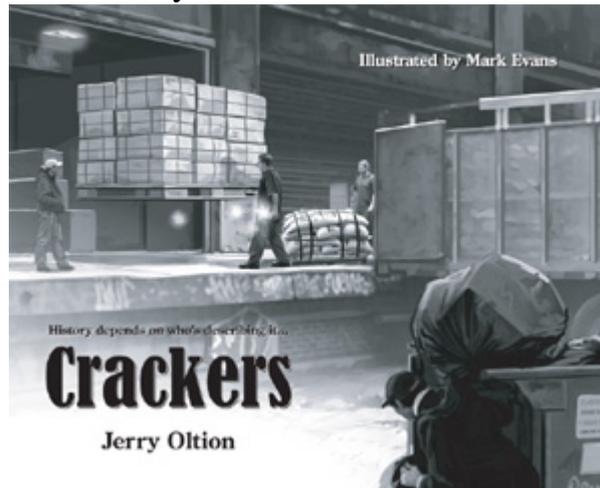


CRACKERS
by JERRY OLTION



Illustrated by Mark Evans

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History depends on who's describing it...

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The bottle-return machine was rigged. Daniel knew exactly how many bottles he had—when you sift through trashcans for enough returnables to buy dinner, you remember every success—but the automated counter outside the Calway store had shorted him by two.

He punched the printout button and waited for the flimsy receipt to slide out of the slot. The printer kicked it out hard enough to fall free, but he snatched it before it could drop more than a couple of inches. He was onto that trick, too. The store manager deliberately set the machines to do that, no doubt figuring that a certain percentage of the receipts would flutter away on a breeze, never to be recovered, and never to be paid, either.

Daniel carefully folded the Tyvek bag he had carried his bottles in and took it inside with him. The bag was worth almost as much as a bottle.

He took his receipt directly to the express-lane checker, a tall, geeky teenager he hadn't seen in the store before. At least he didn't think he had, but it was hard to tell for sure. The kid had the same sculpted hair and wire-frame glasses as every other kid nowadays. Daniel would never have believed *that* fad would return, but apparently it was hip to look like a refugee from the seventies. Probably because these kids hadn't had to live through the original.

The checker gave Daniel the Look when he handed over his bottle ticket. The “Oh, hell, not another homeless guy” look. Daniel saw it on every “respectable” face all over town. As if it were some moral failing to run out of money and wind up living under a bridge. He felt like telling the little pimple factory just how close to Daniel's condition he really was, but he knew the kid would never understand. Neither had Daniel, before the long string of bad luck and bad government that had

conspired to wipe him out. He had long since given up trying to explain to people how he'd lost his job because he was putting too much time into developing a force field generator, and how he'd lost his house because he couldn't make the payments without his job and how he'd then had his invention stolen by a gang of teenagers who didn't even know what they'd stolen—who had probably dumped it in one of the very dumpsters that Daniel now sifted through for returnable bottles, and if that wasn't irony then nothing was—and how every government-sponsored program that was supposed to help people down on their luck had been cut for lack of funds, including the state health plan, which meant that he couldn't even get his antiparanoia medication anymore; but he'd learned the hard way that people tuned out after the words “force field” and just treated him like a loony.

Besides, this kid was his chance for fifty more cents if Daniel didn't piss him off. So he just said, “Your bottle machine shorted me by two bottles again.”

“It did?” the kid asked.

“It did,” Daniel affirmed. “It does it every time. Which should be no surprise, because your manager sets it to do that on purpose.”

Usually the checkers just nodded and smiled and gave him his extra money, but this kid said, “I'm the manager.”

Daniel stared at him. Nineteen, maybe twenty at the oldest. How the hell could he be the manager? When Daniel was that age and working at the I.G.A., he'd still been stocking shelves.

If he'd learned anything in his years on the streets, it was not to back down when dinner was on the line. “If you're the manager, then you're just the person I want to talk to,” he said. “The bottle machine fails to credit one in every thirty or so, and it does it consistently. I've complained every time, but it still happens. Which leads me to believe that you're doing it on purpose.”

The kid said, “What, you think there's some kind of dial inside the machine that lets you select how many bottles to skip per hundred?”

“There must be. It's too consistent to be an accident.”

The kid looked at the ticket, then back at Daniel. “If you think that, then why do you keep coming here?”

“Because this is the closest store to my cardboard box,” Daniel said. “And it costs seven fifty to ride the bus. That's thirty bottles. Thirty-one if I run 'em through your machine.”

