Loco

RUDY RUCKER and BRUCE STERLING

illustration by CARL WIENS

You can’t just morph a federal scientist into a giant invertebrate that catches fire. That’s not an acceptable protocol. And the feds aren’t going to fund you anymore. Not when your boss is a self-flattening radioactive pancake.” In “Loco,” an original science fiction story by Rudy Rucker and Bruce Sterling, desperate times call for desperate inventions.

“Waverly’s dead?” said Becka, verging towards a shriek. “How can Waverly be dead? Without him to cover our ass, we’re finished! They’ll rub us out and say we never existed!”
“You hear that rumbling outside?” said Gordo. “A steamroller. That’s how they got him.” Gordo’s breath misted the frigid air, for Dr. Waverly had ignored paying the power bills to heat their safehouse.

“What kind of bodyguard are you anyway? Hopeless ape! We’re doomed.” With one burgundy fingernail, Becka slit a spy-hole through the aluminum foil duct-taped to the window. “What is that monster doing out there?”

Gordo rubbed his chapped hands. “I was watching Dr Waverly like a hawk. Who knew a steamroller could pounce?” Laughing darkly, Gordo dropped into a leather executive armchair. From this throne, Dr. Fred Waverly had once ruled a federal research empire. The chair’s glossy arms were cracked and its casters were flat as broken feet.

“This means we’re on a hit-list,” said Becka.

“Lighten up,” said Gordo, his voice echoing in the unheated room. “This means we’re on our own. We’ll close down Project Loco. Sell off the secrets. And get the hell out while we can.”

“Was it Yellco who got Waverly?”

“Not likely,” said Gordo, blinking at her. “But I’m glad we’ve got a barricade. In case that roller makes a charge.” He gestured at the walls, stacked with debris.

The contents of Project Loco’s offices had been manhandled by forklift robots and crammed into their hideout: a derelict McMansion in dismal Middleburg, Virginia.

During the seven weeks of their increasingly uneasy confinement, Gordo and Becka had passed the time by piling the federal debris against the walls. Graceless steel desks, empty water-coolers, dead coffeemakers, and oddly angled surge-protectors—plus their specialized locative-science equipment: GPS units, atomic sextants, flux oscillators, nanolasers, and neutrino sieves.

The house was a jumble of crazed debris—except for one shining treasure, the culmination of years of off-the-books black-budget research, a bubbling, green-lit aquarium-tank, with glassy little cells subdividing it like an uneasy high-rise—a tenement for leeches.

Eight or nine species of leeches. Careful Loco research had proved that leeches in particular excelled as plug-and-play biotech implants. Leeches were simple and rugged, they ran off human blood, and their boneless flesh could hold a fine payload of wetware programming. Plus, once you got used to the concept of interfacing with leeches, it didn’t hurt all that much to stick them on.

Happier than clams and flexing in slimy topological ease, the bioprogrammed invertebrates were the ultimate product of the Loco Project. They carried the experimental Loco translocation apps. The parasites’ aquarium boasted its own battery-operated power supply to keep the creatures at a comfortable blood-warm heat.

Gordo pressed his chilly hands against the warm green glass. Outside the safehouse walls, the steamroller clattered on like a coffee grinder, casually, remorselessly. Every once in a while a ragged stranger would wobble by on a bike, but nobody seemed much bothered by the goings-on at a derelict house.
Meanwhile the steamroller was methodically flattening everything near the safe house's garage. With digital efficiency, it crushed the abandoned doghouse. Then the thorn-tangled rose bushes. Then some cheap concrete garden statuary.

So much for the anonymous safety of the Loco Project's final redoubt. The front yard was a maze of roller-marks in snow.

Uneasily, Becka rubbed the back of her neck. “What actually happened? Did Waverly morph into a giant leech? Like Patel did at the lab? Waverly was claiming he'd fixed that in his latest wetware build?”

“He slumped to the ground,” said Gordo thoughtfully. “That’s all I know for sure.”

