

# SPECTRUM

SHORT STORIES OF SCIENCE FICTION, THE  
UNUSUAL AND THE UNPREDICTABLE

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SPECTRUM

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*For humanity. For in our hearts, we truly are unusual and  
unpredictable.*



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## JUMP TRAINS AND SIMULTANEITY

THE CHICAGO VI Jump Station is a lively place. All those butter-and-egg men in a rush to go somewhere. The newspaper vendors barking out the headlines of stuff I don't understand or want to know about. Coffee shops slinging fresh ground bean and sizzled bacon breakfast plates. All day, they're ringing up sales from other people who got money to spare. Ka-ching! Ka-ching! Ka-ching!

I bet it's busy just like any jump station at any space city. I could probably visit the cities Chicago II, III, or IV, then make tracks for New York XVI somewhere in the Nebulous Rim at the far edge of the Oberon Galaxy. And at each city's station, I'd probably see more butter-and-egg-men in fancy suits, more newspaper vendors and more coffee shops.

And then there would be me. A thirteen-year-old boy who carries around a box of colored shoe polishes. It's funny. Even if I could afford a ticket to ride a jump train, I probably wouldn't feel like I belong to any of those places anyway.

“Ain’t it exciting, Susie? Another jump train’s coming in soon,” I says.

I still can’t help getting worked up. A jump train arrival, that experience always makes me feel...it makes me feel like I might one day find a home. Except I don’t know where home is.

Susie is getting herself ready. She hitches up the garters on her long legs. Then straightens out the cigarette packs on a tray that hang from her slender neck by a red strap. She does all that while popping her chewing gum.

“Yeah? Well, you better keep your eyes on those shoes before the polish dries, shoeshine boy.”

My brush starts working fast over my customer’s oxfords. A deep, warm smell tells me I’m heating up the polish just right. With enough speed and friction, I’ll make them shine like new copper pennies.

“That’s why I like you, Susie. You keep me honest.”

“You better hope I don’t get rich selling cigarettes, Bobby-boy.”

“You’d miss me.”

She just smirks, giving me the high hat before strutting on. From my crouched point of view, all I can see going is a black saloon skirt and those beautiful movin’ uprights.

The customer pays, and I do a quick cloth rub which earns me a tip. The dropped coins rattle a nearby tin cup. My dog, a wrinkly basset hound named Mister Pleats, gives a half-hearted wag of thanks before closing his eyes again.

It’s 10am. The station energy systems are about fully charged up. The jump train is coming real soon.

I once asked Tom how they work—he’s one of three station conductors. Jump trains are faster-than-light machines. So at both the Departing and Arriving Stations, they have powerful computers and energy systems. Both

computers are syncopated—or synchronized or synco-something—to mash out some numbers for what Tom called, “An agreed upon singular coordinate in time and space.”

“Yeah, what’s so great about that?” I says.

“Because it’s the numbers that shape the same energy field at both stations. The numbers create two places in space that a jump train exists in simultaneously,” Tom says.

A Joe like me, that kind of thing makes my mouth drop.

“Oh, it gets even better,” Tom says, thumbs tucked into his vest pockets.

“How’s that?” I says.

“It’s the computer on the jump train that has to finally resolve the differences between the two locations *actual* coordinates. That’s how a train arrives.”

I can’t say I understood it all. But the idea that I could be in two places at once makes me wonder if I’m not really sitting on my dead Mother’s lap. She’s rockin’ me to sleep as she says that me and Mister Pleats’ life is gonna’ turn out just swell.

It’s 10:02 on the big station clock, and the station energy systems are ready to go. You can almost sense it, like the air’s gone thick and heavy-like. Even all the butter-and-egg men know it ‘cause they’re grinning at the station tracks like some Joe who ain’t never seen a Christmas tree.

The place goes stone silent. Even if you tried to speak, no words seem to come out of your mouth. I’m smearing a dab of black paste onto a cloth, but I don’t feel like I’m really movin’. Maybe I’m not. I can see the train flickering. A ghost machine jumps into several places on the track. Finally, it turns solid and stands quietly in place.

“10:02am. Arrival from Philadelphia Seven,” Tom yells out over the crowd.

