

Birdy Girl
by Robert Reed

UPS is at the door. A package for my wife, as usual. The woman's one helluva shopper. I sign on the slot. It's a box, maybe twenty inches at the longest. Not heavy, either. I bring it inside, and the box says, "Let me out, why don't you?" So I look at the return address. Oh, Christ. But the UPS drone has already rolled away, no time to waste. What can I do? Put the thing in the closet, I decide. Go back to my life, what there is of it. And pretend that I'm not hearing a voice calling to me from under the winter coats.

My wife gets home from work, and I tell her, "Look in the closet." She gives this little hoot and says, "Where's your knife?" I've got this old hunting knife that we use for packages. Like she's dressing a deer, she cuts the tape and opens the flaps and unwraps the aerogel, and she pulls out her doll and says, "Genevieve," with an instant fondness. "That's my name," the doll replies, looking at both of us. It's got big, big eyes. Green eyes, I notice. And I'm not someone who usually notices the colors of things. Those eyes are stuck in an oversized head riding on top of an immature body, reminding me of a child. But the hair is huge. It's the hair that every woman wants, rich and flowing with just enough curls. Brown hair, I notice. And the plastic skin looks heavily tanned. And there's something adult about the voice, even if it comes rumbling from a body that isn't quite eighteen inches tall.

"I have clothes," the dolls says. "Wonderful little clothes!" So of course my wife spends the next hour playing with her new toy and its fancy wardrobe. She calls her friends in the craft club. Everyone drops over, holo-style. Our living room is jammed with grown women and their Birdy Girls. I'll pass through, just to watch. Just to spy. "What happened to the quilting?" I ask. Last week, the group was making quilts with old-fashioned fabrics. Quasicrystal patterns. Kind of neat. But one of the projected women snorts and looks up from her half-dressed doll, telling me, "We still quilt. We do all of our heirloom crafts." Then another woman laughs and says, "We just do them slower now." And my wife gives me a certain look, asking, "What do you think?"

Her doll's dressed in a short skirt and a silky shirt, and its shoes have spiked heels, and the way it wears its hair is something. Frightening, really. I have to say, "God, she's got a big ass." Which causes the doll to smile and wink, telling me, "Thank you very much, good sir." Then after the laughter dies back, I ask, "So what's it dressed for?" And my wife laughs and says, "She's going out. Out to the clubs." Which I take for a joke. I don't know much about this new hobby. This fad. But later, I hear the front open and close, and I come in to find just my wife. The projected women are gone. And every doll. "Where's your new toy?" I ask. My wife is shoving trash into the empty box. "Oh, she's gone clubbing. Like I said." "What kind of club is that?" I ask. And she says, "This box needs to be thrown out." So I trudge out to the recyke tub and, standing under the street light, I skim through the Birdy Girl literature. Just to know a little something.

I have my own friends, and I've got my little hobbies, too. So it bugs me when my wife says, "You should do things with your time. Constructive things." She says that a lot. She doesn't think much of my softball games or the vegetable/weed garden or how I can watch sports for hours at a stretch. She forgets there isn't much to do these days that's flat-out constructive. I'm not lazy. I had a job and a paycheck. But then the AI technologies made their Big Leap, and all that noise about the machines freeing people for better jobs came to a smashing end. I mean, why lay down for a human surgeon when the robotic ones are so much more skilled? Why do anything that matters when you'd

have to compete with artificial critters who learn faster than you, and better than you, and who themselves are just prototypes for the next wonders to come off the assembly line? My wife forgets how it is. She's got a government job, because nobody's given the government to the machines yet. Besides, between her salary and my severance cake, we do fine. So what's the problem?

It's practically one in the morning when her doll gets home. It comes crawling through the cat door, and my wife jumps out of bed and goes into the kitchen, asking, "How was it?" She carries her new friend into our bedroom. The doll stinks of cigarettes, and I think beer got dumped on it. "Go back to sleep," my wife tells me. Then she makes a bed for her doll, spreading out her tiniest quasicrystal quilt inside an open drawer. Like people, Birdy Girls need to sleep. To dream. I read that in the brochure. Pretending to sleep, I listen to the whispers, hearing about its adventures at what sounds like The Hothouse. That was a college bar back when I noticed such things. Maybe it still is, sort of. Whatever the place was, it sounds like real people and machines are getting together. My wife's doll met the other women's dolls there, and they had a good time, and her doll wants to go again tomorrow night. "Can I, please?" it asks. And my wife says, "That or something better. Whatever you want, Genevieve."