“Was he writhing at all? Did he display spastic invertebrate activity?”

“The way it came down—” Excited now, Gordo crouched in the middle of the room, his heavy body nimble as he moved his hands, mapping things out. “He went soft. The steamroller attacked. And Waverly was like a gingerbread man under a rolling pin. A thirty-foot smear of smashed mathematical physicist. No blood, no bones. I used my hands to pry him off the lawn. I rolled him up like a tortilla and carried him into the garage.”

“Not much like Patel,” mused Becka.

“I can't say,” replied Gordo. “Remember, I only joined your team after the Patel incident.”

“I wish you'd stop bitching about ‘the Patel incident.’“

“Look,” said Gordo, “you can't just morph a federal scientist into a giant invertebrate that catches fire. That’s not an acceptable protocol.”

“Security guys like you can never keep your traps shut,” said Becka, angrily pacing back and forth through the debris. “Forget about Patel, he’s stuffed in a nuclear waste barrel. Let’s talk about Waverly. Even if a steamroller crushed him, it’s not scientifically established that he’s dead.”

“Where do you get that idea? Of course he’s dead. I saw his brains come out of his eye sockets.”

“I need facts,” insisted Becka. “Not your interpretations.”

“Oooh,” said Gordo. “The dragon lady. Okay, as soon as we stepped outside the safehouse, Waverly started babbling. He said, ‘I'm going everywhere.’ He was slobbering. Then he lost his muscle tone. His hands pulled up into his sleeves, and he went all boneless. And then—wham! That steamroller comes out of nowhere and runs him over.”

“Just like that?” said Becka skeptically.

“That’s how I saw it. That’s the machine that killed him, still tooling around out there. It’s like a remote-controlled drone.” Gordo peeped out the window. “Look, it keeps backing in and out of our garage. That’s where I dragged Waverly. It's still running over him. Again and again.”
Bathed in the warm green light of the leech aquarium, Becka stared at Gordo. She looked cute and serious with her short dark hair. Piteful shadows of rage and despair played across her face. As long as Dr Waverly had been in charge, Becka, ever the faithful post-doc, had been full of hope. But now, with Waverly flattened, her illusions were crushed like so many asphalt pebbles.

“Where do steamrollers come from?” she mused. “Oh. The city construction yard.”

“I guess,” said Gordo, still peering out the window. “But I can tell you it didn’t drive here. Someone got hold of our loco and teleported it in. Take a close look, it’s cruising right by our house again.”

Becka hastened to the window.

“It’s motor isn’t on at all,” Gordo pointed out. “It’s drone control isn’t active. You can tell from the lights on top. They’re all off. The things running on pure loco. Someone’s teleporting it all around!”

“Translocating, not teleporing,” snapped Becka. “Can’t you get that one thing straight? Loco applies affine transformations to the subdimensional pregeometry that underlies the spacetime foam. Loco edits our reality from the outside. Loco is nothing like ‘teleportation’.”

“Sure it is,” said Gordo, baiting her. “It’s like on Star Trek.”

“Christ, you’re a moron.”

“Maybe so, baby. But this moron has what you want.” Gordo attempted a leer.

“As if,” said Becka, looking away.


Becka scowled, “I told you that Waverly should never leave our safehouse.”

Gordo picked absently at the masking tape on an office cartoon, taped to the side of an upended desk. An archaic folk-xerox of some guy unscrewing his belly-button and having his ass drop off.

Becka rooted in the debris that braced the safehouse walls. She found a federally-approved orange and silver pilot survival blanket. It was sixty years old and rattled like burnt parchment, but she wrapped it around her sloping shoulders.

“Don’t get that look on your face again, said Gordo, adjusting the buttons of his overcoat. “None of this is my fault. Waverly insisted on taking a walk today. You know he was stir-crazy. He said an outing might reduce his bloat. We snuck out while you were sleeping.”

