

A MARATHON RUNNER IN THE HUMAN RACE

By Dave Smeds

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“A Marathon Runner in the Human Race” is a science fiction story set in the milieu of Dave’s new novel, *Ambassadors*. Two other stories set in that world have already been published: “Reef Apes” in *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, and “Suicidal Tendencies” in *Full Spectrum* 4.

AUTUMN LEAVES FLOATED onto the patio. Neil Corbin counted them: three from the maple, six from the ornamental plum. Another shifting of the seasons — what did he care?

He keened his ears for the familiar chorus of shuffling shoes or the clicking of Joe and Al’s daily game of dominoes. But not a person stirred, and none were visible save crazy Anne over in the shade of the umbrella table. Were it not for the birdsong in the trees, Neil would have sworn his deafness had never been cured.

A car turned into the driveway — another source of silence but for the low moan of tires on concrete. The vehicle stopped mere yards from Neil’s chair. A muscular, casually dressed young man emerged.

“Sorry I’m late, Gramps. Are you ready?”

Nell accepted his grandson’s help in rising. “You’re looking good,” the old man said.

“You will, too, Gramps. Come on. The clinic’s expecting you.”

Nell removed his elbow from the young man’s grip. “I only move at one speed, Matthew. You know that.” He padded toward the car, wobbling but making steady progress.

Matthew rolled his eyes, piled the luggage in the trunk, and went to the driver’s side.

“You forgot the trophy,” Neil said.

The item lay beside the chair where Neil had been sitting. Grumbling, Matthew retrieved it, placing it in his grandfather’s lap rather than waste time reopening the trunk.

Neil’s hands closed over the statuette above the bronze plate that bore his name. His hands automatically stroked the contours of the running figure, but his attention wandered elsewhere, soaking in one last view of the place that had been his home for so long. His glance tracked to the empty, dusty windows of the far wing.

His room had been the third from the end, just over the sign reading “Shadyhome Retirement Community.”

The once-immaculate grounds bore the first small signs of neglect. The grape vine he had planted when he came to live there hung lush with fruit in the arbor by the fish pond, its trunk almost as fat as a tree. He’d never seen so many grapes on it, ripe and ready. His fellow residents always ate them too quickly.

“You must be almost the last guy to move out,” Matthew commented. “I think you’d have stayed there if the place weren’t shutting down.”

“Could be,” Neil said. He sighed. “Let’s go.”

Traffic seemed to part magically in front of them, quiet except for the wind of passage and an occasional cranked up music system. Matthew, as if sensing Neil’s lack of interest in conversation, kept himself busy manually guiding the car, though the navigation menu prompted him as to what speed to travel, and when to change lanes, in order to maintain the symphony of cross-town transit.

Matthew really was looking good. He held the steering wheel with a teenage grace and ease. Neil lifted his own palm, stared at the creases, and after a slight pause, pulled down the visor to look in its tiny mirror.

Moles and liver spots disfigured his bald head. The translucent pallor of his complexion was relieved only by the rosette stain of burst capillaries. Wrinkles — no, crevasses — lined a face rendered gnomelike by passing decades.

He lifted up the visor, and turned back to the scenery. He blinked in surprise. They were arriving at their destination. Miles had vanished, lost to the mirror.

“Dr. Rosen said to have him paged from the lobby,” Matthew reminded him — Neil hated it when young folks imagined he had no memory capacity.

“Do you want me to go in with you?”

“No. I can manage on my own.”

Matthew chuckled. “I’ll pick you up here tomorrow at 10:00 sharp.”

“You’ll be late,” Neil said. He hobbled into the clinic as resolutely as his one-hundred-twenty-year-old legs could carry him.

In the morning Matthew was on time, of course, tardiness cured by the deliberate skepticism. The young man was leaning against the car as Neil stepped out the door ahead of Dr. Rosen and strode briskly down the walkway.

Matthew's eyes telescoped outward like a cartoon character. "Gramps?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Neil answered, voice firm and deep. "You tell me."

Matthew grinned and opened the car door. "Looks like they got every molecule in the right place." He slapped his grandfather on the back, a firm tap that, only a day earlier, would have caused a stagger. "Come on. You'll want to get home and see your new room."

"I can't wait," Neil said, deadpan.

