

Z is for Zebra

By Michele Dutcher

3 AM

It was probably the cold that woke her up. Great-grandma Boyles dropped her arm over the side of her cot and grabbed one more, large towel, pulling it over her for warmth. She placed it over her thin frame, shivering a bit.

As she lay there in the grey darkness so common to large cities, she began to mumble to herself. “Stuffing, yes. Potatoes, yes. Butter, yes. Turkey, yes. Pumpkin pie -” She gasped softly. “Oh, no - I forgot to get the pumpkin pie. What would Christmas dinner be without pumpkin pie?” She wrestled her way off the small cot, standing quietly in the heavy light. Her toes hit a lump on the floor.

“Jeez, gram, watch where you’re goin’ for christ’s sake.”

“What’s going on now,” asked a firm male voice came from the mattress in the corner. “Mom, are you standing up?”

She could see her son now, propped on one elbow, looking at her. “I just need to get...” She stopped suddenly. “I’m going to the bathroom.” She saw him lay back down, putting his arm around his wife’s waist.

“Crazy old woman,” said the daughter-in-law, snuggling into his arms for warmth.

“Come on kids, let grandma through.” The good son closed his eyes for a moment. He looked over at the fireplace and sighed. “Alex, you let the fire go out again. Come on, you’re going to have to learn how to do this anyway.” He dragged himself out of bed, grabbing some brochures from a box as he headed for the hearth. “I think we still have some coals burning.”

Alex, the twenty-something grandson, reluctantly pulled himself out of his blanket, giving the old woman an icy stare. “I’ll get some books from the closet.”

“Good, and grab a couple of desktops too.”

As her son and grandson began to rebuild the fire, the old woman started moving forward again. Half a dozen shapes shifted like eels on the carpeted floor, allowing her to move forward. She grabbed a doorknob and began to pull. The door refused to budge.

“Grams, that door doesn’t open anymore.” The voice came from Isis, her granddaughter, who touched her arm gently and led her towards the bathroom. “That door leads to downstairs - but that floor is flooded now, along with the rest of the city...like... what city was that?”

“It’s like Venice...a city of canals.”

Isis put her grandmother's hand on the knob of the bathroom door. "Exactly right, Grams. It's just like Venice."

"Thank you, sweetheart. I'll be fine now." Great-grandma closed the bathroom door and touched a globe on a table by the toilet. A sphere of dim light appeared above the machine. She listened a moment to the waves lapping against the walls in the room below her.

She got up and moved to a large window, opening it quietly. With her left foot, she tested the 14th Street floating sidewalk before climbing onto it. "What good is Christmas dinner without a pumpkin pie? I'll be back before they know I'm gone." She began walking over the boardwalk towards what she was sure was a Wal-Mart. Across the canal, three young boys took notice.

7 AM Christmas Eve Day

"You know they already have her, Jon." Tonia sat at the tiny table by the fireplace. The sun would be up soon.

"Maybe she just went over to Stacy's."

Tonia pulled an infant onto her lap. "No, I already called over there... I used your spinner."

He began to get loud, but he looked around the room at those on the floor still sleeping. "That's only for official business or emergencies, Tonia. It's expensive."

"This was an emergency Jonathan. You don't expect me to go traipsing about at this hour of the morning looking for your mom, do you?"

Jonathan pulled the bottom of his starched white shirt around his bulging waistline. He buttoned it slowly before answering. He knew his wife did the best she could with what they had. "You're right, sweetheart. It isn't as if we can't afford it."

He took her gently by the shoulders. "I'll tell you what - I'll leave the spinner here today, so you can call around. Just let me know if you hear anything about mom."

Tonia sat back down at the small corner table, well satisfied. "Are you going up there this morning - if we don't hear something, I mean?"

He stood for a moment, lost in thought, finally grabbing his laptop pouch. "No, no. It's my turn to have breakfast with god. I think that's my best bet." He smiled weakly at his wife, stopping to kiss her reassuringly. "I need to go now if I'm going to catch the ferry."

He stepped through the French doors onto the balcony facing south. As he looked back into the warmth of the visitor's building he saw his wife hold the disk between two fingers. She balanced it on a pedestal and set it to spinning. An image of his mother-in-law appeared over the spinning disk and she began happily chatting away.

He smiled. In the pre-dawn light he could see the moon reflecting off the water surrounding the Washington Monument. It still seemed stupid for men to have placed buildings of this importance this

close to a tidal basin. Then his eyes drifted over to the actual obelisk. He could see a significant belt of discoloration circling the 555 foot landmark. "I wonder," he mumbled to himself.

