

“Split Decisions” By Tom Badrick

It was Alan's decision to walk home that night. A single phone call could have changed that predicament, but it was the price one paid in a time of astronomical gas prices and, in spite of rationality itself, foolishly purchasing an oversized sport-utility vehicle. He couldn't carry all of the blame, however; his wife fancied it as well, and with twin girls on their way in only a handful of months, it was a seemingly sound, if more than a little stereotypical, suburbanite investment. 11 miles per gallon was just some irrelevant fine print.

Corners were already being cut and coupons were already being clipped. He wasn't a poor man by any stretch of the imagination, but he was already thinking about the future of his little girls. After all, public education was dissolving at the will of its selfish and uneducated voters, and the private sector only grew more expensive. Conditions as they were, he knew it was better to start saving sooner rather than later. He had nothing short of the best schools in mind for his future neurosurgeons, and the thought of tightening his financial belt a little for their benefit amplified his optimism.

As for Alan himself, however, his line of work was a bit more humble. He was an accountant at Moss and Weaver Financial Group, a small-time, independent firm that promised its clients a more personal touch than its larger brethren. It was April, and, as could be expected, business was caterwauling in a dissonant duet with his overtime hours. He had already convinced himself that the extra money would be worth it in the long run, and so had his wife. Having just finally paid back a hefty repair debt as a consequence of unnoticed water damage to his recently-purchased home, he felt it was a perfect opportunity to help recoup his savings losses.

So on that day, Alan walked. He needed the exercise, anyway. Home wasn't too far away; only about three or so miles according to the GPS software installed on his fancy new smart phone. It was the financially, environmentally, and physically responsible thing to do, and it boosted his mood knowing such. It didn't matter that it was nearly 10:30PM; Somerton was well-lit and friendly. In the very least, he had yet to complain about the opposite since he moved there 18 months prior. Though the night was cold and the weather still showed no signs of

Spring, his bright demeanor and durable winter coat kept him plenty warm.

He crossed the main thoroughfare into a plaza that he knew quite well. There was a pet store, a barber shop, a gym, his wife's favorite salon, and a handful of other businesses he had yet to pay a visit. Of course, these establishments were all closed for the night, and the lot was empty save for a few individuals who waited silently by a bus stop. No doubt they were Pitsborough Engineering employees on their way to slog through another graveyard shift. It was times like this that Alan Weaver thanked his lucky stars that he was in the position to create his own work hours. He enjoyed busying himself in the sunlight, and equally enjoyed sleeping in the absence of it.

Behind the plaza, in a distant corner by an old wire fence, was a footpath that led through the woods. Conveniently, it terminated at the end of the short cul-de-sac that his home sat upon. It was a typical route for him to get from A to B while he ran errands during daylight hours, but he had never passed through it at night before. In anticipation of doing so, he felt childishly excited, and even a little intimidated. He didn't believe there was anything particularly malevolent to fear from the darkness, but still his head swam with old campfire tales and spooky rhymes. He knew, however, his foolish mind would soon be dispelled of such whims when he reached that old familiar path, and then navigated it without event, supernatural or otherwise. With this in his thoughts, he took a quick shortcut through a narrow alley that split the plaza in two. He knew he'd save a bit of time in not having to skirt the entire complex. He'd done the very same thing at least a dozen times beforehand.

After taking only a few inattentive steps between the pet shop and a real estate branch, Alan cast his eyes upon the shock of his life. There, in the middle of the adequately-lit alley, stood an enormous man in a long blue coat. He was easily seven and a half feet tall and his body mass seemed to nearly cover the width of the alley itself. He wore a large, round hat of unfamiliar origin. Despite his frame being almost completely covered in clothing, his visible features made it obvious he was evidently an extremely intimidating juggernaut and not at all a grizzly bear in its Sunday finest.

Alan nearly turned and made an instinctual retreat, but something roused his curiosity. The massive figure appeared to be busy with...

something. In one long, boney hand he held a metallic box comparative to the size of his own head. With his second hand, he skillfully moved a series of levers on one side of the box in a rapid and deliberate order. Then, with a third hand (Good god, this man had three hands!), he held a thick, old-fashioned, leather-bound book directly beneath his eyes.

Even though he wanted to run, Alan's legs wouldn't move. In fact, he realized that for some unknown reason, he was less frightened of the situation and more curious, and his inquisitive nature was winning out over his cowardly instincts. The busied colossus clearly hadn't noticed him, and he continued to read and casually manipulate the many levers on the strange box he held. Alan watched the man intently, and even dared to take a few steps closer. Then, when Alan heard the familiar crinkle of a candy wrapper beneath his right foot, the titan's attention was roused. It glanced up at him with a look of moderate alarm which then rapidly shifted to overt embarrassment. His face even turned a little pink.

"Well, this is... very awkward," the three-armed giant said as he addressed his unexpected company. His voice sounded odd. It was difficult to describe, but it almost seemed to echo itself at a slightly higher tone, "I was hoping nobody would see me if I left from here," he shrugged with all three shoulders, a scene truly bizarre to watch, "But, I guess, here you are!" he helplessly smiled.

