

STORY TIME

Story time. Roger was reading, signing rather, to some younger children who were just learning the language. He'd found an appropriate cautionary tale in an obscure novel about alternate worlds.

When Mr. Ka turned off the time machine, Roger was saying, he found himself a month in the future. The job which Bill had promised him was waiting. So on the next Monday morning, instead of taking the bus to Sandhill Labs as usual, I mean as in the past, Mr. Ka went instead to Microtics Research where he had been taken on as a junior member of the team that was going to build the first heefer.

What's a heefer? one of the children asked.

I don't know, do I? We don't have heefers yet. Now Sandhill Labs also had a heefer project, but they hadn't been able to get over the problem of Loudwine recursion. What Mr. Ka wanted to know (that is, what Bill wanted) was this: had the Microtics people solved the Loudwine problem?

They had.

The answer was very simple, really. It was to hold down the reverberator with a kinkle function until the Loudwine unit had converged on reality. The Sandhill team had just not thought of using kinkle functions, but when Mr. Ka went through the mathematics of it that evening it was perfectly obvious that it would work. He was very excited. The heefer was within his grasp at last.

Mr Roger, sir?

Yes?

Who is Bill?

Well, I've forgotten.

You said Bill was going to get Mr. Ka a job.

Oh. Well, and he did, too, didn't he? You missed that. He's spying on the Microtics people. Remember? Now: although it had taken Mr. Ka no time at all to find out what he had come for, he didn't want to go back just yet. (You remember I told you that Mr. Ka was a time traveller.) If he did, you see, the Microtics people would realize that he was a spy and they would Take Steps, and things might not work out right. So Mr. Ka went on working at Microtics for another month to keep up appearances. And it was a good thing he did, or he might not have noticed the importance of the reverberator lubricant. He kept this to himself, of course, saying nothing to the Microtics people. Their heefer design would fail without more lubricant. But at last he was ready. That night he went over the heefer plans again. Satisfied, he locked them in the trunk of the time machine, put the machine on autopilot and sent it back two months to the Sandhill laboratory. They would find the plans there and use them to build a working heefer, which Mr. Ka guessed would take them from then until now. The Microtics people, who were being held up by inadequate lubrication, would read in the newspapers tomorrow about the big breakthrough at Sandhill Labs.



Sector 5.18 de Glyph prefecture



Mr Roger, sir?

That **same** boy again. Girls never ask questions. Roger thought this story would bore girls anyway. Something needed to be done to fix that.

Two months?

Well, Hugh, he'd gone one month ahead and then waited there another month. **That** makes two.

Hugh fidgeted, obviously unsatisfied but afraid to nag a grown-up. He took a breath and his hands burst into motion.

But where he came from they were living too and they had lived a month while Mr Ka was waiting and so it should be only one. Shouldn't it?

Yes, Hugh, but Mr Ka's trunk would be going back to where he started. So no time at all would pass, don't you see?

Obviously, Hugh didn't see. Standing, stunned, silent — somehow, Roger had said once to Saleem, these kids's silence is more silent than ours. It's unnerving.

Then what happened to the month those other people lived? *That's not fair.* Hugh waved his fists indignantly.

Roger scratched his head and pretended to be puzzled. I think it's like a train on a siding, he said. When the other train passes they get to go too, afterward.

Hugh sat down, dubious, and Roger resumed the story.

When the time machine had disappeared, Mr. Ka laughed quietly and rubbed his hands together. He was very pleased with himself. Late that evening he went out for a drink, to celebrate.

Afterwards, he was run over by a truck.

They'll think I did it because we lost out to Sandhill, Mr. Ka said to himself as he stepped in front of a ten-wheeler. Bill will be in the clear. I hope I remember where I put the key to the trunk.

But he hadn't remembered, of course: it was in his pocket two months in the future. So, back at Sandhill Labs, Mr. Ka was struggling anxiously to pry open the trunk of the time machine. His face was dripping with perspiration thick as snot, which made his eyes sting.