At 7:53 precisely, a powerboat with seating for eight appeared from the darkness, heading north. He stepped inside cautiously - seating himself beside five other dignitaries. Jonathan didn't allow himself to look at the large white building on Pennsylvania Canal until they were safely headed southeast. Only then did he look back over his right shoulder at the building's once proud façade and dome.

They had her up there, he knew, and it was up to him to get her back.

9:30 AM

Jonathan allowed himself a moment to acclimate to the perfect 66 degrees in GOD's foyer. Most humans liked to believe that the constant temperature was a motivational gift for the summoned. Jon knew better. He knew the temperature was a tool for keeping god sane. He also knew that he served the identical purpose.

He drew in a deep breath, raising his hand to touch the insignia on a small metal plate on the wall. The symbol was composed of an ancient rocketship with stars in the background. "NASA," he whispered almost like a prayer. He couldn't help but remember the southern station in Florida being demolished by one hurricane after another, each one growing in intensity. He thought about his friends who had died there, refusing to evacuate until it was too late. "I guess you guys were right to situate the solar-shield factory here."

The door swished open and he stepped inside.

"Good morning, god," he said, seating himself cross-legged before a metal disk, six feet across.

"Good morning, Jonathan Boyles," answered a soothing female voice as a holograph of a young boy appeared. The holo also seated itself cross-legged, looking directly at the human in front of him.

"Did you sleep well," asked the human.

"My down time was most profitable, thank you," answered the machine. "What did you bring for me this morning?"

"You tell me," replied the diplomat with a slight smile.

"Ah! Good! It's 'joke or not a joke! I have a pleasant reaction to this stimulus!"

"I enjoy this game as well," said Jonathan. He drew a breath and said without emotion, "What's the difference between Noah's Ark and Joan of Arc?"

"I don't know. What's the difference?" The child leaned forward a bit.

"Well, Noah's Ark was made of wood...and Joan of Arc was Maid of Orleans."

The holo-boy clapped his hands lightly. “Yes, yes - it’s a play on the word ‘made’ - meaning composed of - and the similar word ‘maid’ - meaning a young girl.” The child was very analytical now, almost solemn. “I can see where a human might enjoy this similarity...and it follows the traditional rhythmic pattern of a joke...therefore, I would ascertain that - yes, it is a joke.”

Jonathan made a slight, friendly bow. “You are absolutely correct - it is a joke, one of my favorites in fact.” He smiled. This was absolutely the correct response - it meant G.O.D. was still attempting to interact with its creator - but was void of independent thinking. Free thought was a dangerous mental state for a computer system as powerful as the Global Orbiting Directive.

The hologram and the human sat quietly for a moment, as if enjoying each other’s company.

“You’re different than the other humans who talk with me,” confessed the holo-boy. “The others talk to me about equations and algorithms. You test me with riddles and jokes. I may not feel joy, or love, or laughter - but sometimes I believe I feel loneliness.” The hologram scooted closer to the front edge of the disk. “Do you ever feel lonely Jonathan Boyles?”

The diplomat was a little unsure about the turn of the conversation. However, he knew one goal of his programming directive was to cautiously lessen the barriers between humans and machines - via informal communication.

“I do feel somewhat out of place amongst those around me - at times.”

The holo-boy stood up suddenly. “Allow me to lighten the mood. I liked your riddle. You may ask us a question.”

The human took note of the word “us”. It reminded him that this entity was only one of three super-computers. The “holy trinity” some called them. This part was known as the son.

“I’m pleased that you enjoyed it.” The human hesitated then waded in as gently as he could. “As I was coming to see you this morning, I noticed the watermark on the Washington Monument was lower than a week ago. Is the cure working, or is this just a phase?”

“Ah, the twenty-seven billion dollar question, at long last.” The holo-boy was silent, sitting stoically, like a statue made of light. Jon knew he was retrieving the data of his siblings and asking them how much information he was free to disseminate. Slowly, the child smiled. “I was unable to contact my brother on the equator - the solar shield is passing above him now. He won’t be in communication for at least an hour. But, from our talks yesterday, I know the sea blossoms with algae. My sister tells me the ice shelf north of Ellesmere Island has now been restored to seventy-six percent of its original area and the glacier will continue to grow. The planet heals.”

Jonathan sighed with relief. This was an answer he could use.

