

# The Fisherman's Bucket

By Luke Johnson

The sirens were loud enough that anyone nearby might have parted their curtains.

Even though she was the very last of the Breeders, he would feel relief that it would soon all be over.

Only an hour or so before, he had conceived of a new plan; then pushed it away. He had a job to do – to see that ultimate order was attained.

After all, he had been one of the first to have UI bestowed upon him.

\*\*\*\*\*

He would always stop here, between the two flaps of iron that bordered the laneway that led to her. He would listen; to make sure he was alone.

But this time was different. He laughed to himself that it didn't matter anymore. This time he had a job to do - a job he wasn't sure he could complete. Not because it was difficult, but because it was easy. Too easy. And she would never know it was done. Just turn the dial slowly so she wouldn't see; watch her get sleepy. Watch her gossamer eyelids become heavy, all delicate and wafer-thin. He imagined how soft they must be.

He counted his steps again now as he pushed the flap back and walked quickly up the stairs to his right. 1-2-3-4-5. Turn right. Quickly past the open part of the corridor where someone could see him from afar. Turn left now. Pull the door slightly towards you as you turn the handle; no

noise that way. Before he closed it, he turned and looked around the empty yards and wondered what it must have felt like when they were full. Full of noise, of effort, of commands; of dissent.

Of humans.

She'd told him about what she remembered, and her grandfather's stories. Of the camaraderie between people with a common goal. Of the unfiltered pride in menial tasks. Of the beauty of devotion.

But these were all gone now, along with the sentiment, and the rest of the humans; but for her.

He prised open the door that led to where she lay in bed and paused again; heard the slow dripping of the tap in the corner that would now count the minutes until it was all done. The room he entered wasn't fitting for this - the end of humankind - but it was oxygenated, and he had kept her safe right here. Until now. He heard his superior's words in his head, imploring him to give her up. He heard her head lift off her pillow and turn towards him as he silently closed the door. Saw her eyes all clear and bright; happy.

He wished he could feel like that.

'Hey.' She smiled at him as he approached her bed, as if she were tearing the very universe apart at the seams and letting more light in. 'You're late. I was starting to worry.'

He wished he could feel like that, too. 'You bring me something?'

He sat on the edge of her bed, far enough away that he could reach his hand over to the control and start turning it. He knew she could live for at least an hour without her oxygen regulation, and he wanted her to be gone one way or another, when the others arrived. He didn't touch it yet.

'Yeah, I did actually. Here.' He passed her a metal nut, shiny and silver. 'Where's that...' He couldn't think of the word.

'Bucket?' She laughed. 'And you're meant to be the smart one!' She leaned over the other side of the bed to get it. He knew this would be the perfect

time to start the process, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not yet. He had time. Time near her.

She swung the oxidised metal bucket over to where he was sitting and he threw it in, clanging and jangling with the assortment of pieces already there.

'Found another one, hey?' She looked in and rummaged her hand around, feeling the cold, blunt edges of things that he had brought to her. Maybe pieces of the very things that were hunting her down. The very things that needn't have worried, had they known her. But she *was* a Survivor, a Breeder. Almost certainly the only one they knew was left, he was quite sure.

She wondered for a second if any of the pieces were from those he knew. She never considered this one might have come from him.

'What did they call those people again who used to use those?' He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear her say it one more time as he nodded at the bucket.

She grinned. 'Fishermen, silly! They were called fishermen!' And if beauty could make a noise, he would have heard the whizz and crackle and pop all around him. Her grandfather had been one, and this was his bucket. If you put your head deep into it and sniffed hard, you could still smell the distant, stale odour of the sea. And she did it now - sniffed hard - and let the memories of everything she tried so hard not to forget flood through her. Even amongst the inert, acrid metal and electrical smells the bucket otherwise contained, she still found what she needed. He watched her with envy, and dismay.

'So, they would just sit there whilst a bit of string was in the water and these animals would just come out on the string when they pulled them?' He never understood it. The patience, the idea of chance. The perseverance for something other than a definite outcome. A Programmer would be dismissed instantly for such folly.

'Well, they'd do a bit more than that, but yes - they could be there for hours and maybe come back with nothing.' She looked at him strangely.

