

An Age of Opportunity or The Can Opener

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Aside from Fluffers and Meow-meow, Edna lived alone in her upper Peachtree enclave apartment. Only rarely did she ever leave. There was no need to. Yes, she felt lonely at times, but she had the cats and the occasional visit from her niece, Mary Grace. There was always the feed, the immersive web, for entertainment, to break the monotony. And anyway, the city wasn't what it used to be, simply wasn't safe anymore.

"May I speak with a person?" she asked, seated in her eggshell green armchair with a view of the crowded skyline.

"Dear valued customer of Make It Make It 3D Printing Services, Inc., we apologize as unfortunately your Silver Member subscription does not include human interaction. But have no fear! For as little as k\$25 per hour, we can assign a customer service specialist to your account. Select 'yes' on your datalens for further instruction or select upgrade for information on the benefits of becoming a Make It Make It 3D Printing Services, Inc., Gold Member subscriber."

She pulled up her budget, using her datalens, the small contact lens that connected her to the digital world that was the feed. k\$45 flashed green in the corner of her eye, listed under the monthly emergency column. Two days prior, Edna had bought the bulk purchase of Fluffers and Meow-meow's favorite synth-salmon kitty treats to save money. When the package showed up, it surprised her how large it was. But she had missed a particular detail. "Can opener not included."

"Meow-meow," she said, the sandy long-haired cat, purring in her lap, "Do you think this is an emergency?"

Fluffers was on the windowsill, purring at the pigeons roosting within a mess of highwire. From the kitchen, she could hear bubbling water, smell the fresh garlic. Cream of mushroom soup, a favorite; her own Tuesday treat.

"Dear valued customer, are you still there?"

"Please, don't rush me," she said.

"Dear valued customer, our apologies. Take your time."

"I just thought, given the situation, a human would want to speak with me."

"Dear valued customer, as was previously stated, unfortunately your Silver Member—"

"Mute," Edna said.

At first, she thought it funny when the buddybot explained that, without an upgrade, it did not have the proper programming to open a can without a can opener. No bother. She would just make one, print it. The problem was, instead of a can opener, the MIMI printing machine had produced a handgun.

Edna was ninety-three years old. The last time she'd seen a gun stretched back over half a century, a silver revolver that belonged to her first husband, her Howie, that he kept in the nightstand drawer. When she saw the weapon, after the initial shock, she was flooded with memory. She remembered how Howie always left his shoes on the porch, that Sputnik and Jewel, her two cats at the time, loved his bootstrings; how the cats would sleep sometimes above her head, right beside the nightstand; that before his passing, Howie had asked for Sputnik to be buried next to him. "Like the Egyptians did," he'd said.

It was called a cross connection, the printing of the gun instead of the can opener. The error occurred when two printers running off the same operating system simultaneously requested design IP. Edna's building, The Brimington, though quite the charmer back in the day, had fallen on hard times and did not have the means to provide an OS per apartment. Likewise, Edna could not afford the hardware to run one herself. Once, a couple of years back, instead of knitting needles, she had received the battery for a drone. It wasn't common, but did happen. Still, the gun was illegal, shouldn't have been available to print in the first place.

"Unmute," she said, paying the k\$25.

"Dear valued customer, thank you for your purchase. Your customer service specialist will be with you in approximately two minutes and thirty-seven seconds."

The buddybot carried in the bowl of soup. Edna shooed away a disgruntled Meow-meow and, with her hands folded in her lap, waited as the robot gingerly laid the tray across the arms of her chair.

"Thank you," she said.

"Boop beep," the robot replied.

Edna's own mother had lived to eighty-seven, her grandmother ninety-two. According to her PG&J connectic health monitor, Edna had a decent shot at reaching one hundred and ten. When she ordered the buddybot care unit instead of checking into a retirement community, it wasn't so much her autonomy that led to the decision, but her financial situation. Yes, she had more than most for sure. She'd inherited the Peachtree apartment and another over in Buckhead,

the latter which she rented out and provided her with enough of an income to get by. But even if she outright sold both apartments, the proceeds would only last five years at say Rambling Estates Retirement Center in Dudley. What if she indeed lived to one hundred and ten or even longer? She couldn't risk running out of money.

