

S T O M P I N ' A T T H E S A V O Y

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

What I really need, Guy thought, is to duck into a Porta-Santa and blow off some of these bad vibes.

W L C D, “the easy-watching channel,” blared at him from a video store across the street. He’d sweated clear through his collarless pink shirt, and burglar alarms were going off in his brain. One of the familiar red-and-green booths stood open and inviting at the next corner. Guy lurched inside and slammed the door.

“Hello, Guy,” said Santa, scanning Guy’s I D bracelet. The white-bearded face smiled down from the C R T on the back wall and winked. “How are you?”

“Pretty shitty, Santa. I’m really paranoid at the moment.”

“I see. What are your feelings about being paranoid?”

Guy wrestled with that for a few seconds. “I think that’s the stupidest question I ever heard.”

“I see. Why do you feel it’s the stupidest question you ever heard?”

“Look, Santa, there’s three guys back there been following me all afternoon. Business suits, mirror glasses, pointy shoes, the whole bit, you know?” He rubbed nervously at a scrape on his plasteel jacket. Guy loved that jacket and he really cared about the way he looked, not like those other asses at work who’d wear anything they saw on W L C D. “I think I lost them, but I don’t even understand what’s going down, you know? First the computer goes apeshit at work. Then—”

“One moment please,” Santa said. The chubby face on the screen seemed to think something over, and then the voice came back. “Okay, you’re Guy Zendale, right?”

“Right,” Guy said. Santa’s voice suddenly had a lot more personality than a moment before.

“You said something about a computer?”

“Yeah. I like, work at Modern Sounds, you know? And I was ringing up this sale when all of a sudden some wires must have got crossed. All this data just starts pouring out all over the screen, you know? Filled up a whole floppy that was supposed to have our daily sales records on it.”

“You got it with you? Can I look at it?”

“Sure,” Guy said. He stuck the diskette in the slot next to the screen.

“Hmmm,” Santa said. “This is very interesting. Do you know what this is?”

Suddenly Guy twigged bad vibes again. He trusted Santa, of course. Just like that deal with priests and confessionals, only Santa was for everybody. The ads on T V told you it was okay. “Get it off your chest ... tell Santa.”

But Guy didn't like the way Santa's voice had changed. Why should Santa want to look at a bunch of receipts from a music store?

"Uh, listen, Santa, man, I don't know *what* the fuck this is about, okay? I really think I better split now."

"Oh, no, Guy, wait just a second. I've got something I want to ... uh ... show you..."

Guy heard footsteps running toward the booth. "Just stay where you are," Santa said.

Guy snatched the diskette and stuck it back inside his jacket, just as the pounding started on the door of the booth.

Guy's vision blurred as the adrenaline hit him. "Holy shit!" he yelled. He lashed out instinctively with his reinforced shoes and the side of the booth split from floor to ceiling. Hunching his shoulders, he dove through the opening and knocked a man in a suit and sunglasses to the astroturf sidewalk.

Still shouting, Guy ran into the middle of the street.

HONDAS ZIPPED AROUND HIM on either side, the drivers squeezing their brakes and shouting at him. Guy flinched and stood paralyzed for a second, then felt himself lifted by the elbows and carried across the street.

"Shit!" cried a voice behind him that had to belong to a suit and sunglasses. "Muties! Hey you asses! Come back here with him!"

Guy remained unnaturally rigid, afraid to even turn his head. He watched numbly as he was swept into a deserted building and down a flight of concrete stairs. Finally his terror began to subside and he risked a quick glance to his left.

Shit, he thought, snapping his eyes away. Muties, all right. Guy had heard stories about the so-called Law of Genetic Conservation, that for every genetically engineered "improvement" something else would go hideously wrong. The mutie on Guy's left could have been Exhibit A in the trial that had outlawed the whole field of genetic research.

The near side of its head was as swollen and lumpy as an organlegger's sack of cut-rate eyeballs. The muties' own eyes were about two inches out of line, the right one protruding a good half inch or so. The rest of its body was fairly normal, except for the hunched back and the enormous hands and feet.

