO? ELLO!"

"Yay!" the group cheered. The camera spun in excitement. Jim cleared his throat.

"Try my name again. Say, hello Jim, hello Jim."

"ELLO. ELLO? [long pause] ELLO, YIM ... ELLO JIM!"

Again, they cheered with excitement. The camera danced with pleasure. Then Russell Yakamoto, the chief research scientist, noticed Frank lurking among the deliveries and signalled the group to hush, gently placing a calming hand on the camera. "Frank, this area is off limits for the next little while. Okay?"

"Sure. Certainly, sir." Shit, I called him sir!

"What is it you've brought us?" He bent over and inspected the parcels on Frank's wagon. "Ah - good! I've been waiting for these. Thank you, Frank. Now, do I need to sign anything?"

Aw sure ... don't let the door hit you in the butt... "Oh, yeah, you do, sir. Here it is." As Frank stooped over the wagon to pick up the clipboard, the video camera suddenly began swivelling and adjusting focus, and then a happy peal cried out from the computer's speakers, freezing everyone in the room.

"DADA! ELLO DA-DA!"

Yakamoto looked at the camera, then at Frank pointedly, "What's

going on?" Frank was flummoxed. He didn't know what was going on, only that this time he certainly wasn't scratching his balls.

"DA-DA! DA-DA!" The thing cried out again.

Frank got behind his pink wagon and started for the door.

"Wait, Frank! Hang on. Frank stop!" Dr. Yakamoto ordered. Frank was so flustered he hardly heard him, but stopped at the door and didn't turn around. Dr. Yakamoto walked over, "Hold on a minute Frank. I just want to find out what is making our project behave so curiously. Would you come with me, please?" Frank followed him back to the work bench.

"People, I want to reduce the stimulus presented to our project. Could you all go back to your work stations for the meantime? Not you, Lucy. Frank, this is Lucy May, she is one of our research assistants. Lucy, this is Frank Dalton."

Frank gazed into Lucy's black eyes, they danced with laughter; but it was over a joke the two of them were sharing, not one at his expense. He extended his hand, Lucy took it and they shook. The video camera swivelled between the three of them, unable to decide who to focus on in the tableau.

"Now Frank, why did our project here react with so much 'excitement' once it saw you?" Yakamoto asked.

Frank was pissed. What the hell was this guy expecting him to say. He had no idea what their 'project' was. Up to this point, he thought he was the butt of one of their jokes. "I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea, sir."

Dr. Yakamoto was unperturbed, he smiled. "You were in here a couple of nights ago, weren't you Frank?" Frank nodded. "Good, you're being honest with me. The security cameras--this camera, by the way, is not one--recorded you here at around 2 A.M. I'm interested in hearing your perspective on what happened that night." He was really getting in Frank's face, but he could also get him fired, which made him even harder to ignore. Still, something in his expression made you want to trust him.

"Okay, until now, I thought this", he gestured towards the camera with his head, "was some kind of practical joke rigged up by your lab boys to catch innocent bystanders in embarrassing moments. Excuse me, lab people," Frank looked pointedly at Lucy who was watching him with a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Was it just him or was it getting warm in here? He felt like a bug under a microscope. "I came in last night to drop off some packages that got delivered late, when all of a sudden your 'project' starts making this strange noise. But I didn't touch it! I just kind of spoke to it and that seemed to calm it down. But each time I tried to leave, it started up again, so I told it stories, nursery rhymes, songs my daddy used to sing to me. Eventually, it must have dozed off or got bored or something. Anyway it stopped that racket and I left. Must have been 6 A.M. by then; my shift was over so I went home. It

was fine when I left it--whatever *it* is. Maybe now you'll tell me?"

"Tell you what, Frank?" asked Yakamoto.

"What it is, sir?" Duh.

"All in good time. Lucy, what are your conclusions, based on what Frank has just told us?"

"Or not," Frank muttered.

"I would say Project Rodney has imprinted on him," Lucy replied. She slowly tapped a Staedtler mechanical pencil against her jaw, just below a delicate un-pierced ear lobe. She was a lefty, and as dry as aftershave.

"Three days ago we installed the new self-awareness code but were disappointed because we didn't see any immediate effects. Possibly, after evolving the necessary neural framework, it was simply a matter of timing. In effect, Mr. Dalton appeared before Rodney at the precise moment when both Rodney's pattern recognition and image tracking functions were activated. The result seems to be that Rodney now responds better to Mr. Dalton than any of the team."