The robot proved useful in other ways. It encouraged her to exercise; every day she took a walk in the feed, using the treadcaster in the spare room. The buddybot also monitored her nutrition and was a fabulous cook. But most of all, she had paid for the self-defense upgrade and now never felt unsafe.

“Hello, Mrs. Flemming?”

“It's Walton-Flemming, dear.”

“You're a Walton,” Edna's mother always told her, and there still lingered some inner pride for the name. But after George, her second husband, stole half of everything right from under her nose, a matter she only learned after his aneurysm and funeral, she kept his name as a reminder that her life had changed and that she had to change with it.

“Beg your pardon, Mrs. Walton-Flemming! My name is Brad, your customer service specialist. I understand we're not meeting under the best of circumstances.”

“Oh, it's not your fault, Brad.”

“Mrs. Walton-Flemming, shucks, I appreciate that. How are you holding up?”

“I'm rather upset, if you can't tell.”

“As I would be too, Mrs. Walton-Flemming, and on behalf of Make It Make It 3D Printing Services Inc., my sincerest apologies. You will be refunded your k\$25, and we have upgraded your membership to Gold Status free of charge. Our way of saying sorry. Now, can you tell me where the gun's located?”

“Dear, I'd like to cut a deal,” she said.

“A deal?” Brad asked.

She never expected to want to live as long as her Grandma Betty, but she already had, and held not the slightest inclination of giving up. Edna was rather fond of her solitude, her apartment with its lily yellow wallpaper, her knitting chair, and the spare room. And there was still so much to explore. Why, just the other day, plugged into the feed, she found a simulation of old New York; for three hours, she walked around Central Park, the sun shining above. But to

keep living as she was, comfortably in her apartment, cost money. It was as simple as that. Given the situation, she had to take advantage, to make a fuss.

“I believe my harrowing experience is worth more than just a membership upgrade.”

“Ah, I see. Now depending on what it is, I might have to go up the ladder for approval, but let me say, how fun. Good for you. Sticking it to the corporate bastards. Believe me, I’m on your side here. So, what do you got for me?”

Edna’s current year-long, MIMI printing subscription cost most of what the apartment over by the old baseball stadium brought in, after taking the property taxes and insurance requirements into consideration. No small amount. She wanted a lifetime waiver. Her first plan of attack had been to threaten to call the police about it, but she had not anticipated speaking with someone as accommodating as Brad.

“I would like to have my subscription waived,” she said.

“Fortunately, I can approve this.”

“For the rest of my life.”

“Oh, I knew what you meant, Mrs. Walton-Flemming. Feel free to access the corresponding non-disclosure agreement with your datalens.”

“That’s all?”

“Technically yes. We’ll have to send someone over to fetch the gun.”

She felt ridiculous asking the question. “Should I ask for more?”

“Mrs. Walton-Flemming,” Brand answered, “to be perfectly honest, I’ve got a good bit of low hanging fruit up my sleeve. Here’s what I can do. I’ve added free food delivery from Walmart Corp. and the latest upgrade to your PG&J connectic health monitor. We’ve also got this new promotion going on with Ugig right now. How about a weeklong travel pass to wherever you want?”

Half of Edna’s monthly budget went to the nearest LuxWalmart, a quarter of which derived from the delivery fee. A new upgrade to her connectic also meant a ten-year guarantee from PG&J that the software would keep working, at least until she turned one hundred and three. And just the prior week she happened to glance at flight rates to Paris. “Remember how beautiful it was,” Mary Grace had said to her.

“Could I have two travel passes?”

“Why, Mrs. Walton-Flemming, of course you can.”

“Then you have yourself a deal.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“And Brad?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine, Mrs. Walton-Flemming.”

Dolores and Leroy gathered by the coffee maker in the MIMI employee lounge. The heat drone buzzing above their heads glowed amber orange. Behind them, piled on top of the ping pong table, a stack of gift-wrapped secret Santa presents nearly reached the ceiling. Outside, it was snowing; the dingy cityscape coated in white.

“You see the leaderboard?” Dolores asked.

“Brad?” Leroy surmised.

“Yeah.”

“He’s just getting lucky.”

“Not what public relations says.”

“You talk with PR?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“None of your business.”

“Fine. What’d they say about Brad?”

“He fixed a level nine issue.”