The kid looked like he might argue some more, but two college girls walked up behind Daniel and set a bottle of wine and a brick of cheese on the conveyor, and suddenly he was all smiles. “Okay,” he said. “Thanks for bringing that to my attention. I'll look at the machine and see if I can figure out why it's doing that.” He

rang up Daniel's fifteen dollars and twenty-five cents from the ticket, plus an extra fifty cents for the two bottles the machine hadn't counted. The change machine beside the check-writing stand spit out three quarters, and the kid handed Daniel three fives from the till.

Daniel took the money without comment. He went around the end of the check stand and back into the store to see what he could buy for fifteen seventy-five.

It turned out crackers were on sale. Just the store brand, but he could get a two-pound box for nine ninety-five, which was still highway robbery, but it left him with enough to buy five packs of ramen noodles and a couple of apples. Daniel hated noodles, but they were cheap and filling, and five packs would do him for a couple of days. If nobody stole them in the night, he wouldn't have to scrounge for bottles tomorrow.

He almost didn't get the apples. The price was right, but they were in a stack so improbably high and steep that he was afraid to take one even from the top for fear of bringing down the whole pile. He could wind up kicked out of the store for good over something like that, which would mean having to find a new neighborhood to scrounge and shiver in. Daniel didn't exactly love his cardboard-lined bridge abutment, but it was better than a park bench. He wanted some fresh fruit, though, and all the produce bins were piled up like the apples, so he screwed up his courage and lifted the top two off the pile as gently as his shaking hands would allow. His fear lent him strength; the apples hardly weighed a thing until he got them free of the pile, but as he backed away it felt as if they gained weight until they were heavy as normal. Odd how the body reacts to stress, he thought.

He took his groceries back to the same checker, who ran them through the scanner while Daniel unfolded his Tyvek bag and packed it himself. "Remember the twenty cents for the bag," he said when the checker was done.

With a theatrical sigh, the checker deducted twenty cents from the total, which left Daniel with exactly fifty cents.

"Guess you didn't need those two bottles after all," the checker said.

Daniel pocketed the quarters and picked up his bag. "Live on the street for a year and then tell me that."

He left the store without looking back, and walked the block and a half to the vacant lot where he hung out on warm days. Today had never gotten really warm, and it was just an hour or two short of twilight, but at least it wasn't raining, and the thought of food had set Daniel's stomach growling hard enough to hurt. He would cook up some noodles when he got back to his camp under the bridge, but he could have an apple and some crackers right now.

There were a lot of planes in the sky today. His vision wasn't good enough to

let him see their wings, and his ears were apparently going south, too, because he couldn't hear any engines, but he could see stuff moving up there that was way too big for birds. He felt a little like a bird himself, settling into the little nest he'd made behind the blackberry thicket at the back of the lot. He took one of the apples from his bag and bit into it, being careful to chew on the side of his mouth that could still handle something that crisp. Mmm, that was sweet. He wanted to down the whole thing in three bites, but the crackers would be dry, and he needed that apple to help wash them down.

The box was glued together like a kid's school project, but he pried it open carefully so he could reclose it again. Even when the crackers were gone, the box could prove useful. They were apparently making them out of some kind of plastic these days, and a guy who lived outdoors appreciated plastic.

He opened one of the four rectangular packages inside with equal care, and reached in for a handful of crackers, but his fingers encountered only powder and crumbs.

Had he opened the bottom? No, that wasn't the problem. The entire package was crushed. All four of them were. There wasn't a single intact cracker in any of them.

"Son of a bitch," he growled. This just wasn't his day. Was this some new kind of deal for people who wanted to make cracker-crumble piecrusts or something? He looked to see if the box said "pre-crushed" anywhere on it, but it was just a regular cracker box. He poured a pile of crumbs onto his palm and tipped them into his mouth. They tasted okay. He supposed they would be just as nutritious this way as if they were whole, but damn it, he'd been looking forward to actually *eating* them, not just pouring them down his throat.

The store wasn't that far away, and he still had his receipt. And that snotty little manager needed to know he couldn't get away with crap like this.

He wrapped up the rest of his groceries, tucked them under the blackberry bush for safekeeping, and headed back to the store. He ate the rest of his apple on the way back, spitting out the seeds and the stem before he went inside. The boy manager looked surprised to see Daniel again, and wary, but his expression grew hard and cold when Daniel showed him the box of cracker crumbs.

"You got these out of the dumpster," he said.

"I bought them not half an hour ago," Daniel replied. "You sold them to me yourself. Here's the receipt."

The manager didn't even look at it. "Oh, yes, you bought *a* box of crackers half an hour ago, but only after you found the crushed ones in the dumpster. You figured you could return the crushed box for another good one. Maybe multiple times if you went to different cashiers, eh? Very clever. But not quite clever enough."