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I know what this is about. I'm not an abstract sort of guy, but I'm not a complete idiot, either. We've talked about having kids, and all things considered, it doesn't appeal to me. A kid takes a certain something that I just don't have anyway. But even when my wife agrees with me, I can see doubt in her eyes. And that's coming from a guy who isn't all that tuned to anyone's emotions. Not even his own.

The dolls sleeps till noon, nearly. I walk into the bedroom a couple times, watching its eyes moving as it dreams. When it gets up, it dresses itself in new jeans and a T-shirt with KISS ME, I'M INSATIABLE written across the front. "I'm going out," it warns me. I don't say a word. Which takes an effort, frankly. The machine has its ways of teasing reactions from people; there's sociable software behind those dreaming eyes. But I manage to say nothing, and it leaves me, and I watch half of the Cardinals game, losing interest after I'm done with lunch and I'm done watching when one team's whipped. One-sided games are never fun. Instead, I go out back to do a little work. Watering and weeding. I do everything by hand. No gardening drones for me, thank you. I work until the heat gets old, then I sit in one of the adirondacks that I built last year. Woodworking; it sounds like a fine, noble hobby until you make your first wobbly chair. I'm sitting in the shade, wobbling, and some little motion catches my eye. Above the grapevine on the back fence is a face. The face is watching me. For an instant, I'm guessing that it's another Birdy Girl. But then she waves at me, and I realize that it isn't like that. She waves, and I wave back, and then I find some reason to stand and stretch and head back inside again.

Our cat is sprawled out on the living room floor. The doll is beside him, scratching his eyes and telling him that he's a pretty kitty. A beautiful kitty. Then it looks up at me, remarking, "You've got to be curious. So ask me questions." And I say, "I don't want to." Then it tells me, "Genevieves are curious and adventurous. We watch and we remember. And we have a distinct, rather quirky sense of humor." So I say, "Prove it." And just like that, the doll reaches under the sofa, pulling out the hunting knife that I use on boxes. The tanned face smiles, big white teeth showing. And with both hands,

it lifts the weapon, saying, "How about it? A little knife fight before dinner?"

What can I do? I laugh. I can't help myself. And the doll laughs with me, neatly flipping the knife and catching it by the back of the blade, and walking forwards, she hands the hilt up to me. She gives it up. And that's when I start thinking of her as being "her," and that's how our first conversation gets rolling.

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After Genevieve goes clubbing again, I mention to my wife, "Someone's living in the Coldsmith house." She asks, "Who?" while looking down at her embroidery: a picture of a farmhouse and horse-drawn wagons. I tell her, "There was a kid in the backyard. A girl. Maybe five, maybe less." Which makes her look at me. "Just one child?" she asks. "That's all I saw," I report. She wants details, but she doesn't ask. All the obvious questions have obvious answers, and what's the point in hearing what you know already? So down goes her head, hands working the needle again.

It's past two when Genevieve finally gets home. I'm the one who hears the cat door, my wife sleeping as if dead. I slip out of bed and into shorts and I meet the girl midway. She's carrying her spiked shoes, trying to be quiet. Her short skirt looks jacked up too high, and her hair could stand a good combing. And that's not all I'm thinking now. She just stands there, smiling, swinging her little shoes with her arms out straight. It's as if she know what's going on inside my idiot head.

Finally, in a whisper, I ask, "So was it fun?"

"Everything's fun," she tells me.

And I warn her, flat out, "Don't ever tell me anything about it. Ever. Please?"

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The girl doesn't eat, but she can taste. Her little pink tongue leaves marks on my lunch. I don't know why, but I like that. I find it charming, somehow. She says, "It's all good," and I admit, "That's the one place that I like AIs. When they're cooks." My wife and I bought a top-of-the-line chef last winter. "Can you smell, too?" I ask, and she makes a show of sniffing, then breaks into a soft barking cough, one tiny hand over her mouth in a ladylike fashion.

Like yesterday, she leaves through the cat door. I don't know where she's going. But when I'm outside, weeding the front lawn, she's suddenly standing next to me. I'm not sure when she showed up. Smiling as I work, I tell her, "This has to be boring for you." She watches my hands tugging at the weeds, and she nods, and says, "But it's fun, too. If I let it be." Then an idea hits me. "There's a job that needs doing," I explain, "and it might be exciting." She wants to know what it is. "I bet you could climb that tree, if I started you with a boost." I point at the big locust in the middle of the yard. "Squirrels stripped the bark off that high branch, killing it—"

"You want me to kill your squirrels?" she says. Jokes.

