**Christopher Adams**

**Happy Birthday Patrick**

He'd slept out of his covers again and woken up cold. The room was only just coming round and the old man was always up first, naked and sleepy and thin.

     Numb vibrations built into an even roll of whooshes and sweeps. Yesterday's air sucked out, tidied and smoothed for re-use. Then came the brightness. Soft pale washing over the crew quarters and notice boards, swilling in loose sheets and dirty clothes. Machines clicked and fizzed awake but the old man rarely went near them. He still wasn't sure what they all did.

     'Good morning Patrick, and Happy Birthday,' James said.

     James was always awake. He didn't need to sleep because he was always looking after the old man and the old man forgot that from time to time. Though, Patrick was sure the smaller ones were up to something. He'd become convinced in the last few months, certain in fact. Why wouldn't they slack off while he was asleep? He knew they only *really* woke up and started work when he did. That's why they were so eager to buzz and simmer when he looked at them.

     Williams used to think his little theory was hilarious.

     'They might only be programmed for basic maintenance, but they aren't stupid. Collegiality goes hang when we're not around,' the old man used to say.

     Williams used to say, 'They're designed to do one simple task until they burn out. They don't have the cognitive software to make choices or prioritise, they're not all like James.'

     Though Patrick's superior, the senior technician rarely exercised any formal authority. As long as he was left alone in his work, Williams behaved decently enough. Most were like that in the early days. His moustache would always twitch when he spoke about robotics or A.I. programming or anything else that blipped or beeped. Those things got him going.

     The old man's bed was slim and itchy and, like the other three, pinched tight at the edges of the room. His uniform hovered overhead and he always dressed in the same order, a habit that hung around despite everything. It ran: top button loose and tie to cover, sleeves rolled at elbow, crew jumper for the cold, trousers and name badge last. It had taken him longer in the last few weeks, the lower back a particular hindrance in the mornings. Sometimes only the most local movements were possible.

     The crew's mess was centralised by a wide, cylindrical table. Four seats surrounded it and four screens angled downwards from above. One showed course trajectory and temperature figures and another lit a lunch menu. The others detailed engine assessment rotas or updates on weekly social events. Thursday was quiz night and Friday a *Guys and Dolls* disco.

     The old man always ate on his own. Even when the canteen crowded he'd find a quiet space and keep to himself. It was easier now they had all gone to sleep for a while.

*'Good morning colleagues. A breakfast has been allocated for all registered crew members by your friends at Tomorrow Ltd. We sincerely hope you enjoy.'*

     Despite complaints, James gave the full message every morning. Patrick insisted there was really no need to go through those kind of things anymore. Not every day. But there were certain policies James couldn't move on. Certain legalities which had to be met. So the old man could say the whole thing backwards if he had to.

*'The contents have been selected to ensure your continuing physical strength and cognitive rigour in the field. A panel of Tomorrow dietary experts have arranged a satisfying meal of balanced nutritional value. We offer: bacon and eggs, sausages, toast, hash browns, tomatoes and a choice of orange or apple juice for the full English breakfast, or a selection of wholemeal breads and mackerel salad for the continental option. Your friends at Tomorrow Ltd. hope you have an enjoyable and productive day.'*

     Patrick didn't mind the bacon. He liked the sausages too but found the eggs suspicious. He didn't care for the mushrooms either.

     'Good morning Patrick, and Happy Birthday,' James said again.

     'Good morning James,' the old man said. 'What time is it?'

     The computer was still, a slight glitch in his electric brain and misfire of understanding. It was an easy mistake. Clever ones like James could *learn* idiom, dictum and colloquialism, but there were always small pockets of meaning that slipped underneath his software, particularly if his calibrations had fallen out of sync.

     'What time is it *at home* James?'

     'GMT: 2:17 am. Sunday, May 18th.'

     'Still sleeping then,' the old man said.

     Though bright and convincing, there was current in James's voice. A slight fizz and burble around his Os and As.

     He sounded like a young man but it was impossible to say a number. There was no place in his words either, no highs or lows of intonation. A history of nowhere. Friendly enough, the old man thought, but he was in every room, wrapping the corridors too easily. Muting football commentaries and interrupting recreational hours to make sure he was listened to. You could even hear him between the fusion towers on G deck.

     The old man folded his toast and eyed a cornflake near Taylor's chair. The room really could have done with a clean. They'd run out of cereal years ago.

     'Patrick, the E deck's oxygen resurgence valves have not passed through recommended maintenance for-' there was a pause and Patrick waited for the octave drop, though he didn't mime it that time. '-Three months, two days and seventeen hours.' Then the familiar high notes were back. 'I strongly recommend that a senior technician oversees the process immediately. The safety of this ship, cargo and crew are-'

     'I know James, thank you,' the old man said, crumbs falling from his face.

     James always waited ten minutes or so in the mornings. That was how long humans needed. It was the time margin his behavioural paradigms aligned with. Though it was not rare for tolerances to go short by a few minutes, in specific circumstances.

     The old man raised a cigarette to his mouth. He always smoked after breakfast.

     'Could you play one of the videos, James?'

     The old man hadn't asked for a while, a few years perhaps, but that day was special.

