

FF

by T J Price

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Smashwords Edition

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One

Darren's brain, like many drivers, tended to shout and rant from the security of his well-oiled vehicle.

Just give me a fucking raise, will you? Come on, come on, come ON!

His boss, Jeff, abruptly glanced round. 'Hm?'

'Nothing.'

'I thought you said something.'

'Not me.'

'No? All right, you can shove off now. I'll finish up here.'

Without waiting for an answer, Jeff turned back to setting the shop's burglar alarm.

Darren glared at the back of that very bald head for a moment and then he drifted off to brood outside on the busy sidewalk.

Jeff wasn't long following him out -- pursued by the tuneless bleeping of the alarm. He frowned a little to see Darren still waiting, but he had to be quick about locking the door.

The bleeping stopped and *Electronic Entertainments (hi fi -- digital -- computing) Ltd* was now secured against the rise of the criminal classes.

Job done, Jeff favoured Darren with a wary smile. 'So, where you off to now?'

'A friend and me are meeting some young ladies for the evening.'

'Oh yes?'

'At the Wetherspoons Pub, on Starling Street.'

'Gosh, is that place still going?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Small, isn't it?'

'No, it's huge. There are three bars, and a stage for bands.'

'They must have extended it.'

'I don't think so. Not in the last few years anyway. It's been a time since you went there, perhaps?'

A shadow crossed Jeff's face. 'Ah yes, I expect so. Noisy there now, is it?' He glanced at the city office workers streaming along the sidewalk, their heels sternly rapping the concrete slabs in their hurry to get home. It was obvious he wanted to get home too.

'I suppose it is pretty loud.'

'Pity, if you want to chat to the ladies.'

Darren grinned. 'We've done our chatting.'

Jeff turned and pulled down the shop's steel shutters. He squatted in order to attach a padlock to the latch at the bottom. When he stood up again, he was a little out of breath.

Darren's brain noted this. *He's like so out of shape. So old, so bald. How come he's the boss and not me?*

'Well, have a nice evening then, Darren.'

'Thanks.'

'And by the way, could you be here by seven, Monday morning? We need to do an inventory.'

Seven o'clock instead of eight-thirty! It was Darren's brain that did the actual yelling. He himself smiled and asked with pained courtesy, 'Didn't we do an inventory last week?'

'We did indeed, but I'm not happy with the printer consumables. I want to know where I am before I negotiate with the new supplier. Okay?'

There was no doubt about it, Darren was disgruntled. Not only at Jeff, but also at himself. Why didn't have the guts to seize this moment, when he was being asked to put in extra hours, to broach the subject of a pay raise?

His mortgage repayments were going up, not down.

‘Yes, of course.’

Jeff’s inquiring glance lingered just a little. ‘Between you and me,’ he added, ‘I’m a bit worried about the Saturday staff. Especially that lad, Liam.’

‘He’s been lifting, do you think?’

‘Let’s put it this way, if there’s any discrepancy this Monday he’ll be looking for another job. They’re ten a penny these kids. They all think they’re God’s gift, but you can replace them just like that.’ He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

‘Too right,’ Darren said, looking at the raised hand.

‘See you Monday, then.’

‘See you too.’

They went in opposite directions.

Darren headed further into Birmingham city centre, where the busy crowds were already thinning out, although the cramped roads were still seething with traffic.

Despite his failure to ask Jeff for a raise, his spirits rose rapidly, like a loosened balloon, soaring between the sheer and towering concrete buildings, off and away into the limpid blue sky. At twenty-two years of age, he had something Jeff didn’t have -- a long future. There would be other jobs, he knew, and the time to succeed in them.

And tonight, he had a blind date.

The pub was about ten minutes walk away. Patrons were already filling the main bar -- small knots of suits, smiling and laughing, their ties loosened and their voices loud.

Darren walked to one of the wooden alcoves and there was Marius, a friend he’d known since school, sitting with a couple of girls.

Marius, a stringy, straw-headed, plain-featured man had always been a little selfish where it came to women and he did not acknowledge Darren immediately. His mouth was working rapidly and the two young women stared at him with hypnotic fascination. The mouth didn’t stop working even when Marius was obliged to look up at Darren.

‘Hey there,’ Darren said, with a hint of irony. He felt the eyes of the ladies on him.

‘Oh, hey.’ Marius’s shoulders sank ever so slightly. He glanced round and saw that yes, he had no choice but to introduce everyone. ‘Linda, Sharon, this is Darren.’

His spell was broken.

Darren smiled and nodded to them. Linda was dark, Sharon was light.

‘Would you like a drink?’ He asked.

‘Thanks, not yet,’ Linda glanced at Sharon. All their glasses were full.

Marius stood up. ‘My round. What you want?’

‘It’s okay, I’ll wait.’ He joined them at the table, sitting beside Marius. ‘I have a limited alcohol intake.’

‘Going to take the pledge?’ Sharon asked. As well as being light, she was long boned and thin.