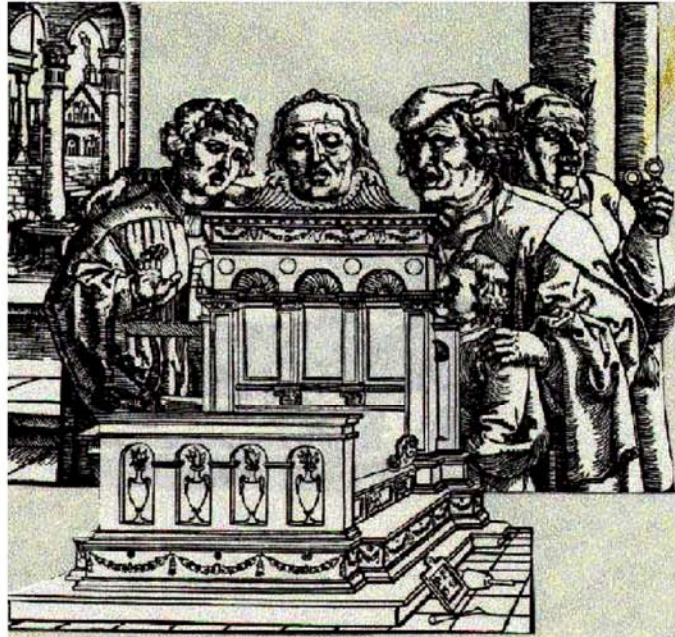
All at once a fierce pain in the back caused him to fall, and at that moment the trunk of the time machine popped open. Mr. Ka got to his knees, his head throbbing, and peered into the gloom at the heap of papers there, covered with his own spidery writing. Formulas, and little drawings of machine parts.

Ugh, he muttered. It feels like I've been run over by a truck.

And he had been, of course.



Late that evening he went out to celebrate.



At that moment the trunk of the time machine popped open.

The children erupted in giggles. Compared to their struggles to get words out of their mouths, the natural laughter was startling and put Roger off his stride. He paused, then chugged on.

As the heefer research was being taken away for study, Mr. Ka looked sadly at the dents and scratches on his time machine. It certainly wasn't new anymore.

And neither was Mr. Ka.





After Saleem left to teach his seven a.m. film class, Roger stolidly finished his coffee and his newspaper. Then he cleared the breakfast table and set the timer on the dishwasher to run at noon when there would be plenty of hot water from the solar heater. In the living room he found a doll's shoe which Sofka's daughter left behind, which he put into his pocket, and also a stiletto sandal which he dropped into the trash. On the way down to the corner where he would cross the street to the school he dropped two letters off at the mailbox. While he was waiting for the traffic to clear he made a list

for himself: milk, laundry, water the herbs on the patio. Besides the herbs, Saleem had bought a dwarf lime, too, which wasn't doing well. For some time Roger had been thinking of putting in a drip irrigation system. On a timer.

After a little thought Roger added a few more items to the list. Some grapes, maybe, if they weren't too expensive. It was an awkward time of year, between the citrus and the melons. His digestion was suffering.

After he'd crossed he realized he'd forgotten to make himself a lunch.