Becka wrung her blue-knuckled hands. “God damn it! We’ve been stuck here for weeks in this crappy, nameless, unheated, dead-end, foreclosed house, playing Dad and Junior and Sis. We shattered every limit of space and time and stuck our software into leeches, and after all our fine work, what do we get?”

“We get a steamroller popped out of thin air,” said Gordo practically.
“With the Pentagon waiting for us to turn our beautiful invention into a killing machine.”

Gordo grunted.

“Or for some sleazy web-biz morons to productize us commercially. I’m talking about Yellco. They hired a bunch of our disgruntled staffers. Yellco and their stupid cloud.”

“The cloud’s ubiquitous,” said Gordo cozily. “The cloud is everywhere, all the time. That’s what’s good about the Yellco cloud.”

“The cloud spies on everybody,” said Becka. “How come the cloud is bigger than the government? This is all so unfair!”

Silently, Gordo blew on his hands, then rubbed his right shoulder. He opened a desk, revealing half a crate of army-surplus beef stew.

“How can you possibly eat at a time like this?”

“When’s a man supposed to eat?” retorted Gordo, searching through a tangle of cable-dripping debris. He produced one stained, misshapen plastic container and pulled a tab at its base. The stew began to hum and rattle.

“That can is seriously past its expiration date,” remarked Becka.

“Desperate times,” nodded Gordo.

“Did you set Waverly up?” asked Becka, slitting her eyes.

Taken aback by the wild accusation, Gordo was silent for a long moment. “Why are you always like this?” he said, his voice nearly a whine. “Everything’s always so complicated with you.”

“I’ll make it simple.” Becka stood up and poked him in the chest with her finger. “Our boss is a pancake. Who’s next?”

“You!” said Gordo, abruptly clamping her in an embrace.

Becka wriggled one hand free. She slapped Gordo so hard that the sound echoed from the clutter on the walls.

“Go ahead, hit me,” muttered Gordo, releasing her and gingerly feeling his inflamed cheek. “Because I’m a mole, all right? You might as well know—I’m a mole from Yellco. I’ve been wanting to tell you that for a long time.”

Becka gaped in amazement, still catching up. “You work for Yellco? All this time?”

“Yeah. When I spread the word about that Patel incident, your staffers scattered in all directions. You ended up exiled and alone, and I came along to pick up the intellectual property. That’s the pay-off, and that’s why I’m still here, all cozy with you.”
“Oh, it’s all so dark-side,” said Becka despairingly. “So sleazy. So sold-out.”

“You academics never have any street-smarts,” said Gordo, still rubbing his cheek. He looked at his reflection in the glass of the gleaming aquarium. “Me, I’m a street-hardened security op. That’s what Waverly asked for—after you guys vitrified Patel’s ashes into a glassy barrel of nuclear waste. Waverly figured a guy like me would know how to hush things up. That shows how much you losers knew about real-life federal security.”

“What were you doing before?” asked Becka, intrigued. “Where do people like you come from?”

“Oh, I was the top security man at Dulles airport. Humiliating passengers. It was great work, but I screwed up and strip-searched a congressman’s son. You guys were my disgrace posting. Project Loco is my personal Siberia.”

“But you should have loved your new job!” Becka protested. “We got such superb results in unconventional physics! Sure, Patel turned into a leech and underwent spontaneous combustion—but that only happened one time! All the rest of those wiggling things locked in the penthouse, those were just animal subjects. Dogs, mostly. Leeches love dogs.”

Silently, Gordo thought this over. “What was Patel like?” he said at last. “I mean, before he got all flexible and tubular.”

“Patel was cute. He had a crush on me, actually. That’s why he volunteered to pioneer the science of translocation. The test went fine at first, but after the leech hit an artery, Patel started heating up inside. Like a runaway reactor. We locked him into the shower-room, hoping he’d damp down. But he crawled out through the keyhole and slithered upstairs to my office.”