Daniel was used to people calling him crazy, but he wouldn't stand for being called a thief. "Look here," he said, waving the box in front of the manager's nose. "The outside of the box isn't even smudged. This has never been near a dumpster." He pulled out one of the unopened packages of crumbs. "These are crushed inside the wrapper, and the wrapper isn't even creased. That had to have happened at the factory."

The kid snorted. "Yeah, right. I'm sure they go around packaging up crumbs just to get at people like you."

That was the last straw. "People like me?" Daniel shouted. "What the hell do you mean by that? You got something against physicists? Or is it a political thing?" Two teenagers with a cart full of groceries hurried past, carefully avoiding eye contact.

The manager blinked stupidly for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave the store."

Daniel felt a chill at those words, but he was well beyond caring. "Not until I get a decent box of crackers for my money," he said.

"No," said the kid, and he crossed his arms in a gesture that Daniel knew from long experience. This was the "I'm done with the crazy person" gesture. It usually led to the "I'm calling the police" gesture. And Daniel was all too familiar with the sort of gestures the police used on homeless people.

So Daniel gave the manager the "Up yours" gesture, grabbed his cracker crumbs, and left the store.

He walked straight away from the door until he reached the street, then turned to the right and around the back. The manager thought Daniel had gotten his crushed crackers out of the dumpster, did he? That implied there were boxes of crackers still *in* the dumpster. Even if they were crushed, they were calories.

There were no trucks in the loading dock, and the doors were all closed, so he headed straight for the dumpsters. Sure enough, there in the middle one were dozens of boxes of crackers. They were pretty banged up from all the stuff thrown in on top of them, but they were still okay. There were also a couple of oranges that probably weren't toxic yet, and a hundred or so bags of yellow powder that had apparently been thrown out merely because they had been packaged wrong. The bags all said "tortilla chips," but the stuff inside was fine as flour.

Or maybe crushed chips. Daniel tore open one of the bags and poured a little of the powder onto his palm, then cautiously dipped his tongue in it. It didn't taste like much of anything at first, but as the moisture in his saliva hydrated the powder, it tasted more and more like salty corn.

Crushed crackers and powdered tortilla chips. Normally he would be dancing

in glee at this much edible food still sealed in airtight bags, but this was too bizarre. Something strange was going on in this store.

He saw motion off to his right, and raised up to see a semi pulling in off the street. It was too late to hide, but fortunately he had the perfect camouflage. Nobody noticed a homeless guy rooting through a dumpster.

He watched the truck back up to one of the loading bays. The garage-style door rolled up and two teenagers from the store came out to talk with the driver and open up the back of the truck. Daniel expected them to start hauling pallets of groceries out with a forklift dolly, but one of the kids entered the trailer with a blinking electronic gadget in his hand and a moment later came back out carrying an entire pallet of sugar sacks as if it were no heavier than an economy-sized package of toilet paper. He disappeared into the store with it, then came out with the gadget again.

Daniel's heart began pounding. He recognized that gadget. He couldn't see it all that clearly, but he knew what it had to be. His force field generator!

The manager suddenly appeared in the doorway, and Daniel turned back to the dumpster, but he clearly heard the manager say, "Let me see that thing a second. Uh-huh. What's this tape for?"

One of the other kids said, "I, uh, dropped it, and the case cracked, so—"

"Oh, I believe the case cracked," said the manager. "When you pried it open. You were playing with the field strength again, weren't you?"

"No, I—"

"I just had someone return a box of crackers that was crushed to powder without damaging the box. You're telling me the lifter did that without modification?"

"It must have," the kid protested, but it was clear he was lying.

The manager said, "Look, this is not a toy. Use it the way it was designed or find another job."

Ha, Daniel thought. Use it the way it was designed. The kid had no idea what he had stolen. He thought it was some kind of antigravity generator. And with the typical imagination of a two-bit thug, he had put it to use in the most mundane way possible.

Daniel edged around the dumpster until its bulk was between him and the loading dock, then when everyone was facing into the trailer he walked away, head down so he wouldn't be recognized. He went around to the front of the store and inside, walked down the long produce aisle, and stuck his head cautiously through the swinging doors into the back. The manager was gone, but the other two kids were still unloading the truck, adding pallets full of goods one at a time to the stack

against the wall.

Daniel slipped into the storage room and ducked behind one of the pallets. There was a gap between the shrink-wrapped bags of sugar and the wall, so he squeezed into it and climbed up the sugar bags until he could see over them and settled in to wait while the kids finished unloading the truck.

