

## Honour is Everything By Claire McKenna

*Brace, lads, brace!*

Chifley gives his command from the blind turn of the highway shoulder, Chifley tall and imposing in his bike leathers like he was gonna Evel Knievel it into some bat outta hell darkness and nary a complaint about the heat or the sulphur. Chif who got his Lord Nelson eye going, stony white but seeing all. Seeing us. Seeing the driverless truck on that hell highway and knowing we were gonna take it down.

Brace, he says, brace, and after the caravan of automatic Me-Haul units roars past us he hollers his signal and the banner is unfurled across the bitumen, a black rectangle as wide as the road, two painted lines, unbroken.

*Hold, lads, hold!*

We see no lights, only hear that blue-shifted *rruump!* of Doppler wind and suddenly it's on us, big as a whale in the desert. The driverless trailer's horn sounds like the devil's klaxon itself. The AI behind those twenty tons of self-driven heavy haulage has seen those two lines and jackknifes two hundred metres into the dirt.

Ain't no way a self driving vehicle's gonna disobey no road rule.

Go go go, shouts a voice to my left, go get it, quick.

In the brake-fluid and burnt-pad stench, Bobby jumps out with the spreaders, twenty five kilos of metal and hydraulic jaws o' life, pops each door joint at the pin. We make our ingress, drag out the contents. Bags and bags of goop in the torch light, nacreous with oil and water.

Woo, Chif! *Le Chiffre!* We got some motherload! The boys high-five, fist-bump.

Bobby cuts one bag open and grins. Pizza base, he says, and passes the pizza-  
goon around. By the time it reaches me the cut has widened and slops out over my hands,  
and it tastes of all things opposite, of meat-starter protein that's only released in  
temperature fractions, separated canola oil, fake-oregano, an ocean's worth of salt. I suck  
the food-ink from the tough plastic, feel the fractions disperse and re-congeal with the  
warmth of my tongue. A memory of pizza. Pineapple Supreme.

I realise then that Chifley has had none. I offer him some, and he shakes his head.

You eat it now, Pup.

Bobby and Omar load up the rest of the plastic bags in the bicycle trolley. The  
hauler was a food truck, so it has every food printer cartridge imaginable. We reluctantly  
discard the pizza bags and grab what can be repurposed for a hotplate or a regular oven.  
Bread bags can make hotcakes. Roast meat can double as a passable soup. We leave the  
raw meats and full vegetable printer cartridges, because they'll cook tough as leather  
without a scaffold.

By now the hauler has registered our entry, and it's calling for help. The support  
drones, diverted with an accident ten k's away, will be here soon.

Bobby and Omar strip down starkers. Is them that will bike on outta sight. They  
got the skin that reflects infrared. They'll be ghosts to the drones. To the things that come  
after.

I ride pillion on Chifley's scooter down the freeway. We pretend we are free folk  
the AI's let live cause it suits them. Like pets. You see 'em sometimes. On the telly when  
we get a signal. These people think they live in a heaven serviced by automata, but forget

that they only provide decoration, structure. They're a scaffold for the meat that will eventually be eaten. They do not rule. No human does on this side of the Wall.

Strange feeling in me as I feel Chif's back through his leathers, his spine at my cheek.

Once I'd wanted to be like the resistance boys that Chifley made. I longed for spliced cuttlefish gene codes sonoporated into my epidermal layers *in vivo*, my t-RNA expressing iridiophore reflectin protein so I was camouflaged, IR invisible, able to move in stealth so no glass-eyed silicon-heart boggart could see me sneaking up on its Kevlar arse.

*I won't risk it*, Chif had said, when I had asked to be gifted so. *The side effects can be lethal.*

I grumped in return. *You wouldn't risk it for me, so why risk it for them...*

Back then Chif had only touched my face with such tenderness I wondered if he wanted to lie with me and make them noises in the night. I wanted to. But he'd only smiled and said that what he did he did for *honour*, and hoped that one day I would understand.

We eat well that night, get drunk and are merry. The highway over our camp groans and grumbles, oblivious to the unsanctioned life scratching beneath it.

I watch Chifley, watching us, forty folks gorging on slurry out of bags and skulling flour-hooch, fornicating behind the concrete pylons, fighting when the available partners run out. I wonder what he thinks. He's got that look in his eyes. Half disgust and despair, like: this is what's become of people. Most of the world is an algorithm now, a

mechanical dance. We're the gremlins, the glitches and bugs. Our own smarts made us *re-dun-dant*.

