

Tyche's World

by Steve Antczak

Jorge remained calm and focused as he piloted the Rover along the Yellow Brick Road at moderate speed. Kien noted how well Jorge was keeping his cool. That was not really surprising, Jorge was, after all, a scientist, and he knew very well that the whole thing was partially his idea. There was no reason to panic and rush toward Bradbury at top speed as others were reported doing. Despite the surface calm that prevailed in the Rover, Kien could not resist another poke, another little dig.

"See, nothing's going wrong."

"I see," Jorge replied tersely. It was obvious he didn't feel like talking to Kien at all, but the Korean just wouldn't shut up and leave him alone. Kien was very much an I-told-you-so kind of person.

"Absolutely nothing will go wrong."

Kien also liked to push buttons. To Kien, a button was there to be pushed. As long as someone was going to push it, it might as well be him. Kien had discovered this particular button of Jorge's only as they were prepping for the trek to Bradbury.

"Kien... please," Jan said. Besides being Kien's wife, she was a licensed psychologist. She had supervised the dissemination of the false information. She sat in the front beside Jorge because she would get motion sickness sitting in the back, despite the wrist bands she constantly wore to alleviate that problem. She was one of a few individuals who was constantly in a state of nausea on the new world, as if her own internal equilibrium simply could not adjust.

"What?" Kien asked in mock innocence. He leaned forward from the back seat so he stuck out between Jorge and Jan in the front.

"I asked you to please not say anything like that," Jorge said, coming to his own defense.

"Like what?"

Jorge let out a snort. "You know what."

Jorge was taller than Kien by almost half a meter, and out-massed him significantly. Yet Kien never seemed intimidated in the least, as if unaware he was supposed to be.

"That everything will be okay and nothing bad will happen just because I say nothing bad will happen?" he asked with a big grin.

Jorge worked his jaw and after several seconds he said, as calmly as possible, "Is there any wood in here at all?"

Jan sighed. "We looked already, Jorge. We looked under the seats, in the dash, in the doors... everywhere, and there is no wood. I'm sorry."

"Come on, Jorge," Kien said. "The universe doesn't care what I say. It won't conspire against me just because I happen to be confident that the outcome of our little experiment will be positive. Don't get all bent out of shape."

Kien was not a bit superstitious. On the contrary, he was downright anti-superstitious. His big hope for the colony was that it might shed the traditional values of Earth and adopt new ones more suitable for a brand new city on a new world. He planned to publish the truth about their scheme as soon as things settled down, to prove once and for all what a load of bull it was to believe in "luck," whether good or bad.

Kien liked to point out that in all his life he had never knocked on wood, rubbed the belly of a Buddha, tossed salt over his shoulder, avoided stepping on cracks, or done anything that had an effect on luck, whether to bring good or avoid bad. Plus, he had broken at least three mirrors in his life, crossed the paths of innumerable black cats, and said whatever he felt whether it would supposedly jinx him or not. This, it turned out, was Jorge's big superstition. Say with certainty that something will go right, and it will inevitably, invariably go wrong.

"Would it really be that difficult just not to say anything? Just for the rest of the trip?" Jan asked Kien. Jan was what Kien called a Euromutt, a blend of European blood that gave her wide cheek bones, a medium sized nose, blue eyes, and brown hair. She was taller than him, by a few centimeters. He wasn't sensitive about it, and in fact it kind of turned him on.

He shrugged. "Whatever."

Jan turned back around to watch the alien desert ahead and on either side of the road.

"But I'm right," Kien muttered under his breath, just loud enough to be overheard.

Jorge's grip tightened on the Rover's steering yoke. Jan shook her head slowly. Kien was crossing the line between asserting an opinion and being out-and-out obnoxious. To him even having a superstition was obnoxious. Best to keep up the offensive until the other party gave in just to get a break from Kien's nonstop barrage of cold logic. He'd once talked someone out of believing in God his freshman year at Emory University in Atlanta, although his friends at the time tried to convince him the other person had given in just to get Kien off his back.

