

SHOVELWARE

A fresh connection.

BY BOGI TAKÁCS

Tamás first bumped into his next-door neighbour while carrying a box full of kitchen utensils upstairs to his second-floor apartment. He cursed himself for not renting a utility drone to fly his boxes in through the window.

“Hey,” his neighbour said. “Can I help?”

He couldn’t see her — the box was blocking his view. “Thanks, I’ll manage.” Pots and pans clanged together as he slipped on a stair worn concave from use. She chuckled, then grabbed the box.

He only got a good look at her once they put down the weight. She was tall, muscular, ethnically mixed. She was wearing college sports fatigues, a faded black T-shirt with a tech company logo and a paisley pattern headscarf.

“Salaam,” Tamás offered.

“Wa alaykum,” she said, “but I’m not Muslim. Just wearing this because my bald head gets cold.”

Cancer? He didn’t dare ask. “Nice to meet you. I’m Tamás.”

“Liliane.”

After five more boxes, she invited him over for tea.

“You deserve this,” she said, spooning honey into his cup. “You’re so thin!”

“Intercontinental move,” he sighed.

“Where are you from?”

“Hungary.”

“Oh.” She fell silent for a moment. “I saw it on CNN. I’m sorry. Here, have one of my sandwiches. You have family back there?”

Fresh tomatoes and salad crunched under his teeth. He swallowed hard. “No family.”

“I’m glad you got out in time. What’s your line of work?”

“I’m a painter. Oils, the occasional watercolour, some digital stuff. Yours?”

“I dream video games.” She smiled.

“Design lead? Concept artist?”

“No — I dream them. After you’re done, I can show you my rig.”

He wiped his hands on his paint-stained trousers.

“Just to be sure,” she said, “letting you into my bedroom has no sexual connotations. Don’t get too excited.”

He shrugged. “I’m gay.”

She opened the door. “Good. I’m just happy to talk shop with a fellow artist, you know?”

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One wall had a French window — the other held a tangle of equipment.

“Is that like one of those imaging things, Mind’s Eye?” He’d contemplated buying one, but he was wary — he knew the devices were non-invasive, they just recorded and displayed mental imagery based on signals registered on the scalp, but he felt there was a limit to how close he wanted to be with technology. He wouldn’t shave his head.

“Yeah, with a bit more resolution than the consumer models,” she replied. “I’m testing this one for the company now.” He connected the dots — the logo on her T-shirt.

He nodded. “But I don’t get it. Why do you do it asleep?”

“You know lucid dreaming? I can control my dreams. Natural talent, I guess. Discovered I could do it as a kid. But some people can also learn it.” She grinned at him.

“Why do you need to dream for that?”

“Much faster. I can dream entire games per sleep cycle. Then the coding team just needs to export the art, the music, code the rules, et cetera. All the art assets in one sitting. I can’t hold all that in my head while I’m awake, but my brain takes care of it while I’m asleep. I’m best at jump and run, platforming, those types of games.”

He grinned back. “Cool. Do you develop for consoles? PC?”

“We just push them out to mobile app stores,” she grimaced. “Shovelware, you know the term.” He didn’t, but he could understand. “We make ‘em by the truckload.”

“I used to do serigraph prints. Not the same, but I get the point.” Not the same at all. He felt disillusioned — he’d expected something glamorous. Dreaming video games! Then again, it seemed that the goal was to speed up the development process, not to improve on it.

“Not so exciting when I put it this way, huh? I’d love to make a survival horror adventure sometime. They say it’s not my genre.”

Horror he knew about. “Giger was one of my major influences,” he said. “That and politics. I can show you my art. Tomorrow after unpacking?”

He felt like he was making her depressed.

Was she making him depressed? He bid her goodbye, then spent the rest of the day scrubbing his kitchen.

He showed her his art. They made more tea and moped in her comfy couch.

Then they avoided each other for weeks.

He found out she was freelancing for various shovelware companies. He got himself a new phone, busied himself with apps. There was a new one every day, her energetic demeanour all over them.

Then they started to turn gloomy.

It took him a month to realize she must’ve been looking at his art. And maybe more. Was that building in the background the Hungarian Parliament, burning? It scrolled by so fast.

He knocked, a tray of cookies in hand. “I’m sorry. I just thought you might ...”

“Come on in!” She was cheerful.

They munched, a shared love of cooking creating a bond between them. “I was looking at your games.”

“I was looking at your art,” she said, unfazed.

“I know,” both of them said at the same time. They laughed.

“Fancy a collaboration?” she asked, then held up her hands. “Not kidding! A friend’s making a leap, setting up a start-up. We could make that dark game I’ve been dreaming about.”

He’d also been dreaming about it. She held no romantic attraction to him, but they intuitively meshed as friends. As collaborators?

She leaned forward. “Tell me about Hungarian politics.”

He ranted on and on, years of frustration finally allowed an outlet. He was safe. He could create — without self-censorship, without doubletalk, without shame.

Outside, the Sun slowly set. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