"You're certainly right about that. Thank you, Lucy," said Yakamoto. "Frank, let's try something, I want you to begin walking slowly around the room."

Frank complied, and as he walked down the row of benches, Rodney's camera tracked him perfectly. Then Yakamoto put his hand over the lens, while Frank continued to negotiate the perimeter--the camera stopped moving and Rodney squealed in protest to the blinding. "Okay, " said Yakamoto, "now stop and say something, Frank."

He stopped about 20 feet behind them and scratched his head, "What should I say?"

"ELLO! ELLO DA-DA!" The camera spun out of Yakamoto's grasp and whipped around until it found Frank.

"Amazing" breathed Lucy.

"Yes, it is," said Dr. Yakamoto with a smile. "Frank, I'd like to involve you in some more testing. Are you able to get away from your regular duties for a few days, maybe a week?" Frank balked, he wasn't sure he wanted to be involved in such weird shit.

"Well, we're pretty busy right now..."

"That's okay, I'll speak to the director, and get her to second you for a few days. You won't mind, will you? It would be tremendously important and exciting work. Of course, we'll pay your regular salary plus a research commission, and overtime for any extra hours you put in."

Well - now that the pot had been sweetened, it didn't seem quite

as weird as some other shit he could remember doing. "No, I mean sure. If you can clear it with my boss, I suppose it'll be okay....I'd better get back to work now."

"Great. See you in a couple of days then. And Frank, thanks for your help!"

"Sure, no problem." He retrieved his pink wagon and left the lab feeling both exhilaration and dread. He had a bad feeling about this science experiment, but he couldn't say why; it was creepy that the thing recognized him, but it was thrilling too. Was he aching for family so badly that even smart silicon would do? Wonder what Lucy's conclusions would be to that? The team watched him go, then huddled around Rodney's machine and began discussing their next milestone. A body.

Two days later, Frank was back in the lab with the new job title, 'Paternity Consultant.' The hospital director had agreed to him working with the research team but had nixed the research commission, and the overtime. No explanation--the bitch--probably going into her own pocket.

When Frank arrived he reported to Dr. Yakamoto, who assigned him an office. He'd never had his own office before, never mind a title--still wasn't sure what 'Paternity Consultant' meant, or what he was supposed to do, but Yakamoto told him they would meet in a couple hours and go over all the particulars. In the meantime, Frank should just relax and settle in. So he sat behind the new desk in his new swivel chair and played with the paper clips, something he thought every manager who had an office probably did from time to time. Tiring after about ten minutes of it, he went out to explore the lab ... he clearly didn't have the stamina required for management work. He noticed people were still arriving for work, so he could sleep in an extra hour in the future. Planning, now he was good at that.

Lucy came in and told him he would get the grand tour as soon as she got her coat off. Had he found the coffee room yet? Nope. He liked her company, her perfume, so he didn't let on that he knew where to get the caffeine. She said to follow her down the hall and she'd drop him off there and pick him up when she came back from her office. He followed in the wake of her freshly showered hair, happy to be alive. Leaving him to fend for himself, he fixed two cups and was sipping his when she returned.

"Mmmm, " she inhaled, "I could use one of those." Frank handed her a cup.

"I didn't know how you take it, so I left it black."

"Perfect, thanks." She drank slowly. "So are you looking forward to the new job, Mr. Dalton? It should be exciting work."

"It's Frank, okay?"

"Sure, Lucy." They shook hands.

"Great--well Lucy, that's what people keep telling me, but no one can say exactly what a 'Paternity Consultant' is or does." Lucy let out a guffaw. He loved it.

"It's just a fancy name that we made up to convince the director you should work with us; her department will look pretty good loaning out a PC. No offence intended...but basically you will be working as a 'nanny'."

Frank swallowed and put down his cup, "I don't think I'm really suited for baby sitting," he glanced around for an exit.

"No, the job is much more than that. Think of Mary Poppins."

"Uh, she was a television producer, right?"

"No that was Mary Tyler-Moore."

"Oh, right. So who was Mary Pippins?"

"Poppins. She was a nanny with magical powers."

"So now I have magical powers?" That's it - he was screwed.

"Look, forget about Mary Poppins. We just want you to play with Rodney, and help him learn about being a boy. He responds to you because you were the first human he saw when he...woke up." She touched his hand, "Frank, you have a powerful influence over him. Maybe too powerful, we just don't know."