Now Kien started singing, "Don't worry, be happy, everything's gonna be all right...", a reggae tune he had always liked. He sang the same verse over and over, barely audible, as if trying to not be overheard. Finally, after the sixth or seventh repetition, the Rover slowed to a stop on the Yellow Brick Road, and Jorge turned around.

"Get out," he said.

Kien blinked, not sure what Jorge was saying. "Get out of what?"

"Get out of here!"

"Jorge!" Jan said. "Come on--" But Jorge held up a hand to silence her. It worked. She closed her mouth, but her eyes were wide open with uncertain fear. Kien had never seen her react in such a docile manner to any man before.

Jorge was a very muscular, dark-skinned Hispanic, and despite his education he was very much a product of his culture. Machismo played a major role in his bearing, especially in association with other men, and most especially with other men who were somehow threatening. Right now, even though Jorge knew Kien's motive and methods all too well, Kien was a threat.

"You know something, Kien?" Jorge asked.

"What?"

"Now I understand why Jan needs someone else to give her pleasure in bed. You're a little man in more ways than one."

Kien swallowed. Jan gasped. Jorge glowered at Kien as he watched the effect his statement had. Outwardly, very little happened. Kien's eyes shifted their gaze from Jorge to Jan, then from Jan to Jorge, and back again.

To Jan he said, "I can see it's true."

Jan nodded, her eyes beginning to water. "Yes. Kien--"

"Now get out," Jorge demanded. "There's a surface suit in the back, six hours of oxygen. By Rover we're only about fifteen minutes out of Bradbury... you should just make it." He smiled wickedly. "I'm sure nothing will go wrong and you'll make it safe and sound."

Without another word Kien crawled back to the mini-airlock, where the Rover was equipped with an emergency surface suit. It was cramped even for his small frame as he wiggled into the suit and put the helmet on. A moment later he went through the airlock and soon stood all but exposed on the surface of Tyche.

The Rover slowly pulled away from him. Down the road it topped a hill, then seemed to sink into the yellow sand. Kien stood alone on the Yellow Brick Road while his wife went off with another man. The universe didn't care.

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Kien had lived on Tyche now for six years, and rarely actually walked out of doors. There were people who did so ever day, like the field techs back at the research station at which he, Jan, and Jorge were based. All in all, there were thirty people at that station. He was amazed something could have been going on between Jan and Jorge and no one knew about it. Obviously, someone had to have known. Maybe they all knew and Kien was the only one in the dark. The thought of Jan cheating had never even entered his head. There was probably no room, it was usually crammed full of numbers and data anyway.

"You think too much," was a favorite line of Jan's when Kien would pontificate on such-and-such a theory after making love as they lay in bed in afterglow. Kien had assumed it was afterglow. Perhaps he'd assumed too much.

He spent his days in a lab theorizing about some unusual field properties measured on Tyche after the colonization process had begun. He'd been checking some readings on magnetic flux at the poles when he got the idea for the Tyche Field. Earlier that day someone else had expressed hope that a soil

experiment would turn out all right, crossing their fingers as they did so... Kien could barely contain his annoyance.

When he talked it over with Jan, they decided it would have to be something that would appear as a real scientific theory. Let it leak out through the usual channels, and it would probably have the desired effect. A few weeks earlier a lander had crashed at the tiny Tyche space port and killed twenty-seven people. Two days later a micrometeor pierced the private dome of colonial financier, Hershel Cole. Equipment was constantly malfunctioning, crop yields were low, experiments went awry... People started to believe the planet was cursed, and there was talk of a general strike and civil disobedience to put the brakes on the colony and send everyone back to Earth, "where we belong" as one union spokesperson put it.

With Jorge's help, Jan and Kien's Tyche Field Theory could change all that. As Kien wrote in his Journal of Planetary Sciences paper:

"A quantum field supported by the conscious mind, wherein if a mind is bent towards ill fortune, the Tyche Field responds and ill fortune befalls one. However, if a mind attributes good fortune, or good luck, to rituals or charms, and those things are present, then good fortune results and a balance is achieved. On Earth this balance is rooted in millennia of tradition and culture, and we take it for granted. On Tyche however, there is no tradition as of yet, and the culture is what we bring with us. Here, our collective consciousness has affected the Tyche Field, but it only allows for ill fortune. We need to create the balance, and things will follow suit and seem to occur as random events of chance, just the way we're used to experiencing them on Earth."