It didn't take long. Using the force field generator as an antigravity device, the kids hauled pallet after pallet out of the trailer as easily as they might have unloaded a shipment of pillows. Daniel kept his eyes on them while they pushed the last pallet into place and switched off the gadget, then put the electronic device on a high shelf between a gallon can of floor wax and a box of Magna-ties, whatever those were. The kids had put it in a fancy box, but he knew it was his force field generator. It was the right size, and what they were using it for couldn't be done any other way. That was Daniel's life work, casually dumped there by a couple of teenage goons who probably didn't even realize that antigravity was supposed to be impossible.

The driver gave the two kids a handful of paperwork, then climbed in his truck and drove away. The kids rolled the door shut, and one of them took the paperwork into the store while the other set to work slicing open the clear film that held the last pallet of stuff together.

Daniel had hoped they would both go back inside and leave him alone in the storage room, but it didn't look like that was going to happen anytime soon. He could have waited until the store closed except for one small but increasingly important detail: apple juice always made him pee, and he had eaten a big apple not long ago. His need wasn't urgent yet, but it would be in another fifteen minutes or so, and he might need that time for running if things went badly.

He could handle one teenager. And with the force field, he could handle any number of them. They wouldn't get the drop on him this time. He rehearsed the steps in his mind: jump down, cross the width of the room to the shelf where they had put his device, grab it, flip it on, and head for the door at a dead run. These kids might be using it for lifting, but he knew how it really worked: the outward-pushing force field would protect him from the impact, so he could plow right through the door's flimsy fiberglass panels if he kept his speed up. The kinetic energy of the whole system was still $1/2 mv^2$, after all.

He took a deep breath. That first jump was going to be the worst; it was at least seven feet down to the concrete floor.

He swung around so he would land feet first and slid over the edge. The kid either saw him or heard him, and let out a startled "Hey!" just as Daniel hit the floor, but Daniel was too busy grunting "Oof!" to respond. He rolled to his feet and rushed for the device, but knocked over the can of wax instead, which fell off the shelf and landed on his left foot.

He cursed and leaped back in pain, knocking over the kid, who had rushed

toward him. Daniel kicked the can of wax aside and grabbed the device, fumbling for the switch even as he ran for the door. The feeling of his invention in his hands again after all this time was like a drug, better than a drug, better than sex or even a good meal. He held it next to his center of mass while he found the power switch and flipped it on—

—and a giant hand grabbed his insides and squeezed. At the same time, his last step sent him flying into the air like an astronaut on the Moon, bounding forward ten feet before coming down again. It was too late to stop, so when his feet touched down again he kicked forward as hard as he could, adding one last step to his momentum toward the door. Trouble was, the kick sent him flying more upward than outward, and he completely missed the door, smashing into the wall above it instead.

The force field protected him from the impact, but that hardly mattered. The field's effect on his insides was worse than running headlong into a wall would have been. Daniel knew exactly how his crackers had gotten crushed, and how the corn chips had been turned to powder inside their bags; his internal organs felt as if they might do the same ... starting with his bladder. He felt the wetness spread through the crotch of his pants as he fell to the floor.

What had the damned kids done with his force field generator to make it behave this way? They must have increased the power by an order of magnitude, and tweaked the tuning circuit to push inward as well as outward. Not a bad modification, actually. That would isolate whatever was inside in its own bubble of gravity-immune space. He would have thought of that on his own if he'd had more time to test the device before it had been stolen from him.

But the modified field had one serious drawback: the thing was trying to kill him. Even moving his thumb was a struggle, but he managed to flip the switch before the force field was quite able to squeeze him into his own navel. His full weight pressed him into the concrete floor. He gasped for breath with lungs that were suddenly free to move again.

The kid knelt down beside him. "Dude, that looks like it hurt. Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay," Daniel croaked. "Call an ambulance."

The kid stood up and ran for the double doors into the store, and Daniel tried to get to his own feet and beat a hasty exit while he was gone, but something definitely didn't feel right inside. He managed to stand, but only by leaning against the wall, and every step toward the door was agony. He at least stuffed the device into his pants, figuring nobody would investigate there, not as soaked as he was now. He hoped none of that wetness was blood, but he couldn't tell by feel and he couldn't bring himself to look.

He heard running footsteps, then the double doors banged open and all three kids rushed in.

“What’s going on here?” the manager demanded.

“Did you call an ambulance?” Daniel wheezed. He had no insurance, but he knew the hospital had to take him if he was actually injured.