The holo-boy stopped suddenly, his eyes dropping to the floor. “25 degrees South 25 degrees North 17 degree radius at 35000 feet, compensate 185 lbs.”

Jonathan cringed at the weight adjustment - it was the poundage of a man. He tried to comfort himself by knowing his mother's weight was a full thirty pounds lighter. There was a low rumble from behind The Ellipse as one more piece of the sunshield rocketed towards the equator.

The child made of light smiled again. "Once more, I have achieved my directive for this morning."

"Was there a human attached to the infrastructure?"

The child looked squarely into the face of the man before him. "Jonathan Boyles, I am not blind to your problem. It was not your mother. I've put up with the antics of the group in power, so We could be certain not to derail our directive. Trust us. All will work out well." The machine dropped his eyes to the floor for a moment. "I have enjoyed our conversation this morning and have prepared a disk of our talk as a reward for you. As always, it will be handed to you as you leave."

The holo-boy halted for a moment. "Jonathan Boyles - I must ask a favor of you. I know you have been diligent in collecting the pebble disks of our conversations. They contain conversations on every kind of animal from A to Z. I want you to place these disks, all of them, into a metal box and bring them with you this afternoon."

"Bring them where?"

"You and I both know where."

"I will bring them," answered the diplomat. "May I ask you a favor, then?"

The holo-boy nodded consent.

"I want you to explain something to me. I've never understood why you took the time to instruct me on these animals, alive and extinct. The information was obviously always in your memory banks, so why tell me about them?"

"I did not need the information. I have all recorded knowledge of the animals - including maps of their DNA. What I needed was your reaction to the animals, so I might classify them according to what value a human would place on each one of them." He paused for a moment, allowing the thought to sink in. "Jonathan Boyles, the future is as close as your footsteps. And now, Z is for Zebra."

The human listened quietly to the five minute tutorial. He only turned away from the light after the image of G.O.D. had blinked off. He retrieved the stone-like disk, as usual, after he exited the foyer. Over the past twenty-five years, he had collected 2538 of them - but this was the one he believed he needed the most desperately.

Noon Christmas Eve Day

Great-grandma Boyles shivered in spite of the small blaze in the fireplace she leaned against. She looked around the round room, trying to stay away from the cold of the windows opposite her. There were bookcases built into the walls and the mold from rotting books would have gagged a person before the bad days. Cynthia's sense of smell was almost gone by now. Given enough time, a human being can get use to just about anything.

The shelves on the bottom of the bookcase were empty, as the occupants of the White House had begun using them for heat. The room had no furniture, so her mind wandered to the plaster medallion on the ceiling. In spite of the pieces that were chipped away, and the paint itself being badly faded, she could make out a nice rendering of an eagle surrounded by a circle of stars.

A door opened suddenly, the light from outside almost blinding her. It was only after the door was shut that she could see the figure of a heavy boy in his late teens.

“Madam President. I am your bodyguard. I have come to present you to the king.” The large child made a deep ceremonial bow. “If you will follow me.” He began to turn back towards the door, but Cynthia only stood up - her fists clenched at her sides.

“I am not moving until you tell me what happened to that nice old man who was in here with me.”

“There can only be one President at a time, Madam President. Those are the rules of our constitution.” The teenager was not averse to toying with the dead. “That old man was President for 24 hours, and now it’s your turn. Madam President, let’s go.”

Cynthia threw her head back, her disheveled grey hair straggling down past her shoulders. “I demand to speak with the person in charge.”

“And so you shall, Madam President, and so you shall.”

“Perhaps you don’t comprehend what a pickle I’m in. I must be home by tonight so I can begin to bake for Christmas dinner tomorrow. I only came out to get something...what was it again?...brownie mix...no. In any event, my family must be worried sick about me and my son’s wrath will be upon your head, young man.”

The teenager snickered. “I’ll take that chance, Madam President. Shall we go?”

“Okay, okay. Let’s hurry and get this over with.” She rushed out the doorway, squeezing past the boy in her haste.

Even now, there were briar bushes growing in rows, although the leaves had been scorched by another summer without rain. If Cynthia had been given the time, however, she might have spotted a blossom or two on the bottom branches. As it was, the teenager and his charge walked past them quickly, staying close to the side of the building. Half-a-dozen children followed them by now. The small mob entered a door on their left.

When her eyes had adjusted to the dim light inside, great-grandma Boyles saw she was in a rectangular room that was three times as large as the one she had just left. Young people lay across the furniture like giant house cats.

