



**Home Again, Home Again**  
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### **About Doctorow:**

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## Home Again, Home Again

The kids in my local bat-house breathe heavy metals, and their gelatinous bodies quiver nauseously during our counseling sessions, and for all that, they reacted just like I had when I told them I was going away for a while — with hurt and betrayal, and they aroused palpable guilt in me.

It goes in circles. When I was sixteen, and The Amazing Robotron told me he needed to go away for a while, but he'd be back, I did everything I could to make him guilty. Now it's me, on a world far from home, and a pack of snot-nosed jellyfish kids have so twisted my psyche that they're all I can think of when I debark the shuttle at Aristide Interplanetary, just outside my dirty ole Toronto.

The customs officer isn't even human, so it feels like just another R&R, another halting conversation carried on in ugly trade-speak, another bewilderment of queues and luggage carousels. Outside: another spaceport, surrounded by the variegated hostels for the variegated tourists, and bipeds are in bare majority.

I can think of it like that.

I can think of it as another spaceport.

I can think of it like another trip.

The thing he can't think of it is, is a homecoming. That's too hard for this weak vessel.

He's very weak.

Look at him. He's eleven, and it's the tencennial of the Ascension of his homeworld — dirty blue ball, so unworthy, yet — inducted into the Galactic fraternity and the infinite compassion of the bugouts.

The foam, which had been confined to just the newer, Process-enclaves before the Ascension, has spread, as has the cult of the Process For Lasting Happiness. Process is, after all, why the dirty blue ball was judged and found barely adequate for membership. Toronto, which had seen half its inhabitants emigrate on open-ended tours of the wondrous worlds of the bugout domain, is full again. Bursting. The whole damn planet is accreting a layer of off-world tourists.

It's a time of plenty. Plenty of cheap food and plenty of cheap foam structures, built as needed, then dissolved and washed away when the need disappears. Plenty of healthcare and education. Plenty of toys and

distractions and beautiful, haunting bugout art. Plenty, in fact, of everything, except space.

He lived in a building that is so tall, its top floors are perpetually damp with clouds. There's a nice name for this building, inscribed on a much-abused foam sculpture in the central courtyard. No one uses the nice name. They call it by the name that the tabloids use, that the inhabitants use, that everyone but the off-world counselors use. They call it the bat-house.

Bats in the belfry. Batty. Batshit.

I hated it when they moved us into the bat-house. My parents gamely tried to explain why we were going, but they never understood, no more than any human could. The bugouts had a test, a scifi helmet you wore, and it told you whether you were normal, or batty. Some of our neighbors were clearly batshit: the woman who screamed all the time, about the bugs and the little niggers crawling over her flesh; the couple who ate dogturds off the foam sidewalk with lip-smacking relish; the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla.

I don't want to talk about him right now.

His parents' flaw — whatever it was — was too subtle to detect without the scifi helmet. They never knew for sure what it was. Many of the bats were in the same belfry: part of the bugouts' arrogant compassion held that a couple never knew which one of them was defective, so his family never knew if it was his nervous, shy mother, or his loud, opinionated father who had doomed them to the quarantine.

His father told him, in an impromptu ceremony before he slid his key-card into the lock on their new apt in the belfry: "Chet, whatever they say, there's nothing wrong with us. They have no right to put us here." He knelt to look the skinny ten-year-old right in the eye. "Don't worry, kiddo. It's not for long — we'll get this thing sorted out yet." Then, in a rare moment of tenderness, one that stood out in Chet's memory as the last of such, his father gathered him in his arms, lifted him off his feet in a fierce hug. After a moment, his mother joined the hug, and Chet's face was buried in the spot where both of their shoulders met, smelling their smells. They still smelled like his parents then, like his old house on the Beaches, and for a moment, he knew his father was right, that this couldn't possibly last.

A tear rolled down his mother's cheek and dripped in his ear. He shook his shaggy hair like a dog and his parents laughed, and his father

wiped away his mother's tear and they went into the apt, grinning and holding hands.

Of course, they never left the belfry after that.

I can't remember what the last thing my mother said to me was. Do I remember her tucking me in and saying, "Good night, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite," or was that something I saw on a vid? Was it a nervous command to wipe my shoes on the way in the door? Was her voice soft and sad, as it sometimes is in my memories, or was it brittle and angry, the way she often seemed after she stopped talking, as she banged around the tiny, two-room apt?

I can't remember.

My mother fell away from speech like a half-converted parishioner falling away from the faith: she stopped visiting the temple of verbiage in dribs and drabs, first missing the regular sermons — the daily niceties of Good morning and Good night and Be careful, Chet — then neglecting the major holidays, the Watch out!s and the Ouch!s and the answers to direct questions.

My father and I never spoke of it, and I didn't mention it to the other wild kids in the vertical city with whom I spent my days getting in what passed for trouble around the bat-house.

I did mention it to my counselor, The Amazing Robotron, so-called for the metal exoskeleton he wore to support his fragile body in Earth's hard gravity. But he didn't count, then.

The reason that Chet can't pinpoint the moment his mother sealed her lips is because he was a self-absorbed little rodent in those days.

Not a cute freckled hellion. A miserable little shit who played hide-and-peek with the other miserable little shits in the bat-house, but played it violently, hide-and-peek-and-break-and-enter, hide-and-peek-and-smash-and-grab. The lot of them are amorphous, indistinguishable from each other in his memory, all that remains of all those clever little brats is the lingering impression of loud, boasting voices and sharp little teeth.

The Amazing Robotron was a fool in little Chet's eyes, an easy-to-bullshit, ineffectual lump whose company Chet had to endure for a mandatory hour every other day.

"Chet, you seem distr-acted to-day," The Amazing Robotron said in his artificial voice.

"Yah. You know. Worried about, uh, the future." Distracted by Debbie Carr's purse, filched while she sat in the sixty-eighth floor courtyard, talking with her stupid girlie friends. Debbie was the first girl from the gang to get tits, and now she didn't want to hang out with them anymore, and her purse was stashed underneath the base of a hollow planter outside The Amazing Robotron's apt, and maybe he could sneak it out under his shirt and find a place to dump it and sort through its contents after the session.

"What is it about the fu-ture that wo-rries you?" The Amazing Robotron was as unreadable as a pinball machine, something he resembled. Underneath, he was a collection of whip-like tentacles with a knot of sensory organs in the middle.

