

Sleight of Hand

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Ralph Swindon has always been a bit of a tinkerer. Whenever we went to his place for a meal, I would end up in his workshop while Jenny and Rachel enjoyed a glass of Baileys or two on the balcony overlooking the pool.

Ralph confided once that his workshop was the only place he could really relax. He worked for one of those big, scientific firms which design hardware for spy agencies and the military. He often brought home bits and pieces of equipment, given free rein by a management eager to stimulate his brilliant, creative mind. I had no doubt the ideas he got in the stress-free environment of his workshop were worth a dozen of the ones that came up at work.

Tonight it was in more of a mess than usual. The shelves at the far end held half a dozen small cages, the white, furry occupants barely visible in the dull glow of a twenty-five watt bulb. There was a scarred wooden bench along one wall, balanced on a pair of old tower cases, a bench that sagged in the middle under the weight of computer equipment. There was an old arcade machine in one corner, the cabinet thick with dust, the marquee faded and peeling. The wall above it was smeared with fresh mortar, and I grinned as I remembered a recent episode where Ralph had been demonstrating a hand-held cutting laser. It had gone through the apple sitting on my head, cut a slot in the wall and neatly pruned the neighbour's jacaranda tree down to a six-foot stump.

'What do you think?' he asked, gesturing vaguely towards the bench.

I stared at the clutter of computer hardware and network cables. 'Uh, yeah,' I said. 'What am I looking at?'

Ralph frowned. 'The computers. I've got them set up so they can transfer electronic mail back and forth.'

I stared at him, wondering how this inventive genius had managed to remain completely ignorant of the internet. 'I don't mean to spoil your fun, but that's been done.'

'Of course it has.' He sat down on an upturned bucket and reached for a discoloured mouse. 'What do you know about sending attachments with your mail?'

I shrugged. 'You drop files on the...' my voice tailed off as Ralph held his hand up.

'I was asking whether you knew how they worked, not how you send one.'

'I guess the program takes the data apart and sends it with the message. The receiver's program puts it together again at the other end.'

Ralph nodded. 'That's about it. The other day I began to consider the practical benefits of sending matter as an attachment.'

'Matter?'

Ralph rapped his knuckles on the benchtop. 'Objects.'

My eyebrows rose. 'You want to email a piece of wood?' We'd managed a bottle of wine between us over the apricot chicken, but I didn't think he was that far gone.

Ralph stood up, reached behind the flickering monitor and pulled out... a stainless steel jug. It had a wide mouth, and looked like a kid's first attempt at pottery. It was fixed to a heavy wooden base which was in turn studded with heavy-duty electrical terminals. There was a pair of thick wires screwed to a couple of the terminals, and a ribbon cable wrapped in electrical tape emerged from somewhere underneath the base and disappeared round the back of the computer. Ralph set the jug down, and I noticed a faint blue glow coming from the interior. I leant closer to look inside, but had to look away from the intense pinpoint of light near the bottom.

'This is the analyser,' he said. 'It scans the object and sends the data to the computer. Unfortunately, the item is destroyed in the process, but I am working on a refinement.' He gestured towards

the other computer, where a square, perspex box was sitting on the mouse mat. 'That's the regeneration chamber. The object is re-created in there. I envisage a smaller model which combines the analyser and the regenerator in a single, compact unit.' Ralph reached under the bench. There was a rustle of paper, and then he came up clutching a knobbly, dirty potato. 'Stand back,' he said.

'How far?' I looked around the cramped garage nervously. Any big explosions and we'd both be done for.

Ralph grinned, then dropped the potato in the jug. A white flash lit up the room like a lightning strike, and there was a buzzing, fizzing noise.

I glanced at the computer screen, where a progress bar was racing towards the right hand edge of a pop-up window. It got to a hundred percent, and Ralph leant over and keyed in a filename, hit Enter, then opened a blank email. I recognised the program - it was the one I used every day.

'You're not telling me that program sends potatoes as well as viruses?'

Ralph shook his head. 'Once you convert the object into data, you can send it with any email program. It's just a file.' He pasted the file into the message, reached for the mouse and clicked send. 'Come and watch,' he said, shepherding me along the bench to the second machine.

We'd only been standing there a moment or two when a mail icon popped up with a doorbell sound. Ralph opened the message and double-clicked the attachment. 'Watch that,' he said, gesturing at the perspex box. As I glanced down, I heard the click of the mouse button.

There was a flash of green light and a vague potato shape appeared inside the box, wavering and flickering like a cheap LCD.

'Damn!'

'What?' I looked at the screen, which was displaying a warning message. 'What happened?'

‘The process is very inefficient right now,’ said Ralph apologetically. ‘I have to add matter to the regenerator so it can rebuild the object. Give us a hand, will you?’

We went over to one of the plastic bins and hauled out a couple of bags.

‘What’s in them?’ I asked, peering inside. ‘It looks like rubbish.’

‘It is. I experimented with a wide range of stuff, and this works best. It’s varied enough to provide everything required in the regen process.’ He went back to the computer and, reaching over the monitor, shook the bag down the back. I peered over and saw a big porcelain urinal with a large hole in the bottom. The last of the food scraps and bits of cardboard were sliding down the sides, and as I watched they vanished into the hole. Ralph took the second bag from me and emptied it down the chute.

