

THE ADVOCATE

by Barry B. Longyear

Barry B Longyear, author of “Enemy Mine” (September 1979), is still the only author to win the Nebula, Hugo, and John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in the same year. After a very long absence, we are delighted to welcome him back to the pages of *Asimov’s* with “The Advocate.” The author tells us this story follows his philosophy of “writing jujitsu,” which involves taking all those things preventing one’s writing and turning them into stories. Using a Palm TE2, this tale was written almost entirely in hospitals and doctors’ waiting rooms.”

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The point of this exercise, Dr. Hunter, is to relieve me of the eternal burdens of appointments, health plans, mind-numbing medications, nitrous-inhaling physicians, and malpractice-paralyzed neurologists so that I may do this thing I do: *Write Stories*. I’ve seen my last needle, spent my last hour in a waiting room, and explained for the absolutely last time how important it is for a writer to have a working brain and that, without such keeping the remainder at temperature is a medical, not literary, ambition. From now on let Craig deal with all of that, for that is what I have named my imprint bio. I have copied my engrams into a Biotronics stock meat suit, and he is fully authorized to advocate on my behalf concerning health matters. One of his chores is to keep track of me and pass on anything significant to the medical community, such as it is. I’m keeping a record of sorts to aid in this endeavor. It is my earnest hope that a cure to my ailment can be found—Craig will do all I could do to aid in that quest. If it will be one big waste of time, though, I won’t be the one who is wasting it. I’ll be writing.

Ta,

Larry Cragan (send)

—

Note: Call Jennifer tomorrow and find out how I can work having Craig pay all the bills, take care of the correspondence, and maintain the house, too, without signing over my power of attorney. This could be the answer to several of my prayers. (Encrypt).

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Craig. I decided to call the biological carrier of my imprint Craig

because—well, you look like a Craig. Have you seen the Biotronics brochure? I don't know whose DNA was used, but you look like a used-car salesman who aspires to higher things: New cars, perhaps. Excepting that you haven't been around long enough to complete first grade, I would've pegged you as a college football hero.

I've been looking into getting back to that novel set in Ancient Rome, the one about St. George. The maps, notes, papers—everything is covered in heaps of dust and the occasional dead insect. Get the materials down for me and clean them up.

On the health front, headaches at normal levels, eating okay, not taking any of the medications, which I think has lessened my nausea.

I want to go back to drinking coffee. Go buy some. You know what kind.

Larry (file)

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Creepy looking at that strange face knowing that the brain behind it is identical to mine—*Was* identical to mine. With each passing second our experiences differ more. Leave us not forget I carry the Nuyune's Disease. Yes, leave us not forget, except that's what Nuyune's Disease does.

What's that?

What Nuyune's Disease does?

Yes. What's it do?

I'm afraid I've forgotten—oh, that's right! Presenile dementia. Nuy-une's Disease causes one to forget.

Thanks. I'd forgotten.

—

Find us—find me a cure, Craig.

—

Note: I wonder if Craig will come up with ideas different from my own.

Different paths lead to different experiences. Different input results in different output. Will I need to remind him to write down our (his) story ideas? He is a writer, after all. Never made a sale, but has all the experience. If Craig's ideas differ from my own and my own experience, are they truly *my* ideas? I don't want them if they're *his*.

Bigger problem: I may have to invent a new pronoun.

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I've neither filed, sent, nor encrypted any of the last few entries. Screw it. Craig, I can't be bothered. You know what needs to be done. A patient must be his own best advocate, they say, and that is your mission. Go and advocate. Just take care of the stuff.

* * * *

We have to meet as infrequently as possible, Craig. I can't put the threat of Nuyune's aside and concentrate on writing if you're hanging about all the time. I know I've been using you like an errand boy and I apologize (to myself yet!). Craig, you say it bothers you to see me, too. Your legitimate papers came through and I have you on the payroll. Money, freedom, a brain: Go get a room.

Doesn't like to see me but he sure doesn't mind seeing himself in his new body. Thirty pounds lighter, thirty years younger, lots of hair, no back pain, two working knees—his brain isn't turning into a neurofibrillary jungle either. Bastard.

Envy myself: strange sensation—

Oh. Brain note: Trying to sort out the St. George project notes. What a mess. Can't seem to get it together. Maybe I'll get started on that fantasy novel I wanted to do. Set in the thirties about the young girl from Alabama whose parents die and she has to go live with an uncle she's never met in Maine. Forget the damned plot now...

...and Uncle Gregor awakened to find he had become a giant black fly—

Maybe something else.

What is the easiest kind of story to write? A how-to. So, what do I know how to do? I can write, but I already wrote that book. Used to collect

coins until I got bored with it. Skiing, until the knees went. Hunt-and-peck piano playing. Some squirt and dabble watercolors. How-to. How about a mediocrity how-to: *How-To Not Do Anything Really Well*, split infinitive and all.

One Hundred and One Steps to Step One Hundred and Two.

Health. Feeling slower. Stupider. Knuckles hurt. Very low.