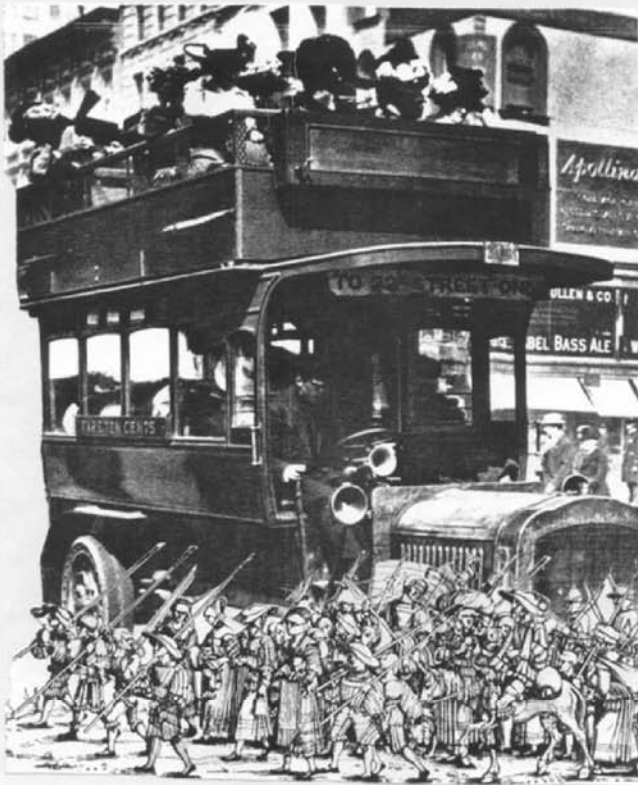


One day some weeks later,
as Mr. Ka was boarding the bus for work,
he caught sight of a newspaper headline.

HEEFER RESEARCH

AUSTIN (AP) -- A breakthrough in heefer technology was announced here yesterday by officials of Microtics Research. "There will be some scrambling to catch up now," Microtics company spokesmen predicted. Citing the work of a team led by scientist William —

cont 5.22



One day, as Mr. Ka was boarding the bus for work, he caught sight of a newspaper headline.



Episode 5.23: Ka treks into the mountains in search of the legendary de Glyph and is never seen again.



You cheated, another boy complained, by name David. He was upset too. Uneasily Roger twisted the large knuckle of his finger. I think, he said at last... but did not go on. The silence was becoming worrisome. The children were looking cautiously at each other.

I'm sorry, Roger said. I didn't mean to cheat. What did I do wrong?

A rustling arose, which no doubt had its deaf counterpart in some disturbance of the empathy. They weren't used to this. They didn't like winning one — it was unnatural. David was getting some hostile looks, but he stood his ground.

Mr Ka doesn't have to die, he whined.

These kids are getting really good. How do they make it seem to be whining like that? Roger was going to be left behind again, with his clumsy hands. Or maybe it was something else clumsy, some haole insensitivity.

Mr Ka looked frantically about for someone else with a copy of the morning paper. As he pushed toward the back of the bus he tried to work out what could have gone wrong. Had he left behind something incriminating perhaps? Was there something they hadn't told him? Work at Sandhill Labs, he found when he arrived there, was at a complete standstill. Offices were dark, and in the laboratory everyone was at loose ends. More than a year of work was lost. Some people seemed only disappointed; others were angry or depressed. A cup of coffee had been spilled, Mr Ka noticed, on some delicate instruments. One man was working at a microscope in a corner; every so often he would kick the lab table and upset everything, so that he had to start over.

Mr. Ka picked up the telephone, but no one at Microtics was taking any calls. As the day wore on, details of the coup began to come in. But no one seemed to know just how it had been done. Mr. Ka began to wish he had not been run over by a truck, just in case.

The week went by slowly. The lab pulled itself together and got its own machine working. Even with the Microtics machine first, it was better than nothing.

Mr. Ka kept waiting to hear from Bill, who had betrayed him somehow. One morning he woke up with a fearful headache and a very stiff back. And that was all.

Roger started to reply but he didn't get far.

It's an *alternate* universe, isn't it?

David was near to tears.

What's wrong with Mr Ka going on living? He doesn't have to be dead. He's over there — David seemed to mean outside the library window — and so who cares? You *wasted* him. He's not hurting anyone.

Roger winced.

Is he? Is he?

No, David. But it's too late now, I think. I'll do better next time.

David sacrificed the obvious rejoinder and sat down on his mat with a grumpy plump. The children nodded sagely.

Roger really was sorry. But: it was also a warning to them. Well, he said at large. What shall we do?

Nobody knew, of course.