‘Almost have already. Six bottles is my max.’

‘What are you going to drink in the club?’ Linda asked. ‘Orange juice?’ For some reason, her tone was accusatory and she glanced meaningfully at Marius.

He also looked at Marius. ‘Are we going to a club, then?’

‘Oceana, as usual,’ Marius said, with a tentative smile.

Darren frowned. He disliked Oceana. Its clientele were even louder and brasher than the music. Still, Marius had set this date up with his work colleagues and it would be mean spirited to carp. ‘Well, that’s great,’ he said.

‘What’s wrong with Oceana?’ Linda asked sharply. Somehow, his “*great*” hadn’t sounded enthusiastic enough.

He shrugged. ‘Nothing. I’ve heard it’s a bit druggy, that’s all.’

‘Don’t take drugs either?’

‘Yeah, when I was about twelve. Something you grow out of isn’t it?’

‘I think I drink too much,’ Sharon said, smiling at him. Linda gave her a sideways look of disapproval. Sharon kept smiling. ‘So I think it’s good to have a limit. I wish I had one.’

Linda seemed to find this funny. While she laughed, Darren said to Marius, ‘You’re not going to have a limit tonight.’

‘Hm?’

‘You’re going to be celebrating.’

‘Hm?’

‘Deo Shalcott’s signed up with Birmingham City.’

‘No shit!’

‘Here we go,’ Linda hooted. ‘Men and football.’

‘How do you know?’ Marius asked him eagerly.

‘It was on the television.’

‘Ah, of course.’ He looked at the girls. ‘He has a shop full of them.’

‘You have a shop?’ Sharon asked.

‘I work with an electrical retailer.’

‘Really? Linda’s after a new iPod.’

‘Oh, we have plenty of deals.’ Darren glanced in Linda’s general direction. ‘If you get a price somewhere, we can generally beat it.’

‘Can you beat anything?’ Sharon asked.

Darren smiled. ‘Depends. What are you after?’

Linda groaned and rolled her eyes.

Marius said, ‘You got yourself a good deal on that television, didn’t you? Integrated Blue Ray recorder. How much did you get your boss to knock off it?’

‘I got a twenty per cent discount.’

‘Because you know the boss?’ Linda asked, putting an unpleasing emphasis on the word boss.

Darren shook his head. ‘I don’t get special treatment. I shopped around and asked him what he could do, like anyone else has to. If I were you, though, I’d say bring the cash and wave under his nose. He can’t resist that.’

Linda simply looked at him.

‘And how much did Deo Shalcott cost Birmingham City, Darren?’ Sharon asked.

‘Five million.’

‘Wow.’

‘You like football, then?’ He asked.

‘Why shouldn’t I? Because I’m not a man?’

‘Hey, I’m not criticizing. It’s good.’ He smiled at her.

‘Is that what you watch on your new television? Football?’ Linda put in, keeping up her faintly derisory tone.

‘I actually don’t watch a lot of TV.’

‘Then why buy one?’

‘More or less to fill out my apartment. I bought it last year, and I’m still collecting stuff.’

‘Where is your apartment?’ Sharon asked.

‘By the *Electric Clock Quays*. You know, that new apartment block there?’

‘They couldn’t sell them,’ Linda said. ‘The building firm went bust in the recession.’

He stared at her now, quizzically. ‘And that’s why I got a really good deal. Almost half price.’

‘Really?’ Sharon exclaimed.

Marius meanwhile was looking depressed. He still lived at home. Taking a drink from his

bottle of beer, he remarked. 'Yeah, Darren's the man.'

Two

Next morning, Darren woke up next to Linda. He had drunk far more than his upper limit of six bottles. Disjointed images accompanied by echoes of blaring voices and an acute, yet undefinable sense of shame haunted him as he looked around the small, dreary room. He was close to the floor, on a futon, or maybe just a mattress. A freestanding clothes rack leaned against one wall. Directly ahead of him, on a low, MDF table, a small flat screen TV and a hi fi mini system held his attention briefly.

Junk.

Fresh, early morning sunlight blazed through the gaps in the nylon window blinds.

Linda was breathing deeply. All Darren could see of her was a shock of dark hair flowing from the top of the eggshell blue duvet. He quickly counted off his clothes scattered over the floor, checking they were all there. Time was short. His head was already pounding and he knew from sorry experience that debilitating nausea was not far behind.

Moving with caution, his gaze ranging restlessly over the second hand furniture and the grimy, papered walls, he slipped from the bed, pulled on his clothes (his work suit) and opened and closed the door after him. Linda remained sound asleep.

He came out onto the landing of a large family house. But no family lived here anymore. The ambience was familiar from his student days -- it was almost a smell -- and it told him that each of the rooms was rented out. Through a pressing necessity he used the toilet before he left, but it didn't feel like an intrusion. It was almost a public place.