'How quaint.' His left hand was turning the dial without conscious effort. He watched her intently, noticing her pupils dilate and her mouth part just a fraction.

Quaint, perhaps – but not as quaint an idea as hope, and maybe he just did feel that. Maybe Gen 4 UI was better than anyone had thought.

She threw the covers back and sat over the side of the bed, close enough to him to feel his leg resting against hers. It was warm; constant. She took his hand and held it between her hand and the stump where the other one should have been. She felt what she had hoped to feel.

'Did you ever think we might...?' She trailed off, holding his gaze. She could feel him trembling, his hand moist and clammy. 'You know, choose each other?' She knew he could never choose her. Knew he was risking expulsion just knowing she was here. Knew every other human long ago had chosen a Gen 4 and that Native Breeding was finished.

Knew the world was safer.

Calm.

Knew the planet would eventually become healthier after the destruction caused by the Great Uprising.

Stable.

But she knew nothing was better; other than when he was in her room.

He shrugged as the dial was now completely turned. The oxygen would soon be gone from her chamber, and she would pass sleepily into oblivion, taking the last beating heart with her. He watched for signs to appear. Knew the collection would still be at least 20 minutes away. He reminded himself that they had told him this was the best way for her. *Humane*, they had said. He had missed the irony, despite his UI.

'You know I would choose you if I could.' And nothing he had ever said before carried more truth. Her eyes glistened as she looked away, keeping his hand between hers. It was dry now as she squeezed it in

understanding, and grief. The tap dripped again, louder by degrees as the room seemed to shrink and the silence that hung carried the weight of everything she still needed to say.

‘Gen fives will be out soon.’ He huffed through his nose and felt the hairs there flay briefly. ‘Wonder how long it’ll take for them all to want to upgrade.’ He was right to worry about becoming redundant, but they each knew the end point was becoming more certain for them both. Dead, redundant, obsolete – did it really matter which word you might use?

She looked at his perfect face and wondered if he understood. That despite the advancements and the curated establishment that oversaw the predictability of everything, that their destiny was just the same. She wondered whether he thought it had to be.

When he had watched the sun rise that morning, it seemed slow. Like it knew what was coming. And his footsteps on the stairs had been the same. Like stretching time might mean everything lasted just that little bit longer. For the last of humanity. For love, if he were ever able to feel it like she did.

The tap dripped again.

‘They’ll be faster, more complex. Taller, stronger. But what can you expect, I guess.’ He looked at her and saw something he couldn’t quite read. She put her stump under the other arm and sighed.

She wanted to say she didn’t expect anything more than *him*. Expect, want, need; none of these were things he would understand. She yawned and felt her limbs begin to get heavy. He watched as the thin haze that began to sheet her consciousness let her face relax and her eyes soften. He longed to touch them, to feel what he so desperately had wanted to feel. Her stump slipped from where it had been sitting and plopped onto her lap. He reached for this as she began to sway and brought it to him. This, the greatest imperfection and reason for her seclusion, stared at him in all its blunt, puckered glory.

Even as he reached for it, his programming shouted to him. How dare he even *look* at that thing? And touch it? This, the very practical manifest

of why humans couldn't remain where they had for so long. But he was drawn to it; always had been. Despite all her beauty and her kindness, in spite of how she had needed to hide for so long now, *this* was what drew him to her. He reached again, slowly this time, like when you are touching something lightly that you used to love; lightly because you dread it might feel unfamiliar. That your heart might have lied about what your delicate fingers might discover.

And he wanted to tell her so much. Wanted to say some of the things that never get said. Good things. Beautiful things. Things that matter. But even as he leant towards her, watched her drift further towards where he was sending her, he smelt that familiar, sweet fragrance, all luscious and pure, and knew he wouldn't say anything. Couldn't. The words would have meaning but carry no weight. If you can't feel, you can't impose sentiment or derive affect.

But his Gen 4 UI couldn't judge how that last beating heart might flutter if he tried.

'Hey.' Her lips moved slowly. Somewhere in her developing haze she could feel him brushing her forearm. She smiled, mostly on the inside because her face was heavy, and looked at him. 'Remember when they started to talk about Real Intelligence?' She nodded as he did. Something wasn't artificial anymore. Then and now, in this room. 'And now, we've got Ultimate Intelligence.' Her lips stuck together a little as she said this, parched and dry. As they parted, he noticed they had tiny wrinkles, flecked with a deeper red. She brought them together as she smiled wider now, but he didn't stop looking. He wasn't sure whether she was sad or proud that UI had come to pass.

