

*"I like to think (and the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow where mammals and computers
live together in mutually programming harmony
like pure water touching clear sky. I like to think
(right now, please!) of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics where deer stroll peacefully
past computers as if they were flowers with spinning blossoms.
I like to think (it has to be!) of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal brothers and sisters,
and all watched over by machines of loving grace."
--Richard Brautigan*

From the taxi, I noticed the traffic light's lenses were dark. For a moment, I wondered if the generator had failed, but the green light flashed and we drove on. My worries weren't entirely meritless, as South Grounders frequently attempt to eliminate Yeavingerworth's electricity. For two weeks, they even succeeded. In that time, King O'Rourke commissioned me to build a generator resistant to their attacks, and it's worked so far. Calmed, I turned my attention to the city. Storm clouds departed from the sky, while children ventured outside to play. There was something soothing in the imagery, and my mind drifted. It was strange to think that I was on my way to see Robert at Marine Heights Central. Just last year, I'd never receive such respect.

During that time, I worked on the front lines as a field medic. At first, the wounds were minor. They consisted of cuts, bruises, and heat-related injuries; perhaps the occasional insect sting. But in time, circumstances grew more severe. Eventually, a soldier was injured in a grenade blast. He was carried from the trenches to the infirmary, while his comrades shrieked. Individual words were lost, but their collective panic conveyed a medley of fear and helplessness. I approached his stretcher, and noted the wounds. Shrapnel had torn into his body, especially his legs and thighs. He was losing blood rapidly, and his chances of living were slim.

"He was hit!" Lieutenant Johnson declared, as he carried the soldier up the staircase. As if I couldn't tell, I thought, but remained silent. Instead, I checked his throat for a pulse, and realized that his heart wasn't beating.

Once we entered the infirmary, Doctor Brusco approached us. "What's going on?" he asked, as he stood there uselessly.

"Get the door!" I barked.

As we entered, I heard a voice cry out in anguish. From another direction, someone chanted, “Doctor Kulick, where are you Doctor Kulick?”

I waved a hand toward the voice, never averting my eyes from the wounded soldier. “I’m right here!” I called. “Please, prepare my tools!” The so-called help was wasting valuable time. Why couldn’t they respond to the situation methodically? Finally, Robert helped me lower him onto the table. At least someone around here was competent.

“Is he going to die?” Chanted random soldiers.

“Get them out of here!” I called to Johnson.

He grabbed a soldier by his shoulders, and forced him out of the room. “Everyone clear out!” Johnson ordered.

As they left, Brusco began waving an ophthalmoscope over the soldier’s eyes. Then he looked up at me. “He’s not responding,” he whispered.

“Of course not!” I exclaimed. “His heart’s stopped; now prepare my tools as I asked.” I turned toward Robert and ordered, “Insert the cardiac monitor.”

“Yes Doctor Kulick,” he replied, already placing the instrument down the soldier’s throat. He began pumping it, as Brusco returned. He carried a tray, and passed me a scalpel from it.

“Tell Johnson we need this patient airlifted immediately,” I said as I cut open the soldier’s chest. “We don’t have nearly enough resources here. Even if we get his heart going and stop the bleeding, his legs could be infected.”

“Excuse me?” stammered Brusco. “This is the middle of a battle, they’ll be—”

“Protocol dictates that if wounds overreach our capacity, we’re to call a medical-unit.”

“I-I’ll tell Lieutenant Johnson,” Brusco sputtered. He dashed outside, as I began massaging the soldier’s heart by hand.

Robert quivered like a leaf as he watched, but grinned when he saw the blip on the screen.

“Nick!” he cried. “You’ve done it!”

“We still have to find the source of his bleeding, and stem the flow,” I replied gravely.

After fifteen minutes of examination, it was clear that the major blood vessels below his bowels were severed. Robert pinched them as I pumped plasma into his system. It wasn’t enough, and his heart stopped again. “Defibrillator!” I ordered. Robert passed the freshly lubricated paddles to me. I rubbed them together, and placed them over the soldier’s chest. “Clear!” I cried, and sent jolts of electricity into his heart. No matter how many shocks we administered, the monitor only displayed a straight line.