Lots of people are getting off. All kinds of suits. Grand-

parents meeting up with their families. Some scrubs coming out here for the University inside the city.

I'm looking around for a couple of shoe customers, calling out, "Shine your shoes! Shoe's shined here!" as loud as I can. Mister Pleats musters up a yelp or two to help out.

Then I see him comin' right at me. He's grinning, his black eyes shining under a pile of oiled hair. There's a buttoned double-breasted, grey suit hanging on his tall frame, and the patterned green lines that run up and down don't seem to want to be there. And he's swinging a gold pocket watch chain like he owns the place.

Hanging on his right arm is a real tomato. Wavy brown hair down to her creamy shoulders, she's all baby blues and cherry red lips that seem like they want to taste inside your soul.

"If I can see the reflection of a Methane pulse drive in those boots, there's an extra tip in it for you," the strange man says to me. He casually rests his boot on my box's stand.

The tomato pinches his cheek with long, slender fingers. "Silly, you know there's no such thing."

"And that's what they said about humans."

I hop to it, pretending not to listen to those two bumping gums. I quickly start working any dirt and mud off the strange man's boots, my second brush primed to make those boots glow, if that's what it takes.

I look over to see Mister Pleats in the tomato's arms. He's belly up to her like a baby and pawing playfully. He practically oozes when she scratches his chin and tells him that he's the cutest specimen she's ever seen.

"I found him when he was just a puppy. Nobody wanted him. I gave him a bite of my ham sandwich, and we've been friends since," I says.

“Do you have any other friends?” the strange man says.

“Nope. Just me and Mister Pleats.”

The strange man studies me. I try not to notice.

“No family? No one else in this city?” he says.

“I sleep under a tarp near the loading bay, if you must know mister. Say, you ain’t a cinder dick are you?”

“I’m sorry—a what?”

“A copper. They work the station undercover.”

“Do I dress like one?”

I glance around. I see Freckles and a few other of Charlie Hands’ street boys loitering nearby. They act like they’re just talking, but I know better. They’re watching me.

You see, they first wanted me to join their gang because I don’t have any family. Said they’d look after me if I gave them a cut of my shoeshines. But I know what always happens to them. They eventually wind up in the hoosegow or get the final kiss off. I told them to take a walk. So now they’re wanting to muscle me out of the Station.

“I ain’t a stool pigeon, mister.”

The strange man thumbs back at Freckles without even turning around, like he’s got eyes in the back of his head. Freckles seems to notice.

“You know, you don’t have to be afraid of those guys if you don’t want to be,” the strange man says.

“I said I ain’t no stool pigeon.”

“No indeed. Just a little mouse in a never-ending maze.”

I don’t like what he says, but I keep my mouth shut. The polish on the second boot gets so worked up, that even I’m impressed by the rich, black color. I finish up by quickly buffing it out.

The strange man smiles at me and unfolds a bill—it’s a whole sawbuck! No one’s ever paid me that much for a

shine. Then he shoves a business card in my hand and winks.

“I could use an apprentice. And maybe you could use a new career.”

The tomato puts Mister Pleats down, and the two stroll off, arm in arm. The strange man is still swinging his pocket watch chain in the other hand.

I look over the business card as they walk away. It's all white except for three words in gold lettering: *Theodore Rattletrap, Xenoarchaeologist.*

When I look up, Freckles is looking at me with this nasty grin, nodding like he knows something I don't.

I didn't think I had seen the last of Freckles, and I was right.

It's One pm. I buy myself a bag lunch over at Danny's Coffee Shop and something else for Mister Pleats. He wags his tail at me, and we both sit down somewhere out of the way on the walkway to eat. Danny can really pack a nice lunch, but his costs more because he's in the busiest part of the station. But after buying the two lunches and a cup of soda, I still have enough cash to finally buy Mister Pleats a small bed for him to sleep on at night.

I've finished my ham sandwich and about to bite into an apple when I see Freckles. He's casually walking over to me, hands in his overalls and whistling. He's alone, just trying to look like he's on the level, but he's as real as a greasy sour-dough twenty.

Freckles earned his nickname because he's got so many of them that they practically cover him in one big blot. He's got red hair and little pink-rimmed eyes that bulge out. And his upturned nose and buckteeth make him look like a rabbit—a mean rabbit.