At the bottom of the steps they began running through a tiled hallway, then down a wooden ramp and into a rough-cut tunnel that was black from years of soot. Guy listened almost hopefully for footsteps following them.

There weren't any.

Guy had never smelled rat urine before, but he was sure he was smelling it now. It's the Subway, Guy thought. As if it wasn't bad enough to be chased by asses in mirror sunglasses and kidnapped by muties, they had to bring him here.

He began to really get frightened.

The muties slowed and turned into a side tunnel. Guy could see the nose of the mutie on his right in his peripheral vision. It was the size and color of an unripe cucumber. What next? he wondered.

One more turn and they were in a long, narrow room, done in white tile on all the surfaces. Greasy daylight filtered in through a reticulated plastic

skylight. From the rusted pipes that still protruded at waist height Guy could tell that the place had been a rest room once, long enough ago to have accumulated a thick layer of dust and cobwebs, but not long enough to have lost the acrid odor.

Finally he had to stop looking at the walls and face the other inhabitants of the room.

At least ten muties lounged against the walls in a range of shapes and sizes, but in the center of them was the Bull Goose Mutie, the ugliest thing Guy had ever seen. Empty breasts dangled from its enormous, Buddha-like chest. Faceted, insectile eyes stared out of a skull shaped like a rotting pumpkin. Its matchstick arms ended in waxy, serrated fingers, and its legs folded too many times under its huge weight. The final, ghastly touch was provided by a smoldering Dr. Graybow pipe in the raw wound of its mouth.

“Guy Zendales,” the Big Mutie said in a squeaky cartoon voice. “We have decided to render you our assistance.”

“Terrific,” Guy said. “Thanks a lot. Why don’t you, like, give me a phone number and I’ll get back to you.”

“Give him Slack,” the Big Mutie said, and Guy was set on the floor to brush ineffectually at the wrinkles in his jacket. “The govt agents,” the squeaking voice went on, “were going to kill you, you know.”

“Kill?” Guy said. “Me?” One of the muties correctly diagnosed his expression and brought him a folding chair. Guy sat in it and massaged the muscle spasms in the back of his legs.

“They must destroy the information on that diskette of yours. Because you’ve seen that information, they must destroy you as well.”

“But ... but ... I’ve never done anything to the govt...”

The Big Mutie, Guy realized, was attempting a bitter smile. “Neither have we. Yet they have systematically attempted to exterminate us for years, despite the fact that it was their experiments which produced us.”

“Why me? What did I do?”

“There was a glitch in the govt computer and it accidentally dumped 297 sectors of classified information into your store’s system. I believe the file was called B L O O P E R S .”

“Bloopers,” Guy echoed. None of this seemed to fit together. He remembered a video he’d seen once, about a patient in a mental hospital. It showed a woman sitting at a gray metal table, setting out lines and patterns with paper clips and pencils and scraps of paper. Tears ran slowly out of the woman’s eyes. At the time he’d wanted to cry himself, without really knowing why. Now he thought he was beginning to understand.

“Perhaps we should explain,” the Big Mutie said. “The govt agents would have destroyed all of us long ago if it weren’t for our special genetic programming. Bob005, for example—” it pointed to the one with the gigantic nose, “is especially strong and fast. Bob667—” here it pointed to the one with the lopsided head, “was adapted for increased intuitive and precognitive powers. He anticipated your problem and enabled us to rescue you.”

“It’s not that I’m not grateful or anything,” Guy said, “but what’s in it for you?”

“We will never be free until the govt falls. We are always on the lookout for a weapon to use against them, and that diskette may be the one we need.” When it moved its head, dozens of identical reflections darted across its faceted eyes, making Guy’s stomach turn precariously.

“Look, I’d love to help, but I have to have the other data that’s on here. I need to get this thing unfucked and sent in to the main office or I’ll lose my job.”