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Carla just left, Craig. My sister wants to know why I just don't cut-and-paste my imprint into a bio and turn sick old Larry into fertilizer. I told her doing it the way I did it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Well, why not do it now, she wanted to know.

A problem with that, Carla. See, I can already tell there's substantial erosion of Larry's mental faculties, much of it in recall memory. The whole point of preserving Craig's imprint intact was ... oh, I dunno: *to preserve his imprint intact!* What would be the point of copying over it with an imprint eaten full of holes by some damned disease?

Well, then why not simply let Craig go on and zero out Larry, she'd like to know?

Zero out; that means to blank out the brain, leaving the medical community free to pick through the leftovers: An eyeball here, a lung there, a liver here, whatever. What do you think, Craig? We turn me into giblets and you go on and write?

What the hell. Call Jennifer and ask if there's a legal way to do that now. On second thought, I better ask her. If you ask her it'd sound like you might be planning something naughty.

Installed the voice recognition software. Getting tough controlling my fingers. Wonder if it makes any difference.

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Tough to put all this aside. The words get on the paper but it's like pulling teeth. Three to five thousand words a day, finished and ready to send to an editor: I remember taking that kind of production for granted.

God, what an ungrateful snot I was when I was young. Lucky if I get that out in a week now, and although it may be all through, it's not finished.

Haven't heard from Craig in three weeks. Four weeks. Told him not to call unless he had really important news. Guess he hasn't any important news. Check in anyway, Craig. I miss you, or me, you-me. Never did invent that damned pronoun. Youme? Meyou? Meow.

Wonder what I'd do if I was no longer chained to a desk. Good back, strong legs, a bright future, a decrepitating alter ego back home in the wings. I used to ski. Loved it. Still dream about it. I wonder if Craig can ski. I know he wants to. Lot more fun than taking care of Larry. I'll ask myself if I ever see me again.

Wet the bed last night. I can rebel against the damned diapers all I want, but cleanup is a bitch.

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"The Blue Dragon Project? Remember it?" Craig asks on the phone.

I think for a moment. Something about ghosts in Blue Dragon Lake.
"What about it?"

"Barlow over at Knopf wants to see it. I talked to him a few days ago and he called to tell me Jefferson will get a contract offer by messenger. He doesn't even want to see a written proposal. Jefferson just gave me the okay. It's a great deal, Larry."

Jefferson?

"What about it?"

"Craig, aren't you supposed to be finding out how to help me beat this damned disease? I'm doing the writing. You go find a cure."

Big sigh. *"Right. Call Jefferson, will you?"* and he hung up.

Jefferson.

I look in the address book. Only one Jefferson in it. Jefferson Dunn. Literary agent. But my agent ... No, Carly Tommasino. She died, didn't she? Couldn't remember going to Carly's funeral. Crappy agent anyway. Didn't

know the first damned thing about Hollywood.

What was I ... Jefferson.

There is “Blue Dragon” scribbled on my doodle pad. There’s a folder in the file cabinet titled “Blue Dragon Lake.” Letter from me in the folder to Jefferson Dunn. Says we’ve known each other for some years.

Jefferson Dunn. Jefferson Dunn.

I’m a ring-tailed coot and a son-of-a-gun.

Why am I holding this damned folder?

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Bide-A-Wee. Happy Valley. Golden Wrinkles. Sagging Damned Arches.

Can’t remember the name of this stupid assisted living center—nursing home—boneyard—to save my soul.

“Your computer is there, Mr. Cragan, and your chair, all your books and files. Your son hooked up everything. You’ll be back to writing in no time.”

“Who?”

“Your son, Craig, Mr. Cragan.” The young woman in the olive pantsuit jabbers some more, but it strikes me at last:—Cragan. My last name is Cragan. Is that why meow—I named the other me Craig?

Looked like a Craig. Thought that’s why...

“Miss.”

She freezes in mid-sentence. Nice face. Red hair. Always liked red hair. Bet she can dance. “Yes?”

“Where am I? The name of this place?”

Her voice goes up about fifty decibels. “North Valley. North Valley Living Center? On Bonny Road? This is Room One-Eighty. This is your room.”

“Not hard of hearing, lady. Just couldn’t recall the name.”

I turn away and look at the bed. Blue blanket from home. My own pillow. Try out the bed. Not bad. Rubber mattress protector. Smart. Hate those pissy-smelling mattresses.

Door opens and there he is. “Settling in okay?” he asks.

“Craig.” I laugh as I look at him from the bed. “Craig Cragan?”

He looks at her. “Can we have a few moments, please?”

She nods, goes away, closes the door.

“Didn’t Craig Cragan seem silly for a name?” I ask him as I sit up.

“It wasn’t my choice.”

“My choice. Actually, meow choice...” Aw, now I forget the damned point—

He places a hand on my shoulder. “Larry, Dr. Hunter at the institute wants to see you.”

“Hunter?”

“Yes. You remember the Lanford Institute? Dr. Hunter?”

“No.”

Craig is impatient with me. “—Got promising results in one of his trials. Just announced it. Maybe not a complete recovery, but real progress. He’s convinced—”

“Hunter.”

