

Yellow Called and Mom Was There

By Tim W. Burke

How did it all start?

The image foams up through the previous thought...

When distraught, Doug's mother bobbed her shoulders with each syllable. It was one of the few ways he recognized his mother through the slumped and disheveled old woman in front of him. In the end, the body remembered what the mind forgot.

"Why won't you drive me home?"

She kept at him every time he visited. Four days a week, five months now.

Behind his Mom, rioters roared in Italy; she just pressed buttons until something loud came on the screen. A window under the image of starving looters read "Synaptical link active."

He thought, Can't she be happy with this? The netsystem they have here even monitors her vitals all day, for Christ's sake.

He rubbed at his bald spot in long, soothing strokes. "Your house is in Virginia. This is Delaware. We are five hours away from your house."

"You keep saying that. I want to go home. My mother will be worried."

Grandma had been buried in Illinois before Doug was even born.

On the dresser that came with the room, Doug's father smiled in Kodachrome hues, pastels and sideburns, younger than Doug by ten years. His father had gambled with experimental lung surgery rather than be an old man seen walking with an oxygen tank.

Who was that well-groomed, reserved woman with him?

He thought, if this happens to me, I will blow my brains out.

Then he said, "I'm not going to drive you to your house. This place is okay."

His mother sagged. Italians yelled over the sound of crashing glass. Doug looked out the window, at the other houses in the development, to get the pathetic old woman out of his eyes.

Duchess Hill was an assisted-living project, a bunch of McMansion ranch houses that had defaulted. The houses had been retrofitted with handrails, keypad locks, a high aluminum wall around it all to keep the charges from wandering and staffed by Nurse Assistant work-visa émigrés from Central Asia and West Africa. It was a prison and they both knew it.

A headache spread from the scar where his Synaptical had been injected.

Crap's been in there six months and all I get are headaches.

Outside, the August day had set into dusk the color and warmth of urine.

"It's time to go, Mom. I'll see you on Sunday." He wrote on the puppy dog calendar by the door. "That's two days from now."

She puffed her cheeks, panic breathing. "Don't go. Please."

She followed him down the hall. He passed the other three rooms, each resident tuned to the "Wheel of Fortune" rerun feed. She tried to get through the security door with him, but the Nurse Assistant finally trotted up and called her "Lizzy", which she had always hated and guided her away.

She scratched her chest where her pacemaker had been injected. "I want a diagnostic. Please give me..."

The nurse looked back at Doug: "Everyone's wanting their Synaptical looked at." Then to Mom: "Okay. If it makes you calm down."

He closed the door behind him. On the stoop, he put his head against the warm, gritty doorjamb.

From behind him: "You don't have to come more than you can handle."

The evening R.N. rode her bike under the driveway LED, her scrubs were patterned with old-time "Hello Kitty."

Doug opened his Toyota. "Yeah. Hi Maylee."

The nurse parked her bike by the garage door. "Seriously. You're not doing her any favors by burning yourself out."

"I know. It's just...I'm not back until Sunday. It's a day away."

"You come when you can handle it. This is a lot to deal with."

"Thanks Maylee."

What the hell else was there? Nobody was hiring. His MMAOI kept his mood stable, but wrung every drop of energy out of him.

Maylee kneaded at her lower spine. Didn't she have her lumbar