Neil slid gracefully into his seat, and had his door closed before Matthew could assist. Through the open window poured the aromas of heavy dew and mulch from the flower beds along the walkway. He sucked in a deep breath. When had his nose ever been able to detect scents so well?

Matthew stepped away to speak to Dr. Rosen. They kept their voices so low that Neil knew they were talking about him. Irritated, Neil deliberately turned away.

A woman was sitting on a bench about twenty yards in front of the car. The morning sun haloed her reddish curls, giving her oval, smooth features an angelic peace, like a Renaissance madonna, but with northern European coloring.

Neil made eye contact. She blushed, and turned her gaze to the avenue, as if expecting someone.

Slowly, belatedly, Neil thought to smile, but it was too late. Matthew climbed in and the vehicle pulled away.

"You really were a runner," Matthew said, gesturing at Neil's body. His jovial tone seemed forced. No doubt his mind was still on whatever Dr. Rosen had told him.

The sawdust scent of the track welled up in Neil's mind. Hurdles skimmed his calves. Competitors hovered in the corner of his eyes, not quite keeping pace with his long, sure leaps and strides. The ribbon parted as his chest struck it.

"I broke a track and field record or two." Neil waved his hand dismissively. "Just school records, you know. I had one good season in sprints and hurdles."

"I thought your event was the marathon."

"That came later."

Neil was jiggling his right leg, and tightening his fists just to gauge their

strength. Matthew kept looking at him with a cat-with-a-canary grin.

“What’s so funny?” Neil demanded.

“Those hormones are pumping now, Gramps. You’re feeling what I felt, two months ago.”

Neil pursed his lips. “Maybe,” he said, temporarily closing the subject.

Boxes of Neil’s possessions, full of a century’s worth of packrat accumulations, lay stacked willy-nilly all over the guest bedroom of Matthew’s apartment. Neil clicked his tongue, estimated the capacity of the empty shelves, and tried to imagine his collection of photographs and prints against the tobin’s egg blue of the walls. He’d forgotten the magnitude of moving into a new place.

Neil began by shifting aside boxes in order to unroll his treasured Afghan carpet. As he did, his hand skimmed the edge of a flap, slicing his skin open.

Wincing, Neil rushed to the bathroom to wash and bandage the paper-cut. With his injured hand over the sink and the other on the faucet handle, he paused. The ribbon of blood along his wrist and forearm reversed its flow, defying gravity to return to the vessels from which it had sprung. That done, the slice closed, weaving together with an itchiness that made Neil feel as if ants were suturing him up with minuscule needles and thread.

Not ants. They were called nanodocs. Within three minutes they had completed their job. Neil ran his finger along unblemished, unscarred flesh. He shuddered. Next thing he knew, the Feynman Institute would come up with a means to revive the dead.

Perhaps they had. Lifting his glance to the mirror, he stared at a man from a previous century. The athletic lines of his reflection matched those in the track team photo from his senior year of college. The thick, brown hair was the same glorious mop his June Cleaver mother hounded him to cut, all the while editorializing about the corrupting influence of Those Beatles Fellows.

The last time he’d looked like this, he’d been twenty-three years old.

Even his perspiration evoked an earlier time, when exertion brought out a crisp, pheromonal incense, not the reek of ancient glands. Neil tensed his neck. The muscles bulged, taut and corded — no more sagging jowls. He tugged off his shirt, and tapped his firm, lightly rippled abdomen.

This was how he’d been before he’d developed that annoying tire around his waist. Before he’d become a father. Before all those years at a desk job. Neil Corbin — lean, mean track star.

Except he was even better this time around. As requested, the nose he'd had surgically straightened at age thirty-nine was still straight; the appendectomy scar, from age seventeen, was gone as if it had never existed. The promise of nanotechnology had blossomed. A year ago, nano-assemblers, despite all their useful applications, could only augment other types of medical care. Now they coursed, self-guided, through every cell of Neil's body, reining in free radicals, disassembling invasive microbes, healing damage as it occurred.

And, of course, restoring youth. Permanently.

Neil turned this way and that in the mirror, unable to resist the visual feast, the sensual kiss of fabric against hard muscle and supple skin. Was this him?

An unfamiliar sensation started low in his torso, grew stronger, and finally demanded attention. He opened his fly and there it was, a physiological event as effortless as breathing or blinking. His groin hummed like a violin string drawn tight over the bridge, its music amplified by the sweet ache from his bladder.