The Big Mutie sighed. “All right. Suppose we get you safely to a computer. Will you at least let us look at the BLOOPERS file?”

“Sure,” Guy said. “Anything you want. Just get me out of here, okay?”

The Big Mutie seemed hurt. “Are we that ugly? Can you not stand to be around us even long enough for us to help you?”

Guy started to lift his hands in denial, then let them drop. “Well, yeah,” he said. “I guess that about sums it up.”

They refused to let him go home. “It’s too dangerous,” the Big Mutie said, “and that’s that.”

Finally Guy suggested the apt of some friends, Sam and Janet Evening. He had a moment of compunction at involving them, but didn’t see any other choice. They had a computer and their apt wasn’t too far away. Bob667 went with them, leading the way through the twisting Subway tunnels.

“Are you all named Bob?” Guy asked.

“That’s right. It’s in honor of our first prophet. He was a 20th century salesman named J. R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs. He was the First Mutie.”

“Oh,” Guy said. He didn’t hold much with religions, even inherently bogus ones. Still, the idea that the muties had a hero made them seem more, well, human. He regretted what he’d said to the Big Mutie about how ugly they were. Actually, they weren’t so bad as long as you didn’t really look right at them or anything.

Once they got to street level Guy took Bob667 to Sam and Janet’s apartment. Night had fallen and Guy felt strangely lonely and uncomfortable. I’m on the lamb, he told himself, trying out the hopelessly antiquated words.

Janet answered the door. “Hi, Guy,” she said, “This is a pleasant—look out! Behind you!”

Guy ducked, then remembered. “Oh, yeah. This is, uh, Bob667. We were wondering ... can we borrow your computer for a minute?”

“You mean you want me to let that mutie in my house? Yuck.”

“It’s really important, Janet.”

“Well if you say so. Sam! Guy’s here! Wait till you see what he brought over...”

Sam glanced up from the pornographic home video he was watching. A couple of the performers looked familiar to Guy—probably neighbors of Sam and Janet’s. “Make yourself at home,” Sam said, and went back to the TV.

Guy slipped his diskette into the computer and punched up a printout of BLOOPERS. Bob667 stood behind him as the printer zinged out the lines of data. Sam and Janet stayed in the other room, talking quietly to each other and pointing occasionally at the mutie.

“Do these names mean what I think they mean?” Guy asked.

"I'm afraid I really don't know what they are."

Guy showed the printout to Sam and Janet. "It's a list of the worst T V shows of all time, right?" Sam offered.

"Not all of them, though," Janet said. "Just the successful ones. What do those dollar amounts beside the titles mean?"

"I think," Guy said, "they mean I'm in a shitload of trouble."

"So what you and the mutie here are trying to tell me," Sam said, "is that the govt has been subsidizing bad T V?"

Janet looked from Guy to Bob667 and back again. "Isn't that a little ... well ... silly?"

"If you'd told me about all this yesterday," Guy said, "I would probably have agreed with you. Today I'm not so sure."

"It's not just the shows," Bob667 said. He slurred his s's even more than usual when he got excited. "They were fixing the ratings, too, which means they were more or less forcing the competition to produce shows just as bad. You get a vicious circle going, and after a while it's not just T V anymore. People are getting trained not to think, not to make decisions, not to take anything seriously. What we have to do now is decide what we're going to do about it."

"I don't really see what the big deal is anyway," Janet complained. "Who cares about all this stuff? Why are they hunting Guy down? Who are we going to blab to, anyway?"

"You don't understand the govt," Bob667 explained. "There's hardly anybody working there anymore, just a lot of paranoid programmers and a lot of interconnected computers."

"What about all those people we elect?" Sam asked. "What do they do?"

"Sit at home, mostly, and watch T V. There's nothing left *for* them to do. The computers do it all."

"Well fuck it, then," Guy said. "I'll just clean up the floppy and send it in, like I was going to, and—"

"Just a second," Bob667 interrupted, holding up a decayed-looking finger. "The govt agents are closing in."