He came to us a year ago, busted eye like he'd been in a bum-fight, spitting molars, arm broken in two places. Was Omar who set those bones, Omar who used to be a med student and now scavenges in the desert with his infrared-camouflaged skin. Chif had run out from wherever the 'eff he'd run from with a full truck of stolen lab equipment, last to escape before the anti-sci pogroms kicked in and anyone with a PhD was carted off to prison.

He brought the sonoprotator, a refrigerator full of CRISPR-cut cuttlefish RNA, and a gift of invisibility.

I saunter over, try and look sexy. Chif's gotta be twenny years older than me, but I had a crush on him since like forever. He's always treated me special.

Hey Chif.

Hey Pup, what you doing girl?

Come to see why you not partying with the others. Why you sitting here with a cat's arse on your face, huh.

Just a little sad, is all.

Why?

Thinking about honour. Wishing I could've done better.

Honour isn't everything.

He doesn't reply. I twitch my skirt at him, make doe-eyes, but Chifley's never turned his head at any of the women, why should he turn for me?

It's two nights later when I see him suit up in the IR-reflective leathers. So hot tonight, air as thick as blood. Thermal imaging doesn't work so well out here in the desert. The drones don't bother us none. By now everyone's coding for reflectins, and in a few days we're all gonna move, make a ghost-run for the electromagnetic border, and freedom. If we can scale the Wall in a group, maybe some of us will make it over.

Only problem is that everyone codes. Except for me.

Chifley's packing a bag. Big bag. Folding shovel in it.

You leaving without us, huh.

He knew I'd be awake. He motions to his scooter.

Get on Pup. Got a job for you.

I'm a little scared. There aren't too many jobs that require a bag big enough for a body and a shovel in the cover of darkness.

There's something going on out on the highway. Something that glows red in the distance, briefly, then fades. A lone truck, a little two-tonner, has taken the by-pass route, the circuit away from the incident. Its headlights are twin hypodermics in the skin of night.

What is this, Chif?

The truck slows down. Not the way the confused hauler did, but as if it were cruising down a suburban street, looking for a place to pull over. Chifley follows the truck on the scooter, and the tail-lights make his suit as shiny as blood on water.

I recognise the branding on the side. Was the same one on Chif's shot-up lab-truck last year, a Mobius strip squirted from an incomprehensible nozzle.

This is dangerous, I say. They'll know you.

Was hoping so.

No jaws o' life here. Chifley knows the password for ingress.

It's cool in the truck's rear. Metal boxes with glass lids. He looks at the cracked screen of his tablet, counts through the inventory. I'm beside myself. We've already taken too long. Soon the drones will come, and I don't code for IR...

My honour, my girl, Chifley says.

He opens one box. Some steam escapes. There's a person inside, curled up in the bio-scaffold printing gel like she was a specimen set in epoxy. A girl, maybe a few years younger than me. The print-job's not that great. She's smeared through the aspic like a blur.

He touches her tenderly, and though I've never seen Chifley cry, he's crying now.

My face must be one big question mark.

I couldn't get Honour out in time, he whispers. Made a stupid promise. Said I'd print her up, good as new afterwards. Only sleep a little while, little girl. Sleep now, baby and your Daddy will bring you back again.

He shoves both heels of his hands in his eye sockets. She believed, and then she died.

I let him weep, until the warning light winked on the driverless dash.

Things happened quickly after that. Chifley scooped smear-printed Honour, bio-gel and all, out of the box and laid her across the floor of the truck. Gave me his jacket,

warm from the desert and his skin, so I might undress under it with some degree of modesty.

Chifley tells me what's going to happen even as he slides the needle into my arm. The truck is headed for an address on the other side of the EM Wall. I'm going to sail on past the immigration scanners, because they'll be expecting a badly printed girl in a glass and metal coffin, bound for a research facility in the south. Then someone will give me a kiss of adrenaline on the other side.

Maybe it's a beautiful lie, like the one he told his kid so she wouldn't be scared when she died in one of them meat-processing centres, just like my folks did, most of my family.

Maybe it's the truth. I trust him, either way.

What you gonna do, Chif?

Gonna bury my daughter, Pup. Then go help some more people.

In my mouth is a memory of pizza fresh from the oven, spangling with melted cheese and popping oil, of my parents at a chequered table and my little brother laughing from his high chair.

I heard he got out, six years back.

I wonder if he'll remember me.

Naked in a bath of pheromones that are not mine, I understand a little of why Chifley chose me above all the others. She'd be my age if she'd lived. She'd look a little like me. To the others he gave a fighting chance, but to me, everything.

Brace, girl, brace, Chifley says in a voice as low as a highway hum, and the sleep comes on, and then I am running in full sunshine, in the footsteps of a girl called Honour.

The End