"Incredible," Neil murmured.

He hadn't had erections for thirty years, yet this was already the fourth in half a day. He made no attempt to produce them; they just happened, as they had every day of his adolescence.

This wasn't like the inoculation with the Ponce de Leon Vaccine, which had halted his aging sixteen years ago, but kept him looking and feeling no better off than a healthy one-hundred-four-year-old. The mass media hoopla of the last six months came back to him like some sort of electronic echo, but the dreamlike impossibility of the reports was gone. He'd followed the lead already taken by three-quarters of the world's population. He was young again.

Then why did it still feel as if his soul hung poised over the abyss of death? He turned away from the mirror, no longer able to look.

His body seemed oblivious to any anxiety his mind could muster. He could have used his penis as a towel rack.

He shook his head slowly. "What," he asked his erection, "am I supposed to do with you?"

MILD INDIAN summer radiance stretched down the canyons of downtown buildings as Neil and Matthew joined the flow of pedestrians. Young face after young face ambled by, nearly all on attractive, physically fit bodies. A few children played, a few middle-aged types promenaded, trying to look distinguished; otherwise, everyone seemed to be in their late teens to early thirties.

A month after his visit to the clinic, Neil had almost grown used to the absence of sagging flesh and rheumy eyes around him, despite all the decades spent in retirement communities, hospitals, and other abodes of the elderly. It reminded him of college — another equally unreal part of his adult life.

“Do I really have to do this?” Neil asked.

“Humor me,” Matthew said meaningfully. “You have to get out and about sooner or later.”

“I’ve been busy. Architecture’s changed a bit since I last generated a set of blueprints.” Back then, such things were still duplicated on paper and were still sometimes blue.

“Gramps. . .”

Neil sighed. He’d never shared a home with Matthew before these past few weeks. He’d been surprised to learn that his grandson could be just as stubborn as he.

This time, Neil had conceded defeat, if only because the kid was right. Neil had been a hermit, and despite his excuses, all too little of his time had been spent at his interface studying to resume his career. For the most part he simply sat in his room.

Matthew at least had the good grace not to lecture. Dr. Rosen had already done enough of that. All that talk about how the very old — and Neil was about as old as anyone on the planet— didn’t always adapt to the installation of nanodocs. They exhibited “a reluctance to engage in life,” as if those who had fought the war against age were now suffering a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Some had gone as far as suicide.

That was their prerogative, Neil thought. Who said that a person had to act young just because he looked it? Who said a person had to embrace immortality?

“You’ll enjoy it out here,” Matthew said.

“You keep telling me that.”

“Trust me. This part of town did wonders for me just after I had my nanodocs installed.”

They turned a corner, arriving at their destination.

“My god,” Neil whispered.

The area was nothing like he remembered. The dingy gray concrete, blacked-out windows, and peeling paint had become a panoply of clean, bright facades with an abundance of glass, proudly displaying the interiors. Gone were the hawkers and the girls lounging like slung beef on the curbsides, replaced by stylish registration desks, openly displayed lists of services, and comfortable parlors for interviews between clients and artists.

The paint on the remodelled apartment house across the street rolled its molecules, shifting from an off-white to a deep beige that reflected the sun less harshly. The last time Neil had seen that building, its bottom floor had been festooned with handbills warning of AIDS. Those posters would be collector's items now that nanodocs rendered any and all venereal diseases a part of the past, along with unintentional pregnancy.

The crowds of prospective clientele, still mostly male, wandered past the establishments like children at an amusement park. Joy soaked the air, a carefree piquancy that slid in with each inhalation, caressing taste buds on its way past the tongue like a fine, dry wine. Neil followed his grandson's lead like a marionette, with his jaw slack and eyes numbed by some new sight almost every instant. Matthew plunged ahead, clearly gripped by an aphrodisiacal contact high.

Two female artists chatted on the steps of a coffeehouse, taking a break during the lull between the morning rush of patrons and the traditional evening barrage. One of the women noticed Matthew's attentiveness and turned slightly, providing both men with a view of a cleavage in which a banker could lose small change forever, if banks still used coins.

"Let's go in here," Matthew suggested.

Neil resisted the tug on his sleeve. "No. I'd like to look around a bit more."