Bam! The green light went out, and when I looked at the perspex box, there was a solid-looking potato inside.

‘Go on, take it!’ said Ralph eagerly.

I reached in and picked it up. ‘It’s a spud,’ I said. ‘So?’

‘So, it came across the wire.’

I laughed. ‘Crap! You just had it pop up through the bottom of the box or something.’

‘You saw it appear!’ said Ralph. He sounded hurt - I’d never questioned him before.

I strode over to the metal jar and peered inside, squinting at the super-bright pea in the bottom. There was something else, a shadowy lump which looked like an after-image of the potato. ‘You fraud!’ I said. ‘I can still see the damn thing in there...’ And with that, I shoved my hand in to grab it.

‘No!’ yelled Ralph, as a flash of white light exploded from the jug, illuminating the garage like a sustained camera flash. There was a fizzing sound as something tugged on my arm, and I pulled back hurriedly.

I had a brief, terrifying glimpse of the stump at the end of my arm before my eyes closed and I keeled over backwards.

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When I awoke, Ralph was sitting on the bucket, a notebook in his hands and a pencil clamped between his teeth. He had a frown on his face, and his eyes were travelling in a triangle - from the jug, to the computer screen, to me.

'My hand?' I croaked.

'Best if you don't look,' said Ralph. 'I'm working on a fix.'

I swallowed. 'Is it bad?'

'Yes.'

One thing about Ralph, he doesn't dress things up to spare your feelings.

'That was a pretty stupid thing to do,' he said. 'The field is active all the time. Still, you've posed an interesting problem.'

'Interesting?' I said, my voice rising as the reality of the situation sunk home. 'Interesting? What about my bloody hand?'

Ralph gestured at the screen. 'It's in there. I can regenerate it, but I have to work out the tolerances so it goes back in the right place.'

I laid back and closed my eyes. Well, he *was* a genius, and at least my arm didn't hurt. Suddenly I remembered Jenny. What the hell would she say if she walked in now?

'Lock the door,' I said, struggling to sit up. 'Jenny...'

'Already have,' said Ralph. 'She came down to see if you were ready to go. I told her you were giving me a hand.'

'Oh, so it's funny now, is it? First you mutilate me, then you crack jokes about it.'

Ralph stared at me, his face serious. Then his expression changed to a grin as he realised what he'd said. 'Sorry, it wasn't intentional.'

I nodded, mollified. 'Think you can put it back?'

Ralph tossed the notebook on the bench. 'No problem. You stay there, I'll bring the regen unit over.' He collected the perspex box and carried it over, gently pulling the attached wires to get enough slack. Then he set the box down on its side, and I felt his firm grip on my wrist as he shifted my arm.

'Now, don't move!' he warned. I watched him go over to the receiving end and change a couple of settings. Then I saw a green glow coming from the box. I tried not to look, but I couldn't keep my eyes away. I stared along my arm, looking past the shortened wrist into the glaring green light. I saw an outline of a hand, and felt tickling at the end of my arm.

'Don't move!' shouted Ralph. 'I need more matter.' He raced over to the bin and hauled out a wet, plastic bag. As he passed by with it I caught a whiff of rotting meat. There was a slurping noise as he up-ended it, and the hand in the box grew more solid.

'More! I need more organics!' shouted Ralph. He glanced around the garage, and his eyes fell on the cages. 'Just the thing!' He rushed over and hauled a big, white rabbit from its slumber. I swear the thing screamed as it went down the hopper.

The hand was firming up, and the tickling feeling intensified to a dentist-drill kind of pain. I squinted through the tears, staring at my hand as some kind of warning bell went off in the back of my mind. It looked...wrong.

Three more furry creatures went down the chute before...BAM!...the green glow vanished and I could feel my hand again. I held it up to my face, grinning as I flexed my fingers. Then I started screaming.

Ralph hurried over to see what I was yelling about. He grabbed my wrist and stared at my hand as a look of horror crossed his face. 'It's...it's back to front!' he stammered.

I shook my hand wildly, trying to get the thing off my arm. I was gibbering, screaming. Suddenly Ralph clamped his hand over my mouth. 'Shut up!' he hissed. 'The girls will hear you!'

Something calmed me - either the threat of explaining to Jenny, Ralph's voice or the wine. Ralph took his hand from my mouth, and stood there, poised to clamp it back again. 'We can do it again,' he said. 'We can take it off and put it back the right way round.'

I took a deep breath and looked down. My heart hammered in my chest as I stared at the palm of my hand, at the pink flesh where it was attached to my wrist. I bent my fingers and shivered as they curled up towards me...

Ralph led me over to the metal jug. He laughed weakly as he guided my hand towards the gaping mouth. 'I love it when you come over,' he said. 'I can always rely on you to idiot-proof my inventions.'

Well, I guess it was a back-handed compliment of sorts.

Programmer, computer salesman, forklift driver, archer □ none of these explain why Simon Haynes started writing science fiction humour in the late nineties. Not even a couple of degrees from Curtin University could hold him back.

Born in the UK and raised in the south of Spain, Simon emigrated to Australia with his family in 1983. He's fluent in Spanish, and laughs politely when people shout Que? in his face. A founding member of Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine and the winner of an Aurealis Award in 2001, Simon lives in Western Australia, although his mind often wanders further afield.