Her eyes were as green as the sea and her perfume reminded him of Mexico. Maybe he *could* do this, "Why do you say 'too' powerful?"

"We haven't quantified it yet, but we think it amounts to a far greater influence than a natural parent has; and look at how real children can turn out. Murderers, Rapists, Thieves. We just don't know at this point what the extent is, nor the outcome obviously."

"They say children learn what they live," said Frank, trying to keep up his end of a conversation that had just taken on the approximate weight of a refrigerator.

"So true," she said fixing him with an inscrutable half-smile. She tapped her jaw with her ever-ready Staedtler. "Anyway, your job is to help Rodney learn to live, and Yakamoto will explain all this to you in great detail, you can be certain. He runs a tight ship, so he'll also have some papers for you to sign, standard non-disclosure agreements and bond assurances. You won't have any problem with those will you?"

"No, of course not." Frank shot his cuffs; he could feel his face flushing. His record as a minor had been sealed, otherwise he wouldn't have been given the job, still it made him uncomfortable when people questioned him about his past; but it was a different

with this one, standing just there close enough to touch....

And the moment was gone, Lucy glanced at the clock on the wall, "I'm just supposed to show you around and introduce you to the team, so if you're ready, grab your coffee and let's go."

They spent the next hour with the people in the lab talking about what each of their duties were. Frank liked most of them and thought he wouldn't have trouble working with them. But each time Lucy introduced him as the "Paternity Consultant", her tone seemed to add something that said "overpriced baby sitter." Was she jealous or was it his imagination?

Finally she took him to see Rodney. He was dreading this moment, but it came down to putting his money where his mouth was, so he took a deep breath and they stepped into the lab. First he heard the whir of Rodney's camera-eye targeting them; then the overhead lights began flicking on and off and music came streaming from the wall system, it was "The Homecoming" by Haygood Hardy. The lab people got up from their workstations and looked around in bemusement. What was going on?

DADA! PLAY WITH ME? OK?

"Interesting, Rodney has somehow hooked into the electrical system," muttered one of the techies.

Dr. Yakamoto stuck his head out of his office, "That's quite a royal welcome Rodney's giving you Frank. Don't squander it." Ducked back inside.

Frank blushed. He didn't understand why this machine had taken such a liking to him, he had taken the job as a way of getting a break from the facilities work, which bored him to tears--he had no real interest in the technology, but the show of affection from Rodney touched him. So he did a little dance and played air-piano along with the song. This won him a tinkling laugh from Rodney and applause from Lucy and the team, so he continued with even more outlandish moves, until he stopped exhausted.

"DO IT AGAIN!" Rodney shouted.

"You two are getting along so well, I think I'll leave you alone. I have some work to do." With that, Lucy excused herself.

So Frank hunched in front of Rodney's computer and tried talking to the camera. He wondered if this was what being on drugs was like. It felt so unreal, and he couldn't think of a thing to say. He tried to remember what his father talked to him about. Not much. It was his mother who answered all his questions. Often at bedtime, he would be afraid of being left alone in the dark, and as she went to turn out the light he'd ask just one more question and she'd sit down again on the side of his bed and patiently explain whatever new puzzle he'd come up with. But he found it hard to relax and open up with Rodney. He kept telling himself they were playing him for a fool. Rodney was nothing more than a hi-tech version of the harp playing, wood

chopping, clockwork toys of the 19th century and he was convinced someone was watching them from a hidden camera, feeding instructions to the machine.

So he tried little tests to expose them. He took three coffee cups and placed them on the bench, hiding a creamo under one cup, and with a lightning fast hand began rearranging the cups. He was good, his hands were a blur. Each time he would stop and with a smug smile ask Rodney where the creamo was, believing that Rodney would make a mistake, but Rodney guessed correctly every time. This pissed him off--no-one guessed correctly every time. Each time he tried again, moving the cups faster and faster, until finally one flew off the bench and smashed on the floor. A few techs stopped and raised their heads, then resumed their tasks. But Frank didn't stop, he simply switched tactics. "Repeat after me, Rodney," Frank rattled off the alphabet backwards. Rodney tried several times to imitate him, but only got a third of the way through so Frank gloated and got up to refill his coffee and get a broom. As he was about to step out of the door, Rodney shrieked, "DADA DO NOT GO!" And raced through the alphabet backwards and forwards, panicked that Frank was leaving him.