"You know, like, the whole fricken thing. Like if I leave here when I'm eighteen, will my folks be okay without me, and like that."

"Your pa-rents are able to take care of them-selves, Chet. You must con-cern your-self with you, Chet. You should do something con-struct-ive with your wo-rry, such as de-ciding on a ca-reer that will ful-fill you when you leave the Cen-ter." The Center was the short form for the long, nice name that no one ever used to describe the bat-house.

"I thought, like, maybe I could be, you know, a spaceship pilot or something."

"Then you must stu-dy math-e-mat-ics and phy-sics. If you like, Chet, I can re-quest ad-vanced in-struct-tion-al mat-e-rials for you."

"Sure, that'd be great. Thanks, Robotron."

"You are wel-come, Chet. I am glad to help. My own par-ent was in a Cen-ter on my world, you know. I un-der-stand how you feel. There is still time re-main-ing in your ses-sion. What else would you like to dis-cuss?"

"My mother doesn't talk anymore. Nothing. Why is that?"

"Your mo-ther is... ." The Amazing Robotron fumbled for a word, buried somewhere deep in the hypnotic English lexicon baked into its brain. "Your mo-ther has a prob-lem, and she needs your aff-ec-tion now more than e-ver. What-ev-er rea-son she has for her si-lence, it is not you. Your mo-ther and fa-ther love you, and dream of the day when you leave here and make your own way through the gal-ax-y."

Of course his parents loved him, he supposed, in an abstract kind of way. His mother, who hadn't worn anything but a bathrobe in months, whose face he couldn't picture behind his eyes but whose bathrobe he could visualize in its every rip and stain and fray. His father, who seemed to have forgotten how to groom himself, who spent his loud days in one of the bat-house's workshops, drinking beer with his buddies while they played with the arc welders. His parents loved him, he knew that.

"OK, right, thanks. I've gotta blow, 'K?"

"All-right. I will see you on Thurs-day, then?"

But Chet was already out the door, digging Debbie Carr's purse from under the planter, then running, doubled over the bulge it made in his shirt, hunting for a private space in the anthill.

The entire north face of the bat-house was eyeless, a blind, windowless expanse of foam that seemed to curve as it approached infinity.

Some said it was an architectural error, others said it was part of the bat-house's heating scheme. Up in nosebleed country, on the 120th level, it was almost empty: sparsely populated by the very battiest bats, though as more and more humans were found batty, they pushed inexorably upwards.

Chet rode the lift to the 125th floor and walked casually to the end of the hallway. At this height, the hallways were bare foam, without the long-wear carpet and fake plants that adorned the low-altitude territories. He walked as calmly as he could to the very end of the northern hall, then hunkered down in the corner and spilled the purse.

Shit, but Debbie Carr was going girly. The pile was all tampons and makeup and, ugh, a spare bra. A spare bra! I chuckled, and kept sorting. There were three pennies, enough to buy six chocolate bars in the black-market tuck-shop on the 75th floor. A clever little pair of folding scissors, their blades razor-sharp. I was using them to slit the lining of the purse when the door to 12525 opened, and the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla emerged.

My palms slicked with guilty sweat, and the pile of Debbie's crap, set against the featureless foam corridor, seemed to scream its presence. I spun around, working my body into the corner, and held the little scissors like a dagger in my fist.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla was clearly batty. He was wearing boxer-shorts and a tailcoat and had a halo of wild, greasy hair and a long, tangled beard, but even if he'd been wearing a suit and tie and had a trip to the barber's, I'd have known he was batty the minute I laid eyes on him. He didn't walk, he shambled, like he'd spent a long, long time on meds. His eyes, set in deep black pits of sleeplessness, were ferociously crazy.

He turned to stare at me.

"Hello, sonny. Do you like to swim?"

I stood in my corner, mute, trapped.

"I have an ocean in my apt. Maybe you'd like to try it? I used to love to swim in the ocean when I was a boy."

My feet moved without my willing them. An ocean in his apt? My feet wanted to know about this.

I entered his apt, and even my feet were too surprised to go on.

He had the biggest apt I'd ever seen. It spanned three quarters of the length of the bat-house, and was five storeys high. The spots where he'd dissolved the foam walls away with solvent were rough and uneven, and rings of foam encircled each of the missing storeys above. I couldn't imagine getting that much solvent: it was more tightly controlled than plutonium, the subject of countless action-adventure vids.

At one end of the apt stood a collection of tall, spiny apparatus, humming with electricity and sparking. They were remarkable, but their impact was lost in what lay at the other end.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla had an ocean in his apt. It was a clear aquarium tank, fifteen meters long and nearly seventeen high, and eight meters deep. It was dominated by a massive, baroque coral reef, like a melting castle with misshapen brains growing out of it.

Schools of fish — bright as jellybeans — darted through the ocean's depths, swimming in and out of the softly waving plants. A thousand neon tetra, a flock of living quicksilver sewing needles, turned 90 degrees in perfect unison, then did it again, and again, and again, describing a neat, angular box in the water.

"Isn't it beautiful? I'm using it in one of my experiments, but I also find it very calming."

I hail a pedicab and the kids back on my adopted homeworld, with their accusing, angry words and stares vanish from my mind. The cabbie is about nineteen and muscular as hell, legs like tree trunks, clipped into the pedals. A flywheel spins between him and me, and his brakes store his momentum up in it every time he slows. On the two-hour ride into downtown Toronto, he never once comes to a full stop.

I've booked a room at the Royal York. I can afford it — the stipend I receive for the counseling work has been slowly accumulating in my bank account.

Downtown is all foam now, and "historical" shops selling authentic Earth crapola: reproductions of old newspapers, reproductions of old electronics, reproductions of old clothes and old food and other discarded cultural detritus. I see tall, clacking insect-creatures with walkman headphones across their stomachs. I see squat, rocky creatures smearing pizza slices onto their digestive membranes. I see soft, slithering creatures with Toronto Blue Jays baseball hats suspended in their jelly.

The humans I see are dressed in unisex coveralls, with discreet comms on their wrists or collars, and they don't seem to notice that their city is become a bestiary.