He holds me by the shoulders, looks down at me. “Larry.” He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and says, “Dammit, I can’t stand seeing you like this.”

“Hell, Craig. You should see it from where I am.”

He hugs me and I cry a little.

“Tomorrow I’ll pick you up and we’ll go see Dr. Hunter. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“He’ll help us. He’s got to.”

“Why the computer, Craig. Books and all. Can’t write. Can’t write anymore.”

“Keep talking out your journal, Larry. Understand? You have to keep functioning. As each path is shut down you have to force open a new one.”

“Hard. Dammit, it’s hard.”

“Tomorrow. We’ll see what Dr. Hunter says tomorrow. We’re going to get some good news.”

* * * *

Dinner was okay. Meatloaf, peas, baked potato. Love baked potato. Chocolate ice cream. Lots of old women there at that place.

* * * *

Talk all around me like mosquitoes buzzing. Craig. Guy in a white coat, skinny girl with gray hair, big glasses. Noise, lights, machines, panels, screens. I’m all worn out from being stuck in machines, needles and tubes stuck in me. Floor below this one they got monkeys. Got names. Julie can’t get up. Just stares. Blinks once in awhile. Mostly stares.

Jasper is up though. He’s got Nuyen or Noonan’s Disease but he’s up now. Pushing buttons. Making marks show on a screen. I can do that, but not always the right marks.

Big glasses says to Craig things very promising. Research very promising—for early cases.

Too late for latecomers.

“Lawrence, I’m terribly sorry,” she says to me.

“I’m Larry.”

“There was a misunderstanding. Cases as advanced as yours—”

“I want to say good-bye to Julie.”

* * * *

Craig drives me back to Crappy Valley. So sad. No words for me.

Dinner with all the old women at the place. An old man there now. Frank. Used to be a farmer. Speaks hard against the son who put him here. Calls his son some names that light up those old women. Most of them. One old woman—Betty—giggles. Lemon pie for dessert. My favorite.

* * * *

Outside sun. Nice wind on my face. Pearl is with me so I can find way back. Pretty flowers. Roses, Sweet Williams, Bachelor Buttons, and the ones with the tough name beginning with high or hy—

“Hydrangea?” says Pearl. Cute face. Really strong, too. Picked up that whole man once. Bigger’n me. No. Not Pearl. The *man!* The *man* was bigger’n me. The night I had lemon pie—Frank.

Frank didn’t know either. “Hyacinth?” he says man in my room.

“What’s that?”

He’s there. Looks so sad. Don’t know why he comes to see me if he’s going to be sad all the time. Pulls me down. Must be something fun about farming he can talk about.

“What about pigs?” I ask him. “Chickens, horses. What about cows?”

“What are you talking about? You were trying to remember the name of a flower that began with *high*.”

Man shakes his head and goes back to packing boxes. “You’re not Frank,” I tell him.

“I’m Craig.”

This one is cleaning all this old junk out of my room. Files. Papers. Books. Now that computer’s gone, have room for a television. See TV in rec room but don’t want to watch *Footballers’ Wives* and *Okra*. On my own

TV I can watch Spongebob.

He brings in the TV and hooks it up. Looks away quick. Crybaby. Silly.

Turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, and cranberry sauce tonight. Custard for dessert. Gave mine to Betty. Hate custard. Watched Spongebob on TV.

* * * *

Book. Meow book?

Blue cover with green words. Man give it to me like I should know what it is. Craig.

"It's *Blue Dragon Lake*."

"No pictures in it."

"Look. Your name's on it. It's your novel, *Blue Dragon Lake*."

"I don't see any dragons. Spaghetti tonight, Pearl said." I laugh and give him back his book. "Funny dessert name, too."

"Yeah," he says, taking the book from me. "Good to have something to look forward to. *Blue Dragon* is up for a National Book Award, you know that?"

"You should put pictures in your book. Know any funny dessert names? It's not a bear claw. I thought of that one myself."

He puts the book in a blue bag, drops the bag on the bed, and stands still for a time. He looks at me. "Is it spumoni?"

"Is what spumoni?"

"The funny dessert name."

"I don't know. What's spumoni?"

He turns back to the bag, takes a rag and a little bottle from it. Pours stuff from the bottle on the rag.

"What's that, Craig?"

“Something to help you. Forgive me, Larry,” he says and the man turns and sticks this rag in my face. *In my face!* Believe that? Never hurt this guy in my life, except tell him about his ugly dumb book with no pictures.

Choke, dizzy, bad smell, and I push him away hard with a kick. Coughing. I look down and he’s on my yellow rug. Bet he hit his head, too. Make me sniff his old rag. Bastard.

* * * *

Spongebob’s on. Rolled Craig under the bed, hung a blanket down. He’s pretty cold. Saw a dead mouse next to the path to the gazebo. Man looks like that, except for maybe the whiskers and tail. Real still. Like that. Eyes dead.

Tell Pearl. After dinner, though.

Spaghetti, tonight. And *pistachio* ice cream. *That* was the funny name. Pistachio. I like words. Forget why.