“Bobby-boy, slip me five.” Freckles holds his hand out to me, but I just ignore him.

“I told you I’m not joining.”

Freckles oozes up and puts his arm around me. He smells like salami and onions, a walking pile of stinky cold cut.

“Look, we’re pals, so I’ll be straight up with you. I saw that guy give you the sawbuck, so I’m gonna’ cut you a deal. You give me the rest of the money, and I’ll tell the boys to leave you alone for a whole month. What do you say?”

“I spent it all.”

“You know it’s just sitting in your pocket. I followed you around.”

“Then you must know I bought a train ticket to Scram City, population you.”

Freckles just laughs and pulls his arm around me tighter. It’s starting to hurt. I try squirming out of his grip, but he’s got me locked down.

“Aww, nuts!” I say.

“What was that, Bobby-boy?”

“Nuts!”

“I guess I’m just too nice. And I was trying to be friendly.”

He’s practically crushing me now. His smile turns downward into a leer. He’s about to do something, just not sure if it’s a punch to the gut or if he’s got a knife.

I do the only thing I can think of. I reach up and smash the apple in his face. Chunks of red and white splatter everywhere.

Freckles lets go of me. He’s cursing and wiping his eyes.

Finally, he looks at me, red faced. A very angry rabbit now. I think he’s gonna’ charge. I brace myself, when Mister

Pleats comes to my rescue. He clamps down on Freckles ankle, and the greaseball lets out a yowl.

“Get him off! Get him off!”

He’s hopping about and trying to shake Mister Pleats off at the same time. With his lanky arms flapping about, Freckles is doing a discombobulated Charleston dance. Other people take notice, and they slow down to point and laugh. He looks ridiculous, and I can’t help but laugh too. But I kind of feel bad for him, too.

“Mister Pleats, come here boy.”

Mister Pleats lets go, wags his tail at me, and waddles over. I give him a scratch on the head.

“You’re gonna’ give me that money, Bobby-boy. And pay extra.”

I look down at Freckle’s pant leg, which is torn and tattered where he got bit. He’s got teeth marks and small puncture wounds with only a little bit of blood. But he’d be all right.

“Tell Charlie Hands hello for me,” I says.

Freckle is limping away. His face is still red, still the mean rabbit. “I know where you sleep, Bobby-boy.”

At 3pm, the city dog catcher took Mister Pleats away. I felt like the Chicago Trade Building had just collapsed on my head.

The dog catcher wouldn’t say who called about Mister Pleats, but he couldn’t allow a dog with no license to be on the streets.

“It’s a matter of protecting the public health,” he says and rubs at his bristly mustache.

Then he snatches up Mister Pleats like he was a wild

bobcat or something, shovels him into the back of his hover truck, and drives off.

The only thing I can do is flatfoot it out to the Pound on West Madison Street and Monroe. So I hide my shoeshine box beneath the tarp I sleep under, and hope I can get Mister Pleats out of the hoosegow.

The Pound is about fifteen blocks away. I'm running past people—some who are yelling at me—"Watch where you're going, buddy."—but I keep on rushing. Several more street crossings, a cut through an alley, and I get there at about a quarter to four. Fortunately, the place doesn't close until six.

It's an ugly, squat building. Sad red brick that's faded by too much dirt and time, only one small window facing out, and a heavy front door that's rusting orange at the hinges. When I enter, it's not much better. The overhead light above the front desk paints the room phlegm yellow. It smells stale in here, like hardly anyone ever comes here. There's a receptionist, her short blond hair hanging down near her eyes as she works a file over her nails. It's a rough, scratchy sound—krrrrruck, krrrrruck. She doesn't even bother to look at me when the door chime announces my arrival.

I've got about eight-fifty in my pocket, and it better be enough.

"Hi," I says.

She just keeps filing her nails. I raise my voice.

"I'm here to pick up Mister Pleats. How much is it? I ain't got all day."

The receptionist still doesn't look at me. "I don't know any Mister Pleats."

"The dog catcher picked him up a couple of hours ago."

She huffs through her nose, puts down the file, and picks up a clipboard.

“A basset hound?”

I get excited. “That’s him.”