Outside, he found himself on a street of redbrick houses, typical of the older suburbs, most of which were familiar to him, and he soon knew exactly where he was in the city. The centre itself was half an hour away by foot and after that he would be in his apartment in another ten minutes.

It was six in morning and the streets were still empty of people. Without people they looked cleaner, more civilised, while the buildings of concrete and glass, towering above him in the city centre, seemed grander, as if it had all been designed to be at its best without crowds of human beings.

The cool air kept his nausea at bay, but the first thing he did when he got to his apartment was throw up in the toilet. Bouts of sickness came and went like a tide of vomit. His skull seemed to be shrinking and driving his eyes out their sockets. As he suffered, he was struck by how loathsome his body was. Which was puzzling, because usually he could take it for granted that he was handsome and healthy. Furthermore, just then, death didn't seem such a bad idea, and that was really confusing, because deep down he naturally assumed, like everyone of his age, that he was immortal.

The hours of torture passed so very slowly and Darren groaned and endured -- there was nothing else he could do. Only when twelve o'clock arrived did the Great God Bud take pity on him. The punishment was commuted to a bearable queasiness and Darren was finally allowed to sleep off the rest of his hangover.

Three

He had been up since six -- feeling well enough to be glad that he was still alive after all.

Food seemed to be an option again. He nibbled tentatively on toast and in return his stomach gurgled like a baby. Yes, solids were okay.

Making a bacon sandwich and then freshening up in the bathroom took him to seven o'clock. The light was fading quickly from the evening sky. Darren slouched languorously on the sofa in order to digest. He gazed contentedly through the glass doors of the tiny balcony. The pale office blocks on the horizon reflected the sinking sun like oblong moons full of eyes. Not only did he feel at peace in a way that was rare for him on a Saturday night, the city too was unusually quiet.

The trouble was, he confused serenity with boredom and at length he switched the TV on. The screen lit up with two smiling, childlike faces. Young Tony and Derrick -- the public's favourite TV personalities. No lightweight programme was complete without them. This one was a game show.

He soon lost interest and began to channel hop. Two hundred channels to hop to and yet nothing quite hit the spot. He rarely watched Saturday night TV. It seemed to depict everything you thought about when you'd finally given up on real life. *Yeah*, he thought, *this is what Jeff does for the weekends*.

Fortunately, he'd recorded a late night-thriller and so he called this up from the TV's hard drive.

As he watched, however, flashbacks of the previous evening's antics began to come back to trouble him and he stopped paying attention. Then a friend phoned, wondering where he was.

After a long conversation in which the friend couldn't stop being amazed he wasn't coming out, Darren drifted back to the livingroom and found the film had finished. The next show was on, even though he hadn't set the television to record anything except the film. The next show in question was *The Sky at Night*, a regular late-night feature about astronomy. Two men, who could have been Jeff's older brothers were in the studio talking about the Nipomedes, a shower of meteors that occurred every two hundred and fifty years. He pressed the FF button and reached the next programme -- the weather report. 'Unfortunately, cloudy skies will probably mean we shan't be able to see the Nipomedes.'

He fast-forwarded again and a one-in-the-morning rerun of last Sunday's *Antiques Road Show* popped up. That would have been on just when he and Linda were falling into bed.

Darren was annoyed now. The new kit hadn't worked properly. It was part of the natural inheritance of his generation to be able to set the timings correctly on a HD recorder, so he knew it wasn't his fault.

He pressed the FF button and kept his thumb down. Flickeringly, a whole night's television unreeled on the screen. Soon, the breakfast show was on, with a pear-shaped middle-aged guy planted deep in a pink sofa. It was offensive to have such a sight laid down on his hard drive.

Darren was transported back in time and place to the shop *Hi Fi Solution*, which stood on the opposite side of the city from *Electronic Entertainments*. This is where he had really brought his new television and HD recorder, despite what he'd told everyone. Jeff hadn't offered him enough of a discount.

There again, in *Hi Fi Solutions* he had found himself talking another Jeff, the manager, and in the background, there had been a young assistant whom Darren glanced now and then, wondering whether the lanky dope with the stupid haircut was on the same wage as himself.

Jeff #2 was claiming, in effect, the digital recorder under discussion was on offer out of the generosity of his own heart. Darren, however, knew that the model was about to be superseded and although it was still a good model its price was set to drop soon. And so made him his own offer, in the light of his inside information.

In light of the recession, and the manager's mortgage repayments, he got his discount.

Darren's triumph, it now transpired, had a two-week expiry date.

As he watched the comical frenzy of the speeded-up television stars, he sighed and told

himself that perhaps he would be better off without a new television. Once he'd got his money back on this thing, that would mean there were two monthly mortgage payments of his own he wouldn't have to worry about.

This reflection brought about a gloomy meditation about money which was interrupted when the thought suddenly struck him that by now the hard drive should have been filled up. Frowning, he took a closer look at the machine. This model had only eighteen hours recording time and he had already recorded enough stuff to half fill it -- stuff he'd never bother watching. Long before now, the machine shouldn't have anything left to play back. And yet away it whirred in front of him -- FF land.