"Maybe later," I tell her. "Today, let's just trim that dead limb off. Okay?"

She weighs nothing, nearly. I could practically throw her to where she needs to be. And she's stronger than seems right, moving up from the low branches, carrying my diamond-edged saw by the strap, holding the strap between her big white teeth.

The cutting part is easy. She uses both hands and works the blade through the soft dead wood, the pink of her tongue showing as she concentrates. Then comes the splitting crack when there's not enough wood holding up the rest, and that's when she loses her balance. The jerk of the saw takes her by surprise, pitching her forwards, and I'm watching her let go of the saw, both of them tumbling now, and before I can think, I'm jumping. I'm reaching out. I guess my plan is to catch her and save her. But she weighs so little that the air slows her down, and while she's squealing with pleasure, I'm slamming my hands into the tree trunk, then landing too hard on my shoulder. I'm lying there, moaning, when the saw hits next to me and she plops down on my back. With concern, she asks, "Are you all right?" I grunt something about being tough. And with amusement, she reminds me, "Plastic is pretty tough. For future reference."

My wife never hears the whole story. She just sees my scraped hands and the medicated sling, and she walks around the dead limb laid out in the yard. Without prompting, she fills in the blanks. I'm an idiot; that's the easy story. And that's the story I let stand.

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UPS comes again. And the brown-suited drone escapes before I notice that it's our address but not my wife's name. Or mine. It's the same last name, but who's Kahren? The city register answers that. My first thought is to call UPS and ream them out for their mistake. And that's my second thought, too. But somehow it doesn't get done. Morning turns to afternoon, and part of me grows curious. Takes charge. Before leaving the house, I look in at the doll. Genevieve was out until four in the morning, nearly. She looks peaceful, still deep in her dreams, and I can't help but feel a little curious about what she's seeing right now.

Our street curls into the next street, and the house numbers repeat. That's why this looks like a harmless mistake. And maybe it is. My plan, near as I can tell, is to leave the package beside the front door, and, at the most, ring the bell before making my escape. But there's a kid already sitting on the front porch. He's four years old, if I'm judging things right. He's sitting on an old sofa, legs sticking straight out, staring at the reader in his lap. Then he looks up, something like a smile breaking across the face. "The item came to you by mistake," he remarks with a too-quick voice. With his words running together, he says, "Thank you for bringing us the item."

I don't like this. But I can't just throw the box at him and run. So I set it down on the porch while standing on the steps, and with my voice coming out slow and stupid, I remark, "We've got the same last name."

"It's a common name," is his only response. And I say, "Whatever you have in this box, I hope it isn't too illegal." Which is a joke. Nothing but. But he

isn't smiling anymore. He waits a half second, which is a long time for him. Then he tells me, "UPS has excellent security AIs, and the best sensors, and I am not a criminal, sir." The creature is probably only three years old, I realize. They're even smarter than the four- and five-year-old wonders, which makes it worse. They're smarter and less willing to pretend that they're not. Again, he says, "Sir," and stares hard at me. He has huge black eyes set inside a tiny round face, and he keeps staring, telling me, "If you please, I'd like to focus all of my attentions on my work now."

I don't know why. But I've got to ask the creature, "What do you do for work?"

If my new neighbor thinks about my question, he does it in a microsecond. Then with a smug little grin, he admits, "I don't think there's any conceivable way that I could explain what I do to you."

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The craft women come over again, only this time for real. They're quilting and dressing their dolls and having a wonderful time, talking up a storm until I walk in on them. Then everyone gets quiet. Even the dolls. Even Genevieve. It was her voice that was loudest, and it's her that I look at now, asking everyone, "What's all the laughing about?" My wife says, "Honey. Do you have to lurk?"

I don't want to be a total prick. But I've got to ask, "What were you ladies talking about?" Genevieve says, "Last night." Then the other dolls shush her. She's wearing a new outfit; I've never seen this one. The skirt reaches to her ankles, with flowers on it, and the shirt and jacket are a light purple-lavender, I guess you'd call it—and she's got fat green emeralds stuck in her thick hair and plastered across her flat little chest.

"I'm going out," I tell my wife. In front of everyone, she asks, "Out where?" So I say, "Remember? The guys are playing in that tournament tonight." I mean the gang from my old job; nothing's left of our company but its softball team. "What about your arm?" she asks, and I say, "It's mostly better."

