

UNGLUED

A whisper in the dark.

BY AMBER D. SISTLA

So, it turns out that they don't make glue out of horse parts anymore. I take it off the list.

I still have another glue on the list — stopping parents who force their kids to sniff glue to keep them from getting drafted. Ms Tyler would like that one. She always says a mind is a terrible thing to waste. I also have gelatin, so I'd still be against misusing animal parts. Ms Tyler always says it's a shame to use animal parts for something frivolous like gelatin when so many people are starving, and starving wastes their minds.

With the other glue and the gelatin, the horse-glue was a redundant cause anyway. Dad always says reduce, reuse, remove redundancy. Said. Dad always said that. Before. I close my eyes tight and focus on my list. Crying wastes the mind, Ms Tyler says.

Glue and gelatin have always been on my list. I mean, glue is all sticky and gooey and it smells really good. And gelatin ... well, who doesn't like Jell-O? I mean, really.

I recite the list again and again in my head, waiting for the sounds to quieten on the other side of the privacy curtain. Whenever I start to get drowsy, I dig my nails into my legs.

Whisper won't come until I'm the only one still awake. Mum says Whisper is just a figment of my imagination, and I should ignore him. But if he's real, I think that would make him mad. Really mad. I'd rather be safe than sorry. That's what Dad always used to say.

Finally, all is quiet, and I peek through a small hole in the curtain. Mum's slumped against her workstation. Probably she'd been looking at her list — the one from the doctors with the cost of every procedure Dad needed. I'd heard Mum and Dad arguing because they only had enough money for one op.

I hear Whisper stirring, and I squeeze my eyes shut. Whisper always hides in the food processor on the bottom shelf. He slithers

and slides out of the appliance shelf, clattering across the shelf with the bowls and plates, scales scritch against the shelf with my robot, and then rubbing against the shelf with my clothes before finally arriving on top at my bed.

I don't open my eyes. Whisper would disappear. I know what I need to do, but the thought of doing it alone makes me feel like a used-up battery.

Are you ready?

He coils around me like a capacitor.

Whisper's question squirms in my mind like a live wire. I nod and open my mouth, and Whisper slides inside, tasting like lightning. He crams inside, pushing

Mum sleeps, curled around her station. Her black hair covers her face. She'll wake if I push it aside, so I just memorize its dark shadow.

I take one last look at our ten-by-ten. We used to have a ten-by-twenty when Mum and Dad still smiled. I don't remember that place much, but I do remember the smiles.

I slide the door open just enough to squeeze through. The halls are crowded. I asked Dad once why they didn't just get a one-by-one. He shrugged and said maybe they were doing a camping vacation, but Mum glared at him and said to Dad to be realistic and she told me that they didn't have money or the buildings just don't have room any more or both. When I looked up camping, it didn't make sense, so I guess Mum was right.

I wedge myself into the queue on the up stairway. On the 243rd floor, a lot of people exit, pushing and pulling me with them. My hands get clammy. This high up, it'd be impossible to get back on if I had a forced exit. Whisper growls, and suddenly there's enough room to keep squirming up and up to the top floor.

The recruitment centre is huge. Hundred-by-hundred, maybe. Bigger, maybe. It made me dizzy just to look at it, so I run around it as fast as I can until my legs won't move anymore.

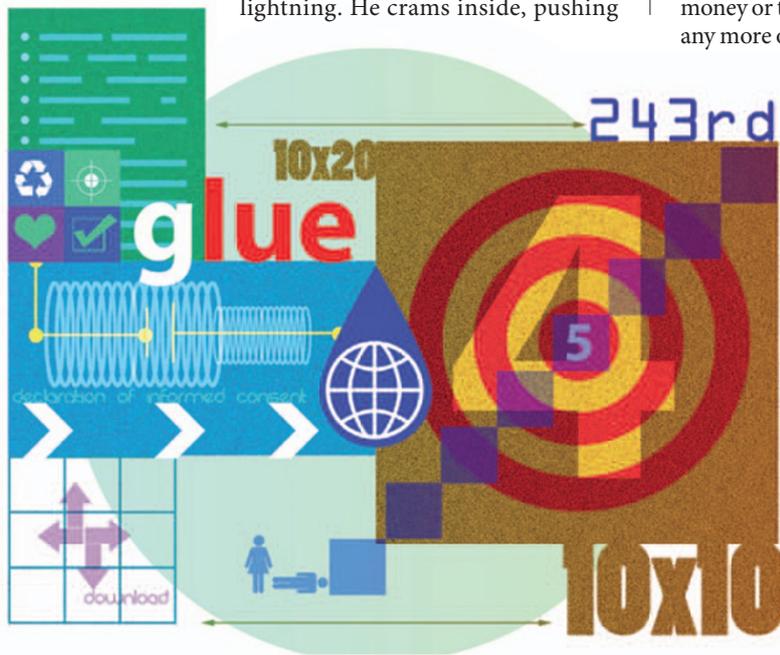
While I'm gasping for breath, the woman recites the Declaration of Informed Consent as if I'm a baby in a crèche. I've been hearing it every month at school for five years now, ever since I turned four and reached the age of Consent.

The woman tells me that she won't know yet what my brain will be used to intelligence until after the auction ends. After Consent Given, the base credit will transferred to my parents' account, and they could get a bonus depending on how the bidding goes.

She tells me that I'm helping save the world. I don't tell her about my list, or that I have my own plans.

Whisper says he has plans too. ■

Amber D. Sistla's fiction has appeared in Jim Baen's Universe and Cosmos magazine.



memories and thoughts about until I think my head will explode, but then it's done, and he's curled inside my mind.

I climb down, pausing to touch my robot. It's all ready, just needs a brain. Dad said if I built it and proved it worked to spec, he would get a mouse brain for me to intelligently it. But that was before.

Crying will ruin everything, so I think about my list until my tears forget they were coming. Down on the ground, I kneel by Dad's makeshift bed. He's deflated a lot since he got sick. I hold his hand and mouth the list in his ear. He doesn't move, the meds make sure of that. Nose to nose, I memorize his face.

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