A fist hammered on the door.

Janet switched the T V to hall monitor and glanced quickly away. "Yuck," she said. "It's another one of *them*."

Guy opened the door for Bob005. "The govt agents are closing in," it said. "The High Bob sent me to warn you. If you don't come with us and let us hide you, they're going to catch you. We can't stop them."

"Didn't we go through all that this afternoon?"

"Look," said Bob667. "If you won't let us hide you, can we at least try something else? Nobody's ever had a chance to get on the govt's computer before. They may just burn that diskette of yours, but there's a chance they'll want to look at it first. To at least make sure they have the right one. Let me copy a virus on there."

"A virus?"

It took a diskette out of a fold in its toga—or a fold in its chest, Guy wasn't sure which. "It is our sacred bulldada in program form—a self-concatenating

string loop. We've spent a long time working this up, for just such an opportunity."

Guy hesitated. "How much more trouble would this get me in?" he asked, but Bob667 apparently misunderstood.

"A good attitude," it said, popping the second diskette into a drive and typing a command. "Are you sure you won't come with us?" it asked again as it took out Guy's diskette and handed it back to him.

"I'm sure."

"Ahem," Sam said. "Did someone say they were 'closing in?'"

"Uh, yeah," Guy said. "Apparently."

Janet yawned widely. "Gee. Really sleepy all of a sudden."

"Gosh," Sam said. "Look at the time."

"I'll just walk you downstairs," Guy said to the muties.

"Don't mean to rush you," Janet said. "But..."

THE THREE OF THEM stopped on a street corner near the Subway entrance. "I don't really understand why you won't come with us," Bob667 said.

"It's like this. If I came with you, that would mean I believe all this shit you told me. I'd have to be crazy to believe that. So I'd rather just go to work and pretend that everything's okay."

"Well, all right then."

Guy felt strangely reluctant to let them go. He was certain he would never see either of them again, less certain why that idea should bother him. "So," he asked. "If they do catch this virus, thing, what happens then?"

"I don't know. Maybe the end of the govt, If so, that takes a lot of pressure off of us. I'm not sure anybody else would notice."

"I would," Guy said.

"Yes, well, good luck then," said Bob667. The two muties walked away. Between one streetlight and the next they were gone.

THE GOVT AGENTS picked Guy up a block later. He was wandering aimlessly, trying to make up his mind where to go. The agents, Guy noticed, wore their mirror glasses even in the dark, even as they tossed him lightly in the back of their Honda.

During the trip one of them lifted the diskette out of Guy's jacket. "Hey," Guy said. "You can't—"

"Shut up, assle," the agent said.

Guy shut up.

He kept expecting them to stop the Honda and throw him off a bridge, or take him into an alley and shoot him, but instead they led him to the basement of the midtown govt complex and handed him a stack of change. "Machines there, bathroom there," the agent said, and left.

The place looked and smelled abandoned. Pipes gridded the ceiling, oily water stained the floor, and plastic crates lay scattered everywhere. At one end of the room stood a big-screen TV, a ratty couch, and a wheelchair containing an old woman.

“You ever watch this channel?” she asked. “I watch it sometimes. It’s not too bad.”

Guy walked over to her. “Who are you?”

“Sit down, sit down,” she said. “Or if you’re going to talk, do it in the other room.”

Guy went to the door and pushed against it. Its surface was devoid of handles to shake or locks to pick; some kind of electronic seal held it in place. Guy bought himself a Coke and went back to sit on the couch.

The woman was watching *W L C D*, “the browsing station.” A lot of football players chased a slippery ball to the accompaniment of synthesized bassoons. The station cut to the *W L C D* logo, then ran two-and-a-half minutes of pie fight scenes from old black-and-white comedies. Then back to the logo, a big dance number, the logo, and a man in a white coat talking very seriously for a minute and a half about hemorrhoids.

After a short piece on crippled orphans, the old lady said, “Makes you sad, don’t it?”