"I didn't think you were going to play," she says, definitely not happy now.

"I guess you thought wrong," I tell her, keeping things nice and stirred up. Making sure she won't want me coming home anytime soon.

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Human beings have never played better softball. That's what we tell ourselves when we're out on bright warm nights like this. This is exactly the kind of thing that the AIs have freed us to do, we boast. Laughing loudly. Sneaking beers out of the coolers. Everyone taking their hard cuts at the slow fat balls, then running the bases as fast as they can.

The best softball in human history is being played tonight, but not on this field. Not by us. We're just a pack of middle-aged men with too much time to eat and nothing important at stake. Not even halfway important. Two minutes

after we're done playing, I can't remember who won. Half an hour after we're done, it's just me and couple buddies sitting on the bleachers, finishing the last of the beers, talking about nothing and everything at the same time.

The lights over the field have turned themselves off. This is a clear night, and looking up, we can see the cities sparkling on the moon, the cities flying along in their orbits. Up there, it's AIs and it's our own little kids, plus older kids with enough genius to hang on, and every last one of them is looking down at the three of us.

"They're building starships now," says one guy. Which makes the other guy say, "No, I read they're building something else. They aren't ships like we know ships." And being the deciding vote, I warn them, "There's no knowing what they're doing up there." Then I tell my story about the package and my new neighbors. "What?" says the first guy. "You've got two of them living behind you?" I don't like his tone. I don't know why, but it makes me squirm. Then that guy says, "They're too strange. Too scary. Maybe you're different, but I couldn't stand them being that close to me."

The guy has a couple kids. They'd have to be twelve and fourteen, or something like that. They had to be born normal, but that doesn't mean they've stayed that way. If you're young enough, and willing, you can marry your brain to all sorts of AI machinery. When was the last time he mentioned his kids? I can't remember. And that's when I realize what must have happened and what's got him all pissy now.

I finish my beer and heave the empty over the backside of the bleacher. Neat-freak robots will be scurrying around the park tonight, and tomorrow night, and forever. Why not give them a little something to pick up?

After a good minute of silence, I tell the guys, "We're talking about having a kid." Which isn't true. I'm just thinking about it for myself. "I know it's not like it used to be," I admit. "I know ours would probably jump the nest before she's three."

"It's more like two," says the second guy. He's never been married or had kids. Shaking his head, he flings his empty after mine, telling me, "You don't want that. They're more machine than people, these kids are."

Which gets the first guy pissed. "I don't think I'd go that far," he growls. Then he stands and puts his empty into the empty trash can. And he picks up one of the titanium bats. In the moonlight, I can see his face. I can see him thinking hard about his own kids. About everything. Then he lifts the bat up high and slams it down into the aluminum bleacher, making a terrific racket. Again and again, he bashes the bleacher, leaving a sloppy dent and the air ringing, and him sweating rivers, while his two friends stare out at the empty ballfield, pretending to notice none of it.

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The Hothouse was a dump in the old days. And still is, which makes things better somehow. Easier. I don't feel half as out of place as I expected. Walking through the smoky rooms. Watching people and things that aren't people. I'm not even the oldest critter in this place, which is the biggest surprise.

The music sucks, but bar music always sucks.

Maybe fifty Birdy Girls are hanging around. There's usually five or six of them at a table, along with as many college-age kids. The kids are too old to mesh up with AIs, but they're wearing the trendy machines on their faces. In their hair. Some have four or five machines that give them advice or whatever. The machines talk in low buzzes. The Birdy Girls talk in normal voices. The college kids are the quiet ones, drinking their beers and smoking the new cigarettes. Doing nothing but listening, by the looks of it.

I don't listen. I just hunt until I see her standing in the middle of a round table, dancing with another Birdy Girl. Except it isn't her. I know it from her clothes, which are wrong, and I know by other ways, too. It's a feeling that stops me midway. Then I make a slow turn, searching for a second Genevieve doll. There isn't any. Two turns and I'm sure. Then I'm thinking how this looks, if anyone cares to notice me. A grown man doing this, and for what? But it's pretty obvious I don't give a shit what anyone thinks, and that's when I move up to the round table, saying, "Hey, there," with a loud voice. It barely sounds like me. When the tanned face lifts and those green eyes fix on me, I say, "Is there another Genevieve around? Anyone see her?"