Darren let it play at normal speed and peered into the screen. Just then it was showing the rolling news that was broadcast every night after three. His eye was caught by the date and time running across the bottom of the screen. It said the 15th of August, 4.14 AM.

But it was still the 14th, and the time was now exactly 9.10 PM.

His TV was seven hours ahead of the rest of the world.

Four

This had to be a prank. He immediately thought of Darren #2. Perhaps that monkey must have mocked this stuff up on a computer and downloaded it onto the hard drive. In that case, there would soon be a Darren #3 working in his place.

He hunkered down and sat crossed legged to stare at the TV screen up close. Whoever had faked the news programme had gone to considerable trouble. There was nothing amateurish about the graphics. In fact, there was obviously nothing wrong with them at all. As for the news reports themselves -- a bomb in Lebanon, a flood in China, a rise in oil prices, riots, these could have been copied from last week's news, or last month's, or any time over the past few decades for that matter. Most of the news looked like stock footage to him anyway.

He went back to the sofa and speeded up the recorder, until the breakfast programme was showing, yet again. And what was even more unnerving -- this was a Sunday edition. Not tomorrow now, but a week from tomorrow. Darren stared at the bland smiling faces of the presenters, wondering at the lengths the prankster had gone to.

On the other hand, it was only stock footage, rigged to go in a loop in a way he couldn't work out right now. In fact, soon he would pick out some repetitions.

The presenter's faces stopped smiling. They had come a serious slot. Darren was looking for clues rather than listening to what was being said, ' . . . fans were excited about Dio Shalcott being signed up last week, but few know that the club's biggest sponsor is a born-again . . . '

Darren cocked his head, as if to catch the words that had already been spoken. Last week?

Dio had been signed up this week. The editing had been so finely done he'd almost missed the little alteration.

He pressed reverse. The HD player refused to respond. There was only one direction that events would go on this recording, just like in real life. The presenters had only mentioned Dio Shalcott's being signed up in passing. This was a Sunday edition of the show, with a religious angle. The piece was about Birmingham City's American sponsor, who had become a born-again Christian after his spell in hospital. Darren began to doubt he'd heard them say last week. If they had, then whoever had concocted this false recording had gone to ridiculous lengths. To have joined up old footage and add graphics was one thing, but to splice-in false dialogue so seamlessly that he'd almost missed it was something else. And then, it was so subtle. Just a phrase in amongst hours of programming. He called up the recollection of

Darren #2's gormless mug tried to attribute it with subtly.

No chance.

He pressed FF. Was it an illusion, or was the machine speeding up -- the succession of images becoming more of a blur? Several days passed within the space of five minutes. He stopped regularly on the late night rolling news. Again and again the graphics displayed the date -- nine, ten, twelve days from now. This wasn't on a loop. There seemed to be a limitless amount of recording. Someone (and this unknown person was already more sinister than a mere shop assistant) had gone to the trouble of fitting the box with an extra large capacity hard disk.

But maybe it was television itself playing a joke on him.

Wasn't there a TV show (hosted by a smiling Tony and Derrick) in which they filmed the public making idiots of themselves -- with a little help from the special effects department?

He scarcely watched rubbish like that, but now he was starring in it!

Where was the hidden camera? . . . in the HD box!

They were watching him!

Despite himself, Darren developed a rictus smile. He sat up straight and rapidly began to calculate the balance between the loss of his personal dignity and the amount of money the TV company would pay.

The news anchorman introduced a new item. 'The coroner has passed a verdict of suicide for the actor Billy Reece, who was found dead earlier this week at his Earl's Court flat.'

Darren stopped calculating what his fees should be scowled at the screen.

'What's so funny about that?' He said in disgust, talking to the crew watching him. But even as he spoke he knew with absolute certainty that no television producers in the civilised world would announce the suicide of a well-known actor as part of a joke.

No, this wasn't a joke.

This was the future.

Five

Darren was still staring at the television at three o'clock in the morning. He had barely moved. The future was utterly compelling. True, the same sort of events occurred, just as they always had. Floods, droughts, local wars, outrageous revelations about public figures and incidents of civil strife cropped up unfailingly every year. But where and for how long was always a surprise. There were no patterns. Speeded up, the economy was the most wildly erratic phenomenon of the lot. Trade figures, inflation, industrial output, shortages, gluts. They came and went, defying the opinion of every expert. And yet the experts were on the news all the time telling people what they expected to happen next.

One consistency Darren did begin to notice -- and it came as a shock when he did -- was the way the regular faces were becoming older. The hair greying, the skin sagging, the eyes becoming duller. No one seemed immune. Even Tony and Derrick, who yesterday had been as fresh faced as schoolchildren, were already looking tired and seedy.