“Time to call it, Nick?” asked Robert.

“Not yet,” I insisted. “I’ll try massaging his heart again...”

Even as my gloved fingers entered his chest, Robert sighed. “Nick,” he lamented. “We’ve done everything we can.” I ignored him, and continued working.

Robert watched for a few moments before he murmured, “He’s not responding.”

“He’s dead,” declared a voice from the infirmary entrance, and I turned my head to see Johnson standing there with Brusco. “He’s dead,” he repeated. “And Brusco’s informed me you wanted to send out a helicopter in the middle of an attack.”

“H-He’s very invested in the lives of soldiers.” Brusco offered.

“Right,” replied Johnson. “I’ve heard whispers you’ve got South Grounder roots yourself, Brusco.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Robert.

“Get out of my way,” Johnson replied as he walked past Robert, and stared directly into my eyes. “I know when you’re from Kulick. Did you think you could get an entire helicopter full of Yeavearingtons killed?”

“I...uh...I...no, of, of course not...” I sputtered, while Robert waved a hand at Johnson.

“Lieutenant, you don’t understand.” He protested. “Even after the monitor flat-lined, he continued working with his bare hands, he’s—”

“That’s insubordination Ryker,” Johnson interrupted. “Expect to hear from me later.” With that, he left the infirmary.

“I’m going to be court-martialed for sure,” sighed Robert, as he shrouded the body.

“I wish I could just shut him off and fix him,” I muttered.

“Heh. Wouldn’t that be something,” grinned Robert. “Y’know, just unplug Johnson and adjust his attitude as you would a faulty machine.”

“I was referring to our late patient,” I replied as I returned my friend’s gaze. “But that thought is just as tempting.”

“Y’hear me bud?” my driver queried.

“Mm?” I responded.

“We’ve arrived.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.” I left the car and walked around to the front window. “Here’s a twenty, don’t worry about the change.”

“Thanks!” smiled the driver.

I grinned back, and strode toward the hospital entrance, where four guards awaited me. I was instantly recognized, but I showed them my clearance anyway. Once inside, I knocked at Robert’s office door.

“Hey Nick.”

“Robert.” I replied, and offered him a handshake. As our ebony fingers clasped, the sight gave me a jolt of familiarity. It had been so long since I’d seen him and in his absence, I had grown accustomed to the sight of white skin against dark. “Long time. How you holding up?”

“Uh, everything’s going slow ’n steady. Nothing, uh, nothing out of the...” he shrugged, “...nothing too bad. You doing okay?”

“Yeah, Aidan and I spent the last few days with the king’s family, just visiting.”

“That right?” Robert’s lips curled into a delicate grin. “Hey, you’re lucky you’re here on a day it’s not raining. It was pouring all weekend.”

“Oh yeah, that’s quite a,” I ran my fingers through my hair, “quite a shame, huh? I know you like to barbecue when you’re home.”

“I’ve still got seven days leave.” Robert straightened a stack of papers. “If I have a cook-out, you wanna come?”

“Maybe,” I hesitated, then expelled a long breath. “So, you had something you wanted to talk about?”

Robert’s expression turned serious. “Yeah,” he nodded, “yeah, there’s a patient. Got here sometime last night. They, uh, they wanted my opinion ‘cause he’s a South Grounder.”

“Really?” I frowned. “Why?”

“Uh, I guess they assumed I had,” Robert mouth tightened shut for a moment, “had more experience with them.”

I groaned. “Robert, people are people. There’s no special way to treat someone just because they’re from—”

“I know that Nick, I was up all night, spent all night treating him. See... once I saw him, his identification, I—”

I raised a hand, halting Robert. “Look, let’s take a deep breath,” I said, and waited for Robert to calm down. “All set?” I asked, and Robert nodded. “Okay, so you were saying some South Grounder is being treated here?”

“Yeah, uh, right, see... the South Grounds sustained civilian damage. One old timer got it especially rough. He was stuck with shrapnel, hit close to his heart and lungs. Many are two, even three inches long, but his medics wouldn’t remove them for fear of killing him.”

