

The Rapture of the Nerds: A tale of the singularity, posthumanity, and awkward social situations

By Cory Doctorow, Charles Stross

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Welcome to the fractured future, at the dusk of the twenty-first century.

Earth has a population of roughly a billion hominids. For the most part, they are happy with their lot, living in a preserve at the bottom of a gravity well. Those who are unhappy have emigrated, joining one or another of the swarming densethinker clades that fog the inner solar system with a dust of molecular machinery so thick that it obscures the sun.

The splintery metaconsciousness of the solar-system has largely sworn off its pre-post-human cousins dirtside, but its minds sometimes wander...and when that happens, it casually spams Earth's networks with plans for cataclysmically disruptive technologies that emulsify whole industries, cultures, and spiritual systems. A sane species would ignore these get-evolved-quick schemes, but there's always someone who'll take a bite from the forbidden apple.

So until the overminds bore of stirring Earth's anthill, there's Tech Jury Service: random humans, selected arbitrarily, charged with assessing dozens of new inventions and ruling on whether to let them loose. Young Huw, a technophobic, misanthropic Welshman, has been selected for the latest jury, a task he does his best to perform despite an itchy technovirus, the apathy of the proletariat, and a couple of truly awful moments on bathroom floors.

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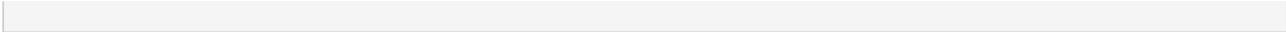
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Editorial Review

Review

“There's a superhuman energy and intelligence to *Makers* that I haven't see since mid-period Bruce Sterling.”
?Lev Grossman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Magicians*

“If imagination is the key to success for a writer, Charles Stross has it in spades.” ?*The Times (London)*

About the Author

CORY DOCTOROW is a coeditor of Boing Boing and a columnist for multiple publications including the *Guardian*, *Locus*, and *Publishers Weekly*. He was named one of the Web's twenty-five influencers by *Forbes* magazine and a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. His award-winning novel *Little Brother* was a *New York Times* bestseller. He lives in London with his wife and daughter.

CHARLES STROSS, author of several major novels of SF and fantasy including *Singularity Sky*, *Accelerando*, *Halting State*, and *Rule 34*, is widely hailed as one of the most original voices in modern SF. His short fiction has won multiple Hugo Awards and Locus awards. He lives in Edinburgh.

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Jury Service

Huw awakens, dazed and confused.

This is by no means unusual, but for once Huw's head hurts more than his bladder. He's lying head down, on his back, in a bathtub. He scrabbles for a handhold and pulls himself upright. A tub is a terrible place to spend a night. Or a morning, come to think of it—as he blinks, he sees that it's midafternoon, and the light slanting in through a high window limns the strange bathroom's treacly Victorian fixtures with a roseate glow.

That was quite a party. He vaguely remembers the gathering dawn, its red light staining the wall outside the kitchen window as he discussed environmental politics with a tall shaven-headed woman with a blue forelock and a black leather minidress straight out of the twentieth century. (He has an equally vague memory of her defending a hard-core transhumanist line: Score nil–nil to both sides.) This room wasn't a bathroom when he went to sleep in it: Bits of the bidet are still crawling into position, and there's a strong smell of VOCs in the air.

His head hurts.

Leaning over the sink, Huw twiddles the taps until they begin to dribble cold water. He splashes his face and runs his hand through his thinning hair, glances up at the mirror, and yells, “*Shit!*”

There's a spindly black biohazard trefoil tattooed on his forehead. It wasn't there when he went to sleep, either.

Behind him, the door opens. “Having a good morning?” asks Sandra Lal, whose mutable attic this must therefore be. She's playing with a small sledgehammer, tossing it into the air and catching it like a baton-twirler. Her grotesquely muscled forearm has veins that bulge with hyperpressured blood and hormones.

“I wish,” he says. Sandra’s parties tend to be wild. “Am I too late for the dead dog?”

“*You’re* never too late.” Sandra smiles. “Coffee’s in the kitchen, which is on the ground floor today. Bonnie gave me a subscription to *House of the Week* and today’s my new edition—don’t worry if you can’t remember where everything is, just remember the entrance is at ground level, okay?”

“*Coffee*,” Huw says. His head is pounding, but so is his bladder. “Um. Can I have a minute?”

“Yes, but I’d like my spare restroom back afterwards. It’s going to be en suite, but first I’ve got to knock out the wall through into the bedroom.” She hefts her sledgehammer suggestively.

Huw slumps down on the toilet as Sandra shuts the door behind her and bounces off to roust out any other leftover revelers. He shivers as he relieves himself: Trapped in a mutating bathroom by a transgendered atheist Pakistani role-playing critic. *Why do I keep ending up in these situations?* he wonders as the toilet gives him a scented wash and blow-dry: When it offers him a pubic trim, he hastily retrieves his kilt and goes in search of coffee.