“I never heard this part,” said Gordo.

“It was such a mess,” said Becka. She tightened her voice and pressed on. “That pathetic Patel was telling me that he’d done the test to show he loved me. With those leechy, toothy mouth-parts, I could barely understand him. Like bluh bluh bluh. And he was hot as a furnace. I was yelling and backing away from him. And then, oh God, he caught fire in my office. Men came in haz-mat suits, I never used that office again. That was the room we turned into your office, actually. After we hired you to keep things mum with your sleazy dark-side connections.”

“So you could turn more volunteers into giant leeches.”

“Not actual leeches!” exploded Becka. “Subdimensional pregeometric assemblages!”

“What’s the diff? They’re both boneless, wormy and wobbly.”

Becka put her hands on her hips. “That’s a typical ignorant layperson’s confusion.”

Right then Gordo’s can of self-heating beef-stew popped open. The putrid smell of spoiled meat wafted out.

“You can’t eat that rubbish,” said Becka impatiently. “Let me show you some real food.”
“Now you’re being nice,” said Gordo, wrapping a rag around the spoiled stew and sequestering it within a file cabinet. He walked back, gently smiling, his voice soft. “Show me what you’ve got for me, baby. People always eat a lot at wakes. And after that—they have sex. It’s life against death. Very human.”

“You wish,” said Becka, her cheeks pinkening.

“I didn’t mean you in particular were human,” said Gordo.

“You can’t have red-hot funeral sex with just anybody,” said Becka, deciding to flirt. She lowered her head, placing a delicate finger on a small bump on the base of her neck, up by the hairline. “As for the food, made Waverly fit me with a loco leech. Call me crazy.”

“I’ll volunteer too,” said Gordo reflexively.

“You might morph into a pregeometric assemblage that resembles a slimy bloodsucker,” Becka warned him, a flicker of a smile on her face.

Gordo shook his head. “I’m thinking that when Waverly morphed this morning, he \textit{willed} it happen. The guy was so cornered and stir-crazy, he \textit{wanted} to morph. Right before the big change, Waverly said, ‘I’m going everywhere.’ Well, I’m going where’s right for \textit{me}. Fish one of those little bastards out of the tank for me. I’ll take my own chances.”

“I just wish I could pry my own leech loose and give it to you,” said Becka uneasily. “But check out my awesome food demo first. It’ll blow your mind.”

Becka pulled two chairs over the flimsy card-table that Waverly used as a desk. Improbably yet deftly, she extracted a loaf of bread from a meager pencil-holder. The bread puffed up as she pulled it upwards, like toothpaste oozing from a tube.

“Now watch,” crowed Becka. “No keyboards, no commands, not even a gestural interface.” She cocked her head, staring at the crisp loaf of flaky bread on the table. The baguette spontaneously opened up with a laser-sliced precision. It rapidly bedecked itself with thin, slot-like wafers of colorful ham and brie.

Becka blinked her sharply focused eyes, and the spatial substance of the sandwich rotated upon itself, like the slats of a Venetian blind. A tidy row of colorful ham and cheese canapés sat on the wobbling table in the chilly room.

“I always wondered how you fed the boss behind my back,” exclaimed Gordo.

Becka proudly nibbled a shred of the gourmet ham.

“That came out of nowhere, like the steamroller?” nodded Gordo. Outside their walls, the machine was still busily clanking around. “Here, but not really here?”

“Where is anything?” said Becka. “An object is just a mesh of pregeometric locative architectures—instantiated via a spatial transform. This food started as a baguette sandwich in Fort Meade, over where we used to work. I
edited the baguette loco myself.”

Gordo scarfed up the little treats as fast as his cold-stiffened fingers could pluck them from the table.

“You’re eating eight sextillion affine transformations for every canapé,” Becka told him, delicately choosing a few for herself. “Loco tech is super processing-intensive. Each of these tasty morsels is a zettaflop of cloud crunch.”