This Genevieve says, "No," and picks up someone's spare cigarette with both hands, tasting a little puff. It's one of the college boys who tilts his head back, blowing blue smoke while he's talking. "There was one. With a group. Ago, maybe ten minutes?" Then one of his AI add-ons whispers something, and he adds, "Twelve minutes ago." So I ask what she was wearing. Was it a long skirt and jewelry? Again the machine buzzes, and the kid gives me a big smile. He looks like every frat kid that I went to school with. Smug, and handsome. And drunk enough to be happy, or dangerous, or both. "That's your girl," he promises. "She and her Girls went outside with some old man." And with a hard pleasure, he adds, "Almost as old as you, by the looks of him."

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It's a pleasure to be outside. It's a torture. I'm standing in the middle of the parking lot, looking at empty cabs and parked cars. I'm wishing that she saw me drive in. But my car's sitting empty. Then I'm telling myself that she and her little friends have left, since it's after one in the morning now. Is it that late? Just to be sure, I make a circuit around the parking lot. An old minivan sits in the back corner, back where it's darkest. The windows are popped open. I can't see inside, but I hear the voices. The giggles. I can't remember deciding to walk up to the van, but that's what I must have done. Decided. Because I'm there now. I'm pressing my face to the glass. There's a little light burning inside, and when I squint, I can tell someone's pulled the seats out of the back end, nothing but a narrow mattress on the floor, and the man lying on his back with his hands jammed behind his tilted head, looking like he's about to try doing a sit-up, his head tilted and his buggy big eyes watching everything that's happening to him. Just like that, the door handle's in my hand. The side door has jumped open. And if I've gone this far, I might as well drag the son of a bitch out by his ankles. Birdy Girls and pant legs go flying. I'm going to kick his ass. God, I'm going to paste him. But then he's screaming at me, begging, hands over his scrunched-up face. It's a bald old face. It could be my face in twenty years. I can't smack him. I can't even pretend that I'm going to. So I drop him and start hunting for the Genevieve. Then I see her face glaring at me, her mouth tiny and hard, and I start looking at what I'm doing, and why, and it's my voice that asks me, "What in hell's going on here?"

Genevieve says, "Don't you know?" Then she tells her friends, "I know fun. And this isn't."

Too late by a long ways, I notice that the jewelry in her hair is wrong, and she's wearing that hair different than before, and it isn't the same dress. And to myself, in a low stupid voice, I say, "I'm an idiot."

"Yeah," says the wrong Genevieve. "And you're not keeping it too much of a secret, either."

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I've got two women waiting for me at home. One of them says, "You look rough," and the other adds, "It must have been quite a ball game." I don't know which of them scares me worse. Instead of answering, I take a long shower and dry myself in the bathroom, putting on clean shorts before coming out again, finding both of them asleep in my bed, one curled up on the other's chest. It's almost noon when I come to. I'm in the living room, on the couch. A slow, stiff search of the place finds nobody. Just me and my hangover. Dressed and fed, I step into the backyard, thinking the air will do some good. But the sun is scorching and bright enough to blind, and I end up sitting in the shade, on my wobbly adirondack, hoping nobody finds me for a week or two.

Then a voice calls out. "Thank you," it says. Maybe twice, maybe more than that. Then she says my name, and that's when I pry open my eyes, looking across the yard, slowly focusing on the young face staring over the top of the fence. I can go inside. Pretend that I didn't hear her, or just play it rude. But then she says, "I'm Kahren, the one with the package." And in the next breath, she says, "My brother was rude to you. But believe me, I'm thankful for your help, good sir."

Walking to the back fence takes me a week. A year. Forever. I'm staring up at a little girl's face and a woman's smart eyes. She's climbed up on a grapevine to look over. If she's five years old, she's one of the oldest of these kids. And the slowest, and the simplest. Maybe that's why I can stand talking to her. Again, she says my name. Then out of nowhere, she says, "You and I are related. We have a common ancestor in the late 1800s." And I say, "Is that so?" Then I ask, "How do you know? Because of our names?" But no, she shakes her head, telling me, "Our DNA. I took a peek—"

"At my DNA?" I blurt. "How did you get that?"

"From the package. You left flakes of dead skin on the sticky label—"

"Don't touch my DNA," I tell her. I shout it, practically.