The machine was speeding ever more quickly. By now, a FF year could pass in half an hour. Darren found it increasingly difficult to drop onto the news -- which was infinitely more fascinating than any of the light entertainment programmes.

It was only by three in the morning, when he happened to catch the tail-end of the *National Lottery Show*, that he realised he could make himself very rich. The idea was so glaringly obvious that he put his head in his hands and cursed himself for stupidly wasting so much time. If he'd had his wits about him, he could have written down next week's winning lottery numbers and been rich now, rather than in five years time.

He stood up, paced the room and forced himself to think straight. He needed a pen, a notebook, yes, but first, he needed to freshen up, get some coffee and clear his head.

While the next stupid programme played at normal speed, he took a cool shower. As his head cleared it occurred to him that the machine might break down, or the recording of the future come to an abrupt end. He had already noticed that both the image and sound quality were very slowly deteriorating.

He jumped out the shower and dried himself. Forgetting about the coffee, he grabbed a notepaper and a pen, and then he almost tiptoed back to the sofa, as if the slightest vibration might upset the mechanism.

Now he began the delicate operation of speeding up the recording with just a slight tap on the FF button to try and get to the next lottery show before the future went offline.

His first taps got him nowhere close. The fourth and fifth hit a Monday, and then the following Sunday, just missing the Saturday draw. The sixth miraculously dropped him onto a Saturday afternoon. There would be another three hours to the lottery show.

Darren agonised for some moments. Every time he touched the FF button, the machine speeded along faster than before -- he might never get this close again. On the other hand, the machine might break down during the next three hours. What to do . . . ?

‘Oh, sod it.’

He was exhausted anyway. Better to let the recording run on at normal speed until it reached the next show. If it didn’t, it didn’t. In the meantime he could get some sleep at least.

He turned the volume down, went to the bedroom and set the alarm for five-thirty. Seconds later he was fast asleep, dreaming about a world where everything and everybody decayed super fast. People rotted away in a couple of years, and then great blocks of iron, wielded from cranes, were used to crush the filthy corpses into the ground.

He started at the bleep of the alarm. Lurching out of bed, he staggered to the livingroom, feeling hot and rancid. His head was throbbing again. Still, he didn’t have time to get an aspirin. The television was screening the tail end of a new game show -- *Ma and Pa*, hosted by Jimmy and Algy, the upcoming talent set to replace those old timers Tony and Derrick. But Tony and Derrick were still hanging in there -- they were next, hosting the lottery show.

Darren forgot his headache when the numbers came up. He wrote them down and held the piece of paper up next to the screen so as to make absolutely certain he had got them right.

Now that he was sure that he would become a rich man, he relaxed enough to go and take some aspirin. He had an appetite, but once he’d pinged a ready meal in the microwave, he found he could only eat a little. His throat was dry and a little painful. Clearly, there was a dose of flu on the way. Still, he couldn’t quit yet, not when he could win the lottery not just once, but as many times as his television would allow him to before it flaked out.

He tapped the FF button and got the weather. Some day, five years from now, there would be fog rolling in from the East. Five years! An eternity. He slouched back into the sofa, sighing that he had to wait so long. Still, when he got his hands on the cash, the possibilities were vast. For a start, he could buy Jeff out -- and Jeff #2 for that matter.

After a moment’s reflection, he almost laughed out loud at himself. If he could accumulate millions on the lottery why would he waste time buying up small electrical stores? He had a film script under his bed which he had been playing around with for the past few years. He could produce that. He could direct it too. He could set up a film company. Or a music recording company. He could grow a multinational corporation like Virgin. He could rival Virgin, drive it into the ground. Branson, Trump, he could dwarf these suckers.

He went to his tiny balcony and breathed in the early morning air. Sunday morning -- the city was quieter than ever. His headache had subsided, but he felt a little shivery and his bones ached. Retreating from the cool air, he decided to have a chicken *Cup-a Soup*. Good

for colds.

He always seemed to get his best ideas in the kitchen and it struck him now that, after he'd won the lottery, it wouldn't be too long before his mega corporation started hitting the news headlines.

As soon as he'd finished his soup, he settled into the sofa and pressed FF.

Six

It wasn't only the sound that was deteriorating, the colours on the screen were darkening, becoming less vivid. The round of game shows, cookery programmes and lightweight documentaries was the same as ever, but somehow the hosts were less shrill, and the contestants more restrained -- sombre even. Darren continued to try and catch another lottery show.

The speed of replay was so fast now that he had to rely purely on chance and chance, just like with the lottery itself, was not kind.

However, he didn't lose interest in the future. Whenever he came to the news, he never failed to listen with the keenest attention for any reference to him and his mega corporation -- he had decided to call it *eDynasty*.

He and his mega corporation did not put in an early appearance. On the other hand, there was no longer any mention of Virgin either, or Branson, or Trump.

Remarkable too was how quickly the familiar faces were aging and dropping out of sight. And those that replaced them straightaway began to age in their turn, and at a disconcerting rate too.