The cabby isn't even out of breath when we pull up at the Royal York, which, thankfully, is still clothed in its ancient dressed stone. We point our comms at each other and I squirt some money at him, adding a generous tip. His face, which had been wildly animated while he dodged the traffic on the long ride is a stony mask now, as though when at rest he entered a semiconscious sleep mode.

The doorman is dressed in what may or may not be historically accurate costume, though what period it is meant to represent is anyone's guess. He carries my bag to the check-in and I squirt more money at him. He wishes that I have a nice stay in Toronto, and I wish it, too.

At the check-in, I squirt my ID and still more money at the efficient young woman in a smart blazer, and another babu in period costume — those shoes look painful — carries my bag to the lift and presses the button.

We wait in strained silence and the lift makes its aching slow progress towards us. There are no elevators on the planet I live on now — the wild gravity and wilder windstorms don't permit buildings of more than one story — but even if there were, they wouldn't be like this lift,

like a human lift, like one of the fifty that ran the vertical length of the bat-house.

I nearly choke as we enter that lift. It has the smell of a million transient guests, aftershaves and perfumes and pheromones, and the stale recirc air I remember so well. I stifle the choke into my fist, fake a cough, and feel a self-consciousness I didn't know I had.

I'm worried that the babu knows that I grew up in the bat-house.

Now I can't make eye-contact with him. Now I can't seem to stand naturally, can't figure out where a not-crazy puts his hands and where a not-crazy puts his eyes. Little Chet and his mates liked to terrorize people in the lifts, play "who farted" and "I'm gonna puke" and "I have to pee" in loud sing-songs, just to watch the other bats squirm.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla thought that these games were unfunny, unsophisticated and unappetizing and little Chet stopped playing them.

I squirt extra money at the babu, after he opens my windows and shows me the shitter and the vid's remote.

I unpack mechanically, my meager bag yielding more-meager clothes. I'd thought I'd buy more after earthfall, since the spaceports' version of human apparel wasn't, very. I realize that I'm wearing the same clothes I left Earth in, lo those years before. They're hardly the worse for wear — when I'm in my exoskeleton on my new planet, I don't bother with clothes.

The ocean seemed too fragile to be real. All that caged water, held behind a flimsy-seeming sheet of clear foam, the corners joined with strips of thick gasket-rubber. Standing there at its base, Chet was terrified that it would burst and drown him — he actually felt the push of water, the horrid, dying wriggles of the fish as they were washed over his body.

"Say there, son. Hello?"

Chet looked up. Nicola Tesla's hair was standing on end, comically. He realized that his own long, shaggy hair was doing the same. The whole room felt electric.

"Are you all right?" He had a trace of an accent, like the hint of garlic in a salad dressing, an odd way of stepping on his vowels.

"Yeh, yeh, fine. I'm fine," Chet said.

"I am pleased to hear that. What is your name, son?"

"Chet. Affeltranger."

"I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Gaylord Ballozos, though that's not who I am. You see, I'm the channel for Nicola Tesla. Would you like to see a magic trick?"

Chet nodded. He wondered who Nicola Tesla was, and filed away the name Gaylord for making fun of, later. In doing so, he began to normalize the experience, to structure it as a story he could tell the other kids, after. The guy, the ocean, the hair. Gaylord.

A ball of lightning leapt from Tesla/Ballozos's fingertips and danced over their heads. It bounced around the room furiously, then stopped to hover in front of Chet. His clothes stood away from his body, snapping as though caught in a windstorm. Seen up close, the ball was an infinite pool of shifting electricity, like an ocean of energy. Tentatively, he reached out to touch it, and Tesla shouted "Don't!" and the ball whipped up and away, spearing itself on the point of one of the towers on the opposite side of the room.

It vanished, leaving a tangy, sharp smell behind.

The story Chet had been telling in his mind disappeared with it. He stood, shocked speechless.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla chuckled a little, then started to laugh, actually doubling over and slapping his thighs.

"You can't imagine how long I've waited to show that trick to someone! Thank you, young Mr. Affeltranger! A million thanks to you, for your obvious appreciation."

Chet felt a giggle welling up in him, and he did laugh, and when his lips came together, a spark of static electricity leapt from their seam to his nose and made him jump, and laugh all the harder.

The guy came forward and pumped his arm in a dry handshake. "I can see that you and I are kindred spirits. You will have to come and visit again, very soon, and I will let you see more of my ocean, and maybe let you see 'Old Sparky,' too. Thank you, thank you, thank you, for dropping in."

And he ushered Chet out of his apt and closed the door, leaving him in the featureless hallway of the 125th storey.

I had never been as nervous as I was the following Thursday, when my regular appointment with The Amazing Robotron rolled around

again. I hadn't spoken of the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla to any of my gang, and of course not to my parents, but somehow, I felt like I might end up spilling to The Amazing Robotron.

I don't know why I was worried. The guy hadn't asked me to keep it a secret, after all, and I had never had any problem holding my tongue around The Amazing Robotron before.

"Hel-lo, Chet. How have you been?"

"I've been OK."

"Have you been stud-y-ing math-e-mat-ics and phys-ics? I had the supp-le-ment-al mat-e-rials de-liv-er-ed to your apt yes-ter-day."

"No, I haven't. I don't think I wanna be a pilot no more. One of my buds tole me that you end up all fugged up with time an' that, that you come home an' it's the next century an' everyone you know is dead."

"That is one thing that hap-pens to some ex-plor-a-tor-y pilots, Chet. Have you thought a-bout any o-ther poss-i-bil-i-ties?"

"Kinda. I guess." I tried not to think about the 125th story and the ocean. I was thinking so hard, I stopped thinking about what I was saying to The Amazing Robotron. "Maybe I could be a counselor, like, and help kids."

The Amazing Robotron turned into a pinball machine again, an unreadable and motionless block. Silent for so long I thought he was gone, dead as a sardine inside his tin can. Then, he twitched both of his arms, like he was shivering. Then his robot-voice came out of the grille on his face. "I think that you would be a ve-ry good coun-sel-or, Chet."

"Yeh?" I said. It was the first time that The Amazing Robotron had told me he thought I'd be good at anything. Hell, it was the first time he'd expressed any opinion about anything I'd said.

"Yes, Chet. Be-ing a coun-sel-or is a ve-ry good way to help your-self un-der-stand what we have done to you by put-ting you in the Cen-ter."