Matthew raised an eyebrow and tilted his head toward the buxom artist. "You sure about that, Gramps?"

"Yes. Maybe I'll drop in later. If not, meet you at seven by the fountain." Matthew shrugged. "Okay. See you then."

Neil wandered. In its new incarnation, the redlight district stretched far past its old confines. One place of business after another washed past him. None held his interest more than a few seconds. He thought he understood why Matthew had chosen to bring him here. Sex certainly was the epitome of "engaging in life." And he could well believe all the therapeutic effect Matthew had personally derived from visits here. Matthew was seventy-two, and thanks to the vaccine had stopped aging at fifty-four. He'd never been old enough for sex to lose its allure.

Neil drifted by a palatial bordello with a statue of Lily St. Cyr out front, continuing on even though the receptionist, in her elegant woman's tuxedo, flashed him a wonderful smile. He ignored a tidy hotel with its rooms where, so the marquee claimed, the virtual whores were Custom Programmed by Maestro Roberto Niezca Himself. He even skipped the old-fashioned video arcades, something familiar from episodes of youthful curiosity or loneliness.

Finally he came to a three-story Victorian. "Gallery of Erotica" it read in Romanesque letters above the door. Few people seemed to be entering, and in their expressions passion rode serenely, absent the frantic urgency of most passersby.

Neil pressed the handpad, letting the gallery debit his account. The sibilant noises of the street vanished as the door swung shut behind him.

He meandered down an aisle filled with sculptures of bacchanalian orgies. In an alcove, a female mannequin wore lingerie that mutated at nano- levels through the fashions of many eras, from Colonial-era teddies to the brass inauguration bra made famous by Erotic Artists Guild president Elaine Agoura. Finally he came to a small section devoted to framed centerfolds from mid-20th century cheesecake magazines.

His glance lit on one he thought he recognized. He and Toby Wyckoff had found a cast-off Playboy once in a dumpster. The model had the same intensely black hair as that issue's Playmate. Her breasts, naturally shapely — as opposed to the silicone balloons featured in later decades — pointed outward at an angle designed to knock teenage boys' eyeballs out of their sockets. A bedsheet denied the viewer a glimpse of her pubic hair — a forbidden zone for the camera in that day and age.

Neil wiped his palms on his shirt. How easily the memory bubbled up. Had he truly been that adolescent, crouched breathless in an alley behind a dumpster, acknowledging for the first time the undeniable tropism of sexuality?

Yes. He had.

An hour later, emerging from the gallery, he drank in the ambience of the street with senses newly tuned. The redolent musk of sweat and arousal that wafted from open upper-story windows made him heady. A thousand nights' worth of gasps, sighs, and moans seemed to pour out of the walls of every building on the street.

Maybe Matthew had been right to bring him here. It had awakened something. Perhaps it wasn't so unreasonable to explore the feeling.

But not in this rain of fire. Despite all the changes, one thing about this part of town was the same: here, sex was a commodity. It was for jaded palates, looking for something new, something quick, something uncomplicated.

Neil's palate was not jaded. He'd been out of the game so long he was like a virgin. He couldn't start with a business transaction. He'd have to do things his way.

He headed for the fountain to wait for his grandson, treading like a snow leopard across the Himalayas, knowing a mate must be somewhere up there among the alpenglow and mist.

The party scene was the same backwater it had always been, with the same fish caught in its eddies, lacking the vitality to dare the rapids to the spawning pools. Neil endured it until, at a housewarming for a neighbor of Matthew's, he met Thea.

Thea was long and statuesque, with a deep ebony complexion that may or may not have been her birth color — did it matter these days? She came up to him as he sat, alone, on the patio retaining wall.

“Hello, you must be Neil,” she said.

Avoiding eye contact, he gestured indoors at the petite blonde Thea had arrived with. “Your spouse seems to be the hit of the night in there.” “Oh, she's not my spouse. Just my roommate.”

His cheeks reddened. “Whoops,” he said. She laughed in a way that told him both that she'd taken no offense, and that she thought it hilarious that anyone would characterize her as homosexual.

“What do you. . .um, do?” Neil asked.

“I'm in household AI sales. Tell me, sir, do you want your door guard program to growl at Jehovah's Witnesses or to politely tell them to fuck off and leave you alone?”

Neil snorted into his beer.