“No, I didn’t call an ambulance.” The manager took a couple of steps closer, but he stopped when the smell hit him. “God, what did you do, piss yourself?”

“I tried to retrieve what’s mine,” Daniel said with as much dignity as he could manage.

“What, the lifter?” the manager asked. Then he laughed. “You’re nucking futs.”

“He’s off his meds,” one of the other kids said. “And now I think he’s really hurt, too. We ought to get him to a hospital.”

“Not in an ambulance,” said the manager. “Not from here. You bring an ambulance to a grocery store and before you know it you’ve got rumors about food poisoning.”

“What do we do, then?”

“You take him to the emergency room in your own car if you want to help him so much.”

Even the compassionate kid had his limits. He looked at Daniel’s face, then at his pants. “He’ll get my seat wet.”

“I’ll be even more of a hassle if I die right here in your stock room,” Daniel said. His legs couldn’t hold him anymore; he slid down the wall and landed hard on his butt.

“Put some plastic bags down before he gets in,” the manager said.

“No,” said the other kid. “Just call the friggin’ ambulance, and tell ‘em to come around to the back.”

“If we call, it goes on our insurance.”

“If he dies, that goes on our conscience.”

“God damn it,” Daniel bellowed, or at least rasped as loudly as he could manage with his bruised lungs, “would somebody just make the fucking call?”

The kids backed away from him and continued their argument in loud whispers, as if he couldn’t hear them as long as they didn’t want him to. He didn’t care. They seemed to have forgotten about his device, and that was the important thing.

He tried to stand again, but a sharp lance of pain shot up his back and he

collapsed back onto the concrete with a loud groan.

“All right, all right!” the boy manager said. “Just make sure he lives until they get here.” He stomped off, leaving the other two kids with Daniel.

“He’s, uh, he’s calling the ambulance,” said one.

“Can we get you anything?” said the other.

Daniel shook his head. He wanted to say, How about my life back, you thieving little punks? How about some compensation for the years of homelessness? How about some justice? But he couldn’t remind them of the generator. He couldn’t find the breath to say anything anyway. It was all he could do to gasp for enough air to keep the swirling tracers in his vision from expanding to fill his entire field of view.

It seemed to take weeks for the ambulance to arrive, but eventually the kids rolled up the door and a couple more kids rushed in with a stretcher, which they laid beside him.

“You’re going to be okay,” one of the new kids said as they lifted him as gently as they could and laid him on the stretcher.

“Do you even know first aid?” Daniel asked.

“Huh?”

“You can’t be over fifteen,” Daniel said. “What is this, career day at the high school or something?”

“Fifteen?” asked the medic. “What? I’m forty-six.”

“Yeah, right,” said Daniel.

“He’s kind of messed up,” one of the grocery store kids said.

“We’ll help him get better,” the medic said. “Ready?”

“Ready,” the other medic said.

Daniel heard something click near his head, and the stretcher rose into the air, bobbing gently like a boat on a river. The medics guided it into the ambulance, which floated just at the right height for loading, despite being much smaller than a delivery truck. It dipped a little under their weight, but quickly steadied out, and a moment later it lifted straight up and flew away over the store’s roof.

Daniel strained to hear the rotors, but he knew he wasn’t in a helicopter. Somehow, some way, the ambulance was flying in perfect silence, without an engine of any sort. Out the window, several other vehicles swept past at various altitudes. They weren’t planes. They weren’t planes.

One of the medics poked a needle in his wrist, and a screen above the window

lit up with numbers. “Wow, you’ve got some weird chemistry goin’ on,” the medic said. “It may take a couple minutes to clear it out.”

Clear wasn’t the word Daniel would have used for it. His head felt like his abdomen had felt earlier: as if some force were squeezing it, forcing the part of his mind that contained his world into a smaller space, making room for a much bigger world, a world that contained air cars lifted by artificial gravity, which was just one of many spinoffs from the force field.

“I invented this,” Daniel said, more to himself than to the two medics in the ambulance with him.

“Invented what?” one of them asked.

What, exactly, had he invented, anyway? His mind was a muddle of memories and paranoid dreams, all shuffled together through the fingers of time. He had invented a force field, that much he remembered clearly. And it had been stolen. But apparently that was long ago, and whoever stole it had known enough to do something with it. Daniel knew he should be angry, knew he *would* be angry, angry enough to track that person down and regain the credit he deserved if he ever got the chance, but at the moment his mind was too full of wonder to hold any other emotion.

“He’s drifting,” someone said.

“Keep him focused.”

“Sir? Sir? What did you invent, sir?”

“The future,” Daniel answered. “I invented the future.”

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