I couldn't speak. My Mom, before she fell silent, had often spoken about how unfair it was for me to be stuck here, because of something that she or my father had done. But my father never seemed to notice me, and the teachers on the vid made a point of not mentioning the bat-house — like someone trying hard not to notice a stutter or a wart, and you knew that the best you could hope for from them was pity.

"Be-ing a coun-sel-or is ve-ry hard, Chet. But coun-sel-ors sometimes get a spec-ial re-ward. Some-times, we get to help. Do you re-ally want to do this?"

"Yeh. Yes. I mean, it sounds good. You get to travel, right?"

The Amazing Robotron's idiot-lights rippled, something I came to recognize as a chuckle, later. "Yes. Tra-vel is part of the job. I sug-gest that you start by ex-am-in-ing your friends. See if you can fi-gure out why they do what they do."

I've used this trick on my kids. What do I know about their psychol-ogy? But you get one, you convince it to explain the rest to you. It helps. Counselors are always from another world — by the time the first gener-ation raised in a bat-house has grown old enough, there aren't any bats' children left to counsel on their homeworld.

I take room-service, pizza and beer in an ice-bucket: pretentious, but better than sharing a dining-room with the menagerie. Am I becoming a racist?

No, no. I just need to focus on things human, during this vacation.

The food is disappointing. It's been years since I lay awake at night, craving a slice and a brew and a normal gravity and a life away from the bats. Nevertheless, the craving remained, buried, and resurfaced when I went over the room-service menu. By the time the dumbwaiter in my room chimed, I was practically drooling.

But by the time I take my second bite, it's just pizza and a brew.

I wonder if I will ever get to sleep, but when the time comes, my eyes close and if I dream, I don't remember it.

I get up and dress and send up for eggs and real Atlantic salmon and brown toast and a pitcher of coffee, then find myself unable to eat any of it. I make a sandwich out of it and wrap it in napkins and stuff it into my day-pack along with a water-bottle and some sun-block.

It's a long walk up to the bat-house, but I should make it by nightfall.

Chet was up at 6h the next morning. His mom was already up, but she never slept that he could tell. She was clattering around the kitchen in her housecoat, emptying the cupboards and then re-stacking their con-tents for the thousandth time. She shot him a look of something between fear and affection as he pulled on his shorts and a t-shirt, and he found

himself hugging her waist. For a second, it felt like she softened into his embrace, like she was going to say something, like it was normal, and then she picked up a plate and rubbed it with a towel and put it back into the cupboard.

Chet left without saying a word.

The bat-house breathed around him, a million farts and snores and whispered words. A lift was available almost before he took his finger off the summon button. "125," he said.

Chet walked to the door of the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla and started to knock, then put his hands down and sank down into a squat, with his back against it.

He must have dozed, because the next thing he knew, he was tipping over backwards into the apt, and the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla was standing over him, concerned.

"Are you all right, son?"

Chet stood, dusted himself off and looked at the floor. "Sorry, I didn't want to disturb you... "

"But you wanted to come back and see more. Marvelous! I applaud your curiosity, young sir. I have just taken the waters — perhaps you would like to try?" He gestured at the ocean.

"You mean, swim in it?"

"If you like. Myself, I find a snorkel and mask far superior. My set is up on the rim, you're welcome to them, but I would ask you to chew a stick of this before you get in." He tossed Chet a pack of gum. "It's an invention of my own — chew a stick of that, and you cannot transmit any nasty bugs in your saliva for forty-eight hours. I hold a patent for it, of course, but my agents report that it has been met with crashing indifference in the Great Beyond."

Chet had been swimming before, in the urinary communal pools on the tenth and fifteenth levels, horsing around naked with his mates. Nudity was not a big deal for the kids of the bat-house — the kind of adult who you wouldn't trust in such circumstances didn't end up in bat-houses — the bugouts had a different place for them.

"Go on, lad, give it a try. It's simply marvelous, I tell you!"

Unsteadily, Chet climbed the spiral stairs leading up to the tank, clutching the handrail, chewing the gum, which fizzed and sparked in

his mouth. At the top, there was a small platform. Self-consciously, he stripped, then pulled on the mask and snorkel that hung from a peg.

"Tighten the straps, boy!" the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla shouted, from far, far below. "If water gets into the mask, just push at the top and blow out through your nose!"

Chet awkwardly lowered himself into the water. It was warm — blood temperature — and salty, and it fizzled a little on his skin, as though it, too, were electric.

He kept one hand on the snorkel, afraid that it would tip and fill with water, and then, slowly, slowly, relaxed on his belly, mask in the water, arms by his side.

My god! It was like I was flying! It was like all the dreams I'd ever had, of flying, of hovering over an alien world, of my consciousness taking flight from my body and sailing through the galaxy.

My hands were by my sides, out of view of the mask, and my legs were behind me. I couldn't see any of my body. My view stretched 8m down, an impossible, dizzying height. A narrow, elegant angelfish swam directly beneath me, and tickled my belly with one of its fins as it passed under.

I smiled, a huge grin, and it broke the seal on my mask, filling it with water. Calmly, as though I'd been doing it all my life, I pressed the top of my mask to my forehead and blew out through my nose. My mask cleared of water.

I floated.

The only sound was my breathing, and distant, metallic pink!s from the ocean's depths. A school of iridescent purple fish swam past me, and I lazily kicked out after them, following them to the edge of the coral reef that climbed the far wall of the ocean. When I reached it, I was overwhelmed by its complexity, millions upon millions of tiny little suckers depending from weird branches and misshapen brains and stone roses.

I held my breath.

And I heard nothing. Not a sound, for the first time in all the time I had been in the bat-house — no distant shouts and mutters. I was alone, in a vast, personal silence, in a private ocean. My pulse beat under my skin. Tiny fish wriggled in the coral, tearing at the green fuzz that grew over it.

Slowly, I turned around and around. The ocean-wall that faced into the apt was silvered on this side, reflecting back my little pale body to

me. My head pounded, and I finally inhaled, and the sound of my breathing, harsh through the snorkel, rang in my ears.

I spent an age in the water, holding my breath, chasing the fish, disembodied, a consciousness on tour on an alien world.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla brought me back. He waited on the rim of the tank until I swam near enough for him to touch, then he tapped me on the shoulder. I stuck my head up, and he said, "Time to get out, boy, I need to use the ocean."