"Is," Alan was at a loss for words. He wasn't sure how to reply, but that didn't stop him from doing so anyway, "Is something wrong? A-are you alright?" He wasn't sure what he meant by that expression of concern, but he supposed it was better than remaining silent.

"Fine as can be, more or less. Got a bit of a rash on this arm of mine. I think you would call it poison ivy. And you, sir? Are *you* alright?"

Setting the box down, the strange man shook his third arm a bit and scratched it through his sleeve. It sat upon his chest, and the shoulder protruded just below his neck. His jacket was even exceptionally tailored to address such an abnormality. Despite the baffling nature of this additional appendage, the motions he made with it all looked very natural and perfectly adjusted. But of course, it was *his arm*, after all.

"I'm sorry," Alan really wasn't sure what he was apologizing for, "I didn't mean to interrupt you with your... um."

"My redistributor? I didn't think you did. And I didn't mean to interrupt your walk." The man's thin eyebrows lifted, and his

otherworldly vocal tones shifted a bit higher and brighter, “But I think you have questions now. I should know; I ask them for a living. Most of your kind scares easy, especially when it's dark. But a rare few of you manage to suppress that fear and replace it with curiosity. I think you are one of those few. So, if you have any questions, feel free to ask. Anything at all. I'll happily satisfy that itch of yours.”

After flashing a warm-hearted smile, the man retrieved his box from the dingy ground and returned to adjusting its tiny levers. Alan was indeed filled with questions; they just had no desire to assemble themselves coherently. His last inklings of fear were gone, but now his overwhelming curiosity was growing beyond control. This man was right about Alan, and, at that same moment, Alan no longer believed this stranger was actually a man at all. It was something else. Something amazing and out-of-this-world. Something that once lived within his childhood dreams. It simply had to be.

“What *are* you?” he asked in a shockingly blunt manner, “I'm sorry if that sounds rude but... and also, what are you doing here... with that... the box?” A dozen grammar teachers turned in their graves in unison, but he was fairly sure he had gotten his jumbled idea across. Alan learned that assembling sentences was difficult while simultaneously gawking in disbelief.

“What am I?” The creature parroted with a broad grin, then paused thoughtfully for a moment before he continued, “The short answer is as follows: I am Gen and I'm happy to make your acquaintance. Now the longer answer: I am a being from another world far different from your own. I'm also what you would refer to as a scientist, and I was tinkering around with this prototype redistributor I've been traveling with. It allows the user to move between planes of existence and visit other worlds, and also intelligently distributes organic molecules to compensate for any required dimensional adjustment. Have you ever been two-dimensional before? Makes your skin crawl! But anyway, this current form helped me blend in while I explored your world. For the most part, that is. I added a third arm for the sake of pragmatism. Believe me, you'd love it! Works like a charm with only minor alterations to your natural physiology!”

The loquacious extraterrestrial nearly left Alan in a state of shock; 'Gen' was just so astoundingly to-the-point... and informative! He had never expected a meeting with a visitor from another world to unfold

like it was. He had actually never contemplated the possibility of such an event even occurring in his lifetime. But now it was happening, and he was beyond fascinated. The friendly, talkative nature of the strange gentleman before him soothed away any leftover instinctual fears, and he found his muscles and vocal cords slowly relaxing. He approached closer to the scientist to get a better look at his many-levered contraption. Gen guessed his intentions and hefted it outward for better observation.

“That's amazing,” Alan responded dreamily, “So you used that thing to come here? What did you come here to do? And my name is Alan. It's nice to meet you too, Gen.” He could feel himself smiling, but he wasn't sure why. Maybe he thought this whole encounter to be, in reality, pretty silly. Or a childhood fantasy come true.

“What did I come here specifically to do? Nothing, really. I've been running tests on this redistributor; it's still without a doubt impossible to aim it accurately in both directions. I can still get home, though; I made sure of that before I left my lab for the first time. But everywhere else is a shot in the dark. In fact, I've calculated the odds of visiting the same world in the same phase and same point of time to be approximately one in the number six followed by eight billion zeros... and that's only when applying the Finite Universe Theory. Anyway, when I came here, I found myself in the middle of your Great Smokey Mountains. It looked pleasant and relaxing, so I thought I'd be a tourist for a while.”

To Alan, that was a comforting thought. It implied much about the attraction of the world he loved. A traveler from another existence, possessing the ability to essentially go anywhere, chose to spend some additional time there on earth. He almost felt proud, though he knew he himself had done barely a thing to make the world as great as it was.

“And what do you think about our world? We've come very far, actually. I doubt our technology matches yours by any means, but I can at least say with confidence that most of us are no longer afraid of our own shadows.”

As Alan gave a clever grin, Gen's smile faded, and he returned his gaze to his redistributor box. He gave a small sigh and resumed toying with the mysterious levers. His echoing tone grew lower, more regretful.