Finally, in the late afternoon, Dr. Yakamoto came in looking tired "Frank, step into my office please." Frank followed him in. "Sit down and close the door. It's time I told you about your new job here. I've heard you've been having a productive time with Rodney today. That's good news. You have taken the first step and that shows initiative, I want you to continue exactly as you've been doing, just playing with him. Getting to know him. Do you think you're up to it?"

"It's been a little spooky; you know that thing is pretty smart. Is there some type of trick behind it!"

"Nope, no trick, are you able to relate to him?"

"Relate? How do you mean, relate to a child, a human, a pet?"

"No, like he's your own son. And you have two weeks to teach him everything he needs to know before you send him off to school, to play with the big boys."

"My son? Okay, yes but only two weeks?"

"Yes, there will be more work of this kind if you are successful. But you've got to be committed to the work -- at soul depth -- and at the same time not get involved with them."

Dr. Yakamoto's intensity frightened and excited Frank. "Yes, I can do it."

"Excellent!"

Frank was abashed at the confidence Dr. Yakamoto had in him to teach Rodney. He had never considered himself very good father material, or an especially good person, which he always suspected was a requirement for teaching children. When you considered all the cars he'd stolen, the drugs he had smoked and the girls he had laid, he'd

be the last person he would choose to raise a child, or to work on your computer, in this case. For that's essentially what Rodney was, or so Dr Yakamoto had tried to explain to him. It helped settle his mind about the eeriness of a machine that could talk, recognize him, beat his best moves, and call him Dada.

For Frank, the following weeks ran by like children chasing an ice-cream truck. He arrived at work early, with delicious anticipation of the day ahead, and often left late, staying until 7 or 8 in the evening. It was fascinating work. He was tempted to not even call it work since might have done it for free, had he met his charge under different circumstances.

Frank and Lucy began meeting early in the coffee room to map out their day's work with Rodney. They had grown comfortable with each other, and found they enjoyed working together. "I want you in my life," Frank said, one morning. Lucy looked up at him and smiled her half-smile. He leaned across the table and gently touched her cheek. Lucy leaned forward and they kissed.

Soon they were seeing each other outside of work. Their time with Rodney went much easier; they anticipated each other and Rodney's development increased rapidly.

Meanwhile, Frank was selling electronic equipment, that he'd stolen from the hospital, to the ex-con, Andy Biggs, he had met at the bar. Since Frank was now working day-shift, his opportunity to get the equipment out was limited; he had to lie in order to go to the storage area and smuggle the equipment out of the hospital. His cover story was that he was going to visit his mother who was in a nursing home. Once a week, he would make his way to the storage facility and load a couple of the heavy parcels onto his wagon and take them out to his van, parked in the loading zone. Often, he would pass Leon, the Shipper/Receiver, and tell him that he had to return some equipment that had been ordered incorrectly. Leon liked Frank, who often brought him a box of Tim Horton's Donuts, and offered to help him load up the van, never suspecting that Frank was selling the equipment to Biggs.

Biggs drove a hard bargain, but he was in the market for most of the equipment that the hospital dealt with. Frank could usually count on an extra \$500 a week just by delivering one or two pieces of equipment. This way Frank could pay Odette her easy-money without digging into his paycheque. This arrangement went on for a while until Biggs began to get greedy.

"I got an idea. Let's start selling some of those e-children your company makes. I got just the customer to sell one to," said Biggs.

"What's wrong with leaving things the way they are? I'm making enough as it is, aren't you," said Frank?

"I can never get enough!" Biggs leered, "Come on! Next delivery, bring me an e-child. I'll give you 50% of whatever I make."

"All right," said Frank, "but I can't do this on a regular basis. It's too easy for them to miss one, and for me to get caught. Nobody keeps track of the supplies. I've got to figure out how to get one of them out of there."

"Okay, fine. Just do it," said Biggs.

Early, the next morning, Frank found out where the e-children were stocked. He let himself into the storage area with his master key. It was eerie. Neatly stacked around the sides of the room were several rows of e-children, grouped by age and sex, and covered in a light plastic sheeting, like a dry-cleaner bags. Their eyes were mercifully closed, as if they were asleep standing up. Now that he'd found the storage area he quickly let himself out. He'd come back later that night to get one and take it to Biggs.