I pull out my money from my pocket, a wad of crumpled bills and some change.

“It’s thirty-five, kid.”

“What? That ain’t right.”

“Twenty-five for the impound fee. Ten for a new license. I don’t make the rules.”

She goes back to her nails. Krrrruck. Krrrruck.

My mind is spinning faster than a loop-the-loop. I’d be lucky to make a couple bucks in a day, but I still got to pay for food and stuff. What if it took a month to save the thirty-five? Two months?

“What happens to Mister Pleats if I take too long to get you the dough?”

“You don’t want to know, kid.”

Just then, the door chime announces someone else behind me. The receptionist jerks up straight in her chair, drops the file, straightens out her hair, and smiles. Yeah, she actually cracks a smile.

“Hello little mouse,” a man says.

I turn to see Theodore Rattletrap and his tomato standing there. Same pile of oiled hair, same double-breasted suit, and that gold watch chain he likes to swing around. The receptionist is making whoopee-eyes at him, totally ignoring the tomato.

Rattletrap turns to her. “I was looking for a basset hound. I hear that they’re an amazing specimen of what you call ‘dogs.’”

The receptionist still can’t take her eyes off him. “You are so lucky. One just came in. I’d be happy to show you.”

“Thank you. You are the loveliest creature.’

She lets out a strained laugh that sounds like a tommy gun—ha-uh-ha-uh-ha. Then she scoops up a keycard. Rattletrap isn’t even looking at me, so I’m about to say something. But the receptionist opens the door that leads back to kennel before I can get a word out. I tag along.

The dog cages are stacked two high and run along both the left and right. A lot of them have mutts inside, and they perk up when we walk by, hoping we’re going to notice them.

When we get toward the end of the row, the tomato lets out a squeal of delight. That’s when I see Mister Pleats at the back wall. At first he’s looking kind of sad, his chin flopped down on his front paws. But he sits up, wags his tail, and gives out a deep-throated bark to let me know he’s okay.

The Tomato runs her slender finger across Rattletrap’s chin. “Can I have him, Teddy? He’s so cute.”

“This is the one. We’ll take him,” Rattletrap says.

The receptionist doesn’t even mention the thirty-five, probably thinking Rattletrap is loaded with dough or something. She says she’s going to get some paperwork and that she’ll be right back.

“I’m already missing you,” Rattletrap says.

The receptionist’s mouth drops and she goes all goo-goo like. Then she kind of fumbles backward as she makes her way out, all the time Rattletrap is making cutesy waving gestures at her.

“Rattletrap, what are you trying to do to Mister Pleats?”

“He’s my dog now, little mouse. Maybe I’ll change his name.”

I’m getting mad, and I can feel my legs and arms shaking. I feel like I want to cry, and I’m wiping at my eyes so I don’t look like a baby.

“You’re going to xeno...xenogist him, aren’t you?”

Rattletrap laughs.

“I’m a xenoarchaeologist, not some human taxidermist. Do you even know what a xenoarchaeologist is?”

The tears are starting to flow now, and I can’t stop them, big blobs of wet. I still remember the first day I gave Mister Pleats a bite of my ham sandwich. I shake my head.

“I study alien life forms. Like you. And Mister Pleats. I find your kind totally fascinating. But I promise you that I mean you no harm.”

Rattletrap isn’t making any sense. There’s space cities all over the Oberon Galaxy. Jump trains coming and going from the Chicago VI Station all the time. And I’ve never seen little green men getting off a train, antennas poking out of their round heads as they chirp out strange words like excited birds.

“There’s no such things as aliens, mister.”

Rattletrap smiles.

“That’s what we’ve said about you. Our councils thought you were a mythical creature until humans began spreading further out amongst the stars.”

“You’re just saying that stuff because you think I’m some dumb kid.”

“I have no reason to lie.”

The receptionist returns with some paperwork. She hands it to Rattletrap with another tommy gun laugh. Then she opens Mister Pleats cage, imprints his license number on one of his ears, and scans it to make sure it takes.

“He’s all yours, Mister...”

“Rattletrap. Theodore Rattletrap.”

“That’s such a nice name. Can I call you Teddy?”

“You can call me most anything you want, just don’t call me naughty.”

Again, the tommy gun laugh—ha-uh-ha-uh-ha.

