

HOW KAMERON LAYAS RODE OUT THE CRASH

Shameful behaviour.

BY RAHUL KANAKIA

For about 30 seconds back in 2031, Kameron Layas was the most famous shame engineer in the world.

His breakthrough came when he bought 30 years of archived video from the surveillance cams of a very large supermarket chain.

Thirty years' worth of frazzled mums and dads pleading with hyperactive kids who won't stop yapping in their ear about some \$7 piece of neon-coloured candy gunk — pleading for just one minute — no, one second — of quiet, so that they can just try to remember if they have everything on the list ...

Thirty years of parents reaching their limit — just once ... once in a lifetime — and buying that moment of quiet by slapping their kid upside the head.

And then, in the summer of 2031, 30 years' worth of parents — many of them with kids who'd long ago matured into a healthy Oedipal hate — got official-looking letters containing pictures of the long-denied incident ... and those letters came with fines. The mums and dads paid up. You bet they did.

It was the mother of all breakthroughs. Within six months, the shame engineers had poured into parenting.

If you fed your kid too much mercury-tuna, or didn't strap them into a child-seat, or let them ride without a helmet, then those ubiquitous silently recording cameras got it all, and you probably got a notice. Of course, the bonanza didn't last long. It never does. By the time Kameron made the cover of *Time*, he was almost bankrupt, and the big corporations had already moved into the parental-shame business. They started putting microchips in all their products — cars, TVs, guns, everything — so that they could record whether parents were exposing their kids to danger. How could the smaller players compete with that?

That's when Kameron began his long, slow descent. However, he refused to feel ashamed of his decline. He spat on the sidewalk and he shat in the street and he kicked at cars and pried the microchips out of things, and the fines kept piling up, oh they kept piling up ... Kameron owed hundreds of thousands — millions! — of dollars in fines that there was no way on Earth he was ever going to pay.

And then Kameron overdosed.

Kameron's best friend in the world was Doctor Exponential. They worked the parks together, collecting bottles. At night

they pushed their shopping carts back to the overpass and listened to the music of the freeways. Sometimes they'd pool their cash and score a little horse from the guy at the corner.

But nothing in their partnership really covered what to do during an overdose. Kameron was huge: he weighed more than 300 pounds. The Doctor was small and skinny. How was he supposed to drag Kam to the hospital?

Besides, the Doctor could see the three cameras watching them. They knew Kam was dying. If they wanted, they could save him, but the Doctor knew that the cameras didn't give a damn about people like Kam.

But this time he was wrong.

As soon as the cameras identified Kameron Layas, a computer alerted Oakland's private-ambulance service. The little self-driving rescuecar zipped over and scooped Kameron up while Doctor Exponential was still looking around for help. The Doctor turned just in time to see the ambulance carry his friend away.

The Doctor wasn't there when Kameron woke up. The Doctor was at the library, researching. Kameron was discharged with a full belly and a \$24,000 bill. It took him the best part of a day to pick his way back to the underpass.

The two of them clasped wrists when they saw each other. They sat down, leaning against the pylon, and the Doctor covered Kameron with a blanket.

"Hey man," said the Doctor. "You know you're worth more alive than dead?"

The two of them sat there like that for ten minutes. Kameron glanced at the dealer on the corner: the dude had a gun tucked just under his shirt.

"What'd you mean by that?" Kameron asked.

"You've got total fines of like ... ten million dollars."

"Yeah?"

Back in the day, the Doctor had been a real doctor: a doctor of maths. He said: "Every time you get a fine, a computer thinks you owe some company some money."

"So what?"

The Doctor grunted. How had Kameron managed to do the things he did?

Kam never understood anything.

"If someone owes ten mil to a company, then that company, in its account books, counts that debt as an asset: they start acting ten mil richer. Then they slice that debt up and use it to back securities that they sell to other people. Over time, it all gets multiplied, so if you'd died, a hundred mil worth of securities would've become worthless. That's why you're still alive."

"Yeah?" Kameron said. "Alright ..."

Kameron looked at the nearest camera. And then he smiled. It was pointed straight at him.

He got up and walked over to the dealer. "Hey, give me all your vials," he said.

The dealer said: "What? Get out of here, skag."

Kameron stepped up, reached into the guy's pockets, and pulled out two handfuls of glass vials. The dealer said: "What the ...?" and pulled out his gun. But when he pulled the trigger, it blinked red and did nothing.

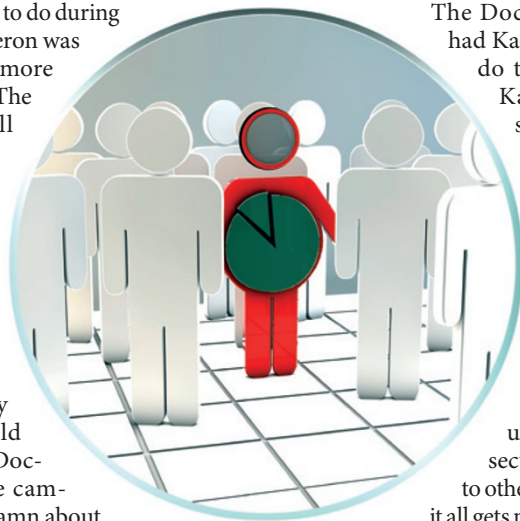
"Nuh uh," Kameron said. "The computer ain't gonna let you mess with me."

Kameron pulled the gun out of his hand, then he fired it once, up into the air, and the dealer started running away.

Kameron stepped into the road without looking, but the self-driving cars did rapid swerves right around him. He walked back and dropped all the vials onto Doctor Exponential's lap. "Take them," Kameron said. "I don't need them any more."

Then he sat down next to his friend, lay the gun in his lap, and covered it with a corner of the blanket. ■

Rahul Kanakia is a science-fiction writer based in Baltimore, Maryland.



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