He walked back to the lab thinking about how he would take the e-child later that night. He would have to sign in at the security desk, that could pose a problem if anyone discovered the e-child missing and started looking through the logs for suspicious activity. He would have to get one out during the day, it would be difficult but harder to trace.

As he walked back into the lab, Lucy surprised him, "Hi Frank, all set to get to work?" Frank jumped.

"Lucy! Yep, I sure am,"

"Why so jumpy, Frank? Your mother doing okay?"

"My mother? Oh --she's fine. Just a lot on my mind."

"How's the nursing home working out?"

"Not too bad. She's settling in, thanks. So, what's on for today?"

"We're scheduled to work out with Rodney in the gym. Now that he's been placed into his new body, he's going to need to learn how to use it."

"I'd forgotten today was the day he would be transferred over. How is he liking it?"

"He's ecstatic about it. He can't wait to show you, and have one of those airplane rides you you've been promising him. But let's go in so you can see for yourself."

Frank and Lucy stepped into the playroom, set up for Rodney's day-care and phys-ed. It was large and well lit with natural lighting pipes. The walls were lined with cupboards containing art materials, and at the far end, a large jungle gym was assembled, with an attached swing-set. Rodney, who was wildly swinging back and forth jumped off when they came in. His face was lit up with pleasure as he shouted Dad, and ploughed into Frank's legs, wrapping his arms around Frank's knees and hugging them with the loving arms of a six year

old.

Frank could barely speak over the lump in his throat, "Hey there, cowboy! You got yourself a great pair of dogs now. How will we keep up with you?"

"Dad, you're funny! I don't have doggies!"

"He means your feet Rodney," Lucy said, "it's a slang term."

"I like having these doggies!"

"Well then let's put them to work, cowboy," said Frank.

They played together on the swings showing Rodney how to pump in order to get height, and bounced on the teeter-totter -- games that would develop his coordination and physical stamina.

After a couple of hours Rodney was exhausted. It was the end of their shift, and Frank was anxious to be away to the storage compartment. He asked Lucy to take care of shutting down Rodney and gave her an excuse about having a medical appointment to go to. Lucy was concerned, but didn't press for detail. Hmmm, she doesn't pry. I like that. Too bad about the lie.

He stopped by the warehouse to pick up his wagon and a tarp, then went back to the storage area where the e-child inventory were kept. He took a quick look around to make sure he was alone, and then slipped inside.

He didn't want to turn the lights on. Jeeze, it felt creepy standing among the rows of sleeping children; he tried to imagine they were only mannequins. Still, he could here the throb of their breathing and it made the hairs prickle on the back of his neck.

He bundled up the nearest e-child in the tarp and put it on the wagon. He didn't stop to consider its age or sex. Biggs hadn't been all that fussy anyway. Frank carefully let himself out of the storage area and made his way to the loading dock. As he turned the corner at the end of the hall he thought he heard the "snick" of a door closing. Shit, he had forgotten to lock the storage room. Back he went, radar twanging. Any minute someone will come down this hall. He shoved the key in the lock, turned it, and then hustled to the loading dock.

"HEY FRANK! NEED A HAND WITH THAT?" Leon calling from the opposite end of the dock.

Shit.

"NO, I'M OKAY, THANKS LEON!"

"MORE EQUIPMENT TO RETURN? THAT SURE LOOKS AWKWARD. Here, let me help you." Leon running over.

THUMP.

Frank flipped the body into the truck. "Like I said, I got it Leon. See you tomorrow." Frank jumped into the cab.

"Thanks again for the donuts, Frank!"

"No problem," Frank started the engine and drove away (sigh). Never mind the donuts, Leon, think about the wagon you owe me.

It surprised him how keyed up he was about getting caught. He must really enjoy working at the hospital. Probably it was working with Lucy and Rodney that really made the sun shine in his life. It pissed him off that Odette had him by the balls so tight he had to risk stealing from the place. He couldn't live this way anymore. After this e-child was delivered, that would be the end of it. Odette could go screw herself, or she could take him to court and they would finally settle the matter. He would no longer cave in to her outrageous demands. Making this vow felt good. Frank held the wheel with his knees and spat into his hands, then rubbed them together until they were dry.

When he pulled up at the rear of the pawnshop, Biggs greeted him with a surly "You're late! Where the hell have you been?"

"I have a regular job, you know, aside from helping you get rich! Anytime you want to change our arrangement just say the word."