“I’ll be sure to remember it so I can update your paperwork.”

The Tomato squeals again as she takes Mister Pleats in her arms. He’s pawing at her playfully, not even bothering to look at me. I start crying again.

“Mister Pleats, don’t you miss your pal?” I says.

“You. Move along. Don’t bother these nice people,” the receptionist says.

Rattletrap and the Tomato are walking out of the kennel, Mister Pleats in the Tomato’s arms. I don’t know what to say or do. Then Rattletrap turns back to me.

“You still have my card, don’t you little mouse?”

“Yes,” I manage to blubber out.

“Then come work for me. Be my apprentice.”

“Will you give me back Mister Pleats?”

Rattletrap doesn’t say anything as he’s about to leave with my dog.

“Where do I find you, mister? Where do I find you?”

“You will. You just will,” Rattletrap calls back.

I’m sitting on a bench, back at the station, and the place just isn’t the same. At 9pm, I’m usually packing up my shoeshine box, counting my money, and then I go see if Danny’s got any left overs for me and Mister Pleats. But I’m just sitting there on that bench, alone, not even bothering to go over Danny’s. I watch the night sweepers pushing away garbage with their bristled brooms. I feel no better than a crumb that gets swept away into a bag. A real crumb.

Susie must have finished her shift because she doesn’t have the cigarette tray strapped around her neck. She’s

walking my way, but I don't even bother to look at her gartered legs. I don't feel like talking.

"Hey Bobby-boy. Hey, I'm talkin' to you."

"Yeah?"

She pops her chewing gum.

"Some friends of yours were looking for you. They said they got something for you."

I sit straight up. The only person who'd be looking for me is Freckles. He wants revenge for when I smashed that apple in his face. Made him look like a twit in front of a bunch of strangers. And some of Charlie Hands' street boys would make sure that I wouldn't be smashing a second apple. My night is about to get worse. Much worse.

"Geez. You should have told him to take a long walk on a short pier."

Susie puts her hands on her hips. "Bobby, don't be rude with me."

"Sorry. I'm just a little glum."

"What's a shoeshine kid got to be glum about?"

That makes me pretty mad. I want to yell at her.

"Yeah, what do you know? Nothin', that's what. You know nothin'."

"Geez, Bobby, you'd think you'd lost your best friend or something." Then she walks off in a huff, like I'm the one insulting her.

I want to say more, but I spy out Freckles searching around an empty ticket station further down. He's out here at the station's closing time because he knows that no one is going to be around to help me.

I've got to find some place to hide. I can't go back to Loading 'cause Freckles has already told me that he knows I sleep there. The only place I can think of is cargo storage. It's several levels high with stairs and elevators, and I might

be able to slip into one of the units to hide behind stacked boxes.

As quietly as I can, I sneak off toward the back end of the station.

I have to creep alongside the hovering tracks because there's less light here. Just to my left is the open space of where the jump trains appear. Living in a city that exists literally in space, you eventually come to a place where the concrete stops and a deep plunge into cold vacuum happens. The only thing between everyone who lives in Chicago VI and a quick death is some sort of energy shield that protects us all. But that hasn't stopped a few crumb-bums from taking their own lives by taking a leap over some guard railing. That's not going to be me.

I can see the first set of stairs leading up to storage. My feet are clanking on the steel steps. Below, I can hear someone say that they hear something. I grab another cold handrail and continue on.

The first unit's door is locked. I jiggle at it, trying to not make any noise. There's a window, but it won't slide open. I can see boxes stacked inside. If I were to break the window, someone would hear that for sure. I go up more flights.

Two more units and still no luck. This situation is throwing me a curve. It's when I get to the fourth level one that I finally get a break. The window is cracked open because someone forgot to close it. I pull myself up and flop over to the other side. I bang my arm up a little as I land, but that's nothing compared to what Freckles will do to me if he catches me.

Then I lock the window closed from the inside and hope for the best.

It's dusty in here, small bits of stuff floating all around tied rolls marked *Cotton Batting* and some sort of insulation.

Maybe that's why someone opened the window. It makes me want to cough, but I cover my mouth when I hear clanking footsteps coming up.

"Bobby-boy, you up here?"