Thea kept talking. She was easy to listen to. The stiffness leaked from his shoulders and spine. He stopped compulsively running his hands up and down the handle of his mug. Thea filled the dreaded long pauses when he couldn't think of a thing to say. Yet she listened when he did manage to stutter out a phrase. She laughed at his jokes.

Gradually the conversation became real, more than small talk. Neil managed to get past his tendency at earlier parties to keep it light. Dr. Rosen said that trait was a defense mechanism, a habit left over from his twilight decades when any friend he made died. Old widowers risked much to try to forge deep relationships. Neil didn't care about the analysis. He just did what felt right. Heart pounding, he got the words

out: “Can I see you again?”

Thea played with one of her tightly kinked curls, like a cat next to a mouse it has trapped, letting the poor thing wonder if it will again set down its paw. “Yes. I would like that,” she said.

For their first date, they took the Slingshot up to low earth orbit, on a ten-hour tourist package Thea had signed up for on a whim years back. She’d never canceled the reservations for two, figuring that when the time finally arrived, she’d find someone who wanted to accompany her.

Neil and Thea spent the bulk of the visit strolling along the view decks of the Earthrise Mall, goggling at the starscape. Their favorite moments, though, took place in what Thea labeled “the trampoline chamber,” a sphere eighteen meters in diameter, attached to the space station just so Grounders could fly back and forth to their hearts’ content. They giggled like children, hysterical at the peculiar effect of weightlessness on their faces and figures. By the time they took their berths in the descent vehicle, they were so pleasantly exhausted that they napped for the last half of the glide to sea level.

As they strolled out of the station into a blustery night, Thea threw back her head and hooted enthusiastically, “Oh, I love doing new things, don’t you?”

Her arm drifted into the crook of his elbow. Neil’s wits seemed to vanish into the breeze, knocked out of his brain by the unexpected chill of natural planetary atmosphere. He recognized the cue. The decision, said her body with a theatrical shiver, was his.

She looked so perfect, black flesh framed against a black sky. The warmth of her radiated all the way from his cradled elbow up his arm and down his torso to his crotch. Yes, he told himself, trying to reestablish his ability to breathe. If she was ready, so was he.

SHE TOOK Neil into her with velvet-glove softness. She squirmed on top of him, rolling like an otter on the slick, firm surface of his torso. Her breasts tickled the hairs of his chest, pasting them down with her own sweat. Casting off his anxiety, he concentrated on pleasing her.

She was riding him again, much, much later, when his climax arrived. The ejaculation seemed to originate from the tips of his toes and the surface of his scalp, rushing to his penis and into her with flash-flood suddenness and force. As his hips collapsed to the mattress, he thought he would faint.

“Well!” she said, arching back and purring, still straddled across him. “What’ll we do tomorrow?”

He opened his eyes, peering under heavy lids at her beaming, gratified smile. His body still basked in post-orgasmic tremors, but his mind was working again. He replayed her comment from earlier in the evening. “I love doing new things, don’t you?”

The night lost the transcendence that came from banishing thirty-five years of abstinence. In its place rose the shame of having read the signs wrong. Neil choked down his disappointment. He began to count the days until Thea would no longer consider him to be “the new thing.”

Felice pranced across the tennis court, playing aggressively, forcing Neil to call upon old tricks to hold his own. Though small and fine-boned, she whacked the ball over the net with blistering vigor. The sweat flew from Neil’s hair as he lunged to catch her serve. The upper quarter of his racquet got there just in time, sending the ball arcing lazily to her side.

She caught it before the bounce, slamming it into a far corner of his court, far out of his reach.

“C’mon, Neil,” she yelled. “You can move those hunky thighs faster than that.”

He stuck out his tongue, and on her next serve, fed her the ball straight back to her face — another old trick. Startled, her backhand counterstroke fell apart.

“Barbarian!” she called cheerfully.

Neil grinned, enjoying the steady pounding of his heart, the burn in his legs. But she’d gotten him with the comment about sluggishness. He was trying hard, but whenever he flung himself full-tilt across the court, he recalled the time, at age 74, when a knee had locked up without warning, sending him to the asphalt so hard he broke his nose. He’d given up tennis at that point.

His body was good now. He should trust it.

He hated seeming less than ideal in front of Felice. She seemed like just the person to ease the bruises left by his three-week liaison with Thea. The winter had been long and lonely.