Sandra’s new kitchen is frighteningly modern—a white room job that looks empty at first, sterile as an operating theater, but that *oozes* when you glance away, extruding worktops and food processors and fresh cutlery. If you slip, there’ll be a chair waiting to catch your buttocks on the way down. There are no separate appliances here, just tons of smart matter. Last night it looked charmingly gas-fired and Victorian, but now Huw can see it as it truly is, and he doesn’t like what he can see. He feels queasy, wondering if he ate anything it had manufactured. But relief is at hand. At the far end of the room there’s a traditional-looking dumb worktop with a battered old-fashioned electric *cafetière* sitting on it. And some joe who looks strangely familiar is sitting there reading a newssheet.

Huw nods at him. “Uh, where are the mugs?” he asks.

The guy stares at Huw’s forehead for an uncomfortable moment, then gestures at something foggy that’s stacked behind the pot. “Over there,” he says.

“Uh, right.” The mugs turn out to be glassy aerogel cups with walls a centimeter thick, light as frozen cigar smoke and utterly untouched by human artistry and sweat. There’s no sign of the two earthenware mugs he made Sandra for her birthday: bloody typical. He takes the jug and pours, hand shaking. He’s got the sweats: *What the hell did I drink?* he wonders as he takes a sip.

He glances at his companion, who is evidently another survivor of the party: a medium-height joe, metabolism pegged somewhere in his mid-thirties, bald, with the unnaturally stringy build that comes from overusing a calorie-restriction implant. No piercings, no scars, tattoos, or neomorphisms—apart from his figure—which might be natural. That plus his black leather bodysuit means he could be a fellow naturalist. But this is Sandra’s house, and she has distressingly techie tastes.

“Is that today’s?” he asks, glancing at the paper, which is lovingly printed on wood pulp using hot lead type by the historic reenactors down the other end of the valley.

“It could be.” The fellow puts it down and grins oddly. “Had a good lie-in?”

“I woke up in the bathroom,” Huw says. “Where’s the milk—?”

“Have some freshly squeezed cow juice.” He shoves something that resembles a bowl of blue ice cubes at Huw. Huw pokes at one dubiously, then dunks it in his mug.

“This stuff *is* organic, isn’t it?”

“Only the best polymer-stabilized emulsions for Sandra,” the joe says sardonically. “Of course it’s organic—nothing but carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, and a bit of phosphorous and sulfur.” Huw can tell when he’s being wound up: he takes a sip, despite the provocation. “Of course, you could say the same about your kilt,” adds the stranger.

“Ah.” Huw puts the mug down, unsure where the conversation’s leading. There’s something disturbing about the joe: A sense of *déjà vu* nagging at the edges of his mind, as if—

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Alcohol has this effect on me at times,” Huw says in a grateful rush. “I’ve got an awful memory—”

“The name’s Bonnie,” says the man. “You spent most of the early hours trying to cop a feel by convincing me that Nietzsche was responsible for global cooling.” Huw stares at him and feels something in his head do

an uneasy flip-flop: Yes, the resemblance is clear, this *is* the woman he was talking to last night.

“‘S amazing what a good bathroom can do by way of gender reassignment surgery these days, you know?” the bald guy—Bonnie?—continues. Then he winks at Huw with what Huw realizes, to his horror, is either lascivious intent or broad and filthy-minded humor. “How’s your hangover? Are you up to picking things up where we left off?”

“Aaaugh,” says Huw as the full force of the post-party cultural hangover hits him between the eyes, right beneath the biohazard trefoil, and the coffee hits his stomach. “Need fresh air *now*...”

* * *

Huw makes sure to wake up in his own bed the next morning. It’s ancient and creaky, the springs bowed to conform to his anatomy, and he wove the blankets himself on the treadle-powered loom in the back parlor that Mum and Dad left him when they ascended, several decades before. (Huw is older than he looks, thanks to an unasked-for inheritance of chromosomal hackery, and has for the most part become set in his ways: incurious and curmudgeonly. He has his reasons.) His alarm clock is a sundial sketched on the whitewashed wall opposite in bold lines of charcoal, slightly smudged; his lifestyle a work of *wabi* in motion.

He yawns and sits up, pauses for a moment to get his bearings, then ventures down the comfortably unchanging stairs to retrieve his post. There is no email. He doesn’t even have electricity in the house—not since he ripped the wiring out and plastered over the wounds in the walls. The dusty tiles in his vintage late-nineteenth-century terraced home are cold beneath his bare feet. A draft leaks around the ill-fitting outer door, raising gooseflesh on his bare legs as he picks up the dumb paper.

Two-thirds of the mail is spam, which goes straight onto the compost-before-reading pile, but there’s also a genuine letter, complete with a hand-drawn bar code—what they used to call a *stamp*—on the envelope. Someone took the trouble to communicate with him personally, putting dumb matter in motion to make a point. How quaint, how formal! Huw approves.

He rips the envelope open with a cracked fingernail. He reads: *Your application for international triage jury service has been provisionally accepted. To activate your application, present this card in person to ...*

He carries the notice through into the kitchen, puts it on the table so he can keep an eye on it as he eats. He barely notices the morning chill as he fiddles with the ancient Raeburn, loading kindling and peat and striking a fire to heat the Turkish coffeepot and warm his frying pan. Today is Huw’s big day. He’s been looking forward to this day for months.

Soon, he’ll get to say what he thinks about some item of new technology—and they’ll have to listen to him.

* * *

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