“They’ve never seemed to know what they’re doing.”

“Yeah, well, they sealed up his wounds right away, like he’d been in a car crash or something.”

“I suppose that’s one reason we’re winning the war.”

“Well, eventually they figured something was wrong and brought him to us. They’re obviously wary of ‘the enemy,’ but he was a civilian injured under our fire and—”

“...and under state law, that makes him our responsibility.”

“Right.” Robert nodded, and collected his thoughts. “But at that point, his wounds were infected. Once I removed the shrapnel from his neck and chest, I cut out some infected tissue and administered antibiotics. But by then, it’d spread too far. Best case scenario is that with care, he’ll live another couple of months.”

“Tragic,” I snorted. “But why come to me? I’m not even a field medic anymore.”

“It’s... ah, it’s not that. It’s just... certain details revealed during his admission, they caught me off-guard.”

“So what were these details?”

“His identification said his name was Alan Kulick.”

I fell silent.

“Nick...?”

I didn't respond.

“Hey, Nick?” Robert asked a little louder. He took hold of my shoulder and shook it.

That startled me, and we reestablished eye-contact. “Yes Robert?” I asked calmly.

“You take that in?”

“Yes. His name is Alan Kulick. My dad.”

Robert breathed in sharply. “I was hoping he'd be an uncle or even unrelated.”

“It's just...” I glanced at my watch, then back to Robert. “You had lunch yet?”

“Excuse me?”

“Have you had lunch yet?”

“It's ten am.”

“I know. Listen, why don't you get yourself something to eat? I'll tend to...” I thumbed some books lining Robert's shelf. “...him alone.”

“Sure,” Robert nodded slowly. “I've got him in an iron lung, down in our private lab of course. Figured you'd want it that way.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “Lead the way.”

Robert complied. “There's no telling what the other patients or even the staff would do to a dirt dwell...uh...a South Grounder in the general population.” He was silent as he led me downstairs, and only faced me when we arrived at the bottom. “Nick...about that term I used...I'm sorry, I...”

“Think nothing of it Rob.” I smiled warmly. “Force of habit, right?”

He grinned back at me, but seemed guilty nonetheless. “Perhaps,” he said as he unlocked the door. “It's still no excuse. Listen, you're always welcome in my home. I'd love to have you for a barbecue. You could finally meet Neil. You're great with kids. I mean, sometimes I think the princess loves you more than her own...”

“So he's in an iron-lung,” I interjected. “Anything else I should know?”

“Not really; he keeps drifting in and outta consciousness. I'm pretty sure he's cognizant at least some of the time. But don't expect to really engage with him.”

“Right.”

Before Robert departed, I gave him some money for lunch. I doubt he actually ate. He probably decided I needed time alone. I certainly did, but not for the customary reasons.

In our laboratory, I observed the machine you're encased within, as it reclined next to my latest project. I took a seat nearby, and blabbed about my ride over. And well Al, that's about the long and the short of my trip here today.

You'll forgive me if I don't call you dad. The term feels distasteful. Rachel and I weren't your children; we lived as prisoners in that log cabin. Deep in the woods, home was unbearably lonely. Due to racial tensions, the South Grounds were isolationist in general. But honestly, I'd wager a small fortune that few endured our anti-social existence. Every moment was filled with dread. The walls were lined with yellowing paint strips, peeling off the walls like claws. If you found toys in our possession, you bashed them to bits. The only affection you showed was toward your humanoid machines. Those memories anger me even now. We had no running water, or even basic heating. Yet any resources we obtained went into robots. You wanted to sell them to the government as weapons, but all you built were stream-driven tin cans. They weren't fit for anything other than selling to travelling roadside attractions. Whenever they visited, you told us to hide.

"I'll sell you this one for forty dollars," you told some shifty-eyed carny as Rachel and I huddled close in the cupboard.

"Nikolai...?" Rachel whispered.

"Shh Rachel," I said under my breath. "He'll hear you."

"Nikolai, please. I can't keep it in no more. I'll start crying."

"Rachel, I love you. But shut up."