"Aw, forget it. Did you bring the e-kid? Let's see him." Biggs was excited. Frank wondered what the big deal was and then it struck him what a privilege it was to be working with Rodney. How lucky he was not to be like Biggs, stuck inside a life that ground him down, while he ground others down, cynically believing that life was unfair to everyone, in equal measure.

"Sure, " Frank said "it's in the back of the truck. Under the tarp." Frank went to the back of the truck and lifted the tarp but found nothing underneath. "What the fuck! It was here when I left the hospital!"

"Did you make any stops?" Asked Biggs.

"No."

"What about traffic lights?"

"Yeah, sure one or two."

"Shit. It must have jumped out along the way. We've got to retrace your route."

"Alright, get in."

"Hang on, lemme lock up the store."

The cool night air felt good on her skin. The storage room, where her brothers and sisters remained, had been hot and poorly ventilated. She felt both glad to be outside, and anxious to return

home. She had jumped from the truck at the first opportunity, reacting to the feeling that it was bad to be away from her family. Now she loped alongside the highway, cars speeding passed her with a rush of wind that rocked her slight body. A low-level impulse spurred her back to the hospital.

A car pulled onto the shoulder ahead of her, and stopped. The driver, a soft, round shouldered, middle-aged man with glasses pushed open the passenger door and shouted. "Hey, little girl, what're you doing out here on the highway? Get in and I'll drive you home."

"Thank you." She climbed into the front seat beside the soft man who sat with a white handkerchief spread over his crotch. "Please return me to the Gibson Medical Facility. Address: 11223 Development Way," she said in a sweet voice.

"Oh, I certainly will. Let's just get this seat belt strapped on you, first."

Frank and Biggs spent the rest of the night driving back and forth along Frank's route, searching for the e-child but failed to find her. When Frank arrived at work, Lucy met him at the door. She was distraught. "Frank! One of the e-children left the building last night, somehow -- no one knows how, it's never happened before!"

"Hey, slow down Luce. It's okay they'll find her."

"They already have. She was lying on the shoulder of the highway. She was beaten and raped. The auto-ambulances picked up her locator beacon, they brought her in. Doctor Yakamoto just spent the last two hours operating on her."

Frank was shocked. He felt a rush of guilt for removing her from the hospital, and putting her into harm's way. He also realized it would be impossible to take another e-child now. They would beef up security to prevent losing another one. "Why would she leave the hospital?"

"It's not possible, she couldn't have left on her own. They're all switched off, in there. Someone had to take her. The police don't have much to go on, but they've found the body of the man who raped her. Someone strangled him with his seatbelt. It's just horrible! I can't imagine being in her place while all this was going on."

"What?" Said Frank, "she was raped by this guy, but she managed to kill him too? That doesn't sound possible."

"We don't know who killed this guy, Frank, but we do know he was the one who raped her. Doctor Yakamoto gave DNA samples to the police and they've confirmed that they belong to a man who was strangled to death in his car, not far from where she was found."

"It's like someone avenged her."

"Yes, or it's a freak coincidence."

"Have you been in to see Rodney yet?"

"I was in earlier but he wasn't in his room. I thought he had gotten up to meet you, so I went to the coffee room but he wasn't there. Eventually, I found him in the E.C. storage area, curled up around the feet of one of the children -sleeping. He must have found about the missing girl and went to wait for her, or help her."

"Is that what he told you?"

"No, he said he didn't know how he got there. But I didn't feel like he was being honest with me. And Frank..."

"What else, Lucy?"

"There was blood on his hands."

"On his hands?"

"Yes. On his hands."

"Whose?"

"He said it was his. From a nose bleed."

"Can he do that?"

"Certainly. His body is fully functional."

"Let's keep this among the three of us, for now. Okay?"

"Okay. I'm not going to ask you why."

"Thanks. Did you shut him down last night?"

"He asked to be put into dream mode, he said he wanted to dream about his family. I didn't see anything wrong with that. He also asked to see you. I told him you had left early but would be in to see him in the morning."

"Well, let's go see him."

They spent the rest of the morning helping Rodney exercise his new body. He and Frank even wrestled the way a father and a son do, one fully exploring his strength and cunning, the other practicing subtle restraint. At lunchtime, Frank excused himself to run a few errands. He had to phone Biggs and try to sort out what would happen now that they couldn't get one of the 'non-learners'. Odette had left several messages on his voice-mail demanding he start paying the additional support or else face her lawyers in court.