In other areas of his life, he was adjusting. He’d resumed his architectural career. He’d moved out of Matthew’s apartment into a place of his own. Dr. Rosen seemed satisfied with his progress. Yet this new world remained flat without a companion to share it with.

Felice was a miniature tornado. She played with a determination that intimidated blossoms right off the nearby trees. She was easy to admire, and it was

likewise easy for him to imagine building on that respect until it included an erotic element.

He was thinking of that, not his stumbling, as their court time expired.

They collected their balls and ambled away, surrendering their spots to another couple.

“Good game,” he said. He’d been ahead, but she’d been coming up on him rapidly; if they’d had time to play out the match, she’d probably have won. He told her so.

“I did okay,” she said, shrugging in such a genuinely modest way that he couldn’t help but feel even better about her. The woman had no pretensions; he didn’t have to strut for her. He didn’t have to invent compliments.

“Want to shower together?” Neil asked.

Felice raised her eyebrows. He supposed she was wondering why go to the trouble—their nanodocs could scrub out their pores, dissolve the grit, and freshen them up. But showering together had a definite romance to it, like roasting marshmallows over a campfire under the starlight. He knew he wasn’t the only traditionalist left, or the locker rooms wouldn’t still be there, over at the edge of the courts by the redwood grove.

“Sure,” she replied, as if catching his mood. “Why not?”

The spray did wonderful things to Felice’s body. The rivulets born on her upper chest and shoulders twisted and forked as they negotiated her curves. The fine, almost transparent hairs at the base of her neck caught droplets like dew on strands of spider web in a morning garden. Her nipples rose. She arched her breasts toward him, as if to say, “Here, these need the touch of warm, soapy hands.”

He hesitated. The way her wet hair clung to her skull, and the color of it, reminded him of his own daughter — may she rest in peace — as a toddler.

“How old are you, Felice?” he murmured.

Old enough, her wink told him, but she answered, again without guile, “Thirty.”

He’d been a widower longer than she’d been alive. Christ, she might not even have reset her age yet; he might be seeing her natural youth. He stepped behind her, and used his warm, soapy hands — on her back. He didn’t want to let his body language commit him to a course he didn’t intend.

She leaned into him, robbing her slick form against his. The spray couldn't wash away, her fresh, feminine aroma. His penis stirred against the curve of her buttocks.

He shifted his hips away abruptly, as he would have done had a child, wriggling in his lap, prompted an inadvertent sexual response.

He needed time. An evening of candlelight and good food would reshape his mood, make him forget the ninety year difference in their ages. Even a few minutes might be enough, but not now, with the water rinsing away the delicacy of his fantasies.

He didn't have time. The stiffening of her shoulders told him she'd taken offense.

Ah, thought Neil, he'd buried himself now. She'd made an offer, and he had slapped it down. She wouldn't leave herself open for rejection a second time. If he wanted anything to happen later, he'd have to pursue her with diligence. She'd make him ask, in words, and would give him no encouragement until her ego had recovered.

But he didn't want to pursue her with that kind of fervor until he was more sure of his feelings for her. Yet to delay would surely cause yet another insult. He didn't have to be a genius to know that all too soon, Felice would be looking for a new tennis partner.

Slowly, like a senior citizen, Neil rinsed the soap from his hands.

Daffodils bloomed along the walkways of the cemetery. The heat of late spring had already shriveled natural daffs, but here the yellow King Alfreds and orange-and-tan Saharan Lords stood tall and proud, maintained by their own versions of nanodocs, programmed by the groundskeeper.

Neil followed a route his feet had traveled many times before, until the headstones took on dates-of-birth that sent a burble of acid up his esophagus. 1950. 1955. 1960. 1965. The last generation to die of old age. He could find the names of kindergarten classmates on those marble and granite markers. By the law of averages, his mortal remains should be here, too. But that burst appendix hadn't claimed him, the lymphoma had been treatable, that drunk driver had swerved at the last moment. Here he was.

An ancient oak tree shaded the particular resting site that he had come to see. Weather had muted the sharpness of the carved letters. He scanned across the name to the impossible date-of-death. How had thirty-two years passed with so little in them?

Kneeling he placed a lavender rose upon the grass, over the spot he imagined his good wife's heart to be.

"You spoiled me, Stacey," he said to the earth. "You set my damn standards too high."