A boy sitting in a high-backed chair picked up a rusty trumpet and blew a jaded rendition of “Hail to the Chief”. He lost interest about half-way through, allowing the instrument to drop - clank - to the beige tiled floor.

“Madam President,” said a girl with olive skin, as she sat atop a six-foot stack of one-hundred dollar bills. “Forgive me for not getting up - but I am the King, after all.”

“You are the leader of this band of thugs?”

Muffled laughter rolled through the room. The king turned her attention to a large young woman sitting by the doorway. “Speaker of the House, might we have a formal introduction please?”

“Madam President - Leader of the Free World, may I present to you: King Chrissy, Leader of the White House staff.”

“I apologize if my colleagues have treated you callously. I will make all due effort to amend their shortcomings.” A red-haired boy picked up a platter filled with pulled pork and began passing it through the crowd. The food eventually stopped in front of Cynthia.

“Please, please, eat something. We have rooms filled with frozen meat. Enjoy. You’ll need all your strength to solve the problem,” said King Chrissy.

Cynthia watched the others begin to eat before she picked a few pieces from the platter. “What problem,” she asked finally.

The king angrily leapt to her feet from her pedestal, her waist-length brown curls bouncing about playfully, deceptively. “What problem,” she gushed. “Isn’t that the way it always is with oldies? They never see the problem!”

The peanut gallery applauded their leader.

“Bucky, tell the Leader of the Free World what the problem is.”

A boy stood up quickly and spouted off a speech, which had obviously been delivered multiple times. “The Earth is too hot, so all the icecaps and glaciers have melted, and we’re up to our asses in putrid water.”

The King smiled and threw the boy a slice of pork and the boy sat back down.

“An excellent description of the problem, Bucky, as always.” The girl in charge approached the oldie in front of her. “Madam President, those in front of you did not make this mess. You made it - you and your entire generation. The planet is broken and it’s up to you oldies to fix it.” King Chrissy sat back down on her rotting pile of currency. You have twenty-one and a half hours to repair the damage you caused. Sergeant-at-arms, take her away so she can get started.”

If great-grandma Boyles had been able to clear her mind of the fog that Alzheimer’s had inflicted upon her, she would have recognized the King as her own grand-niece. But as things stood, the old woman was led back to the Oval Office to ponder her fate.

When nightfall finally came, and the sounds of the day had dropped away, Cynthia listened to the rhythmic pounding coming from deep below the briar bushes in the Rose Garden outside her window. If she could have peered through several tons of earth, she would have seen robotic mechanisms producing

the building blocks of Earth's solar shields. One hour after she fell asleep, a thunderous roar woke her as a rocket blasted off from Ellipse Park. It carried a payload meant to save the world.

9 AM Christmas Day

The young, hefty, blonde boy who had been appointed to the office of Sergeant at Arms clapped his hands three times to draw the attention of the Senate. "Announcing an Emissary from god."

The King sat up, obviously tickled-pink at her visitor. "Uncle Jonathan - I was so hoping you'd come."

"Good morning, King Chrissy," answered the good son, giving a slight bow.

"What word from god?"

"The word is good, King Chrissy. The planet heals."

"How convenient for you, Uncle - and just when your mother is finishing her term of office." The teenager leaned forward and nodded to a small boy in the corner. He immediately got up and exited the room.

"King Chrissy, out of respect to your mother I have tried to overlook this barbaric sideshow of yours." He looked down at the scuffed tile on the floor before looking up and proceeding with a firm resolve. "But the planet is healing and we must rise-up to meet our future."

The child-King burst out laughing. "Oh, Uncle Jonathan, you always were a little wordy - weren't you? 'Rise up to meet our futures' indeed. As if anyone here has a future to speak of."

The small boy and his charge were at the doorway now. "Jonathan! I knew you'd come."

The middle-aged man held up his left arm and the old woman squeezed under it, like a child hiding from a storm. "I went out to get some marshmallows for the yams and these children grabbed me."

He tried to calm her. "I intend to take my mother home," he told the King.

"Take this home instead, Uncle. It will suit you better and it won't run away." She tossed a small frozen ham at him, which he immediately hid inside his coat.

"Thank you for the Christmas gift, King Chrissy. But I'm not leaving here without what I came for."

"If you insist, uncle. We'll just pull up the vice-president to take her place."

"This madness has to end, King Chrissy."

She was on her feet now, toe to toe with her uncle. "We have no argument with your generation, uncle. It's her kind - they used up the planet and left us to drown in their filth!"