He rang up Biggs, "It's me, Frank."

"Yeah, it's you. So what's happening Frank? When are you coming

by with another one of those synth-kids?"

"I can't. Not after what happened last night. They've got a full time security guard watching the inventory now."

"That's no problem --"

"What do you mean, 'no problem?'"

"Listen to me! Bring that one you're always bragging about. They don't pack him away at night, do they?"

"Rodney? Forget it. He's worth way more than one of the non-learners. Besides, how would I get him out of there? I'd be the first one they'd suspect."

"I'll double the money. And don't worry about getting caught, I'll take care of it. You just take him home with you tonight --and the babe you're in love with. Make out like you're going to have a little practical assignment with the kid. I'll grab him when you're all tucked into your beds and fast asleep."

"No, I can't do it. Not to Rodney. There's got to be another way."

"There isn't. And if you don't cooperate with me on this Frank, your boss is going to find out you've been doing quite a bit of 'in-house' shopping at his expense. I might even send him a video of you stealing that synth-girl last night."

"Try that shit with me and you'll spend the rest of your days sleeping with one eye open."

"What's the big deal anyways, Frank? He's a car, a joy-ride, a thing. He's easy money."

"How the fuck would you know anyway? You don't spend eight hours a day, five days a week with him."

"That's my point, he's your job. Do you think that's good for him? Being raised in a factory, on a time clock? I'm going to see he goes to a good home and you get paid for how well you brought him up. Which will get Odette off your back. Am I right?"

Silence.

"Come on, am I right?"

"Ok. Harm one hair on his head, your life won't be worth shit!"

Frank returned to the playroom shortly after lunch and tried to look nonchalant as he floated the suggestion about a sleep-over at his place.

"Hey, I've got a great idea, why don't we all go back to my place tonight? I'll order us some pizza and we'll watch movies. I've got your favourite, Rodster: Princess Bride! Won't that be great?"

Rodney was thrilled: "Yay! We get to go to Frank's home!" Lucy was not quite so enthusiastic.

"Frank, are you sure that's such a good idea? Everybody around here is on edge, something out of the norm like this may just cause more trouble."

"Don't worry about it, Lucy. We'll leave a message for Dr. Yakamoto. and let him know where we are. It will be an excellent domestic experience for Rodney. And for us too..." Frank moved close to Lucy, their breath mingled.

"Oh, you sure are learning the lingo, Handsome. I guess you're right, it would be a great experience for Rodney, and us." Lucy put her arms around Frank's neck and kissed him gently.

"Oooo, yuck!" Said Rodney.

That night, they arrived at Frank's apartment laden down with DVD's, pizza, and pop. Frank got plates and napkins from the kitchen while Lucy cued up the movie. Rodney ran excitedly from room to room.

"Where are your toys, Frank? Is that your bed? Are these your clothes?"

When he reached Frank's office, he saw his father's shotgun locked in a gun cabinet.

"Is that a real gun, can I hold it?"

"No dammit! was Frank's first thought. How could he explain the world of hurt bound up in that old gun? But he understood the effect the awesome power of a gun held over a six year old boy. So he took the key out of this desk drawer, unlocked the cabinet and took the gun down.

"Be careful Rodney. Yes, it's a real gun and guns are not for playing with. They can kill. You can hold it though." Rodney took the gun reverentially, studied it closely.

"Did you ever kill anyone, Frank?"

Frank took a breath.

"Hey you guys! The movie's ready and the pizza's getting cold." Lucy, calling from the living room.

"Why don't we talk about this later, Rodster? Let's get some pizza." He took the gun and put it back in the cabinet, then guided Rodney out to the living room. He was sweating.

As they ate pizza and watched the movie with Rodney snuggled between Frank and Lucy, Rodney looked up at them and said "If I was a real boy and you were my real mom and dad we could do this every night, instead of pretend. Wouldn't that be cool?" There were tears in Lucy's eyes and she squeezed Frank's hand and they both leaned in and hugged Rodney. The Frank began tickling the both mercilessly.

After the movie, they put Rodney to bed on a cot in Frank's office; he asked be put into sleep mode so he could dream about the three of them as a real family. Lucy turned the dial on Rodney's wrist watch until it displayed the sleep controls, then she selected Dreamland. "Good night Rodney, sweet dreams." They hugged him one last time and then they went to bed themselves.