"I can't—"

"Put your hand over your mouth."

"Why can't we have a dad like other kids?" Rachel snivelled. "Why's life always awful?"

I lifted a hand to cover her mouth, when guilt stung my heart. Instead, I hugged her.

"One day I'll make sure no one's ever like dad ever again. Promise."

That vow must have seemed empty compared to our reality. You heard us talking, and whipped us afterwards. Such instances were rare for Rachel and I, but mother sustained them daily. I still flinch when I remember her pain. At least we were used to that lifestyle, lacking anything to compare it to. But mother knew life before you; I can't imagine what it was like for her. The air she breathed must've been spiked with tension, as you spun your panorama of violence around her.

After school, I dared not return to our crumbling cabin. But the city was no better. Though once an industrial powerhouse, the recession sent factories closing and abusive fathers tinkering with machines. But deep in the woods, none of that touched me. The oak trees and meadows stretched out for miles. Everything seemed in its place, and operated like clockwork.

Once I believed my haven was ordered, but that changed as I spent time studying wildlife. I found difficulty reconciling my notion of nature as a well-oiled machine with the suffering it caused. Before school one morning, I watched a Pigeon. As I made notes about his behaviour, a hungry hawk descended.

Killing to eat is bad enough, but the real horror is that it ate him alive. I realized that if nature is indeed a machine, it's a very poorly designed one.

I did my best to counteract that. I've always had an interest in science, particularly biology. Thanks to you, I also learned basic first aid from tending to mother and Rachel. Using scraps from the junkyard, I built a makeshift "hospital" deep in the woods. Shop was an optional class, but I was grateful I took it. I learned the trade quickly; it even led to a part-time job in that terrible economy. My hospital was kept secret from you of course. Not that you cared much about where we were, as long as we disappeared when you had customers. I saved money to buy the necessary tools, and took to the library. I read voraciously about animal physiology, particularly from a veterinary perspective. Then I began applying that to the wounded creatures I found.

I know what you're thinking, and yeah, I was still a kid. I couldn't save them all, sometimes I even made things worse. I also got scratched up and bitten a fair number of times. But I could patch myself up easily, and it taught me tact. Knowing when not to help is as valuable as knowing how to help. Plus, I was learning something that seemed important. If nothing else, it was an escape from you. Out there, the animals were my friends. I had none to speak of in the city. When kids at school noticed me at all, they showed little but contempt.

Take the time I noticed a wounded cat in an alley. My first instinct was to run and help, but by then I knew better. Instead, I paused to assess the situation. She had a collar, which suggested she was domesticated. There didn't seem to be any factory spillage or sharp objects about, but she was bleeding badly. As she mewled, I searched the dumpster for plastic wrapping.

When I found some, I approached cautiously. "Hey kitty," I soothed, avoiding eye contact. "Can I help you? Let me help you, okay?" At first, her ears flattened against her head and her back arched. But as I approached, she sensed I meant no harm. I scooped her up in the plastic, and studied her injuries. Her chest was strewn with glass, and my concern gave way to confusion. I searched the alleyway for a broken window, or even some shards I missed. When I found none, it should've been obvious. But I didn't realize what had happened until youthful voices appeared in the distance, and the hair along the cat's back bristled.

"Looks like it took the alley on the left," said one. "Left a trail."

"Scott, wait up!" called another.

Scott, I thought. Even Mrs. Hanna doesn't like him.

"Naw, let's hurry up and catch it," the first voice shouted. Soon, Scott and his friend Harry appeared. "I don't wanna miss Captain Phenomenal." The cat dug its claws into my arm, desperate to flee, but I clutched her tight. I stood there, too thunderstruck to move.

"Oh great," said Scott as he noticed me. "It's Alan's kid; shouldn't you be helping daddy build a talking can-opener?"

"Yeah," Harry chortled, before he realized what I was carrying. "Hey! Are you holding...ew! It's dripping all over him!"

"You did this," I mouthed, dumbfounded. "It was you."

“No way!” declared Scott. “We just wanted to help it.”

“How did this happen?” I asked. I took a step back, shielding the cat with my body.