It's Freckles, and he's just a level below me. Someone plays at the unit's door, testing it. Then several footsteps come up to where I'm at. I slink down in a couple of rolls of cotton.

"Bobby, I found your shoeshine box."

They test the door which doesn't budge. I can see someone peeking into the window, their beady eyes scanning around. I try to get even lower when my nose starts to twitch. I want to sneeze.

"Your shoeshine box is in little itty-bitty pieces, all over the station."

Some of the boys laugh. I'm desperately fighting back the sneeze. My eyes are starting to water.

"You got nothing left, Bobby-boy. So come out."

Freckles gets quiet for a moment, listening. I'm pinching my nose, holding back the sneeze. I don't know how much more of this I can take. Fortunately, he gets tired of not hearing anything and decides to move on.

I'm holding my breath to stop myself from exploding out of my nose and I'm starting to get a headache. A minute goes by. I take a few cautious breaths. Then a few more minutes pass. Finally, the urge to sneeze passes.

I must have waited about an hour. I don't hear Freckles and the boys anymore. I sneak a peak out the window. Only empty stairs. I start to cough, getting all this dust out of my lungs—it's almost like a spasm. Then I calm myself. I listen. Nothing. No one noticed.

I really want to get out of this dust box, so I open the window again and crawl out. I land with a thud on steel

platform. I hold my breath, but I still don't hear anything. Maybe Freckles got tired of searching for me. I don't think it's true. If there's any quality I can pin on him besides being mean, it's that he's really stubborn.

I look around. Then down. The coast is clear.

My luck seems to have changed for the better.

Going slower, supporting my weight on the handrails, the steel steps clank is muffled as I make my way back down. No one shouts out. Third level. Second level. Almost back on the station platform, when murmurs carry somewhere from behind me, the storage units three rows down.

So much for luck. I'll have to make my way back along the station tracks, get to the main entrance, and escape into the city.

I'm creeping along the hovering tracks, again, but this time in reverse. There's columns every ten feet, so I get to another one, press myself against it, and scan ahead for trouble. I'm moving pretty slow. It's better to be cautious.

It's when I get to the thirteenth column—yeah, lucky number thirteen—when I freeze. Ahead, a group of Charlie Hands' boys are loitering in a group, smoking cigarettes, and telling dirty jokes. They don't see me. The murmuring that I heard earlier is coming from behind, and it's getting closer. I'm trapped. My odds of just sneaking by the boys without being seen aren't good. I'm thinking about making a run past them and hoping for the best.

"Psst. Little mouse. Over here."

Goosebumps are crawling up my arm and neck. It's definitely Rattletrap's voice. But I don't see anyone.

"The tracks. I want you to jump," Rattletrap says.

"You some kind of genius? I'll fall and die."

"No you won't. I promise."

Suddenly, Rattletrap's face appears in mid-air over the

tracks. He's grinning at me. I almost yell out like I've just seen a ghost, but manage to control myself.

"You don't have much time. Jump the guard rail now."

Then his grinning face disappears again.

The murmurs are getting closer. I don't have much time. Rattletrap is right.

I make a break for the guard rail. My breath is sucked in. I will all the strength in my legs that I can manage.

I run right at the rail which is about three feet high, plant my hands, and vault over.

My eyes are closed. If I'm going to fall into space, I don't want to see it.

Someone yells out, "Hey, did you see that?"

"Yeah, I think someone's over there," someone else says.

I'm waiting to free fall. But I don't.

I can feel solid floor underneath my feet. My shoes shuffle on something that might be a knit rug of some kind as I regain my balance. I hear the soft tick of a nearby clock and a throat clearing. Odors of old paper, cedar and leather are filling my nose. The smells and sounds reminds me of the downtown library for some reason. It's where I sometimes go to hide away from my troubles and get lost in an adventure book. It's a place I can feel safe for a bit.

When I open my eyes, I'm standing in a strange room that seems to hover in space. Books cover one wall from top to bottom. Yellowed charts and diagrams, hundreds of them, cover another wall painted red. Pinned collages of unreadable figures and sketches are everywhere. There's two lounge chairs with a small table between them, the legs made of sculpted metal to look like lions.

