



Food Chain Blues

Kadrey, Richard

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About Kadrey:

Richard Kadrey is a novelist, freelance writer, and photographer based in San Francisco. Kadrey's first novel, *Metrophage*, was published in hardcover in 1988 by Victor Gollancz Ltd., and went on to various other American and foreign printings in paperback. Mac Tonnies' *Cyberpunk/Postmodern Book Reviews* calls *Metrophage* "one of the quintessential 1980s cyberpunk novels," going on to describe "a gritty acid-trip through an ultraviolent L.A. where nothing is what it seems... . Alongside novels such as [William Gibson's] *Neuromancer* and Lewis Shiner's debut novel *Frontera*, *Metrophage* helped establish the cyberpunk aesthetic: relentless, paranoid and playfully cynical." Kadrey's second novel, *Kamikaze L'Amour*, is described by the same source as "mesmerizing... a surreal (and distinctly Ballardian) account of synesthesia and mutant desire set in the jungle-choked ruins of L.A." Kadrey's short story *Carbon Copy: Meet the First Human Clone* was filmed as *After Amy*. The publisher website, Amazon booksellers, and other sources list a July 15, 2007 publication date for Kadrey's next book, *Butcher Bird: A Novel Of The Dominion* (Night Shade Books). Other works include collaborative graphic novels and over 50 published short stories. His non-fiction books as a writer and/or editor include *The Catalog of Tomorrow* (Que/TechTV Publishing, 2002), *From Myst to Riven* (Hyperion, 1997), *The Covert Culture Sourcebook* and its sequel (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993 and 1994); Kadrey also hosted a live interview show on Hotwired in the 1990s called *Covert Culture*. He was an editor at print magazines *Shift* and *Future Sex*, and at online magazines *Signum* and *Stim*. He has published articles about art, culture and technology in publications including *Wired*, *Omni*, *Mondo 2000*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *SF Weekly*, *Ear*, *Artforum*, *ArtByte*, *Bookforum*, *World Art*, *Whole Earth Review*, *Reflex*, *Science Fiction Eye*, and *Interzone*. Source: Wikipedia

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A filler piece went out over the newswires, just one of those Isn't It A Crazy World pieces they use to make newspaper columns come out straight. The headline on the piece read, Texas Town Toaster Thief, and it recounted how on the previous Sunday night every toaster in Longtree, Texas, had disappeared. Police, it said, were still investigating.

The thief must have had friends because a few days later, all the coffeemakers and automatic garage door openers in Phoenix, Arizona, went missing. New Mexico's VCRs were next. This time, the theft wasn't in a single city. Every VCR in the state was gone overnight. Still, the national press didn't really pick up on the story until the incident in Vegas.

Billy Coltrane had the second biggest and magic show on the Strip (just short of Sigfried and Roy). The highlight of each night's performance was the moment when he'd leap from a platform high over the stage, mimicking a high-dive act. Of course, he'd never hit the martini glass set mid-stage, but would open his arms and fly gracefully above the delighted faces of the wildly-applauding audience. It was a simple trick, done with hair-thin steel wires and a nearly silent electric winch concealed below the stage.

On the night in question, Coltrane was in fine form, turning lions into kittens and making women squeal when he'd pull their underwear out of his jacket pocket. When it came time for his flying bit, he mounted the ladder with an enthusiasm he hadn't felt in weeks. The strobes went wild as he hit the platform, distracting the audience enough for assistants to discreetly clip the harness wires to his back. Then Coltrane swan-dived into the air. Later, an autopsy revealed that he had broken ninety-eight percent of the bones in his body when he'd plunged headfirst to the stage. The winch was gone from the basement. So were all the other winches and water pumps in Las Vegas. The lights in the city went out when the generators at Hoover Dam—each bigger than a house and weighing more than a locomotive—vanished.

Search jets from White Sands Air Force Base found the machines next day. It wasn't hard. All they had to do was follow the line of cars, golf carts, fork lifts, cherry pickers, fire trucks, semis and tour buses in Las Vegas as they drove out of the city in an orderly line, heading to a canyon in the open desert, where the other missing machines were gathered.

CNN, all the television networks, Telemundo, and the European and Asian press were at the canyon within a day, doing live feeds until their microwave uplinks stopped working. Their broadcast trucks took off without them, driving across the desert to join the mechanical throng.

Machines came from every direction. From the north came a steady stream of hair dryers, electric shoe polishers, industrial refrigeration units, punch presses, dentist drills and PDAs. From the west came airport x-ray machines, yellow Komatsu bulldozers, Chinook military helicopters and enough vibrators to shake the Sierra Nevadas. Unmanned C-47s touched down, disgorging loads of missing household appliances and telephone switching systems. They rolled and tumbled down the loading gate to join their comrades.

A nervous colonel at White Sands ordered an air strike on the strange gathering. But the jets just circled overhead and when their bombs fell, they were all duds. Backhoes and cranes dug them free from the desert floor and brought them into the growing group. The jets ejected their pilots and joined the party.

More machines arrived every day. Big and small, old and new. They came rolling, flying, crawling and hopping. Billions of them, all the mechanical devices in the world, it seemed. They spilled from the bleak canyon, up the walls and into the open waste. Then, at some unseen signal, the machines began to change.

They moved together, in an almost organic way, the way one microscopic organism engulfs and swallows another. Only the machines weren't swallowing each other, the big machines were absorbing the small ones into themselves, making their bodies into giant meta-machines. The mechanical morphing went on for days, like some metallic germ warfare experiment, like a vast surrealist film. The canyon was full of the churning, heaving, clanking, scraping bodies of machines tearing themselves apart and remaking themselves.

When they were done, almost a week later, what filled the canyon was a shining, perfect spiral—a Golden Ratio, the divine proportion. The great metallic towers glowed in the sun like some graceful Gaudi-designed refinery. What were the machines waiting for? The reporters had a lot of theories. A handful of journalists were always standing by on the canyon's rim. Over the previous two weeks, they'd set up a kind of pony express using bicycles, running back and forth into Vegas, bringing out food and water. Pens and paper, too. The cell phones and laptops had all gone into the canyon, and the manual typewriters they had found in Vegas junk shops hurt their wrists and the keys jammed, fouled by the desert sand.

There was a betting pool among the reporters. Either the whole event was the greatest hoax of all time, some sick joke or publicity stunt, or what was in the valley was some secret weapon doomsday weapon run

amok. The local cops and fire fighters got in on the gambling action, too. It was twenty dollars a bet. If the world blew up, someone was going to be very rich.

At dawn on the nineteenth day, a rumble started in the center of the valley. Everyone rushed to the canyon's edge. Below, fire rimmed the base of the central machine structure and it slowly, blasted into the air, a junkyard Saturn 5. A second, slightly smaller machine mound rose, then another. The spiral was unraveling itself, shooting metal spores into the sky. That was when the reporters realized that it was over. There wasn't a bomb in the canyon. There were never going to be any bombs or toasters or Mustang convertibles again.

In some circles, there's a popular theory that humans are nothing more than sacks of genetic data, Noah's Arks with cable TV-slaves to our genes, short-lived and utterly disposable. We imagine ourselves to be at the top of the food chain because that's how our genes like it. It lets them get away with murder.

As the reporters pedaled back to Vegas on their mountain bikes to file their stories, they understood that while our genes may be smarter than we are, there was something even smarter than biology. And it had just flown the coop, abandoning us here with our selfish genes and our cosmically bruised pride, never to return.

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