“Look, we were just messing around,” mumbled Harry. “We didn’t mean for it to go this far.”

“Harry!” Scott declared angrily, and shoved him to the ground. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Whaddaya mean me?” Harry asked from the pavement.

Scott just ignored him, and turned his attention back to me. “Give me the cat. Now.”

“I...I have to get her out of here. She’ll die if—”

“Give it here!” shouted Scott. He reached for the cat, and I drew back, ready to bolt. “Harry, get up and help me!” Scott sneered.

“Why couldn’t you have just left it alone?” Harry moaned. “It’s not the cat’s fault you got a crummy grade...”

At that, I checked her collar. “This is Mrs. Hanna’s cat,” I stammered.

“Shut up!” Scott bellowed as he lunged forward. “We didn’t mean to hurt it that bad, I’m not getting it trouble for this!” He attempted to pull the cat from my arms.

“No!” I screamed. The cat shrieked, but was too weak to flee. “There’s glass all over her chest,” I cried. “You could kill her, you could...!” Scott planted his fist in my nose. I nearly tumbled to the ground, while he lifted the defenceless animal by the skin of her neck. My hands covered my face as blood gushed from my nostrils.

“You’re different from Alan’s other failures, Kulick.” I heard Scott scoffing. “You ain’t made’a metal.” Fresh tears mixed with my blood. “We weren’t gonna hurt it,” continued Scott. “But you know what? I should break its neck in front’a you. Dad says these things grow into darkies anyway. It’s cuz’a you we had a recess-shun.” I removed my hands from my face. Both were caked with blood, and I stared at Scott through the red. But I didn’t see him terrorizing a cat. I saw you, Alan, terrorizing mom. “I’m like Captain Phenomenal,” Scott declared. “I’m gonna save the humans from the darkies, I’m gonna...”

I don’t remember what happened next. But when it was done, Scott was sprawled over the pavement. I stood above him, observing his unconscious form. There was no sound, save for Harry’s screaming. With the cat cradled in one arm and the other straight at my side, I lurched away. My shoulders were thrust forward as I walked; my face a stony mask. Mrs. Hanna’s place was only a block away, but it’s doubtful I arrived there without drawing attention. The city was always bustling, yet no one noticed me. Either that or no one cared. In the South Grounds, the latter is more likely. It’s a place where at best, you’re ignored for doing the right thing. At worst, you’re punished for it.

Mrs. Hanna’s house was located on a hill, just beyond the neighborhood. I passed there often, as it was on my way home. This was my first time travelling it however. It was too steep to walk safely, but I was too out of it to care. I knocked at the door with my free hand, and waited for an answer. Through the window glass, I saw a pale woman appear. Her face was covered with freckles, while her auburn hair nearly fell to the base of her neck.

“Hello...?” She ventured as she opened the door.

"Hello, Mrs. Hanna," I replied.

Her eyes widened as she observed the beaten form before her. "N-Nikolai?" She stammered. "You gave me a fright...what happened?" She paused for a moment, and then noticed her cat in my arm. "Is that...oh no...is that Clarissa?" she gasped.

"Couldn't go for help," I said flatly. "No time."

Most people would've just slammed the door and called the police. But Mrs. Hanna was an understanding woman, particularly compared to other Westview professors. It was as though the peculiar location of her house mirrored her own displacement in the South Grounds. "Give her here," she said with a gentle smile. Her eyes betrayed her terror, but she was able to disconnect and help. This clearly wasn't her first time dealing with a wounded animal. "Hold her still," she said as we entered the basement. I took a moment to study our surroundings. Mrs. Hanna and an entire infirmary down here, one that made my wooden hospital look as primitive as it was.

"We'll have to give her a shot before I can operate," Mrs. Hanna said. While she pulled on her gloves, Clarissa bit and scratched me a little. I barely felt it, and held her still as Mrs. Hanna prepared a syringe. "Would you like me to shave her chest as you organize the examination table?" I asked, while Mrs. Hanna sedated Clarissa.

Speechless, she stared at me. "Are you...are you capab...can you do that?"