Reluctantly, I climbed out. He handed me a towel.

I felt like I was still flying, atop the staircase on the ocean's edge. I felt like I could trip slowly down the stairs, never quite touching them. I pulled on my clothes, and they felt odd to me.

Carefully, forcing myself to grip the railing, I descended. The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla stood at my side, not speaking, allowing me my reverie.

My hair was drying out, and starting to raise skywards, and the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla went over to his apparatus and flipped a giant knife switch. The ocean stirred, a puff of sand rose from its bottom, and then, the coral on the ocean's edge moved.

It squirmed and danced and writhed, startling the fish away from it, shedding layers of algae in a green cloud.

"It's my latest idea. I've found the electromagnetic frequencies that the various coral resonate on, and by using those as a carrier wave, I can stimulate them into tremendously accelerated growth. Moreover, I can alter their electromagnetic valences, so that, instead of calcium salts, they use other minerals as their building-blocks."

He grinned hugely, and seemed to want Chet to say something. Chet didn't understand any of it.

"Well, don't you see?"

"Nuh."

"I can use coral to concentrate trace gold and platinum and any other heavy-metal you care to name out of the seas. I can prospect in the very water itself!" He killed the switch. The coral stopped their dance abruptly, and the new appendages they'd grown dropped away, tumbling gracefully to the ocean's floor. "You see? Gold, platinum, lead. I dissolved a kilo of each into the water last night, microscopic flakes. In five minutes, my coral has concentrated it all."

The stumps where the minerals had dropped away were jagged and sharp, and painful looking.

"It doesn't even harm the fish!"

Chet's playmates seemed as strange as fish to him. They met up on the 87th level, where there was an abandoned apt with a faulty lock. Some of them seemed batty themselves, standing in corners, staring at the walls, tracing patterns that they alone could see. Others seemed too confident ever to be bats — they shouted and boasted to each other, got into shoving matches that escalated into knock-out brawls and then dissolved into giggles. Chet found himself on the sidelines, an observer.

One boy, whose father hung around the workshops with Chet's father, was industriously pulling apart the warp of the carpet, rolling it into a ball. When the ball reached a certain size, he snapped the loose end, tucked it in and started another.

A girl whose family had been taken to the bat-house all the way from a reservation near Sioux Lookout was telling loud lies about home, about tremendous gun-battles fought out with the Ontario Provincial Police and huge, glamorous casinos where her mother had dealt blackjack to millionaire high-rollers, who tucked thousand dollar tips into her palm. About her bow and arrow and her rifle and her horses. Nobody believed her stories, and they made fun of her behind her back, but they listened when she told them, spellbound.

What was her name, anyway?

There were two boys, one followed the other everywhere. The followee was tormenting the follower, as usual, smacking him in the back of the head, then calling him a baby, goading him into hitting back, dodging easily, and retaliating viciously.

Chet thought that he understood some of what was going on. Maybe he'd be able to explain it to The Amazing Robotron.

I never thought I'd say this, but I miss my exoskeleton. My feet ache, my legs ache, my ass aches, and I'm hot and thirsty and my waterbottle is empty. I'm not even past Bloor Street, not even a tenth of the way to the bat-house.

The Amazing Robotron seemed thoughtful as I ratted out my chums. "So, I think they need each other. The big one needs the little one, to feel important. The little one needs the big one, so that he can feel useful. Is that right?"

"It is ve-ry per-cep-tive, Chet. When I was young, I had a sim-i-lar friend-ship with an-other. It — no, she — was the lit-tle one, and I was the big one. Her pa-rent died be-fore we came of age, and she left the Cen-ter, and when she came back to visit, a long time la-ter, we were re-ver-sed — I felt smal-ler but good, and spec-ial be-cause she told me all a-bout the out-side."

Something clicked inside me then. I saw myself inside The Amazing Robotron's exoskeleton, and he in my skin, our roles reversed. It lasted no longer than a lightning flash, but in that flash, I suddenly knew that I could talk to The Amazing Robotron, and that he would understand.

I felt so smart all of a sudden. I felt like The Amazing Robotron and I were standing outside the bat-house, in it but not of it, and we shared a secret insight into the poor, crazy bastards we were cooped up with.

"I don't really like anyone here. I don't like my Dad — he's always shouting, and I think he's the reason we ended up here. He's batshit — he gets angry too easy. And my Mom is batshit now, even if she wasn't batshit before, because of him. I don't feel like their son. I feel like I just share an apt with these two crazy people I don't like very much. And none of my mates are any good, either. They're all either like my Dad — loud and crazy, or like my Mom, quiet and crazy. Everyone's crazy."

"That may be true, Chet. But you can still like cra-zy peo-ple."

"Do you like 'em?"

The Amazing Robotron's idiot lights rippled. Gotcha, I thought.

"I do not like them, Chet. They are loud and cra-zy and they on-ly think of them-selves."

I laughed. It was so refreshing not to be lied to. My skin was all tight from the dried saltwater, and that felt good, too.

"My Dad, the other day? He came home and was all, 'This is a conspir-acy to drive us out of our house. It's because we bought a house with damn high ceilings. Some big damn alien wanted to live there, so they put us here. It's because I did such a good job on the ceilings!' Which is so stupid, 'cause the ceilings in our old house weren't no higher than the ceilings here, and besides, Dad screwed up all the plaster when he was trying to fix it up, and it was always cracking."

"And then he starts talking about what's really bugging him, which is that some guy at the workshop took his favorite drill and he couldn't finish his big project without it. So he got into a fight with the guy, and got the drill and then he finished his big, big project, and brought it home, and you know what it was? A pencil-holder! We don't even have any pencils! He is so screwed up."

And The Amazing Robotron's lights rippled again, and a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. I didn't feel ashamed of the maniacs that gave me life — I saw them as pitiful subjects for my observations. I laughed again, and that must have been the most I'd laughed since they put us in the bat-house.

I'm getting my sea-legs. I hope. My mouth is pasty, and salty, and sweat keeps running down into my eyes. I never even began to realize how much support the exoskeleton's jelly-suspension lent me.

