The charge-up man

Last delivery before the Singularity.

Catherine H. Shaffer

My charge-up man came on the very last day before the Singularity. There were butterflies in my stomach as I heard the music from a distance. Then his van crested the hill. His van, its sides painted all in red and blue, like an old-time gypsy caravan. Children came running from down the street, with phones and music pods and game packs in their little hands. They laughed when the charge-up man touched their devices to his charger. They should work for a whole month, now. A month!

Of course, the whole world was going to change in 24 hours. We'd been getting ready for the Singularity for so long, I couldn't quite believe that it was finally going to happen.

The government men had come around with their pamphlets. They handed out iodine tablets and duct tape and air freshener and other things that didn't make any sense. The rate of technological progress was going to go exponential, they said. Computers and artificial intelligences and nanotech devices were going to, at some point, get up and start improving themselves, and after that, the world would change in ways that no human being could imagine. Then they left.

The charge-up man was different. He'd started coming around when our stuff stopped working. Software updates would fail, or power adapters would become obsolete. Or sometimes the whole block would brown out, and he would park his van with its generator and go around powering everybody up again. The Singularity needs a lot of energy.

I had to fan myself a little with my newspaper as I went to the front door to open it. My charge-up man was really cute. I opened the door and he smiled at me. "Charge up, Ma'am?"

I stepped aside and let him in. I was wearing my low-cut top and I had put on make-up and perfume. Just for him. I was feeling reckless. Everybody was, that day.

My charge-up man wasn't the right man for me. We had never even traded profiles. But what the heck? A day later, we might find ourselves in a travelling mariachi band, or living underwater with tentacles growing out of our heads. Nobody knew what was

going to happen after the Singularity.

The charge-up man moved around my apartment, holding his charger, with all of his adapters and cords on a belt around his hips. He had wavy hair with little curls on the back of his neck that I wanted to twirl with my fingers.

He charged up all my newspapers, magazines and books. He charged up my phone and my pager and my toothbrush. He upgraded the cat and the catfood dish and the vacuum cleaner. The charge-up man had a list of all the devices in my house that needed charging and upgrading. I couldn't keep track of them. I remembered the old days, when we had to charge our own stuff, and the battery only lasted a few days, or a few hours, instead of a whole month. It was so inconvenient. And I got so angry when I wanted to use my phone or my pocket computer and tried to turn it on, only to get a warning: *Low battery. Please shut down immediately to avoid information loss.*

"What's your name?" I asked him.

He was squatting, charging up the little dinosaur that washes my floors. I bent over so he could see down my shirt when he looked up.

"My name is Brian. What's yours?" He was definitely looking down my shirt.

"It's Rita."

"Hi, Rita," he met my eyes for a moment, and then looked at the dinosaur again. "I don't have the right adapter for this device. I'll need to get a larger male adapter from my van. I'll be back in a minute."

Too soon, Brian was done charging up everything in the house, and it was time for him to go.

As he stood at the door, hesitating slightly, I gathered up my courage. "Couldn't you stay?"

He smiled at me. "Not now," he said. "Everyone wants a charge-up with the Singularity coming tomorrow."

"Then I won't see you again until...?"

Brian was framed in the doorway, sunshine bouncing off reddish-blond hair. He flashed a smile at me. "I'm not working tomorrow."

I beamed back at him. "Perfect."

After he left, I collapsed in a heap on my sofa, my heart flipping over in my chest.

Singularity day was a worldwide holiday. All my books and newspapers had stopped working in the night. My toaster had a core dump and wouldn't boot up, so I had a bowl of cereal instead.

Brian came over and we went outside. Wispy clouds were drifting across a bright blue sky. My house had completely shut down, and I had a message that everything in it was obsolete, and would be upgraded soon. A crowd made up of my confused neighbours milled around in the street.

Someone had a watch, and started counting down.

We joined in: "Seven, six, five, four, three, two..."

Brian squeezed my hand as we both said, "One!"

There was silence. After a long minute, a child asked: "What happened?"

I sat talking with Brian later. People had brought out lawn chairs and lit barbecue grills. They were still waiting for something to happen. "I thought the Singularity would be more impressive," I said, as I slid a marshmallow onto the end of a stick.

Brian shrugged. "A Singularity needs a lot of energy." He took out his PDA and thumbed it on. The screen lit up briefly, then a message came up before it dimmed again: *Low battery. Please shut down immediately to avoid information loss.*

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