Rattletrap is sitting on one of the lounge chairs and the Tomato is in another. She has Mister Pleats on her lap. As soon as I sees him, he wags his tail and barks.

“Isn’t the control of simultaneity a marvel?” Rattletrap says.

I shake my head. I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“Where are we?”

Rattletrap is studying his pocket watch, the protective flap open. “We’re in a different inertial frame of reference. A room within another space and time. As far as your friends out there are concerned, we don’t exist. Very complex stuff.”

I turn and see Freckles and the boys scratching their head just several feet away. But they can’t see me.

“So, am I trapped in here or something?”

“On the contrary. The galaxy has now opened up to you.”

“I can travel without a jump train?”

“Little mouse, you do ask a lot of questions. I’ll explain a little, for a little is all I still know about humans. After your great wars on Earth, humans thought it best to span out through various galaxies. Spreads out the risk of another incident, I suppose. It’s also why your leaders limit your access to technology. Only approved operators are allowed the limited secrets humans possess. Can’t have everyone learning too much, doing too much. That goes for jump trains, too.”

The Tomato gets up and brings Mister Pleats over to me. He’s wiggling with excitement and practically jumps into my arms.

“Thank you. I’ve missed him. But I still don’t understand any of this.”

“Let’s take a ride,” Rattletrap says.

He does something on his pocket watch. Suddenly we’re standing in a jump train car. There’s only one other

person here, a man reading a newspaper. The headlines are dated for yesterday. He doesn't see us.

Then we appear in another car. Or maybe it's another jump train because the windows have different colored curtains. There's a family here, a father, mother, and a boy. The father is smoking a pipe. The warm cherry tobacco smell makes me think that this is how all father's smell. The boy is reading a comic book, and his mother is stroking his wavy hair. I want to be in that boy's place, letting his mother comfort me, telling me that I don't have to shine shoes anymore.

"I feel like I'm home," I says.

"In a galaxy so vast, what really is home?"

And now we jump again. I'm surrounded by stars and darkness. It seems to go on forever. I suddenly feel tiny, insignificant. Freckles is far, far away. I don't even care anymore. There is so much more out here than shoe shine boxes and a jump train station.

"What do you think of all of this?" Rattletrap says.

"Like I could find a family some day."

Rattletrap smiles at me. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

I'm still taking in all the stars that surround me. Small ones, bright ones, blue ones. Thousands of them. And further on, thousands more. I feel good inside, just like I ate the best ham sandwich in all of Chicago VI.

"It's only your imagination that will limit you, little mouse."

"I want to be your apprentice. I want to be a Xenos...Xenos..."

Rattletrap smiles again. "You have much to learn before I can call you anything."

The stars all seem to say my name, an invitation of twin-

ling wonders. There must be some place out there for me.  
It's like a happy dream.

Mister Pleats gives me a warm, wet lick.

I hug him close. For once, I feel like I could belong to something else. I could find it. Maybe I ain't such a crumb, after all.

## AFTERWORD

Fiction writers are motivated to write a good story. Or at least, they wish to write something not yet read before. If this wasn't true, most wouldn't publish their work with the hope of an audience turning the pages of their book. You may think that there are exceptions to this such as writers of metafiction. The book *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino comes to mind. It's a frame story that intentionally draws attention to the fact that the reader is trying to read a book titled, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Most readers are probably looking for an escape or for a story setup that builds to a satisfying ending for a character, myself included. I relished Calvino's experimental book as much as I might enjoy flipping through the pages of a high school chemistry text. But even so, Calvino does have a captivated fanbase and to each their own.

My point is that there is still an audience for interesting works of fiction. Stephen King's works are partly the reason I'm inspired to write fiction in the first place. *The Stand*, *The Shining* and *The Eyes of the Dragon* managed to satisfy

my early bibliophilic appetite. Later, I devoured Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*. And I'm still hungry for more books.

As a writer, I'm certainly no Stephen King. And my audience is even smaller than Italo Calvino's. I'm okay with that and grateful that you've actually made it this far into *Spectrum*. It means that you've at least enjoyed some of the stories within these pages. If you did enjoy some of the stories, then I managed to do something right. Perhaps, I applied the fiction formula correctly.