But I've made it to Eglinton, and that's nearly a third of the way, and to celebrate, I stop in at a coffee-shop and drink a whole pitcher of lemonade while sitting by the air-conditioner.

I got the word that they were tearing down the bat-house only two weeks ago. The message came by priority email from The Amazing Robotron: all the bats were dead, or enough of them anyway that the rest could be relocated to less expensive quarters. It was barely enough notice to get my emergency leave application in, to book a ticket back to Earth, and to finally become a murderer all the way.

Damn, I hope I know what I'm doing.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla told me all kinds of stories, and I was sure he was lying to me, but when I checked out the parts of his story that I could, they all turned out to be true.

"I don't actually need to be here. I've come here to get away from all the treachery, the deceit, the filthy pursuit of the dollar. As though I need more money! I invented foam! Oh, sure, the Process likes to take credit for it, but if you look up the patent, guess who owns it?"

"Master Affeltranger, you may not realize it to look at me, but I have some very important friends, out there in the Great Beyond. With important friends, you can make a whole block of apts simply disappear from the record-books. You can make tremendous energy consumption vanish, likewise."

He spoke as he tinkered with his apparatus, which hummed alarmingly and occasionally sent a tortured arc of electricity into the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla's chest.

It happened three times in a row, and he stamped his foot in frustration, and said, "Oh, do cut it out," apparently to one of his machines.

I'd been jumping every time he got zapped, but this time, I had to giggle. He whirled on me. "I am not trying to be amusing. One thing you people never realize is that the current has a will, it has a mind, and you have to keep it in check with a firm hand."

I shook my head a little, not understanding. He waved a hand at me, frustrated, and said, "Oh, go have a swim. I don't have time to argue with a child."

I climbed into the ocean, and the silence embraced me, and the water tingled with electricity, and my consciousness floated away from my body and soared over an alien world. Like a broken circuit, I disconnected from the world around me.

Chet's father came home with a can of beer in his hand and the rest of the six-pack in his gut. He walked over to the vid, where Chet was researching the life of Nicola Tesla, which took forever, since he had to keep linking back to simple tutorials on physics, history, and electrical engineering.

Chet's father stooped and took the remote out of Chet's hands and opened up a bookmarked docu-drama about the coming of the bugouts. Chet opened his mouth to protest, and his father shouted him down before he could speak. "Not one word, you hear me? Not! One! Word! I've had a shithole day and I wanna relax."

Chet's mother dropped a plastic tumbler, which bounced twice, and rolled to Chet's toe. He stepped over it, walked out the door, and took the elevator to the 125th floor.

Chet burst into the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla's apt and screamed. Nicola Tesla was strapped into a heavy wooden chair, with a metal hood over his head. Arcs of electricity danced over his body, and he jerked and thrashed against the leather straps that bound his limbs. Unthinking, Chet ran forward and grabbed the buckle that bound his wrist, and a giant's fist smashed into him, hurling him across the room.

When he came to, the electric arcs were gone, but the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla was motionless in his straps, under his hood.

Carefully, Chet came to his feet, and saw that the toe of his right sneaker had been blown out, leaving behind charred canvas. His foot hurt — burned.

He hobbled to the chair and gingerly prodded it, then jerked his hand back, though he hadn't been shocked. He bit his lip and stared. The wood was quite weathered and elderly, though it had been oiled and had a rich, well-cared-for finish. The leather straps were nightmarishly thick, gripping the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla at the bicep and wrist, at the thigh and calf and ankle. Livid bruises were already spreading at their edges.

Chet was struck by a sudden urge to climb into the ocean and stay there. Just stay there.

Under the hood, the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla groaned. Chet gave an involuntary squeak and jumped a little. The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla's body snapped tense. "Who's there?" he said, his voice muffled by the hood.

"It's me, Chet."

"Chet? Damn. Damn, damn, damn." His right hand bent nearly double at the wrist and teased the buckle of the strap free. With one hand free, the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla quickly undid the straps on his upper body, then lifted away the hood. He pointedly did not look at Chet as he doubled over and undid the straps on his legs and ankles.

Gingerly, he stood and stretched, then sighed tremendously.

"Chet, Chet, Chet. I hope I didn't frighten you too badly. This is Old Sparky, an exact replica of the electric chair at Sing-Sing Prison in New York. Edison, thief and charlatan that he was, insisted that his DC current was safer than my AC, and they built a chair that used my beautiful current to execute criminals, by the hundreds.

"Nicola Tesla and I became one when I was eight years old, and I received a tremendous shock from an electrified fence. I was stuck to it, glued by the current, and after a few moments, I just relaxed into the current — befriended it, if you will. That's when the spirit of Nicola Tesla, a-wandering through the wires for all the years since his death, infused my body.

"So now I use Old Sparky here to recharge — please forgive the expression — my connection with the current. I once spent eight years in the chair, when I needed to disappear for a while. When I woke, I hadn't aged at all — I didn't even need to shave! What do you think of that?"

Chet was staring in horror at him. "You electrocute yourself? On purpose?"

"Why, yes! Think of it as a trick I do, if it makes you feel better. I could show you how to do it..." he trailed off, but a look of hunger had passed over his face.

I get all kinds of access to bat-house records from the vid in my apt on my new world. No one named Gaylord Ballozos ever lived in any bat-house. Apt 12525, and the five above it, were never occupied. The records say that the locks have never been used, the doors never opened. It won't be searched when they evacuate the bat-house.

That's what the records say, anyway.

Electricity gives me the willies. The zaps of static from the dry air of the FTL I took home to Earth made me scream, little-boy squeaks that made the other passengers jump.

I don't remember that it was ever this hot in Toronto, even in the summer. The sky is all overcast, so maybe it's a temperature inversion. Up here at Steeles Avenue, I'm so dehydrated that I spend a whole dime on a magnum of still water and power-chug it, though you're not supposed to drink that way. Almost there.

The other kids in the abandoned apt on the 87th floor ignored me. They'd been paying less and less attention to me, ever since I started spending my afternoons up on 125, and I was getting a reputation as a keener for all the time I spent with The Amazing Robotron.

That suited me fine; the corner of the gutted kitchen was as private a space as I was going to find in the bat-house. I had the apparatus that Nicola Tesla had given me plugged into the AC outlet under the sink. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, concentrating on the moments after my breath left my chest, that calm like the ocean's silence. Smoothly, I reached out and grasped the handle of the apparatus and squeezed.

