

USEFUL OBJECTS

It's time to play your part.

BY ERICA L. SATIFKA

After he passes the age of reason, my brother chooses to become a foundation. Specifically, the foundation of the new state capitol building in Austin, Texas.

"You've never been to Texas," I say.

"It was the best opening they had," he replies with a small, sad shrug. "And you get weekends off?"

I'm still working the counter at Jiffy Mart, delaying the inevitable at a pointless task nobody asked me to perform. My friends have all gone off to be fire hydrants or ATMs or jackhammers or five-piece dinette sets. "Undifferentiated," the Makers call shirkers like me. I hear them whispering through the thought rays that emanate from their human-powered satellites *Choose. Decide. Be of use.*

And I reply: "Not yet."

The bell jingles and I look up to see a woman in mid-transformation barging into the store. Probably just took her injection after a weekend of rest. She's half-human, half-Vespa, and her chassis scrapes the paint off the door frame.

"A little help?"

I sigh and manoeuvre her through. I would have brought her purchases out to the parking lot if she'd asked me to. "What do you need?"

"Motor oil. Oreos."

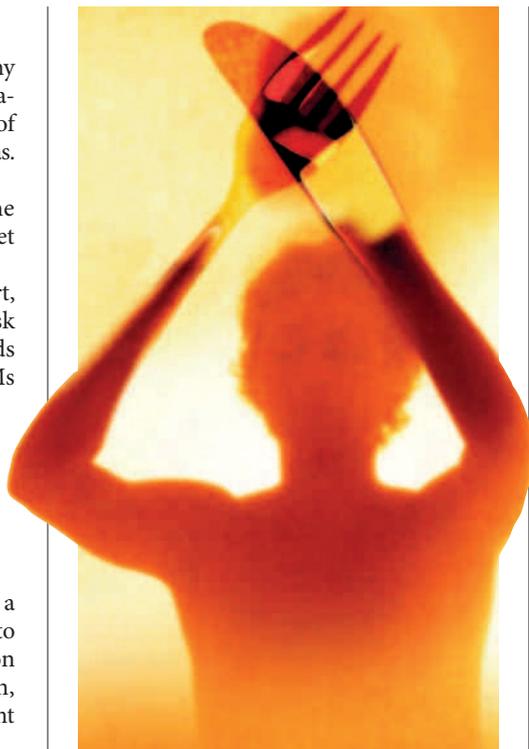
I tuck the items into her saddlebags. No charge, of course. As I close the door behind her, she belches a cloud of exhaust into my face. The transformation complete, she idles at the corner until a passing Maker hops aboard. It pops an Oreo into its mouth and speeds off, jagged teeth covered in chocolate bits.

The Makers are alive, but they're not organic. The division between 'living thing' and 'object' doesn't exist for them. And they have a hard time believing that we care about such a piddling thing as keeping our own bodies. To a Maker, a job's a job, and we all play our role. Except for us selfish undifferentiated types.

Choose, say the voices in my head. Decide. "Not yet," I say. "Piss off."

That keeps the voices down, for a little while anyway.

The Makers' home world is as artificial as they are, a spherical factory orbiting a distant blue sun. No nature, just industry. They arrived in the bodies of the last race they'd conquered, ships that died on contact with



our atmosphere. The ships died happy, the Makers told us, knowing they had been of use.

I'm not so sure about that.

It was a slow invasion masked as a self-improvement regimen. None of my friends really had a job. We were all living on plastic, taking useless classes at the community college to maintain our health insurance while we pretended our parents' basements were fabulous studio apartments. The queues for the Makers' employment centres stretched down the sidewalk like an ant trail.

Except, I kind of liked the art-history class I was enrolled in at the time. I didn't mind living at home. And anyway, injections hurt.

The Makers tend their human machines like careful gardeners. They shamle down the human-lined streets on their twisted, insectoid legs. And every day I feel their alien hate pulsing at me.

When they were full-time people, my parents used to telecommute, so it made sense for them to become a house. Which is great in one way, because I don't have to sleep

in a stranger's armpit. But it's also bad in another, because there isn't any privacy. Sex becomes

unthinkable in a house built from your parents' bones. I think that's why my brother's moving so far away.

"I'll miss you," I say as I watch my brother pack his bags.

He's already taken his starter injections, and his words come out thick and gravelly. Stone man. "You could come with me."

"I don't know anyone down there," I say. I don't add that I don't know anyone here anymore either. We don't wear nametags or anything, so you only know your friends when they transform into their part-time human forms. And useful objects don't want to hang around with undifferentiated slackers like me. "I'll write you. You'll still be able to read, won't you?"

"Of course I'll be able to read. I can do anything you can do. Except move."

"But you get weekends off?"

"Weekends," he says, "and alternate Wednesdays."

I don't take public transportation anymore, and I don't dare climb in a taxi, not when I could be entering the cab of my hated fifth-grade teacher. Luckily, I only live ten miles from the ocean. I grab my trusty bike, which was never alive, and pedal down the road to the coast.

Choose, the voices say. Contribute. Be of use. I pedal faster.

Because it's November, the ocean is deserted. I take off my shoes, roll up my trouser legs, and wade into the brackish water.

I choose to be the air, I think. I choose to be the rain on my face and the rocks beneath my feet, the waves crashing over the rocks and the sun beating down on the waves. I wish to disappear into nature, into Earth itself. That's something the Makers can't give us, for these things have no function. They are not of use.

I stand in the ocean until the pounding rain becomes too much to bear. My teeth chatter. But I just can't bring myself to leave. The rain drowns out the voices, and the dark keeps me from seeing the boats in the distance and wondering who they are, if they're anyone at all.

Someday, I know I'll have to choose. I can't remain undifferentiated forever.

Not yet, though, not yet. I'm not nearly ready yet. ■

Erica L. Satifka's fiction has previously appeared in *Clarkesworld* and *Daily Science Fiction*, among others. She lives in Portland, Oregon. Visit her online at www.ericasatifka.com.

➔ NATURE.COM
Follow Futures:
@NatureFutures
go.nature.com/mthoodm