

Post

by Tara Cottrell

From the roof of Judy Garland's house, she watches the parrots flutter in and out of the bottle brush palms. She misses the pigeons, unassuming, pale grey and soft. Not like these parrots, plumage like firecrackers exploding, their bodies heavy as crows, overfed as they are by the untended orchards. Yes, pigeons. Where are the pigeons of Los Angeles? Beyond the parrots and the palms, she can see an airplane resting in the canyon below, belly up, wings like outstretched arms, the occupants inside presumably rotting in their seats. The scavengers and their machines haven't appeared yet, but it's only a matter of time.

She hears the tap tap tapping of Paul's metal finger at the door of his upstairs bedroom now. He wants to be let out. So sweet the way he does it, so polite. He could smash the door to bits with his titanium fists if he wanted to. She waits as long as she can before rising from the lounge, her legs still thick with last night's Dramamine. Tap, tap, tap. If she leaves him long enough, he will start singing to himself in Spanish. He was a refurb and she suspects the songs were loaded by the previous owner. All the Mexicans here own at least one All Purpose Protector. They're the only ones with any money now.

She takes the narrow staircase from the roof down to his opened window and clambers in. He stands with his arms at his side, just a foot or two from the bed, facing her.

"Hello Paul," she says.

His eyes flip open and he gives her a smile, teeth bright as stars. There's something different about him.

He holds a pair of scissors. Where he got them, she has no idea.

"I cut my hair," he says.

"I can see that."

His hair is odd to begin with. She's not sure why they bothered with hair in the first place. It is all wrong, a spikey brown thatch

tipped with white. It is a texture made for sleeping outdoors, maybe even underground.

"I cut my hair," he says again.

"It looks nice," she says.

"My hair is made of fox fur."

"Ah, okay," she says.

Occasionally he offers her a small piece of random information about himself. A few weeks ago he told her he liked apples.

She looks again at his hair. It does look like fox fur. They have been culling foxes for years now, and yet they still roam L.A. in packs so large they clog the interstate.

He follows her down the stairs. Clunk, clunk, screech. Clunk, clunk screech. It breaks her heart to hear it. Not much longer, she thinks. Not much longer.

As is their habit, she and Paul spend the morning by the empty pool in the backyard. It is overcast, the sky clotted with clouds like ripening bruises. Paul sits rigidly on an overturned bucket. He cannot sit on the patio chairs, because they did a shoddy job of skin-layering him and his metal thighs are sharp enough to slice through the plastic webbing of the chair. So many things they didn't think of in the older models. He reads to her from a book about the life of Judy Garland, a movie star she has never heard of from the last century. This is Judy Garland's house, or was, a very long time ago. She knows this because on the back cover is a photo of Judy sitting on the edge of a huge fountain made of carved stone mermaids. The fountain is still here, still the centerpiece of the torn up circular driveway in the front. She doesn't know where he got the book, just like she doesn't know the origin of the scissors he used to cut his hair. She guesses there is a room up there she doesn't know about. When she first broke into the house, after the weather riots, she did a quick look through the upstairs rooms. Most were empty, a few had been partially torched, probably by the farmers. From the road though, she can look up and see tiny window on the second floor, next to Paul's. Maybe that's the room,

she thinks, full of scissors and books about Judy Garland.

At the bottom of the empty pool, leaves mulch in a rust colored puddle of rain. She used to wake for the rain, rarity that it was. But with the Dramamine, she wakes for nothing but Paul's tap tap tapping in the morning. Paul is telling her about Judy's second marriage now. She inhales and smells something she recognizes, something that sets off the ripply sensation of *deja vous*. Paul goes on.

She stops him. His olfactory program is only intermittently right. But she tries anyway.

"Smell that," she says. "What is it?"

"Trick or Treat," he sing songs.

He's right. Rotting pumpkins, though no one has celebrated Halloween for at least twenty years.

She lies back on the chaise, fans her toes out. Paul painted her toenails a mercurial silver yesterday and each nail looks like a square of tin. She smells candy corns, the seam of a torn wrapper from a chocolate bar, the rubbery smell of the inside of a mask.

This is his ether, she thinks. He satisfies her unending craving for what was, offering up gorgeous pieces of nostalgia. He gives her the before, not the after, the pre, not the post. It is why she spends entire days with him by the pool listening to him talk and talk about Judy. It is why she takes Dramamine at night, and sometimes during the day, so she will sleep through the urge to bring him into bed with her.

"Weather tonight?" she asks Paul.

"Three tangerines," he says.

He does this more and more now. Spits out random data, ancient software serving up something from another time, another owner maybe. Three years ago he might have been sent on a grocery outing and told to buy fruit.

She tries again. "What will the weather be like this evening Paul?"

"Delicious," he says.

This is his assessment of tangerines, not the weather. It's

pointless to ask. There's no predicting the weather anymore, even for an All Purpose Protector like Paul. The vagaries of the climate have people angry. Two months ago, a weatherman was kidnapped in broad daylight outside one of the television studios in Culver City. He's still missing. It was the same week as the tornado, the same week lighting shot two planes out of the sky. The one in the canyon below is the only one accounted for. Even big things disappear now.