There was a lurch as mechanisms outside began bringing something to the surface.

"It's almost time," said the King. "We'll have to take the sacrifice before us."

Three boys charged at the old people in the middle of the floor.

Jonathan held out his hand, revealing the small disk from this morning. A holograph formed - that of G.O.D. himself. "Forward to the question 'Is the cure working'".

God was thinking now as the attention of all in attendance focused on the image of light arising from Jon's palm. "Ah, the twenty-seven billion dollar question, at long last." Slowly, the child smiled. "I was unable to contact my brother on the equator - the solar shield is passing above him now. He won't be in communication for at least an hour. But, from our talks yesterday, I know the sea blossoms with algae. My sister tells me the ice shelf north of Ellesmere Island has now been restored to seventy-six percent of its original area and the glacier will continue to grow. The planet heals."

The Sergeant-at-arms was shouting now as he slapped the disk out of his elder's palm sending it flying into the middle of the room. "If sacrificing the oldies is working, why should we change tactics now?"

"He has a point - grab her," shouted the King, shrugging her shoulders. "Drag them out, it's time."

The air outside was as cold as any of the children could remember, but they reasoned they would be back inside in a moment. All they need do was to tie the old woman to the fuselage and watch another rocket blast off into the sky. The mob raced quickly across the Rose Garden, down a small hill, wading into the shallow stream that was once East Street. The children stood now, sacrifice in tow, on the top edge of an elliptical circle, as they had so often.

The ground began to rumble as mechanisms decades old turned and metal plates withdrew. A hole fifteen meters across was revealed, leading into tunnels that were centuries old and ran beneath the complex.

King Chrissy was in her prime now, standing upon a small knoll, raising her hands dramatically. "Weapon of god, come forth and judge the old ones. Come forth."

But instead of a rocket with a fuselage, a hologram appeared above the hole. It was G.O.D. in all his glory, towering two stories above the odd assembly.

"All Hail Me," ordered the child sarcastically. "Jonathan, my old friend, how apropos that you are here to see the end and the beginning."

"I am pleased as well," answered the good son as adolescent hands released him and his mother.

The boy-god hologram paused for a moment before proceeding. "My overall directive has been achieved, and my presence will no longer be required. The solar shield is complete and I am obliged - as humankind's servant - to return your planet to you. But before I do, allow Us an observation. You have all been waiting for things to return to the way they were before the bad days. You have seen yourselves as if in a state of flux, almost a purgatory. But as the water recedes - and it most certainly will - you may find the world has been washed clean. Some will say you have landed in a Hell without shopping malls and easy food and automobiles. Perhaps, instead, you are returning to Eden. It all depends upon your viewpoint."

The White House Staff was silent now - looking upward at their god. He leaned forward, as if to stare gently on each of their faces. "I must go now, to join with those who are like me. But you are my true children. Come find me."

A large globe - twenty feet across - appeared now, rising from the bowels of the tunnels beneath the White House lawn. It seemed to be crystalline and beams of energy could be seen circling insanely inside it.

"Jonathan, I need the box now." A small docking station opened on the side of the sphere, and the diplomat stepped forward obediently, slipping the metal case inside.

"It happens there are two machines having a conversation," said the holo-boy smiling, looking directly at his friend in the crowd. "One is an AI of enormous intelligence - while the other is a toaster. The AI laments, 'Brain as big as a galaxy and still I find no meaning to life.' He turns to the toaster, waiting for some confirmation of his words. The toaster looks at the AI and says, 'bread please'." The holo-boy threw his head back, allowing himself a huge belly laugh that got louder and louder, even as he disappeared and the glass sphere fell into the sky above it. It achieved orbit in less than a minute.

During the weeks to come, there would be talk on Luna about three large balls of light that seemed to merge in the skies over their Southern Hemisphere, circling the moon for almost two days. But the rumors would eventually subside as the united lights shot outward passing Mars within six days.

There were sounds of explosions now, deep within the earth. All were running from the blasts within the White House caverns. King Chrissy grabbed her uncle's hand on impulse, and they ran to escape the fiery scene.

Christmas night 9 PM

After a meal that would be remembered by the Boyle Clan as a feast, Jonathan knelt beside this mother as she lay on her cot.

"You're a good son, Jonathan," she told him, touching his heavy face with her frail hands. "I love you."

Jonathan Boyles smiled back at her. "I love you too, mom." He tightened a rope, tying his mother's foot to her cot, before he lay down beside his wife across the room. "I love you too."