"I should be," I replied. "That's generally the easier part." Mrs. Hanna opened her mouth to question me, but couldn't. "Clarissa doesn't have time for this," I stated. "I trust you know what you're doing. You need to trust me too, or she's not going to make it." Emphasizing her cat's name proved effective, and Mrs. Hanna immediately switched gears. We became machines, programmed to help. Hours of surgery and a blood transfusion later, Clarissa was unconscious, but alive.

"I can't believe it," Mrs. Hanna gasped afterwards. "How could she survive a wound like that?" Her emotions had returned, but I answered pragmatically.

"You mean the glass over her coronary artery? Well, it only cut through the tissue lining it."

"You don't understand. If the glass went even a hair further—"

"...Clarissa would've suffered a heart attack and died within minutes."

Mrs. Hanna was astounded. "How do you know all this?" she asked. Something about her tone jolted me. Without the cat to worry about, I began feeling more like myself.

"I... I dunno." I said. "I read a lot about medicine at the library."

"What for?"

"So I'll know what to do in situations like this. See, my family gets banged up a lot and..."

"Banged up?"

"W-we live way out in the sticks," I faltered. "Loads of stuff goes wrong out there."

“Mm.” I could tell she wanted to press me further, but didn’t. “So how’d you do it Nikolai?”

“Huh?”

“Explain to me how we saved Clarissa, step-by-step.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for a pop quiz?” I asked, masking my reticence with sarcasm.

“Think of it as extra credit.” Mrs. Hanna smiled.

“Well, you know it wasn’t pretty. We had to crack her chest, and then…”

She listened patiently as I explained. It was obvious that she sensed something was wrong, but she decided to let me tell her when I was ready. Mrs. Hanna respected her students, and established trust. Those qualities made her an excellent teacher, as well as a reliable friend. And that’s what she became as she prepared refreshments and mended my wounds. Soon she was telling me about her life, clarifying why she had this set-up in her basement.

“I didn’t even know this town had a veterinarian, let alone that it was you,” I said between sips of freshly brewed tea.

“Yeah,” she explained. “I originally wanted to do it full time. But there’s not much money there anymore. Especially with the economy being how it is. I have to work out of home.”

“That explains the basement.”

“Indeed. If people want to spend money taking care of their pets, I’m their only shot.”

“You have to be prepared.”

“Mm-hm. But it’s my turn to ask a question, Nikolai.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s with your act during school?”

“My ‘act’?”

“No one your age should’ve been able to perform this operation. Some trained professionals can’t.”

“What, do I seem slow or something?”

“Of course not,” she chuckled. “Your grades are quite high, and you’re well-liked by the staff. But that’s because you do your work and don’t mouth off. But at the same time, you’re regarded as just another piece of scenery. A quiet student destined to be shoved into factory work, while they ignore the fact that rarely pans out anymore.”

“I can’t help how people view me,” I replied. “How is that putting on an act?”

“I was half-teasing,” she giggled. “It’s not so much an act. There’s just nothing to suggest you could do this. And I can’t believe you learned to perform a complex operation simply from tending to bruises on your sister.”

“Well, since I was a kid I spent a lot of time in the woods, studying the animals. When one was hurt, I tried to help it.”

“You learned all this from trying to help animals in the woods?”

“Well, not all of it, no. Like I said, I read a lot too.”

“So, you taught yourself to operate from books?”

“Kinda.” I hesitated, somewhat confused. “And watching videos.” She was silent. “Anyone can learn this stuff,” I said defensively. “It’s all there in the library.”

“I just...you’re sixteen. I can’t believe you’d have the dedication, let alone the ability to teach yourself all that.”

“I’ve had my share of failures. Even now, I screw up sometimes.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“I dunno, since I was eight I think?”

She was flabbergasted. “That’s incredible dedication.”

“All I do is read and then try to apply what I learned. There’s nothing else to do around town.”

“Well, I think that’s pretty special. Don’t you?”

I looked away bashfully. “I dunno. But thank you, Mrs. Hanna.”

“Please Nikolai.” She grinned, and placed a hand over mine. “Call me Rowan.” The ghost of a smile ran across my lips.