Paul has begun reading again. They got the voice right, God did they ever get the voice right. If she closes her eyes she can imagine he is a regular man, which of course, is part of the problem.

In the book, Judy Garland is living in London now, with her new husband. Paul turns the book around like he's a children's librarian and shows her a grainy photo of the front door of Judy's house in London. There is nothing remarkable about it, save the slot in the door, presumably for when there was still a letter service. POST, it is marked.

Later she takes Paul upstairs to his room, so she can study the manual without him seeing. "Time for a nap," she tells him. He is still reading as she shuts his door. Garland was found dead in her London home, in her bathroom by her last husband, Mickey Deans, on June 22nd, 1969. She hears him as she walks down the hall, his voice echoing off the marble floors.

She pauses at the top of the stairs, calls back: "Get some rest Paul, there's a funeral tonight. You love funerals."

He doesn't stop. Coroner Gavin Thursdon stated that the cause of death was accidental overdose of barbiturates; her blood contained the equivalent of ten 1.5-grain Seconal capsules.

She lies back on her bed, a mattress pushed up against a wall of the foyer. It is a cavernous and cold, the walls tagged with graffiti. But the bed is comfortable and she found a set of very soft Mickey Mouse sheets in a kitchen cupboard. Plus, the windows. She loves the windows, tall and wide, strangely unbroken. Best of all, they're high enough so that when Patrol

comes by with their lights shining, they miss her completely.

Outside she can hear people starting to gather on Mulholland. There is a sponsored funeral today. Paul loves a sponsored funeral. The lights on his panel rise and fall in beautiful patterns when he sees the carriage roll by. He stares without blinking, mouth ajar, his whole body defying gravity as it tips forward to get closer. This one is for a musician, a Britney Spears who expired on her eighty-fifth birthday. The flyer says it will pass her house at 7:30 p.m. Do not miss this amazing opportunity. And under that: Brought to you by the makers of New Cocaine. Better. Stronger. Faster.

She pulls the manual out from under the mattress. The pages are greasy and dogeared. She keeps thinking there are parts she might not have read yet, that will give her the answers. But she never seems to get any closer to figuring out what to do. The manual reads like a poor translation from another language. There are illustrations that don't look like Paul at all and she imagines the manual belongs to another model entirely. She feels under her pillow for a Dramamine tablet, finds one, and swallows it. She stares at a page full of strange diagrams that make no sense. This is why so many of the All Purpose Protectors end up in the canyon with the cars, she thinks, limbs bent backwards, necks at odd angles.

The only section in the manual that is clear is the section at the back, the section titled: Gepetto Syndrome. They are clear about this because they want her to get a new one, she thinks bitterly. The whole section bleeds with red text, warning her what will happen. She scans the signs of the syndrome for what must be the hundredth time, then pats around for another Dramamine.

As she drifts off, she feels earthquakes or believes she does. Mini-quakes have been going on for months now. But it's become a tease; the big one they keep promising never comes. The geologists still left, the ones who haven't fled California, or the country all together, occasionally agree to television interviews. Like the weathermen, they look terrified and sad.

She wakes at sunset. No tapping, just the sound of the wind picking up outside. She stands at the windows and looks out. Near the fallen airplane, a few broken cars stud the ground, pushed over the edge by people who can't afford the electricity. The fading light glints off wing mirrors and windshields. She gets her binoculars and trains them on the airplane. Still no looters. Something fills the frame though, dark and shifting, moving closer. She lowers the binoculars. It's a man in the driveway, coming towards the house. She cannot stop herself: she waves. He waves back, without smiling. He is not in a uniform and when he gets to the window, he knocks on it, as though she hasn't seen him yet.

She stares at him through the glass. He face is bruised, his lower lip split. 'Who are you?' she asks.

He does not answer her. An All Purpose Protector, she thinks. A new one. Maybe they finally got the skin texture right or maybe they split his lip like that in the factory. For authenticity.

"Are you from the plane? Did you survive the crash?"

He points inside. "Can I come in?"

She goes to the front door. He follows her, passing the rest of the windows. If he wants to hurt her, Paul is upstairs, and in sleep mode. She should not open the door.

"Please," he says.

She slides the deadbolt and opens.

He bows to her slightly in thanks. "I'm a weatherman," he says.

She doesn't know what to say to this. "Do you want to sit down?" she asks. She indicates the bed behind her.

"I'm very hungry, do you have some food?"

"Just ration packets, but you're welcome to them."

He nods.

She leaves him sitting on the edge of the mattress and goes to the kitchen, where she unzips a packet of stew and pours it into a bowl, snaps a butane canister into the stovetop and turns on the heat. When she comes back, he is lying back on the sheets, eyes closed. He makes soft sleeping sounds like a real man.

"Your food is here," she says.

He blinks and struggles up. Definitely a real man, she thinks. Paul only has two settings - awake and asleep, there is no transition from one to the other. She has never seen a good transition with a Protector.

She hears tapping. Paul is awake

"Is there someone here?"

"Paul," she says.

"Is that your roommate?"

"He's a Protector. He's a refurb. He's breaking down."

"I hear they can get pretty violent."