Was that it? Was he carrying a torch? Was her ghost jealously guarding him, perhaps? Convenient, to think it was only that.

The rose caught a sunbeam that slipped through the oak leaves. The petals drooped in the increasing heat. The flower had not been programmed to last.

That was the way it had to be.

A family appeared through the cemetery gates, making a procession toward a large crypt near the fountain. Every adult of the group walked on long, supple legs, their unlined faces tilted away from the day's brilliance.

Two lanky men, so similar in appearance they could've been twins, brought up the rear. From their body language, Neil doubted they were twins. More likely the one on the left was the great-grandfather of the one on the right.

Neil worked his way back through the graves. At the entrance, a woman stepped onto the lawn with a small bouquet in her hands. As the distance between them closed, he automatically made eye contact.

Her fine reddish curls and her figure brought a concealed smile of appreciation to his face, but when he saw recognition spark in her green eyes, he stopped short. So did she.

"I know you, don't I?" she said.

"Yes," he replied. "I saw you at the clinic, the morning after my nanodocs were implanted."

"My morning-after, too." She looked at her bouquet, and then at a set of headstones, as if measuring the distance between the two. But she didn't walk on. Instead, she smiled.

"My name's Neil." "Nadine."

Neil and Nadine — it had a nice, alliterative ring. Suddenly his scheduled plans for the rest of the morning dissipated.

"Are you a local girl?" he asked, waving at the cemetery. "Family here?"

“Just my husband. He died not long after we retired out here in ‘41. I didn’t see much point in moving him or me back to Texas. So ah jus’ stuck him in th’ ground with his boots pointed up.” A chuckle accompanied her last sentence, adding to the color of the deliberately exaggerated twang. Neil recognized that kind of mirth; it was the type people used to bandage a deep wound.

“You know,” Neil said, half to himself, “when I saw you on that bench outside the clinic, I just naturally assumed you were twenty-two. Old habits, I guess.”

Abruptly she raised the bouquet to her nose, covering a bashful smile. She glanced again toward the headstones. “Would you excuse me for a moment. . .Neil?”

“Of course.”

She nodded, grateful for his instant understanding, and traced her way across the cemetery. Neil found a shady spot beneath an oak much like the one growing near Stacey Corbin’s resting spot. He sat on a retaining wall, watching the patterns of the clouds in the sky. Nadine joined him there, sans bouquet.

A babble of thoughts seemed to dance across her brow. Neil tentatively broke the silence by asking her occupation.

“I was in furniture sales,” she answered. “But there’s not much need to sell things like new sofas when a homeowner can just command the old one to change its color, or create a spare from garden dirt. So I’ve shifted into interior design. You’d be amazed how picky everyone’s become about their decor, now that they can afford any style they want, and can change it every day.”

“No, I wouldn’t be amazed,” he said, and told her of some of the home redesign requests that had flooded his office.

Before Neil knew it, an hour had passed, and his mouth had become cottony from all the conversation. Suddenly Nadine glanced at her watch. “Oh, my lord! I have to go!” She winced, as if wishing she’d forgotten to put the timepiece on that morning.

“Can I take you out to dinner some time?” he asked. The question tumbled out without having to think about it.

The green of her eyes deepened, or was that just the widening of her pupils? “Yes.”

“How about tomorrow night?”

She pursed her lips. “How about Tuesday instead?”

She laughed at his tiny frown of disappointment. “You northern boys are so impatient.” She lifted her hand up. Recognizing the gesture, he kissed her knuckles.

A trace of a shiver rolled along her arm.

“We have plenty of time,” Nadine said. She gave him her Link access number and turned to go.

Yes, Neil thought, watching the wiggle of her hips as she disappeared down the street. Time. Deep inside himself, he turned from the trophies and record books and team photos on his shelf, and looked toward the open track ahead. His feet were in the starting block.

What did one hundred twenty years of the past matter, compared to a thousand years of the future? Heading home, Neil repeated Nadine’s number under his breath until it became part of him.

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Dave Smeds is the author of two fantasy novels: *The Sorcery Within* and its sequel, *The Schemes of Dragons*. His short fiction has appeared in anthologies such as *In the Field of Fire*, *Sword and Sorceress*, and *Future Earths: Under African Skies*, as well as in magazines from *Pulphouse* to *Ghosttide*.