It was all utter nonsense, and Kien suffered severely in rebuttals, but he weathered the storm knowing that he would get his chance to respond with the truth, and more importantly, the reason for the lie.

If he ever made it to Bradbury alive, of course.

It was still early in the day. He knew he'd make it before nightfall when it would get too cold to survive in just a surface suit.

Ahead he saw a column of smoke rise lazily into the air. He couldn't tell if it came from the road, or the great geodesic dome of Bradbury.

He kept walking in measured steps, keeping an even pace to conserve air. As he walked he speculated on the future of Tyche's colony. Kien hoped he might have a hand in building a test society different from anything on Earth, free of Earth's various trappings of superstition, racism, sexism, religion. A new world in the truest sense, starting over, a blank screen. When the truth about the Tyche Field came out, he knew it would begin. No one, not even the most hardheaded fanatic, as long as he had an intellect, could deny the truth when it was thrown in his face like a bucket of cold water. Kien had faith in that, at least.

He walked in surprisingly good spirits. For some reason Jan's infidelity with Jorge had little effect on him. Kien always looked at personal situations with the mind of a scientist, or a mathematician. A new variable had been added to the equation of his life, a y had been dropped and his outcome was less clear. It wasn't good or bad, just different. The universe didn't know the difference between good and bad.

When he topped a hill, he saw the Rover. Behind it rose the dome of Bradbury, still several kilometers off. The Rover was on its side, off the road, and the column of smoke rose from the engine compartment. Kien quickened his pace, but didn't run. Running would use up too much oxygen, and he might need it if he had to help Jorge and Jan. When he got to the Rover, he saw they were beyond help.

Jan's face was pressed up against the windshield, blood trickling down the plexiglass from her mouth and nose, her blue eyes staring blankly out. Kien could see the back of Jorge's head, or what was left of it, also pressed up against the windshield. It was apparent from the way the road was churned up that the Rover had rolled a good twenty meters. Jorge's patience must have worn thin, Kien surmised, and he'd sped up and lost control. The Yellow Brick Road made a curve around an outcropping of rock, then went straightaway into the Bradbury Rover port. The finely packed sand that made up most of the Yellow Brick Road was notoriously difficult to maneuver on, especially in a Rover doing more than 50 kph, which was technically against one of Tyche's few laws. Kien figured Jorge had to have been doing that or more when he lost it.

Kien stood there for a little while, staring at his wife's cold face. It looked cold, had that distinct lifelessness about it Kien had only seen once, on his Grandfather at the old man's wake. This bothered him, because it was exactly the kind of thing the three of them had been working, as a team, to avoid. Superstition resulted in this. Kien turned away from the Rover to face the Bradbury dome. The dome reflected the midday sun brightly, spreading light across the yellow desert in a way the planet had never witnessed until the coming of Humanity. Each face of each tetrahedron seemed to reflect a different color, a rainbow arched in all directions over the surrounding landscape.

Had Jorge not been so superstitious and full of machismo they would have been there by now. The shipment they were going for had already arrived. It was probably in the midst of being distributed to relieved colonists.

When Kien finally reached the Rover Port, and climbed the exterior stairs up to one of the rarely used secondary airlocks, he noticed something unusual. No one was around. Under normal circumstances there would have been very few people around, true, but there would at least be somebody. Now there was nobody. When Kien went through the airlock, he struggled out of the surface suit and hung it in the REFILL section, then decided to go into the dome proper and see what was going on. The halls were antiseptic and white, and just as empty as the Port. As he neared the exit of the hall into the dome, he could hear voices, shouts and screams, a cacophony of human sound. He smiled. They were celebrating the arrival of the shipment.

He stepped from the hall to the false outdoors of Bradbury. He was in Jubal Plaza, one of the many parks spread around the perimeter of the dome to disguise it, to make it seem less enclosed. Towards the center, at the highest point, there were actual buildings like in any city, the tallest being the Wells Marriott, a full fifteen floors. The population of Bradbury was over five thousand.