“A zettaflop?”

“That’s one higher than exaflop. So don’t get all greedy. The cloud-load for this snack creates info lag all up and down the Eastern Seaboard.”

“A secret chow-line through the cloud’s back door,” mused Gordo. “That’s some kinda management perk.”

“That’s how life has to be nowadays,” Becka shrugged. “Looks great, tastes yummy. It’s provisionally real. Of course if the loco crashes before you’ve metabolized your lunch—tough! You’ve got a bellyful of subdimensional quantum foam.”

Gordo looked up hopefully, licking translocated mayonnaise from his fingers. “So we can glom free lunches from random delis forever, whenever we want?”

“Burn Before Thinking, is what Dr. Waverly said about that idea. We were supposed to feed Special Forces paratroops with this. And then there was our death-ray app. We were supposed to translocate raw energy from the core of the sun. And blast it out in a beam.”

“Awesome,” said Gordo. “How did that work out?”

“It’s technically feasible. But we kept having problems getting the coordinates right. Hassles with the gravitational warp—it’s very chaotic at the center of a star, what with general relativity coming into play. Very unstable. We tested the process on dogs, taking them outside to bark at the sun. And of course that body-morphing issue was a big problem with the dogs. Quite a few caught fire.”

“Burning dog-shaped giant leeches with death-ray eyes,” said Gordo.

Becka plucked at her full lower lip. “I really wouldn’t put it that way.”

“You and Waverly were a pair of loose cannons.”

“We wanted to hit some goddamn development milestones, okay?” said Becka. “We were finally turning the corner. Waverly found a superior West Virginia leech that was free of the morph effect! He’d been wearing his leech with no trouble for two full months. I’ve had my own leech for just a few days less than him, and I feel perfectly fine.”

“So far, so good,” said Gordo. “Just look how far you’ve come, you and Dr. Waverly.”

Becka flopped into Waverly’s stuffed chair beside the sparkling aquarium-tank of the loco leeches. She closed
her eyes and rested her hands on her temples. Presently she lifted her head and bleakly stared at him.

“Whether you want to admit it or not, Waverly’s still alive. He’s undulating. Even though that steamroller keeps rolling on him, making him thinner and thinner.”

“How would you know that?” asked Gordo cautiously.

“I can see him through my loco leech. Not see him, exactly. It’s more like proprioception—I know ultraprecisely where he is. Like the way you know where your elbow is, or your bedroom furniture when you get up in the night.”

“Well, I saw him with my own human eyes, and I didn’t see any undulating. He looked deader than hell.”

“What a blind, coarse, unfeeling man you are. What a nightmare this is for me,” Becka intoned. “The girl with the highest SAT in the history of Minneapolis. I should have paid more attention to reading Mary Shelley. Frankenstein? I always loved Mary Shelley. I mean, she was super-brainy, but really romantic and hot.”

Becka’s face quivered with despair. She reached under her flimsy card-table desk. She heaved out the overstuffed, derelict-style backpack she used as her raw-panic bug-out-bag. It held some choice packs of blueberry people-chow in there, a half-pint of ouzo, even a plush stuffed turtle. Finding a mass of crumpled tissue, she wiped the tears from her smooth, olive-skinned cheeks.

“That pitiful trembling tortilla was the greatest physics genius of our time,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Gordo said gruffly, “I know, it’s a shame.”

“At the end of his life, you and I were the only friends he had left. We’re like his next-of-kin. We should do the decent thing by him. Go fetch a piece of Waverly from the garage.”

“Your mentor’s mortal remains are kinda crumbly,” said Gordo.

“Crumbly?”

“Majorly.”


Gordo looked glum. “What you said.” He pulled back the frayed cuffs of his overcoat, studying the the peeling skin of his hands. “Look at this. And the rays cooked my shoulder, too.”