     James avoided certain conversations. He hadn't the capacity for sophisticated dialogue or *empathic reciprocation* like the cleverer models. But the circumstances had been unusual for so long that some communicative processes had to be reassessed for his human. He'd *learned* how and when to entertain its whims as best he could. He knew when to do one of the big thoughts.

     They took a little longer than his usual decisions.

     Oceans of faceless probabilities and risks balanced against one another and miles of data on *positive co-operation* were consulted. Digital schisms and algorithms darted, assessed, re-assessed, but returned only the ones and zeros of error code.

     '*Tomorrow* Ltd. must insist that oxygen valve maintenance is this vessel's immediate priority. As the acting senior crew member, the safe passage of this ship, in accordance with-'

     '-Do you know what day it is today, James?'

     'Yes Patrick, Happy Birthday Patrick.'

     'Then give me a video you stupid cunt.'

     The old man exhaled, head wrapping in haze.

     There wouldn't be any paperwork to go through. There was nobody around to reset James to ten seconds earlier.

     Patrick was a lousy technician. He'd a history of disciplinary action for decorum and sloppy safety procedure. He swindled his ration card and didn't use the ship's leisure facilities as expected. He was an infant in James's space of boundless capabilities, but he was human and James was not.

     The screen above the old man shuddered alive and James wouldn't speak for a while. All advised courses of action stilled.

     The first moments of this one were jittery. The sharpness was primitive and the sound, muddy and distant. But where the others had dots, percentages and data, this one had greens. Deep and real from where it could have been June.

     It was beautiful in there. Lovely skies and grass stretching deep and wide into a far sight, islanded by families and day. Games of cricket and football were playing out. Natives probably, shirtless and eyed by the pretty girls.

     But the lens wasn't with them. It was with the hill and the little boy on his bicycle.

     This one was ready, helmeted and strapped tight in elbow pads. He was going to be first down. Blond curls flitting in the Sunday brightness and feet steady at the pedals.

     There was a voice in there too, opaque and dissonant, seas away from the old eyes watching.

     Patrick knew there'd be a countdown and at *Go!* the little knees would thunder, work and batter at the pedals. The tiny boy would fly harder and faster, giving his all with the most wide, beautiful cheeks, the other children miles behind.

     There would be another voice too.

     The camera hadn't seen them yet but Patrick knew there was another voice in there. It belonged to a woman in a summer dress, arms outstretched and smiling from the very middle of herself. 'And here he goes! The brave champion of the world!' she'll shout and take him in her arms where the hill levels. Joy and the hope of everything in their eyes before cut off.

     The old man had seen it before but it had been a while.

     The room was quieter when it finished and his cigarette had split between his fingers. Ash was getting everywhere.

     Core temperature graphs and vector efficiency diagrams were coming back, folding over the greens.

     Miles away, giant engines burned away their reserves, pushing three thousand tonnes through cold dark. James knew the old man wouldn't move. He'd learned a lot about his human over the years and could tell when something was wrong.

     'Patrick, would you like me to go through our data on Jane?'

     'No, not today James.'

     'I understand.'

     There were no windows in the crew's quarters but she hung just outside, reddened and weightless. The scanners had noted her mean distance at two hundred and thirty five thousand miles away, about the same as the old man's home from its moon.

     She moved in quiet spins, one twirl equalling six of earth's, and had two moons herself. But the surface was always shifting. Current and gas and dust mixing and scattering in constancy. Deep ambers giving way to tired yellows. Clouds forming thick gaps of shadow. The old man sometimes tried to make shapes out of the clumps, tigers and elephants on flying carpets, bicycles going down hills.

     Jane the planet didn't have a real name, most of the minor rocks don't, but Patrick called her that because it was the first thing that came to his head. He'd never known a real Jane.

     'Patrick, I have recalculated those probabilities you asked for. Is it a suitable time?'

     The old man didn't speak.

     'The statistical likelihood of reaching earth within the next thirty two years has increased from seventeen percent to twenty four. I have also reassessed the oxygen circulation and food rationing programs with pleasing-'

     'You don't have to go through that again, James.'

     'I understand.'

     'Patrick I'm afraid the risk to respiratory function is approaching significant. Lack of filtration can lead to erosion and contamination of the oxygen re-cyclisation sensors. If left unchecked, and at our rate of use, the air will be unbreathable in less than thirty days.'

     'I know James, thank you. I'm going now.'

     'Beyond that, failure to apply necessary maintenance by identified technicians can warrant immediate disciplinary action and suspension.'

     'Thank you James, I'm going now.'

     'Thank you Patrick.'

     James was doing his best but something was centralising. Some new thought. Only minor in the far edges of his endless and perfect algorithms, but one that warranted consideration.

     It wouldn't be long now and that wasn't unusual, but it would be different this time.

     Since his beginning there were always others to fill a place, always other names and ways and idiosyncrasies to learn, but soon, like them, this old man would go and he'd be alone for a while.

     Patrick started on his boots, taking his time to lace both before rising. At his pace, it'd be half a day before he got to the other side and found the right corridor.

     He wanted to pop in to the Captain's quarters while he was out, look out the window for a while and grab a last bottle of something.

     James turned a blind eye that time, it was his birthday after all.