A woman ran towards Kien, clutching a bag in her arms. Her face radiated joy, happiness... until she got closer, then Kien could see the joy was twisted, her happiness manic. She tripped and fell toward him, the bag flying from her arms, landing on the walkway, breaking open. Dozens of small, colored objects scattered across the floor, some sliding right up to Kien's feet. He bent down and picked one up.

A rabbit's foot, dyed sky blue, attached to a gilt plastic chain.

The woman frantically gathered up as many of them as she could and ran up to Kien, babbling something he couldn't understand.

"What's happening?" he asked. She looked confused for a moment, then turned and ran with whatever rabbit's feet she could grab in two handfuls.

Kien went further into the dome. People ran past him, all towards the perimeter, all clutching good luck charms, all with that same crazed look.

Two men were ahead, fighting. One held a wooden Buddha; the other was trying to take it away. Kien grimaced because the wooden Buddha's were his idea, trying to get two charms for the price of one. The man with the Buddha spun away from the other man, then suddenly spun back and brought the Buddha down on the other man's head. The injured man fell, screaming in pain, cursing. The man with the Buddha practically skipped merrily away, until tackled by someone else. The Buddha fell and the two men were trampled by a mob chasing another man who was trying to make off with a heavy box of horse shoes

Trinkets that were supposed to bring good luck ward off evil spirits... but still trinkets.

Kien realized then that he wasn't helping to build a new world. He was helping to build the same one all over again.

And the universe didn't care.

END

C is for Clear

By Michael Stone

A thick silence descended over the small tableau. Charity said to Andy, "Just run that one by me again, will you?" Tom the fat tomcat sidled out of the kitchen into the lounge. Andy wilted. "This bloke down the pub said they were all the rage across the Atlantic. That is, until somebody sued the manufacturers and put them out of business.

He's got a contact who sends 'em over by the lorry load. On the black market, like. That's why there are no instructions with it, or packaging. Not that you need any, it looks pretty much self-explanatory to me."

"Go on, I'm listening."

"Well, this bloke, he said that they were a great tonic for anybody dazed, or weary. Or if they was just plain jaded. He reckons it works like an emotional back-scrubber. Perks you up, like. You put this plug attachment in your ear," – Andy demonstrated it – "enter a number on the keypad, presumably you put in a higher number the more depressed you are, and press the green button here. Only the battery needs recharging first."

"This green button? The one with a phone symbol on it?"

"Yes, that's the one. A phone? I thought that was a C for . . . I dunno. Cheer up? Carefree?" Andy's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "It does look like phone though, doesn't it?"

Charity nodded.

“D'you think I've been conned?”

Charity widened her eyes and raised an eyebrow.

There was a long pause. Andy said, “Sorry, love.” Charity just huffed.

But Andy was nothing if not persistent. “How the bloke was saying, you could wake up all groggy and fed up, and just refresh your brain. He said that's why it's called a DazeAway. And I thought to meself, ‘That'd be grand! I'm always a bit dazed and confused first thing’.”

Charity snorted, opened her mouth to say something and then decided against it.

“And I thought about you and little Robbie and the . . .” They never mentioned Charity's postnatal depression by name.

“Oh, Andy, that's what the tablets are for. The doctor said it was going to be a long haul. There are no shortcuts. Even if this stupid thingy worked.” She picked up the DazeAway. “It's not as if we haven't already got a mobile phone. I bet this one was nicked. What did you pay for it?”

Andy looked even more wretched.

Charity sighed. “Go on.”

“I told him I hadn't got the cash, but he said it was okay, he took all major credit cards.”

“And?”

“We-ell, he did. I gave him my card and he took it. Just got up and walked out, like.”

“You pillock! Didn't you try and stop him?”

“I couldn't believe it at first. I kept thinking he must've gone to get a pen or summat. Then when he'd been gone a couple of minutes I got suspicious.”

“You don't say? Good God! What am I to do with you? You and little Robbie, it's like having twins! Look, get on the phone and give the credit card company our details. Tell them your card has been stolen.”

“Isn't it a bit late at night for that?”