“I’d better not go into the garage at all,” said Becka quickly. “Not with him decaying into pregeometric subdimensional Feynman diagrams. So, okay, well, you can go in there again. Because you’ve already been exposed. Run to the garage pronto and fetch in a piece of the boss.”

“No way.”

“Don’t be stupid! You already touched him. Just hold your breath and flake off a small piece. I don’t need much
for a forensic study.”

“That’s such a lame word, forensic,” said Gordo, rebelling. “Why not truck him over to Dulles and feed him through the airport scanners?”

“I know he’s still alive,” insisted Becka. “I just need a way to prove my hypothesis. And—” Becka jumped to her feet, her face alight. “Eureka!”

“What?”

“I just realized! Dr. Waverly translocated that steamroller here himself! He’s the one who brought it in. He’s using the steamroller to flatten himself, so he won’t go critical. He’s reducing his bloat so he won’t catch fire.”

“What then?” said Gordo, really doubting her.

“He’s aiming for a higher type of phase transition! Our simulations predicted that was theoretically possible, but—if he’s actually achieved it, he’s entered a whole new level of existence! Be a man and go into that garage, Gordo. Or at least call out to Dr. Waverly from the garage door.”

“I’ve had it,” Gordo snapped. “You know what? I’m out of here. I just made up my mind. Waverly is stone dead. I’d be crazy to stay in this meat-locker one minute longer. I can outrun that steamroller. I’m a tough guy, I’ll take my own chances out in the real world.” Gordo flipped up his collar, pulled down his hat, and ambled toward the door.

Becka rose to her sneakered feet and scampered hastily after him. “Wait, Gordo. You’re abandoning years of research by brilliant scholars.”

Gordo looked Becka up and down, from her ironic Goob Dolls hairpins to her skatepunk Converse sneakers. “Research by mixed nuts, more like. What good did you get out of any of this research? Ever? Maybe you’re gonna find out the personal phone number of the Higgs boson, but meanwhile you’re a blacklisted junior professor who was shitcanned for science fraud.”

Cut to the quick, Becka retorted. “Well, you’re a big ugly goon who gropes helpless females in airports.”

They studied one another, awaiting some next, consequential move.

After a dreadful interval, Gordo realized he would have to be the one to speak up. “Look. Don’t get mad. Maybe we could work something out. You and me. We could blow this bad scene and make a run for it. There’s a lot of good security jobs in Qatar and Kazakhstan.”

“What am I supposed to do in those countries, swathe my face in a Hermes scarf? I’m a brilliant American federal scientist with years of loyal service! I’m staying right here in my own country. My only problem is that Project Loco is so freaking astral it makes LSD look like Medicare.”

“The feds aren’t going to fund you anymore. Not when your boss is a self-flattening radioactive pancake.”

“It’s not exactly radioactivity,” said Becka. “But, yeah, I know.”
“So, how about we hook up with private enterprise,” suggested Gordo. “My pals at Yellco. They’re in big business, they can deal with the feds. You go and do the kabuki for them. A live demo. Lay sample loco leeches on those awestruck investor geeks. Then I can close the venture deal.”

“Selling government-funded research results is unethical,” said Becka in a lofty tone. “Since you’re not a scientist like me, you know nothing of the proper research and development protocols.”

Gordo nodded quietly, grimly. “Oh, I agree with you. I appreciate that, the way you just put me down. I’d love to see you cut a deal for yourself.” He stroked his stubbled chin, pooching out his lips to assume a wise expression. “You’re guilty of warping the fabric of spacetime with a leech stuck to your neck. You’ll get the gas chamber. The networks will run it live.”

“Oh god, oh god, oh god!”

“You’re fine if I’m here to protect you,” said Gordo, stout and manly. “Waverly’s flatter than toast, but nothing’s happened to you yet. You know what we need? A drink. A drink, two trench coats and a handgun.”

“How can you even talk about booze when we’re in so much trouble?”

“Bust out that ouzo you’ve got hidden in your knapsack. Translocate us an apple pie.”