A story has a formula and it's a rather basic one—a person plus a struggle equals story. But the formula is not quite as simple as it first appears. The author soon discovers complications as he or she begins constructing the scenes of characters interacting with other characters. There's the matter of ordering causally related events so that the reader understands why the characters do the things that they do. And finally, the story should have an acceptable structure. When the author types out the last page of manuscript, combines the pages into a bound novel or a collection of shorts and publishes the work for the world to consider, it's only then that the author discovers if an audience agrees that the simple formula was applied well. And the reader proves this by using a lesser mechanical determination—the reader continues to turn the pages of the book until the story finishes.

I'm waxing poetic. But I'm only explaining the mechanics of a story—person plus struggle equals story—because I'm writing this Afterword. And as a reader, you're probably curious to know why I wrote some of the stories in *Spectrum*. Let's start with the short, "Three Nights in Budapest," a story I wrote back in 2014.

“Three Nights in Budapest,” is my earliest attempt at a character story. Andrew is unhappy with his life and he struggles to change things. As the story goes on, the reader begins to suspect that part of the problem may be Andrew. In our own cultural clichés, a person like Andrew is seen as a villain and rightly so. But it’s too often that we read stories where the victim is the one who finally makes the change in life. These stories risk becoming clichés of clichés. Being one of my first stories, I wanted to be different. I began asking questions of the characters. Is the victim truly a saint? Probably not because we are human, after all. Is there good inside Andrew? He does have a motivation and it is relatable. I feel that the story events unfold in a way that we can begin to see why he does the things he does even if the results aren’t for the better. My goal to write something different *and interesting* was hopefully achieved.

Stories like “Winter Sleep,” “The Big Crash,” “Goodbye, Sweet Mercury” and “AA for Happy the Mouse” are more experimental. When I asked an editor to read “CRDL,” he told me it was gratuitous violence and refused to further critique it. I admit that it is a disturbing story but the editor missed the point. The story is a metaphor for what can happen when cynicism turns into something much darker. The metaphor *is* the character. Each of the characters in the story represent a piece of the darker nature of this metaphor. And the story poses a question in the title itself, “What does the acronym CRDL actually mean?” When the story question is answered, the reader may begin to see that the over-arching character, the metaphor, is harming itself and not willing to stop the pain. But is there ever really an answer to such questions? Maybe not. Humans truly can be unusual and unpredictable.

My favorite types of stories have a world-shattering event take place and someone must address it before further chaos breaks out. J.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a great example. Sauron has returned to dominate Middle Earth and it's up to Frodo Baggins to toss the One Ring into the fiery Cracks of Doom. The books kept me up into the early morning hours and caused self-inflicted grogginess during middle school class periods. But such threats can happen in sci-fi too. In "Edge of Twilight," aliens are making their way to Earth by ingesting one terraformed planet after another. Still being somewhat experimental for a short(er) story, I don't always write the story from Kelvin's point of view. By changing characters, I feel that the reader gets a better understanding of what's going on. And I still manage to stay within the story structure because Kelvin does manage to save the day at the very end.

"Jump Trains and Simultaneity" comes closest to being a milieu story. Bobby hasn't actually explored any place just yet because he's still stuck at the train station. But he doesn't consider the location home and the ending hints at something more. To be honest, I feel like there is much more story waiting for this character. Perhaps the concept of simultaneity will provide a framework that leads to an ongoing sci-fi series. Maybe Bobby and Mister Pleats will continue to roam through the universe in search of some place where he can finally kick his feet up and be content.

But even if there is an underlying formula for some or all of the stories in this book, there is one thing I can never write into the pages—the reader's application or interpretation of themes. This is where the book truly becomes unpredictable. Like the characters in this book, you experience the world in your own way. And those experiences shape

the way you interpret events in these stories. Does Markey VI in “The Sound of Blue” truly experience what it means to be human? And what was the apocalyptic event that destroyed civilizations? Those are questions that I don’t answer. Only you can resolve them.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael's most recent story, "The Sound of Blue" won Silver Honorable Mention from Writers of the Future. This has fueled his passion for writing fiction.

He lives in Ohio with his wife, three dogs and two cats. He writes because his cat hates him. You can find out what he's up to at [www.authormichaelduda.com](http://www.authormichaelduda.com).



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