She frowns. "He's very polite."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," he says. "Where did you get him?"

"Target," she says.

"I love Target," he says wistfully.

"Me too. Though a little less, now that Paul is breaking down."

"You could return him."

"It's too late," she says. She considers telling him that she's lost the receipt, that they don't take returns on refurbs.

"I'm in love with him."

"Gepetto Syndrome," he says, nodding.

"I was warned. I read the literature. It's my own fault."

"Falling in love is not your fault."

"You sound like the drug conglomerate," she says.

She shakes out a few Dramamine for the weatherman. Four of them rest in her hand.

"Besides," she says. "He's made of metal. I'd say that's my fault."

"You know they're giving those out free now with the ration packets," he says, looking at the pills in her palm.

"Finally something I can use," she says. "It takes the edge off."

"Nothing takes the edge off," he says.

She doesn't know what to say to this.

"I can help you, you know," he says. "I can help you get rid of

Paul. My wife fell in love with one too.”

“I'm sorry,” she says.

“I'm going to let him watch this last funeral. He can't take his eyes off the streamers.”

The weatherman nods and she wonders if his wife fell in love with a Protector who liked funerals too. He finishes the stew, and in the remaining gravy makes crosshatch patterns in the bottom of his bowl with the edge of his spoon. The room is darkening around them and she is sitting close enough to him to feel warmth. It is nearly night now. She gets up and turns on all the flashlights mounted to the wall.

“Whose is it?” he asks. “The funeral.”

“I don't know really,” she says. “She was famous once I think. She sang songs. Britney something. That's all I know.”

She returns to the mattress, where he is lying flat on his back with his hands clasped over his chest. She lies down next to him and closes her eyes.

“Where are you from?” she asks.

“Culver City. I was kidnapped. I'm a weatherman.”

She opens her eyes and rolls to face him. “You're him,” she says.

He meets her stare. Maybe his lip isn't split she thinks. In the dark it looks more like a birth defect.

“Don't you want to go home to your family? They must be wondering where you are,” she says.

He shrugs. “I'm not sure.” He heaves himself off the bed with great effort. “Shall we go take in the funeral then? Do you want to go and get Paul?”

She has no idea what Paul will do with the weatherman. And if he misses this funeral, she'll have an excuse to wait for the next one.

“I might let him sleep,” she says.

He looks at her for a long time. “Alright,” he says.

Both sides of Mulholland are already cluttered with old people in fold up chairs, blankets over their knees. She and the weatherman sit with a few others at the edge of road, squatting on the side of a

curb. Next to them, a man standing in a pink polka dotted rain coat is crying a little. The man next to him pats his back.

"She lived a good life," the man says to the polka dotted coat. "All the work she did with those children after the war."

"I can hear the carriage coming," the weatherman says.

Suddenly, here comes the Dramamine, entering her bloodstream in a steady wave. She wonders if she will ever build up a tolerance for it; she hopes not.

The wind has picked up, swirling leaves, lifting the edges of blankets. When the glass walled carriage at last appears, the wind is so strong it upsets the horses. They jerk their heads, pause, begin again. Paul should be here she thinks, he especially likes the horses. Men following behind toss sachets of New Cocaine to the crowd. Only a few pick them up. Britney lays in the glass carriage in an emerald green sheath, her white hair fanning out beside her. The carriage is painted with the words Forget Me Not. Next to the words is a picture of a blue capsule blooming from a stem.

The carriage passes. Now the wind is too much. People pack up their chairs, fold blankets. She huddles into the weatherman's side.

"Where is this wind coming from?"

"I don't do the weather anymore," he says sadly. "And even when I did, I wouldn't have been able to tell you."

"It's all Target's fault," she says.

"The weather? It might be I suppose."

"No, the Protectors. They get cold, so you have to put blankets over them. You have to load new software, like all the time. Of course you fall in love with them."

Now they are the only ones left, the faint clop clop of the hooves fading. "We should leave California," he says. "There's nothing good here anymore."

She thinks of Paul, of leaving him here in a dismantled pile in the foyer and she feels like crying. "We have to take him apart now," she tells the weatherman. "Before I change my mind." He takes her hand and kisses it without looking at her. She does not feel the cut part of his lip. Then he stands and helps her to her feet. She turns

to look at her house, at Judy's house. The front door is open, but she remembers closing it.

The weatherman points. "Look," he says.

Paul stands in the fountain, as motionless as the stone mermaids beside him. She can just make out his squared off shoulders and above that the shadowy fuzz of his strange hair. His panel lights up, pulsing and multicolored. She wonders how long he has been standing there and what he has seen.? "Paul," she says.

Paul says her name, something she has never told him. He steps out of the fountain and moves towards them steadily. Clunk, clunk, screech. Clunk, clunk, screech. She suddenly wants to tell Paul that she loves him. All these years, she's felt like a heroine, a survivor, a one-member species fated to keep going. While people disappeared, while planes dropped from the sky and animals went extinct, she held on for Paul. But now, watching him come towards them, walking like the robot he truly is, she knows she can't do it anymore.

"What is he doing?" the weatherman asks.

"I don't know," she says. But she does.