“No pie for you,” said Becka primly. “It’s not even ten in the morning.” She turned to the coffee maker that sat atop an unstable heap of lab equipment. “I’ll make you a nice strong coffee.”

“What ever,” said Gordo. “Rough day. I hate seeing dead people. Especially when I have to clean them up.”

Becka sniffed. “The noise of that steamroller is giving me such a headache.”

Gordo reached absently into his shirt pocket. “Hey, you want some aspirin? I copped it last week in that shell of a mall. It’s German! Really pure.”

“You can be a handy guy sometimes, El Gordo,” said Becka, gratefully eating a painkiller.

“Real soon now, we burst into action,” said Gordo, “Caffeine and sugar, aspirin and ouzo! We’re gonna take the war to the world outside!”

Just then they heard a clumsy scratching at the front door, followed by a series of light, precise knocks.

Gordo peered through the fisheye spyhole in the center of the mansion’s bolted door. “This is the living end,” he said. “Now someone sent us a robot.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No way, look for yourself. It’s one of those Japanese quadruped things, those herky-jerky origami dogs. I’ve never seen one outside a YouTube video.”

“I can see it through my loco leech,” said Becka with an inward look. “Maybe we’d better find out what it wants.”
Gordo opened the door to reveal a disposable droid, a flimsy creature that had been created as a 3D-printed construction of grid-wired plastic. It was cheap and flimsy, tidily folded to balance on four pointed feet. Graphic displays flowed across its surfaces.

The closest surface resolved into the plump face of their landlord. His name was Yonnie Noe, and he was famed for having bought up three thousand houses in the blasted Northern Virginia suburbs. Keen on personal service, Mr. Noe printed out fresh rent-collector droids every day.

“I need to speak with Dr Fred Waverly,” said Yonnie’s face, his tone peremptory. The sound emanated via vibrations from the collector droid’s surfaces. The creature cocked its head, aiming its photosensitive patches into the house, sampling the air with a roughened surface near the tip of its triangular nose.

“Dr Waverly’s in the garage,” said Gordo. “He’s getting a massage.”

“That’s nice, but I smell burnt wiring,” announced Yonnie. The bot slid a papery leg through the open door. “Did you use a two-prong plug in a three-prong hole, sir? I’ll have to inspect for that.”

This was a ruse. Once a collector droid had somehow folded and slithered its way into a deadbeat’s sanctum, valves would open and it would emit a spray.

“You can’t evict us,” bellowed Gordo, giving the droid a savage kick.

“You didn’t pay your landlord,” chirped the paper robot, skittering right back. “Allow me to display your deadbeat financial status.” A series of charts, blueprints, progress bars and spycam views scrolled rapidly across its back and its legs.

Yonnie’s face reappeared, threatening and serious. “The ambient biometric feeds shows the renter of record to be lying on floor of the garage.”

“I just told you that,” said Gordo. “But you weren’t listening.”

“Dr. Fred Waverly’s brainwaves are subnominal,” intoned Yonnie. “I deem him incapacitated. Your evident failure to file a police report is a crime! Prepare for immediate eviction, followed by arrest!”

“Dr. Waverly’s only resting,” babbled Becka over Gordo’s shoulder. “He’s in a deep trance. He’s an ascended master. I know you want your back rent, Mr. Noe, but we don’t have the password to activate Professor Waverly’s credit account.”

“This is unacceptable,” snapped Yonnie.

“You can’t arrest us,” said Gordo. “You’re made of paper and coat-hangers.” He gripped the robot by its papery midriff and threw it into the snow. He slammed the door and shot the steel bolts.

The robot pattered and scratched at the door, emitting a buzzing series of escalating threats. And they could hear a second droid fumbling at the window.
With trembling hands, Becka stuffed a few things into her backpack and shrugged it onto her shoulders. “I’m not strong enough for this,” she said. “I can’t beat up robots. I’m a scholar.”