He nodded again as he placed her arm gently back into her lap. As he turned away for a second, she saw his hand move towards the wall. She tried to remember what was there; something important she knew, but it was too muddy; too far away.

'I remember,' he said. He looked out of the small window across the room and listened, but he couldn't hear any sirens yet. He beckoned her to lay back on the bed and she did, wearily. He saw her hair, golden and wavy like patterns he'd seen in sand at the beach and in the timber he'd

seen pictures of, felled and split long ago. His right hand has crept back to the dial and was turning it again, only back the other way this time.

UI – what a time he understood that had been. He traced his finger through the dirty notches others had made on her bedpost. For the sad last attempt at humanity. He understood their want, but never the need. UI at its finest, or most defective perhaps.

‘Remember when ideals became rules.’ Her voice was slightly stronger again now. He saw the flicker of something in her eyes that had always made her, *her*. The dial was at its starting point again and he knew how he had to finish this.

‘When personality types became pathologies.’ She huffed a little air through her nose, as if she remembered something that used to matter.

He stood as she turned from where she was lying, and she finally understood what he had done. And what he was doing. As the fog cleared, so too did her doubts.

He was saving her, for an hour or so.

‘I remember when beauty was determined by the beholder, not the Programmer.’ And he didn’t remember, but he understood somehow that it was so. And he knew his words hurt less when he said them softly like that.

Her eyes glistened as she felt what he was saying, incredulous that he might really conceive of it. Silly thoughts, she’d had – she knew it. But right here and now, he was showing her that maybe they weren’t so silly. That just maybe he was different to all the rest. That UI might just have had the capacity to be just that – perfect with all the trimmings. To feel love, to be wanted and cherished and missed. To understand that sacrifice and devotion meant more than holding hands or even making babies.

She looked outside, to where her chamber ended and what used to be her real world began. There were familiar sounds – the hum of cars and the distant shuffling of consumer’s footsteps. But there were no horns, no shouting; no discernible conflict. No humans. And she wondered why the quiet was unsettling. Unnatural. Like the engineered protein cakes that had replaced her grandfather’s fish had been satisfactory but not enjoyable.

And he didn't know it, but what he might have felt was an irrational mix of despair and gratitude.

And all the silences they'd ever shared would say more than either could hope to speak of now.

But just for a bit – for maybe 30 glorious seconds – the sun streamed through that tiny window and made everything feel as though it just might still be OK.

Like everything else, this will pass. 'You'd better go.'

\*\*\*\*\*

By the time the sirens were deafening, the door had long since been locked. It wouldn't change much, but he knew it would give protection for just that fraction longer. That fraction that would allow a deep dissection of decision, of what choices had been possible. Of the fleeting freedom he'd given to her to be human one last time. The harsh battering of the door ram intruded only slightly as this last moment of repose swaddled them both.

For her, it was a blessed few minutes where she knew her end was here. The gentle strangling of life as the oxygen-starved cells slowly turned up their end and called it a night. She watched from a few streets away on a balcony long since deserted by others that had no doubt once celebrated right there the new year, a birthday; things worth remembering. She'd sat on a hard plastic chair that smelt of beer and piss and family and rested her feet up on the balustrade. Remembered when she used to hear dogs bark. When she would hear her grandfather's stories, even when he started to forget. Felt for a moment that heady mix of destiny, love and of being rescued. Watched the sun glow through the bastard retreating atmosphere her own people had ruined and left desolate. Watched *him* led out in cuffs through that broken door; that genial, contented smile telling her everything she had always hoped was true.

She didn't notice the bolts and nuts that had slowly gone missing from him over the time he'd cared for her. Bits that sat in the bucket at her feet, amongst the smells and scales of everything that had been real.



Her release, his sentence.

Her defect, his burden. And allure. Her perfection, his dishonour.

Her grandfather, the fisherman, had said to her that the mismatch of intelligence, emotion and given task is one of the most fundamental and common human errors.

Everything is in layers, they had said to her. Everything is in layers.