“They'll have a 24hr automated service. Just do as you're told.” Charity wiped a hand across her eyes. It was late and no doubt Robbie would be awake in a couple of hours. She loved the little blighter but God he was demanding. A bit like her husband really. She smiled. That's it Charity, she thought, keep smiling, and it just might see you through.

“I'm sorry Charity, love. I didn't think.”

“No, you never—” She bit back the angry retort; she was too tired. “Tomorrow you go down the police station and tell them what's happened. If some thug is going around selling what are probably stolen mobile phones, he needs locking up. Would you recognise him if you saw him again?”

“Too true I would! I've a good memory for faces if nowt else.”

“Okay.” She patted his cheek. “But for now, just phone the credit card company. I’m going to bed.”

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Andy stood in the draughty hallway, frustrated. A pleasant woman's voice, after welcoming him to the Credit Card Customer Careline, told him to test to see if his phone was a touch-tone model. “Please press the star button, now,” the voice advised.

Andy frowned and fumbled with the dial. “What's a bloody star button when it's at home?” He snatched up Charity's mobile off the side of the phone table and saw a button with a * symbol at the bottom right corner. The dial phone had no such provision. “Oh, great!”

What to do? It'd be too expensive making the call on Charity's mobile. He could wait till morning when customer services would be manned by real live people, but by then the bugger with his credit card would probably have spent a fortune on it. Andy switched on Charity's mobile and began to punch in the number for the careline. The keypad was locked. “For God's sake!” He shook it ineffectually and considered waking Charity for advice, but his sense of self-preservation quickly derailed that train of thought.

Andy trudged back into the kitchen and idly picked up the new phone. Why not? he thought. After a little jiggery-pokery he managed to use Charity's charger to plug it into the mains. A smug smirk plastered itself across his face as a green display lit up. “I ain't so dumb.”

He screwed the earpiece into his ear tightly, balanced the phone book on the kitchen table, traced the careline number with his left index finger, and thumbed in the number.

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Charity's slippers feet slapped the rods as she carried little Robbie down the stairs. She had spent twenty minutes trying to coax him back to sleep. He was neither too cold nor too warm, he wasn't hungry or thirsty, and his nappy was clean and dry. “So go to sleep you little toad!” Robbie, ignoring his mum's sound advice, continued to grizzle. “Let's get you a drink of milk, eh?”

Charity frowned at seeing the kitchen light on and the lounge in darkness. She had expected to find her husband watching some late night TV or sulking over a beer. And she was ready to give him some grief over it, too. Why did she have to get up to the baby when her dozy hubby was already awake! “Hush, Robbie.” She set the baby down on a mat where he immediately found something crunchy to pop in his mouth. Charity moaned. Finding something small, inedible and potentially lethal seemed a knack Robbie possessed. She bent down to take it from him when she saw the DazeAway smashed apart on the tiled kitchen floor. Poor Andy, she thought. He must have taken it harder than she realized. She prised a shard of black plastic out of Robbie's mouth and gathered together several larger pieces from under the table. She examined them closely. One was the battery compartment lid. On the inside was embossed a logo. A white sticker read: Memoraze and DaysAway are trademarks of

Charity frowned and examined another fragment. Caution! Always consult the manual before using your DaysAway.

“The manufacturer accepts no responsibility for misuse of portable Memoraze equipment.” Charity said the words to herself, softly, letting them tumble off her lips like poisoned cherries. So Andy had got it wrong about the DaysAway, but so had she.

“Come here Robbie!” she gathered the youngster up in her arms and trod slowly to the lounge. “Andy? Andy, are you there? Andy, love?” She flicked the lounge light on. And there, occupying a small space between the settee and the wall and curled up in a ball, was Andy.

“Andy? Are you—Are you all right?”

He removed a thumb from his mouth. “You aren't my mummy!”

Tom the fat tomcat, sensing he wasn't going to get any peace tonight, got up and sidled out of the cat flap.

Charity thought it again: You and little Robbie, it's like having twins. She tried to cover her ears as Andy began to wail. “I want my mummy, I want my mummy, I want my mummy . . .” End