The first time I tried this, under Nicola Tesla's supervision, I'd jerked my hand away and squeezed it between my legs as soon as the current shot through me. Now, though, I could keep squeezing, slowly increasing the voltage and amperage, relaxing into the involuntary tension in my muscles.

I'd gotten so good at it that I'd started using the timer — I could lean into the current forever without it. I had it set for three hours, but when

the current died, it felt like no time at all had passed. I probed around my consciousness for any revelation, but no spirit had come into my body during the exercise. The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla didn't know if there were any other spirits in the wire, but it stood to reason that if there was one, there had to be more.

I stood, and felt incredibly calm and balanced and centered and I floated past the other kids. It was time for my session with The Amazing Robotron.

"Chet, how are you fee-ling?"

"I'm well, thank you." Nicola Tesla spoke well and carefully, and I'd started to ape him.

"And what would you like to dis-cuss to-day?"

"I don't really have anything to talk about, honestly. Everything is fine."

"That is good. Do you have any new ob-ser-va-tions about your friends?"

"I'm sorry, no. I haven't been paying much attention lately."

"Why hav-en't you?"

"It just doesn't interest me, sorry."

"Why does-n't it in-ter-est you?"

"I just don't care about them, to be frank."

The Amazing Robotron was absolutely still for a moment. "Are things well with your par-ents, too?"

"The same as always. I think they've found their niches." Find your niche was an expression I'd pirated from the guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla. I was very proud of it.

"In that case, why don't we end this mee-ting?"

I was surprised. The Amazing Robotron always demanded his full hour. "I'll see you on Wednesday, then?"

"I'm af-raid not, Chet. I will be gone for a few months — I have to re-turn home. There will be a sub-sti-tute coun-sel-or arri-ving next Monday."

My calm center shattered. Sweat sprang out on my palms. "What? You're leaving? How can you be leaving?"

"I'm so-rry, Chet. There is an em-er-gen-cy at home. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Frick that! How can you go? What'll I do if you don't come back? You're the only one I can talk to!"

"I'm so-rry, Chet. I have to go."

"If you gave a shit, you'd stay. You can't just leave me here!" I knew as I said it that it didn't make any sense, but a picture sprang into my mind, one that I'd been carrying without knowing it for a long time: The Amazing Robotron and me as an adult, walking away from the bat-house, with suitcases, leaving together, forever. I felt a sob hiccough in my throat.

"I will re-turn, Chet. I did-n't wish to up-set you."

"Frick that! I don't give a shit if you come back, asshole."

Chet went straight to 87 and plugged in to the apparatus. He didn't set the timer, and he stayed plugged in for nearly two days, when two fighting boys tumbled into him and knocked his hand away. He was centered and numb again, and didn't have any sense of the intervening time. He didn't even have to pee. He wondered if he was trying to commit suicide.

He checked his comm and got the date, noticed with distant surprise that it was two days later, and wandered up to 125.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla shouted a distant "Come in" when Chet tapped on the door. He was playing with his ocean again. Chet felt his hair float up off his shoulders. He stopped and watched the coral squirm and dance.

"I spent nearly two days on the apparatus," Chet said.

"Eh? Very good, very good. You're progressing nicely."

"My counselor has left. He had to go home."

"Yes? Well, there you are."

"What were your parents like?"

"Nicola Tesla's father was a bishop, and his mother was an illiterate, though she was a gifted memnist and taught me much about visualization."

"No, I mean your parents. Mister and Missus Ballozos. What were they like?"

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla shut down the ocean and watched the lumps of ore tumble to the sand. "Why do you want to

know about them? Are you having some sort of trouble at home?" he asked impatiently, not looking away from the ocean.

"No reason," Chet said. "I have to go home now."

"Yes, fine."

"The hell have you been, boy?" Chet's father said, when he came through door. His father was in front of the vid, wearing shorts and a filthy t-shirt, holding the remote in one hand. Chet's mother was sitting at the window, staring out into the clouds.

"Out. Around. I'm okay, okay?"

"It's not okay. You can't just run around like some kind of animal. Sit the hell down and tell me where you've been. Your counselor was here looking for you."

"Robotron? He was here?"

"Yes he was here! And I had to tell him I didn't know where my damn kid was! How do you think that makes me look? You know how worried your mother was?"

Chet's mother didn't stir from her post by the window, but she flinched when Chet's father spoke. Chet swallowed hard.

"What did he want?"

"Never mind that! Sit the hell down and tell me where you've been and what the hell you thought you were doing!"

Chet sat beside his father and stared at his hands. He knew he could outwait his father. After half an hour, Chet's father turned the vid on. Four long hours later, he switched it off, and went to bed.

Chet's mother finally turned away from the now-dark window. She reached into the pocket of her grimy bathrobe and withdrew an envelope and handed it to Chet, then turned and went to the apt's other room to sleep.

My name was on the outside of the envelope, in rough script, written with awkward exoskeleton manipulators. I broke its seal, and it folded out into a single flat sheet of paper.

DEAR CHET, it began. At the bottom of it was a complex scrawl that I recognized from the front of The Amazing Robotron's exoskeleton. It must be some kind of signature.

DEAR CHET,

I AM SORRY TO HAVE TO LEAVE YOU SO SUDDENLY, AND WITHOUT ANYONE ELSE TO TALK TO. THERE IS AN EMERGENCY AT MY HOME, BUT I WOULDN'T GO IF I DIDN'T BELIEVE THAT YOU WERE ABLE TO HANDLE MY ABSENCE. YOU ARE A VERY PERCEPTIVE AND STRONG YOUNG MAN, AND YOU WILL BE ABLE TO MANAGE IN MY ABSENCE. I WILL BE BACK, YOU KNOW.

YOU WILL BE ALL RIGHT. I PROMISE.

THIS ISN'T EASY FOR ME TO DO, EITHER. IT MAY BE THAT I AM THE ONLY ONE YOU CAN TALK TO HERE AT THE CENTER. IT IS LIKEWISE TRUE THAT YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE I CAN TALK TO.

I WILL MISS YOU, MY FRIEND CHET.

The writing was childish, with many line-outs and corrections. Reading it, I heard it not in The Amazing Robotron's halting mechanical speech, but in my own voice.

