STRIPPED TO ZERO

Someone to watch over you.

BY STEPHEN S. POWER

I don't know why we bother waiting on the stoop. After an hour, I grab Tommy's Caillou backpack and reach for his hand. He tucks it against his chest. It kills me, but I can't blame him. I'd call his mother if she would carry a phone. Or answer if she did.

Tommy follows me inside and asks: "Do I still get chips for being good?"

"Sure," I say, turning, "if you can beat me. Go!"

We race across the lobby and down a hall to the 24Shop, a small room lined with video displays. I let him dart in just ahead of me, and the shop says: "Good morning, Tommy."

"How does she always know my name, Daddy?"

I shrug. To a four-year-old, even the most mundane technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The shop has a woman's voice, soft and warm. I imagine her kneeling when she asks him: "What would you like, Tommy?"

He looks from screen to screen. Dancing chips. Splashing sodas. Cookies, ice cream and comfort foods. The shop says: "How about corn flakes with milk?" A bowl of cereal appears.

"No, chips," he says.

"It's much too early. Oatmeal with cinnamon?" Steaming oatmeal appears.

"No, chips! Daddy..."

Stupid nutrition protocols. "He can have a snack."

The shop says nothing. Instead, images flow down a screen like a slot machine before settling on a MoonPie.

"Yes!"

"And a coke?" the shop asks.

"Why not?" I say.

A red light blinks above the bill slot. Standing behind Tommy, I nod, and the light turns green. A MoonPie tumbles into one tray, a can of RC into another.

"What do you want, Henry?"

Tommy takes my hand. "Nothing," I say. "I'm good."

Upstairs, Tommy turns on the TV and tears into his food. He's promptly shown commercials for MoonPies and RC, a fact to which he pays no attention.

I head for my reading room and find

Karen sitting on the toilet tank. The mirror's unplugged and draped with towels.

I close the door.

"What are you doing in here? How did you even get in?"

"I spoofed a pass card."

"I'd get you a real card."

"Worse than phones." She glances through the high, small window.

"He waited an hour for you."

"I know. I watched."

"From the shadows? Jesus. He can't remember most of your shit, but it's starting to stick."

"It's not shit."

I hold up my hands. "Look. He misses you. Come on out. I'll tell him you —"

"Don't make excuses for me. And I'm not going near that TV. This toilet's bad enough. Probably reporting my weight." She lifts her boots off the lid.

"Fine. I'll call him."

"No."

"Then why get his hopes up? Why ... this?"

"I wanted to see him, but I needed to speak with you."

She slides down and stands close. She seems taller. And thinner. Probably the boots.

"I'm leaving," she says. "For good. I won't be coded anymore. I won't be tagged. It's killing me."

"So you'll kill him instead."

"He's another tag, Henry."

"He's a little boy."

"No. We're just data sets here. Why can't you see that? Is that all you want him to be?" Now I get it. "You're not taking him."

"We could live clean. Stripped to zero. Anonymous. This place I'm going —"

"I'll get him to his room," I say and grip the door knob. "Slither out, and the TV won't see you either."

I don't worry about her snatching Tommy. It'd be easier for her to disappear if no one wanted to find her, and I would.

"Then tell him," she says, "when he's old enough, tell him that I'm not crazy."

"He'll never be that old."

My watch screen flares. Tommy knocks. "Daddy, I don't feel well."

I look at Karen. She's already ducking behind the black shower curtain.

I open the door. Tommy's face is pale, sweaty and smeared with MoonPie. With a whirl, the toilet lifts its lid.

"Quickly." We kneel together on the mat, and Tommy spews brown-black vomit.

I can hear my mother say: "You just *had* to let him eat all that junk, didn't you?"

The toilet expresses a milky foam that bonds with the vomit, then it vacuums both away. I wipe Tommy's mouth with a tissue as the scent of vanilla fills the room.

"Smells like Mommy," he says.

"Yeah." I used to love her vanilla perfume. "I could set the vents to vanilla too."

"No, I want Mommy."

"I know." I rub his back.

"Why didn't she come?" Tommy slams the toilet lid down. "Where is she?"

I take his wrists and turn him so I can look him in the eyes. "Do you love her?"

He nods.

"Then she's always nearby."

"Like in the shower?"

"Ha! Exactly. Come on. Let's get a new shirt on you."

I pick Tommy up and take him through to his room. While he paws through a drawer, I hear her footstep outside. I smell the vanilla again, my stomach twists, and, despite everything, I want her to rush in and grab us both. So when the front door clicks, I'm horribly relieved, like someone watching his terminal partner finally die.

Tommy pulls out his Batman T-shirt. I bend him into it. We go to the living room and flop down in a heap before the TV. The first commercial is for vanilla air fresheners.

It's on every channel. ■

Stephen S. Power's novel *The Dragon Round* will be published by Simon&Schuster in June 2016. His stories have recently appeared at AE and Daily Science Fiction with many forthcoming. He tweets at @stephenspower and his site is stephenspower.com.

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