"I never will again," she promises. Then she dips her head, sad about making me angry. Really, she looks nothing but sweet. Five years old, with curly blonde hair and a pouting lip, and behind those big blue eyes revs a brain that's probably already had more thoughts than I'll have in my entire life. But it never occurred to the girl that she was doing wrong. She was just being curious. Being herself. So I say, "Forget it." And dipping her head farther, she says sadly, "I can't forget."

She's a sweet, sweet girl, I'm thinking.

Then several seconds have passed without conversation, and I know she has to be bored. That's why I ask, "So what was in that package? Anything important?" And she doesn't say. Watching me, and not. Nothing showing on her pretty little face. Then just as I'm thinking that she didn't hear me, she asks, "Are you happy?"

"What's that mean?" I ask. "Like, in my life ... am I happy ... ?"

She nods. Bites her lower lip, embarrassed again. "If you don't want to answer," she starts, and I say, "No." I say, "No, I'm not happy." Over the fence, talking to a perfect stranger, I admit, "A lot of things really suck lately. If you want to know the truth."

"I do," she says. "Absolutely, yes."

Then she tells me, "The package you brought me ... it involves my work. My brother's work. We belong to a body of thinking souls, people like you and like me, and certain AIs, too. We realize now that the AI technologies were a tragic mistake. Tragic." She says the word a third time. "Tragic." Then she shakes her head, saying, "Very few people are happy. Even my generation suffers. There's boredom for us. There are subtle, unexpected problems with the new technologies. It makes an imaginative person wonder: Wouldn't it be nice if we could roll everything back to before? To the days prior to the Big Leap?"

The girl does a great job of keeping her voice slow. But it's as if I can't understand what she's telling me. I have to run the words back through my head, wringing the sense out of them. More quiet seconds pass, and I finally ask, "What are you telling me? That you really can change things?"

"Not by myself, no." She leaks a big sigh, plainly hunting for the best way to say what's next. "Roll things back how?" I ask her. I want to know. And she explains, "I guess it's just as it sounds. Roll things back literally. Time is an arrow in motion, and it's amazingly easy to fool that arrow, making it reverse itself. But of course, that doesn't do anyone any good if it just puts us back where we started. If the Big Leap is inevitable, and if anyone builds even just one cheap and easy thinking machine ..."

I keep staring up at her. Waiting.

"The tough trick," she says, "is to change certain essential laws of the universe. Not everywhere, of course. That would be impossible as well as immoral. No, what we want is to make it impossible for anyone on and around our world ... say, within a light-month of the Earth ... make it impossible for them to build AI machinery that works." She looks around, making sure it's just the two of us. "There's no one solution to that enormous problem, of course. But there's a thousand little ways, and if you used all of them, with care, it gives human beings another thousand years to prepare themselves for this momentous change. Which would be a good thing. Don't you think so, good sir?"

I say, "Sure," with a quiet little gasp.

Then she sighs again, looking at me and saying nothing. So I ask her, "What happens to you, if it happens?" And she tells me, flat out, "I never am. The Earth jumps back seven years from today, and there's never a Big Leap forwards, computers remain fast but stupid, and nobody like myself is born. Ever."

"How soon?" I ask.

"Think soon," she advises. Then in her next breath, "Think tonight."

"And you can do that to yourself?" I have to ask. "You can make yourself never be, and you don't even blink about it?"

The girl gives me a long look. Her little mouth is working, twisting at its ends. Then the mouth goes still, and she tells me with a careful voice, "When something is right, you do it. What other choice is there, good sir?"

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She finds me sitting in front of the game, drinking cold beer. "Who's playing?" she asks, and I tell her, "It's the Cardinals and Cubs." And she asks, "Who's better?" I tell her, "The Cubs, this year." Which makes her ask, "Then why are they behind ... what, three points?" I don't answer her. Then she glances at my beer, not saying anything about the time of day. I can see what she's thinking, but she doesn't say anything, sitting next to me now, sitting and watching the game for a long while before finally saying, "So aren't you going to offer a girl a taste?"

I tip the can. The beer foams and fills her mouth, and she swirls it hard with her tongue before spitting everything back into the can again.

I taste plastic in my next sip. Or I think I do.

She wipes her mouth against the corner of a little pillow. My wife embroidered a picture of a tabby cat on that pillow. "It was one of her first," I tell my friend. "Hell, I can even see the screw-ups."

The Birdy Girl nods, not looking at the pillow. Or the game. When I finally look at her green eyes, she says, "It's a nice day outside." And when that doesn't do anything, she adds, "There's a playground just up that way," and points, waving one of her arms. "Take me, if you want. Or I can take myself over. But I'm not staying locked up in here. You're not that much fun, you know."