Guy thought about the floppy with the *B L O O P E R S* file on it. Was this what the govt had been shooting for? He wondered how much money they’d quietly put into superstation *W L C D*. How perfect it was for them—a station you never had to turn off, because if you didn’t like what was on you only had to wait a minute or two. No complicated plots to follow, no characters to get mixed up, no difficult shadings of emotion.

Guy tried to lure the old woman into conversation, but she refused to talk in more than three- or four-second bursts. He learned that her name was Mildred, but nothing else about her, or the reason he was being kept with her in the basement.

Trying to ignore the *T V* proved beyond Guy’s will. He had nothing else to do in that basement but drink Cokes and eat candy bars, and in that suffocating grayness the splash of big screen color drew his eyes irresistibly.

He was able to doze off for a few minutes at a time, but a sudden fanfare from the set would wake him up. The old woman never seemed to sleep.

Finally he decided to risk the old woman’s wrath and tried to switch the thing off. “Hey!” she shouted at him. “Whatcha doing there? Get away!” The power knob was frozen, as was the channel selector.

“Nothing,” Guy said. “Never mind.”

“This is a good program,” she said. “I like this one.”

“Okay,” Guy said. “Okay.”

He soon lost his sense of time. His watch was still running, but he didn’t know if the numbers were *A M* or *P M*. He’d told that new girl at the store, the one with the soft, mobile lower lip, that he would call her this weekend. He didn’t know if the weekend had come or gone.

He began to stay asleep longer, wake up less fully. He wished he had clean clothes and a razor. He wondered about Bob667’s virus program and decided that it had failed because nobody had come to rescue him.

Then one day he couldn’t remember the last time the old woman had said anything. He struggled up from the couch and waved a hand in front of her inert face. No response. He felt her arm for a pulse, and though he couldn’t

find one he noticed the flesh was still warm and soft. As he let go of her hand it knocked the afghan off her lap, revealing a mass of circuitry.

An andie, he thought. No wonder.

He ran to the door and began pounding on it. "Hey! Hey, somebody, let me out of here!"

The door drifted open under his hands.

The building was deserted. Chairs lay haphazardly around the offices and glass was broken out of the doors. Guy tapped on one of the CRTS, but it was dead as the old woman downstairs.

The programmers had obviously panicked when the computer went down. So, Guy thought, no more govt.

He compared his watch to the bright sunlight out, side and decided it was eleven in the morning. He went home, took a long shower, and walked to work.

ISABEL NECESSARY, his district manager, wanted to fire him at first. She couldn't believe that Guy could have lost the diskette *and* missed five days' work without phoning in.

"I was in an accident," Guy lied cheerfully. "I lost my memory."

"I'll bet," Isabel sneered. "You were probably just lying around watching TV."

But in the end she let him stay. Probably, Guy thought, because she couldn't find anybody else for the money who'd wear decent clothes.

He stopped at Sam and Janet's place after work, but they'd moved away, with no forwarding address. The new tenant, a middle-aged man in a bathrobe, had WLCD running in the background when he answered the door.

"Sorry I can't help you," he told Guy. He had one eye still on the TV as Guy thanked him and left.

Standing in the street, Guy realized it was the first time he'd been outside in recent memory without something terrible happening to him. The astroturf sidewalk felt firm and springy beneath his feet; he was clean and nicely dressed again. He should have been happy, but somehow he felt like he'd missed out on something, as if he'd woken up and found himself inexplicably old and frail.

He decided he really ought to talk it over with Santa. He crossed the street and went into the booth on the corner.

The Porta-Santa was dead.

Santa's face was frozen on the screen, half, way into a wink. One eye was almost closed and his mouth was twisted in what looked like a grimace of pain.

Guy stood there for half an hour, watching the distorted face, waiting for some kind of message. It's not coming, he realized at last. It's like the mutie said. The revolution happened, but nobody noticed. They were all home watching TV.

"So long, Santa," Guy said.

He shut the door of the booth and shuffled away down the green plastic lawn of the sidewalk.

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