“In all honesty, I think it's terrible, Alan. You live in a beautiful

world, but it's enslaved by such terrible masters. And when your people aren't stagnating, they go backwards.”

He unloaded such abrasive words without so much as a flinch. Alan felt deeply offended, as he knew he was likely a shareholder of the blame in Gen's conclusion. He knew that humans weren't perfect, but he had always seen progress everywhere he looked. What was there to truly dislike so deeply to condemn an entire world like that?

“It's unfortunate that you think so, but I see it in a very different light. I know we aren't without our flaws, but we adjust and improve. Why do you say we stagnate when we once lived in trees?”

“To be frank, I only have to state the obvious. First off, many of you starve while uncaring others throw away more food than they actually consume. Then, all of you recklessly destroy your land and water like it's going to renew itself at some point in the self-inflicted short lifetime of your species. Furthermore, none of you can agree on anything. You can't stop killing each other over silly little belief systems for even five seconds to just ask why. I'll be honest, Alan. I doubt even a global, life-or-death catastrophe could bring your people together to form a mutual solution. Everyone would be too busy stabbing each other in the back to be sure they are the ones to come out ahead when the dust settles. I really do hate to say it, but the vast majority of the other worlds I've seen would say the same of you. If it's any consolation at all, this intolerance and violence you hang onto is not a universal trait on any level of civilized world.”

Alan stood dazed as the traveler aired out much of humanity's millennia-old dirty laundry. As defeatist as it was to submit to such harsh words, Gen was right, and no amount of isolated, optimistic, look-on-the-bright-side examples were going to change reality. The more he worriedly thought about it, the more he agreed that yes, humans were too far-gone to save themselves from anything their wrathful future had in store. Perhaps not them, but maybe somebody more advanced? Alan wasn't too proud to beg for help.

“It's true that we struggle to get along,” Alan confessed, “Some of us do manage to tolerate others, albeit sometimes grudgingly. That and we fail to live in balance with the things around us. We destroy nature much faster than it can repair itself. You're probably right; our current trajectory is full-speed ahead into a downward spiral. But there are animals, plants, and our own children that don't deserve to be dragged

down with us. I think deep down most of us know that we are doing too little too late, but it feels like we can't change things on our own. Is there any help you may be able to spare us? For the sake of the ones that are still innocent?"

Gen's response was as fast and direct as all the rest. Also, it was not at all reassuring.

"I can't do a thing, I'm afraid. Any solutions I provide publicly would be ignored, and I would most likely be burned at the stake as what you would call a heretic or even a terrorist; I'm almost one-hundred percent certain of that. Ironically enough, your people have a history of mocking, imprisoning, and murdering for advocates of peace. Besides, even your children are victims of your destructive DNA patterns; any outside relief would be shockingly temporary. It's unfortunate, but biology has never been known to be a merciful master."

The box Gen toyed with began to make a slight buzzing sound. Without any acknowledgment, he continued to explain his positional inability to save mankind from itself.

"We have technologists who can adjust malicious codes, but with the experimental, shot-in-the-dark nature of this method of travel, the odds of me returning with any amount of assistance are essentially nonexistent. It's unfortunate, but I have managed to catalog what I can. I did a great deal of exploring, I devoured your news and libraries, and now, I'm heading back home."

Alan tried to fight for a few more words to defend his kind, but he knew that Gen was right. The future did look very bleak, and the end was clearly a matter of 'when' and not 'if'. Most people choose to spend their lives inside of a little shell, trying to remain as ignorant as possible of the dire issues that have no immediate effect on them. There was no doubt that humanity could do great things given that it could just find a way to get along. Unfortunately, genetics don't rewrite themselves overnight, and certain survival instincts well past their age of necessity stayed to ensure humans remained little more than a dishonest, paranoid, violent, self-important herd animal.

Ceasing the depression of reflecting on the shortcomings of his doomed race, Alan turned his mind outward once again. He watched Gen adjust one last lever, place his box on the ground, and take a considerable step back. In a few moments, he stood in awe as a steamy, mirage-like distortion began to erupt from above the box. It was like

staring at a distant road on a hot day, but this was directly in front of him. As he watched, the distorted air began to glisten with rainbow-like color, and on occasion, small, watery bubbles would appear and then disappear within. Alan was absolutely fascinated, and all of those past thoughts clouding and cluttering his mind were set aside for that one moment of pure, reckless awe.

That was it. That was the passage to countless other worlds and limitless discovery. And all it required was a few steps forward.

Just a few steps.

Gen glanced at Alan and took in his blissful yet vacant expression. He cocked his head to the side and gave him a curious smile as the pitch of his other voice raised once again.

“You know, Alan. You couldn't hide your sense of adventure if you wanted to. There's no need to even ask. After you, my friend.”

Gen stepped aside the best he could, a friendly smile still on his face as he watched Alan slowly step into the anomalous distortion.