“I can handle this crisis,” said Gordo, watching her. “Pick me out a loco leech.”

“Okay, try the top left box in the tank,” Becka counseled. “Put a leech straight up your nostril and it’ll hook to your brain immediately. It takes a whole hour to interface it if you stick it on your neck.”

Leaning over the aquarium, Gordo pincered out a writhing brown West Virginia leech. Holding it tight between finger and thumb, he snorted it up.

“Oof,” said Gordo, staggering. He held up his hands, staring at them like he’d never seen fingers before. “Sextillion,” he muttered. “I’m counting the molecules, yeah. Septillion.”

The collector droids were scratch-scraping at the door and the window, earnestly trying to slide in through the cracks. But this algorithm failed them. They were quiet for a minute, and then they emitted two tightly collimated chirps. One of the window panes shattered into shards. Instantly two folded-up shapes glided through the empty pane like paper airplanes. The droids unfolded themselves to stand on all fours, wavering like drunken hat stands.

One of the collector bots lifted his tail and began to spew a thin stream of repulsive gas.

With a savage effort of his will, Gordo dove into the locative mental spaces of his leech. Immediately he found the city construction yard. Translocating physical objects was as easy as lifting a fork from a table.

“Roar,” Gordo declared.

A bulldozer crashed gloriously through the wall into the littered dining room, its blade raised like a tar-stained guillotine. The dozer’s tracks and blade made a lethal, pig-slaughtering racket. Fresh, cold air streamed in.

“This all goes on your bill,” screeched Yonnie No’s voice, and then his origami droid was crushed.

Gordo bobbled his head, manipulating the bulldozer as effortlessly as a wire-frame graphic. Its dirt-stained teeth knocked the aquarium from its stand in a geyser of shattered glass and wallowing parasites. The dozer whirled, its dirt-stained treads gouging the floor.

“I’m voiding your deposit,” chirped Yonnie Noe’s remaining collector droid, scuttling out of reach. It hid in the crannies of the junk piled against the walls, preparing to vent its own supply of gas.

The bulldozer rotated in place, lining up for an attack. Gordo zoomed the dozer’s dimensions down to a nimbler size. With a blur of motion, the miniaturized bulldozer darted like a rabid terrier to crush the last droid to bits.

And then, with a smooth affine transformation, Gordo restored the dozer to its full stature. It trundled outside, making another yawning hole in the wall, opening a Pompeii-like vista.

Silence fell. The dozer was motionless beneath the pearly winter sky. In the garage, the steamroller was silent.
too. A few dark dots of snow began to fall. The frigid air smelled somehow like steel.

“You overdid it,” said Becka critically.

“Women always say that,” shrugged Gordo. “You wanted me to solve your problem... Hey, problem solved now, it’s all rubble.”

“Look,” said Becka, pointing,

A wide, flat sheet was creeping across the snowy winter lawn, reflecting glints of rainbow color from the low, gray clouds.

“He’s like a flounder,” said Becka. “Or no, he’s like a soap film.”

Waverly the soap-film man undulated and rose into the air. As if seen through a haze of static on a clouded video screen, he twinkled, stuttered, juggified, and broke up—into frantic dots. A swarm of Waverly gnats. Bright and glittering, the gnats swirled in a slow tornado.

“He’s going everywhere,” said Becka. “He predicted this. He’s encysted himself into a quintillion particles.”

With a dip and salute, the swarm of Waverlys scattered itself to the vagrant breezes of winter.

“I don’t think that’s an attractive career choice,” said Gordo.

“Do you want to try and pry your leech loose, before it really digs in?” asked Becka. “I think it’s too late for me.”

“I’m riding this all the way,” said Gordo. “Wherever it leads. Having this superpower—it feels like the first time I’ve ever really been alive. It’s just you and just me against the world. So first, before anyone else shows up—”

He nodded his head towards the house.

“Hot funeral sex?” said Becka, her expression unreadable.

“Please,” said Gordo.

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