Frank had spent most of his life expecting danger to come while eh was sleeping. Now someone was shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up Frank, where's the e-kid?" It was Andy Biggs, trying to keep his voice low. Frank's reflexes were quick; he sat up and threw a left hood at Biggs. But Biggs was quicker, he dodged the hook and pushed a gun into Frank's temple. "Interesting how relationships change in the dark, isn't it Frank? Now where is he?"

Bigg's voice woke Lucy up. "Frank, what's going on -- do you know this man?"

"I was Frank's business partner, but he's trying to screw me, so now I'm just a simple man who's protecting his interests."

"Shhh, it's okay Lucy. He won't hurt us." Frank put his arm around her.

"What is he talking about, what does he want?" Lucy asked.

"He wants to take Rodney."

"You're not going to let him are you?"

"No of course not. Look Biggs, you're not getting Rodney, and the gun doesn't scare my. We've got a 911 Auto Alert that will go off if you fire that gun in here."

BAM!

Biggs put a slug into Frank's right arm and chuckled while Frank screamed at the pain. "Not this one, it's been modified by Santa's elves; no smoke, not much noise, lots of punch. Now let's go."

"You're not going to get away with this." Frank moaned. Blood was running down his arm and soaking into the white bed sheets.

"If you're stupid enough to send the cops after me, they'll find out about your part in this plus how you stole the e-chick. Not to mention the thousands of dollars worth of equipment you stole from the hospital." Lucy was stunned.

"Not the girl, Frank?" Frank turned away.

Rodney came awake; he had a sensitivity to human emotions that bypassed his programming. The distress led him to Frank and Lucy's bedroom. A big man was standing over them holding a gun. Rodney felt the imperative to protect his family at all costs. He quickly went back and got the shotgun from the cabinet.

The big man stalked back and forth in front of the bed blaming Frank for not keeping his end of the bargain, while Frank sat on the edge of the bed bleeding. Rodney pointed the heavy gun at the man's back and tried to hold it steady. He squeezed the trigger and the shotgun exploded with fury. The big man collapsed into Frank's arms.

The shotgun blast activated the 911 Auto Alarm. It alerted police in the area that a firearm had been discharged and dispatched them to Frank's apartment to investigate. The first squad arrived within seconds and punched through the apartment door with a portable battering ram. Once inside, they swarmed through the apartment with their guns drawn. When they reached the bedroom, they saw one man slumped over another, both covered in blood; a woman tending to the wounds of the man on the bed; and the perpetrator, a boy with a gun.

"THIS IS THE POLICE, DROP THE WEAPON, NOW!"

Lucy and Frank reacted with one voice, "Rodney, put down the gun!"

The commotion startled Rodney. As helmeted figures filled the doorway, he turned and lifted the shotgun toward them. They opened fire. Frank launched himself at Rodney and sailed into his small body, knocking him aside as the bullets slammed into his chest. Lucy screamed and ran to Frank who lay clutching his chest.

"Frank, hang on. Someone we need a doctor!"

"I don't think there's time, Lucy. Don't cry. I'm happy we had our domestic experience, I just wish we had done it sooner."

Rodney scrambled to his feet and rushed over to Frank and Lucy. "Dada, are you okay?"

"Hey Rodster. You saved your family today. We're very proud of you." He held his hand up and Rodney grasped one of his fingers in his small hand.

Several police officers surrounded the little group, one knelt down and began applying a compress to Frank's chest. "We've called the paramedics, they should be here any minute. By the way, this is an e-child, we'll have to impound him."

"Why would you do that?" Lucy demanded.

"The law. It states that any autonomous synthetic being implicated in the death of a human will be rendered inactive."

"But he was protecting us. You can't de-activate him for that!"

A detective came over and tapped the police officer on the shoulder, "You recognize this guy?" Pointing with his toe to where Biggs lay dead.

"Yes sir. It's Andy Biggs--major criminal scum!"

"Well, get him tagged and bagged and out of here. He's fouling up the air. We don't need to bother this family any further. The boy deserves a medal."

"Yessir."

Lucy pulled Rodney to her and hugged him. "Hear that Rodney, you deserve a medal!"

Rodney sat down and pulled Frank's head into his lap. "No, Dada does." Then he began to sing, "Hush little baby don't say a word, Dada's going to buy you a mocking bird."

The End.