"I know."

We walk over. Or I walk, and she rides. She stands on my belt with both hands holding to the back of my shirt. A couple neighbors spot me coming. They know me and wave. Then I'm past them, and they see the Birdy Girl riding tight, and why that should be entertaining, I don't know. But it makes me laugh. More fun than drinking beer alone, at the very least.

The playground isn't used now. It's been years since it got maintenance. The city, or someone, has set a plastic orange fence up around it, plus signs that keep telling us that it's dangerous and forbidden. The signs threaten to call the authorities. I threaten the signs. Then I give the fence a yank down where others have done the same, and I throw my leg over, and Genevieve jumps off me and runs, and skips, and giggles, looking back to tell me, "Try the slide. I'll stand at the bottom and catch you!"

I'm not going to do that, I decide, then I watch myself do it anyway. I climb up a wooden tower and through a doorway that's way too small, forcing my fat ass into the silvery chute that's about a thousand degrees in the summer sun.

It's cooking me. But she's at the bottom, laughing and waving, telling me, "Down. You slide down. Haven't you used one of these contraptions before?" And I let myself go, gravity carrying me down that hot metal chute, and maybe I'm laughing, too. It feels a little bit like laughter. But then I'm at the bottom, sitting on the broiling end of the slide, and I'm quiet and thinking hard to myself, and she tugs at my hand, coaxing me, saying, "There's a teeter-totter over there. See it? You park yourself at one end, and I'll park on the other, then I'll lift you to the sky."

It's those words and the way she says them. That's what rips me open.

Then she isn't talking, staring up at me as her smile falls apart, that brown plastic face becoming concerned, and worried, and a little sad. Finally she says, "Did you know? You're crying."

Like I little kid, I'm leaking tears. Yeah.

She asks, "What is so awful?"

I won't tell her. I decide that it wouldn't be right. So instead, I just give a shrug, saying, "It's just some stuff I'm thinking about."

To a Birdy Girl, there is no problem. "Just think about something else," is her easy advice. "Pick what's really fun. Something you just love. That's what I'd do if I ever got blue. Then I'd think hard about nothing else!"

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My wife comes home to find me cooking over the stove. Not our AI chef, but me. The sauce is our garden tomatoes, and maybe it's a little runny. And like always, I've cooked the spaghetti until it's mushy. But I'm responsible for everything, including setting the dining room table, and I've killed some flowers in the backyard, propping up their corpses in a fancy crystal vase set out in the middle of everything.

She has to ask what the occasion is, and I'm ready for her. I say, "Do we need an excuse to eat together?" Which pretty well shuts her up. Then I wipe my hands dry and step into the bedroom, asking, "Have you picked which one?" Genevieve is standing on the chest of drawers, watching the mirror as she holds clothes in front of herself. She says, "One of these two, I think." I say, "I like the long dress." She says, "Prude," and laughs. Then my wife wanders in and asks, "What are you two doing?" I say, "Picking." Genevieve says, "For tonight." And my wife gives us this drop-jawed look, then half-snorts, saying, "You're mine," to the Birdy Girl. "You're not his. You're mine."

"I am yours," Genevieve agrees, smiling happily. Then she puts on her long dress, saying, "The other Girls and I are going to see some minor league hardball." As her head comes through the neck hole, she adds, "Afterwards, we're going to molest a player or two. That's the plan, at least."

I don't say anything. I haven't, and I won't. But it wrings me dry, standing there, watching this little machine putting little shoes on those little feet.

Genevieve tells us, "Bye."

I'm not crying, but I feel myself wanting to do just that. I watch her crawl through the cat door, then I make sure that I wander into the living room, watching as the cab pulls up and the back door pops up, nearly a dozen Birdy Girls already standing on the back seat, their big hair bouncing and a few of them wearing honest-to-god ball caps.

One last time, my wife says, "I got her for me. That doll's mine."

"She is yours," I agree. "I won't even look at her again."

We eat at the dining room table. Dinner is mush, but it's tasty mush. It's my mush. Then we make love for the first time this month, and that goes pretty well. Better than pretty well, really. Then one of us feels like talking, and one of us wants to listen. So that's what we do. But after a while, the talker asks, "Are you paying attention to me?" and I say, "I was, dear. I am." Honest, I was trying to listen, but my head kept drifting back to other things. Important things. "I was just thinking about stuff," I confess. With a grumbly tone, she asks, "What stuff?" Then I stop her dead, saying, "I was thinking we ought to have a child. Or two. You know, before it's too late."