After watching it for so long, Darren finally started to weary of the future. It was not dramatically different from the past. He felt the need of some diversion, and he happened to find it quite soon -- a football match.

What a relief to watch something he actually enjoyed! True, the match was near the close of the first half and he didn't support either of the teams, Albion and Gillingham, nor did he even recognise any of the players, but still, the standard of the game was high and having fallen into a temporary support for Albion, noting their players were particularly skilful, he was disgusted by a Gillingham player getting away with a blatant foul, which then allowed Gillingham to score just before half-time was called.

He was eager to hear how the pundits would analyse this turn of events during the fifteen minutes they had to assess the match so far.

As usual there was a panel of three, including the anchorman.

The first to speak -- an old, overweight guy -- began by complaining that surely the referee needed his head examined and Albion might even be robbed of a well-deserved victory, etc, etc. It was precisely the sort of thing Darren expected to hear. Long before the conclusion was reached, however, he had stopped listening. A realisation had burst upon him, like a cold explosion at the back of his head, and he actually clutched himself in horror.

The old fat guy was Dio Shalcott!

The once lush black hair was quite white, the honey coloured skin had turned a kind of buff yellow and was scored with dark lines and the eyes -- so clouded and tired. To see what had become of that svelte, A1 fit star player terrified Darren.. He couldn't understand why this was at first -- he's seen plenty of old men before. Even worse specimens, really.

And then he realised. Shalcott was younger than him!

So what would *he* look like when this future arrived?

Would he even still be alive?

Seven

He was out on the balcony, warming himself in the sunshine. The city looked beautiful. The concrete and glass towers were luminescent against a perfect blue sky. Below, amongst the old bridges, wharfs and tow paths of the canals, couples walked hand in hand and the occasional jogger flitted by. A holiday barge, decorated with brightly painted pictures of flowers, was moored by a lock. All around, life bloomed contentedly as if it would last forever. Meanwhile, in the room behind him, the television squawked, blared and yapped -- the idiot messenger of annihilation. The sunshine gently kissing his skin did not reach the coldness inside him.

What was the point of anything?

The dream of owning a mega corporation had become a ludicrously worthless objective. Wealth really was meaningless without youth and health. What he wanted was for everything to stay the same. To be twenty-two forever. To work for Jeff in *Electric Entertainments* for all eternity.

Without knowing it, until today, he had been living in paradise. But the TV illustration of his own mortality had ruined everything. From now on, there would never be an unsullied moment of joy.

Suddenly, Darren was sick of being alone and depressed. It was nine o'clock. He was determined to get away from the television and somehow escape its soul-destroying message.

He hurried from the balcony, dressed quickly and on the way out, picked up the remote. He was about to OFF the TV when a woman's sexy, but hard and unerotic voice said, 'Fine lines? Wrinkles? What next? Only perfection! -- with *Oreale's Only Perfection* anti-aging mutli-eugenic skin rejuvenation creme system . . . '

Darren's heart beat faster -- Of course! They'll cure old age eventually, won't they?xx

Clearly, even Oreale's multi-eugenic creme system hadn't been able to hold back time for poor old Dio Shalcott, but unlike Dio, what he had in his possession was the technology to see much further into the future, to a time when Oreale really had developed a creme for immortality. And then, no doubt, once the fuss had died down, the ingredients would become common knowledge and, if he searched long and hard enough, these magic ingredients would appear in some documentary or other.

Hope rejuvenated him.

He eagerly prepared to dig himself in for as long as it took to glean the secret of immortality. He went to the kitchen to brew coffee and while he waited for the kettle to boil, it occurred to him that if he had made himself immortal, the last thing he'd ever do was drawn attention to himself by setting up a mega corporation.

So *that's* why *eDynasty* hadn't appeared in the news!

His spirits higher than ever, he searched out a large writing pad in order to take extensive notes, and then, sitting down on the sofa, he picked up the remote and pressed FF hard.

Eight

Over the next hundred years things began to finally change on the TV.

For the first few pauses, covering a few decades, variations on the same formats continued as always. The cop series, the quiz shows and the sit coms, continued as always, even though the stars and hosts aged and fell away and were replaced with shocking rapidity. Dio Shalcott, Tony and Derrick, even their fresh-faced young rivals, Jimmy and Algy had become dust and ashes. Quite forgotten.

Seeing this, Darren felt something of that earlier horror seeping back into him, like freezing water. Still, he kept the main goal in sight.

The speed of the machine had increased a little every time he pressed the fast forward button and now a mere touch would take him years ahead.

After approximately the next sixty or seventy years, a noticeable difference began to make itself apparent in the programmes. It happened suddenly. He had paused the recording in the middle of what appeared to be a cookery show. Two women, both dressed in an oddly coarse grey material, their hair twisted and set in peculiar asymmetrical styles, were holding between them an enormous eel-like creature and talking so excited and so quickly that Darren couldn't follow what they were saying. Then a chef appeared, a fat, mustachioed man, dressed in the traditional checks and whites and waving a wickedly long steel knife. The women fell silent and smiled at him fixedly while he began to sing. It was like no tune he had ever heard and it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The words seemed to be gibberish, but suddenly Darren picked out the words. 'Big, good for tumtum, head best but leave eyes for aunty spider. Yog Sogoth!'