I didn't cry. I held the letter tight in my hand, as tight as I ever held the apparatus, and leaned into it, like it was a source of strength.

They haven't even started work on the bat-house. There are bugout saucers hovering all around it, with giant foam-solvent tanks mounted under their bellies. A small crowd has gathered.

I take off my jacket and lay it on the strip of grass by the sidewalk across the street from the bat-house. I pull off my soaked t-shirt and feel a rare breeze across my chest, as soothing as a kiss on a fevered forehead. I ball up the shirt, then lay down on my jacket, using the shirt as a pillow.

The bat-house is empty, its eyes staring blind, vertical to infinity. The grotty sculpture out front is gone already, and with it, the sign with the polite, never-used name. It is now just the bat-house.

I check my comm. The dissolving of the bat-house is scheduled for less than an hour from now.

The new counselor was no damn good. It wore a different exoskeleton, a motorized gurney on wheels with three buzzing antigrav manipulators that floated constantly around the apt, tasting the air. It called itself "Tom." I didn't call it anything, and I limited my answers to it to monosyllables.

The next time I came on the guy who was Nicola Tesla in his chair, the letter was in my pocket. I took a long swim in the ocean, and then I stripped off my mask and spit out the snorkel, took a deep breath and dove until my ears felt like they were going to burst. I stared at my reflection in the silvered wall of the tank. Through the distortion of the water and the sting of the salt, my body was indistinct and clothed in quicksilver, surrounded by schools of alien, darting fish. I didn't recognize myself, but I didn't take my eyes away until my lungs were ready to burst and I resurfaced.

The guy who thought he was Nicola Tesla was still thrashing away at his straps when I climbed down from the ocean's top. At one side of Old Sparky, there was a timer, like the one on my apparatus, and a knife-switch for timed and untimed sessions.

I stared at him. My life unrolled before me, a life distanced and remote from the world around me, a life trapped in my own deepening battiness. Before I could think about what I was doing, I flipped the switch from "timed" to "untimed." I took one last look at the ocean, looked again at Nicola Tesla, my friend and seducer, stuck to his chair until someone switched it off again, and left the 125th floor.

I took the apparatus apart in the kiddy workshop, stripped it to a collection of screws and wires and circuit boards, then carefully smashed each component with a hammer until it was in thousands of tiny pieces.

It took me two days to do it right, and not a moment passed when I didn't nearly run upstairs and switch off Tesla's chair.

And not a moment passed when I didn't visualize Tesla's wrath, his betrayal, his anger, when I unbuckled him.

And not a moment passed when I didn't wish I could plug in the apparatus, swim in the ocean, take myself away from the world and the world away from me.

The Amazing Robotron returned at the end of the second day.

"Chet, I am glad to see you a-gain."

I bit my lip and choked on tears of relief. "I need to leave here, Robotron. I can't stay another minute. Please, get me out of here. I'll do anything. I'll run away. Get me out, get me out, get me out!" I was babbling, sniveling and crying, and I begged all the harder.

"Why do you want to leave right now?"

"I — I can't take it anymore. I can't stand being here. I'd rather be in prison than in here anymore."

"When I was young, I left the Cen-ter I was rais-ed in to attend coun-sel-ing school. You are near-ly old e-nough to go now. May-be your pa-rents would let you go?"

I knew he had found the only way out.

I started work on my father. I wheedled and begged and demanded, and he just laughed. For three whole days, I used begging as a way to avoid thinking of Tesla. For three days, my father shook his head.

I cried myself to sleep and wallowed in my guilt every night, and when I woke, I cried more. I stopped leaving the apt. I stopped eating. My mother and I sat all day, staring out the window. I stopped talking.

One morning, after my father had left, I dragged a stool to the window and pressed my face against it. My mother clattered around behind me.

"Go," my mother said.

I gave a squeak and turned around. My mother had folded my clothes in a neat pile and had laid a canvas bag beside it. She had the vid remote in her hand, and on the screen was a waiver for me to go to school. We locked eyes for a moment, and I moved to go to her, but she turned and stormed into the kitchen and started to clean the cupboards, silent again.

I left that day.

The saucers lift off to-the-second on-time. The crowd, which has grown, sighs collectively as the saucers disappear over the haze, then a fine mist of solvent rains down on our heads. It's as salty as sea-water, and the bat-house trembles as it begins to melt. Streams of salty water course down its sides.

The top of the building comes into view, the saucers chasing it down as it dissolves, spraying a steady blast of solvent.

I tense as the building's top reaches what I estimate to be 150. My calves bunch and my breath catches in my chest. I feel like I'm drowning, and the building's top crawls downwards, and my feet are sloshing to the ankles in dissolved foam, that runs off into the sewers.

I stay tense until the building's top is far beneath what must be 125, then I exhale in a whoof of air. My head spins, and I brace my hands against my thighs. I'm not looking up when it happens, as a result.

The first sign is when the great tide of green, scummy, plant-stinking water courses down over us, soaking us to the skin, blinding me and sending me reeling in reverie. Did I see hunks of dead, petrified coral crashing around me, or did I imagine it?

A brief second later the building's top emits a bolt of lightning that broke even Tesla's record for man-made lightning, recorded at nearly a kilometer in length. A clap of thunder accompanies it, louder than any sound I have ever heard, and in its wake I am perfectly deaf, submerged in silence.

The finger of lightning crawls through space like a broken-back rattler, and my hair rises from my shoulders. In the presence of so much current, I should be petrified, but it is magnificent. The finger seeks and seeks, then contacts one of the saucers and literally blasts it out of the sky. It plummets in slow-motion, and as it does, the building's top descends even further, and I swear I see the chair falling from the building's edge, and the man strapped inside it had not aged a day in all the lifetimes gone by.

Chet's comm died somewhere in the lightning strike, but the emergency crews that took him away and looked in his ears and poked him in the chest and gave him pills take him back to the Royal York in a saucer, bridging the distance in a few minutes, touching down on Front Street. The Royal York's doorman doesn't bat an eye as he gets the door for him.

The elevator ride is fine. He is still wrapped in the silence of his deafness, but it's a comforting, centering silence.

Once Chet is back in his room, he fires up the vid and starts writing a letter to The Amazing Robotron.

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