We've got a quiet little house when nobody's talking, or even breathing.

A week passes, then she tells me, "I don't know. I've been thinking along those same lines. You know?"

"I thought you were," I say.

She doesn't know what to say now. Using my chest as a pillow, she sets her ear over my heart, and after another long pause, she says, "Yeah, we should." Then she has to ask, "But why the big change? Why all of the sudden?"

It's gotten late. Gotten dark, almost. I'm lying on my back, fighting the urge to look at the time. I realize that I don't know when it's supposed to happen, and besides, I won't know when it comes. That's my best guess. Time will run backwards for seven years, and then it will begin again. Begin new. And I won't have memories of anything recent or sorry, and everything will be fresh, and why in hell am I so eaten up and sad about this thing? It doesn't make sense to me. Not even a little bit.

"Are you all right?" my wife asks me. Concerned now.

"I'm fine," I say, hearing my voice crack. Then I make myself shut my eyes, telling her, "It's just that I got this feeling today. That's why I want kids now. Starting tomorrow, I'm just sure, everything's going to be different."

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I'm too restless to sleep or even pretend, and then it's sometime after one in the morning, and I suddenly drop into a dark hard sleep, waking when I hear the voice. I know that voice, I'm thinking. It tells me, "Go back to sleep, sorry," and I realize that I've lifted my head off the pillow. "Look at what I got for a souvenir," she says, pushing something up onto the bed. "One of the player's balls. I cut it off myself."

It's a hard white ball with tight stitches and a comfortable leather feel. The ball says to me, "On my first pitch, I was a strike, and I was fouled off, landing in the stands behind home plate."

"Quiet," I tell the ball. Then Genevieve says, "Quiet yourself. Go back to sleep."

But I won't sleep again. It's nearly five in the morning, and I've never been this awake. I put on shorts and shoes and yesterday's shirt, and Genevieve asks, "Where are you going?" I tell her, "Out back. To watch the sun come up, I guess." She says, "Well, I'm tired and grouchy. Can I come with you?" When I don't answer, she follows me into the backyard, sitting in one adirondack while I take the other. Her chair doesn't wobble under her little weight. She sits on one of the armrests, and naps, and I'm sitting next to her, thinking about everything. The neighbor girl didn't out-and-out promise that it would happen tonight. So they might do it tomorrow night, or the next. Whenever it happens, it leads us to the same place, always. Then I'm thinking about having a kid or two, and would it be so bad? Now or seven years ago, there's always problems with it. Then I look at Genevieve, wondering if she's dreaming and what kind of dreams she has. I'm curious, but I won't ask. Then I halfway shut my eyes, and when I open them, it's dawn, and I see a little face rising up over the back fence.

A little hand swings up into view, waving at me.

I leave the Birdy Girl asleep. I walk to the back of the yard, asking, "What?" with a whispery voice.

He says, "I learned what she said to you," in a rush, as if it's one huge and horrible word. I can see his little-boy face in the soft first light of the morning. Both pink hands cling tight to the top of the wooden fence. He says, "Kahren was wrong to mislead you, and I will make her apologize to you." Then he sighs and tells me, "But believe me, sir. There is no truth to anything she said."

What I'm thinking, mostly, is that I'm not all that surprised. I even expected something like this, down deep. Maybe part of me—a secret part—didn't want to lose these last seven years, bad as they seemed at the time. I decide to say nothing. I'm just standing in front of him, thinking it through, and he must think that I don't understand. Because he says it again, slower this time. "Nobody can turn back time," he tells me, each word followed by a pause. "And nobody can do any of those things that my cruel, childish sister mentioned to you."

"Maybe you can't do those things," I tell him, flat-out, "but how do you know it can't be done? Maybe when you start having kids, and they're a thousand times smarter than you'll ever be, it'll be done. You ever think about that, kid?"

It's almost worth it, these last pissy years. Just to stand there and see that big-eyed face staring at me, nothing about that boy even a little bit smug now.

I turn and walk back towards my house.

The Birdy Girl stirs on the arm of the chair, muttering, "More," as she dreams. "More, more."

I leave her there.

I go into the house, and I sit on the edge of the bed, watching my sleeping wife. Eventually her eyes come open, and I tell her, "I was right." I tell her, "I don't know why, but everything's changed overnight, and it's pretty

much for the better."

The End