It seemed English had been changing.

He watched, waiting for the next development. But the chef continued to sing and the women merely stared with their fixed grins. After fifteen minutes, Darren couldn't bear anymore.

Darren pressed fast forward again -- and again. As he progressed into the future, activity of any sort on the screen became more protracted and cheerless. The cookery shows, the gardening programmes, football matches even, consisted increasingly of people talking amongst themselves in a language of which he could understand ever less. A game of football would stop because of a minor foul and a group of players would form, a reporter would run on the pitch and a debate lasting ten, twenty minutes would be conducted which didn't seem to have anything to do with playing football.

When it came to the news, most of the items covered inexplicable meetings among grey suited men and women, sitting beneath multi coloured banners of abstract designs.

Abruptly, some two centuries into the future, the game shows, the light entertainment programmes, sport and drama, even the news -- they all utterly vanished.

Now there was only one programme on TV.

The outdoors.

Hour after hour, day after day, week after week . . . year after year -- nothing but long static shots of various streets. The location would change, following no pattern. Sometimes the view was from a roof, sometimes it was from ground level. The camera seemed to be placed almost at random. Once, it faced a featureless brick wall. Some streets shown were quite deserted, but mostly the programme covered streets in the city where there was at least a scattering of pedestrians. Occasionally, there were busy crowds.

The faces of the people never showed emotion beyond a preoccupied frown as they hurried about their business -- they always looked anxious to get somewhere else. Meanwhile, the craze of the previous decades -- for endlessly gabbled speech -- had faded away.

In fact, no one seemed to speak at all.

The cameras were kept running continuously. There were just as many scenes by night as by day. By night, if ever part of the sky was visible, it was a horrible hectic red, bright enough to illuminate the roofs and tower blocks. Then, one night, the sky was ablaze with great swirls of ghostly light, which Darren recognised as the aurora borealis.

The buildings didn't change. Nor did the design of cars. But then, cars abruptly disappeared also. And so did bicycles and any other side of vehicular travel. Everyone walked.

It took time, but Darren eventually realised that he no longer saw children. The number of people seemed to decline a little, though not dramatically. In fact, the churning crowds in the cities actually grew denser.

The shops, when he caught a view of them, all bore wholly unfamiliar names by now, and they mainly sold clothes and shoes. The fashions were muted and dreary.

Altogether, the scenes on TV were so monotonous and so little happened that Darren fast forwarded the recording with regular, almost idle, jabs of his thumb. Not surprisingly, when finally something really different finally happened, he only caught a glimpse of it before he'd automatically moved forward again.

It had been a figure, all white -- the rather grey white of polystyrene -- which moved so much quicker than everyone else, flickering amongst the crowd as it nimbly passed through it. There had been something distinctly unpleasant about the thing. It had spooked him.

That was the last straw.

Darren hauled himself up out of his seat. He yearned to be amongst the living again and even though he felt the flu coming on, he was determined to go for a walk.

The open door to the balcony revealed a sunlit city that was more alive on a Sunday than anywhere at any time in the future. He knew now that it was better to live while life was worth living. He had given up on the mirage of immortality. In five years he would still be rich once he'd won the lottery. The real reason why his corporation *eDynasty* had never appeared, he finally decided, was because he had enjoyed himself while he still could, rather than slaving for a meaningless legacy.

He went to the bathroom and took some Paracetamol to knock back his fever, then, in the kitchen he washed the taste away with a swig of orange juice. There -- he felt better already. He took his coat from the cupboard and on the way to the door, he picked up the remote to turn the television off.

The street scene hadn't changed from when he'd stood up.

Anger surged through him at the sheer banality of what was in store for humanity.

On impulse, he pressed the FF button and kept it pressed.

The hard disk whirred and complained loudly. Darren smiled to himself. He wanted this machine -- the future -- to burn itself out. He wanted to see it die first.

But the thing wouldn't quit. Ten minutes passed. The decades -- the centuries were tumbling away. Surely, *something* had happened?

He lifted his finger out of curiosity and the screen filled with a . . . street scene.

By the tone of the light, it was late afternoon and the camera was pointed across the road to a shop. Occasional pedestrians, no different from all the rest that had come before, walked past, in their usual haste. That was it.

'Well, I'm just going to have to kick the shit out of you then.'

He took a step towards the machine when he saw a polystyrene-grey creature stepped out of the shop. Darren stopped dead. The thing took a few steps, paused as if to reconsider, then turned and went back in.

This happened over and over. Twenty or more times. Darren inwardly recoiled at the insect-like rapidity of the thing's movements. And there was something like an insect's brainlessness in the way it so quickly repeated the same inane action. Finally, it left the shop and crossed the road, passing within a few feet of the camera, allowing him to get a good look.

The thing didn't wear clothes. The body, somewhat cruder than a shop dummy, didn't have any distinguishing marks either, except for the face -- Darren only caught a glimpse, but it sent his heart racing with a peculiar fear. The features were drawn on, crudely, as a child might have drawn a face. Two blobs for eyes, over which were dashes to represent the brows. These though, were set at a sceptical, mocking angle that would have been strange in

a children's drawing, because there was something so artful -- so knowing -- about the execution. And then there was the squiggly line for the mouth -- it was curled upwards to deftly suggest an ironic smirk. Altogether there was a pronounced and deliberate malignancy in the creature's caricature of a human face.

Darren couldn't stop himself. He forwarded the recording. Another change was taking place, perhaps seven or eight hundred years into the future. The number of people were thinning out dramatically and the white creatures were becoming more numerous. These were perfectly identical to each other, about two thirds the height of an average adult and moved with the same abnormal rapidity. Looking at them, he sensed they had no living weight, just as if they were made of polystyrene after all.

They repelled him on some profound level, rousing in him the same spontaneous aversion that cockroaches would. He sensed that he would find their touch and even their proximity unbearable. And yet, as they moved along the street, amongst the crowds, the remaining humans did not seem to find their presence the least disconcerting.

He stared at the dismal, uncanny scene a moment longer and thought to himself -- *Whatever you are, I'm going to outlast you now.*

He pressed FF.

Eventually the world would end, the screen would go blank and he would be free to throw this pile of junk in the trash can.

Then he could walk out into the living sunshine.

He dropped into the sofa, determined to wait for as long as it would take. Five minutes passed and the wildly reeling machine began to slow of its own accord, emitting a drawn-out drone.

This was it -- the end.

The recording ground down rapidly to normal playing speed. FF no longer worked.

On the screen was yet another street scene.

Darren let out a bitter laugh. However, he soon saw a subtle change *had* been wrought. Yes -- at last the passage of centuries had taken their toll. The buildings were the uniform grey of weathered-exposed poured concrete. A thousand years of rain had washed all the colours away. The road and pavements were quite bare. 'Is that it? The end of the world?' He asked derisively. As nothing moved, he might well be looking at a still. The final digital frame.

He sat up and gasped. 'No!'

The building ahead was his own apartment block.

It had been partly transformed by centuries of erosion, but there was no doubt. Darren couldn't subdue his horror at how insanely desolate it looked.

All at once a great balloon of white filled the screen. The shock made him cry out and shrink back into the sofa. His heart beat hard as he saw that he was staring into the huge face of one of those pale creatures. It seemed to be examining the camera. A moment later it stood back and motioned its crude fingerless hand with that quick, flicking action with which they all moved. It was beckoning. And as it turned and walked away, the camera followed.

Darren watched the last show on TV with horrified fascination. They were going down the street and into the entrance of his apartment block. The tiled concourse looked like the interior of an ancient mausoleum. Naturally, the lifts didn't work anymore, so the camera followed the creature up the stairwell, which was caked in the dust. The creature slowed down, as if to build the tension, and yes, when they reached his floor, they proceeded down the corridor to his front door. The door was a rotten shell. The creature turned back for a few seconds, smirking into the camera, and then knocked. The door collapsed into powdery shards.

They entered.

Darren's apartment was sunk in gloom, the windows adding another layer of grey to the light from the hot, leaden skies. The host stood to one side and grinning at the camera, extended one arm to present the prize winner to an empty world.

And there, on the sofa, Darren saw a dried mummy, its eyeless sockets staring at the dead TV screen and one skeletal hand still clutching the remote.

End

Thank you for reading. This story is part of a collection, *Twenty-First Century Cthulhu*, due out this coming winter.

Already available at Smashwords for free, *Nomance*, the antithesis of a romance story, and *A Date in Winter* -- verse.

Herman's History -- a black comedy about fate is at Smashwords for \$1.99, or for 99 cents with this coupon code, KN93N.

I also write under the name Trevor Price

Postmodern Medicine, published by [Untreed Reads](http://www.untreedreads.com). Also available here <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/21768>

In the near future, Mardin, a young publicist living in Istanbul, is hired to raise the public profile of FromBirth Ltd, a new company which specializes in the commercial supply of body parts. To promote the public profile of FromBirth, Mardin produces a "documercial" about the contribution of Ayeshia Smith -- the first ever 100 per cent donor. The film is so successful, Ayeshia becomes internationally famous for being dead. Mardin looks forward to a long and lucrative career, never dreaming that Ayeshia is about to make the ultimate showbiz comeback.

Here's a review at Night Owl Reviews: <http://www.nightowlscifi.com/nor/Reviews/Josie-reviews-Postmodern-Medicine-by-Trevor-Price.aspx>