“Get out of here. That’s crazy talk.”

“Another gun.”

“Shit. No way. How?”

“Cross connection. Some old lady.”

“What was she trying to make?”

“A can opener.”

“Ha!”

“Tell me about it.”

“They catch the other one?”

“No. But security’s on it.”

“And PR told you all this?”

“Yeah, and trust me, they’re reliable.”

“Ted? Ted is reliable?”

“Okay. Maybe not Ted. But he’s out sick if that makes you feel any better.”

“It does.”

“You really hate that guy.”

“I have my reasons.”

“Anywho, Brad’s with some C-suiter in the conference room right now.”

“Dammit, Dolores. It could’ve been one of us assigned to that call. What do you think that bonus looks like?”

“Enough to get the girls into St. Mary’s.”

“Yeah, while we’re dreaming, I could finally afford those PG&J beauty treatments.”

“Always the vain one.”

“Need to keep this pretty face of mine...well, pretty.”

Both received an alert on their datalens; a minute left of breaktime. Dolores was already at the door by the time Leroy gulped down the rest of his coffee.

“Wait for me,” he said.

“I’ll see you at lunch,” she replied, giving a hurried wave.

“Hold on,” he called back, “can I tell Chuck about the gun?”

But she was gone.

Security is an adventure, they told her. A fun way to pass the day. They forgot to mention just how boring a stakeout could be. Even worse, Sofie had been assigned Fritz as her partner. The second time he fell asleep, just after lunch, she broke regulation and didn’t wake him. Never had she been so grateful for silence. Who knew one person could know so much about fly fishing.

Fritz liked to think of himself as a cowboy, wore a dumb duster hat and kept a Colt Python hidden beneath his yellow MIMI security jacket. Instead of tobacco, he chewed sunflower seeds, was always spitting the shells into a blue tin cup that swung from a little hook he'd attached to his belt. Unbearable.

But now that they were inside the apartment building, she knew why the OS had paired them. Her weakness had always been crowd control, and Fritz walked right in and handled the lockdown perfectly. "Nothing to worry about, folks," he said. "All under control." And they believed him. A real man of the people apparently, with his mustache and love handles, the stupid drawl she knew wasn't real. Nonetheless, they were ahead of schedule.

The psycho was on floor eighteen. Apartment 1949. Douglas Cripe. Forty-two years of age. Unemployed. Imagining the look on his face when the can opener appeared instead of the gun made her giggle. She hoped he'd run. If there was anything about the job she enjoyed, it was the chase, the mad dash of the criminal. They had done their due diligence. Two buddybots were positioned at each floor exit. The swat team would land on the roof any moment now. But there was still a chance, a four-percent likelihood according to the OS, that the man was a runner.

"What's he doing now?" she asked the OS.

"Suspect is walking from the kitchen to the living area."

She felt her heartbeat, her quickening pulse.

"Fritz, where are you?"

"I'm in position."

"OS, locate Fritz."

"Floor eighteen. Southside elevator," it said.

"You don't believe me?"

"No, Fritz it's—"

"Sofie, man ain't worth a damn without his word."

"Fritz, shut up. It's order four in the playbook. I'm supposed to double check. OS, send Fritz the objective—"

"I can pull it up myself. Sorry."

She walked down an empty hall of teal carpet and plumb-colored walls, the paint having cracked and peeled with time. Along the ceiling were missing light fixtures and an exit sign flashing orange, hanging by its power cord. Fritz appeared around the corner and waited for her

to take the lead. At the door, they activated their riot vests. Then she punched in the room code. The door opened, and in they went, but there was no one there, the apartment entirely empty, not so much a toaster let alone a person.

“OS, locate suspect,” Sofie said.

“Suspect is walking from the living area to the bedroom.”

“Like hell he is,” Fritz said, spitting into his little cup. “How long ago you reckon he hacked the building?”

“Fritz, shut up and let me think.”

“But what if I like thinking out loud?”

And it struck her. The suspect’s location.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “I know where he is.”

Truly, Edna had been fortunate. She had her health. Her best friend, Azalea, died some three years back from the flu of all things. There were some her age out there, outside, wandering the wild streets, cold and hungry, who wouldn’t reach ninety-four, let alone one hundred and ten. If she was careful, there was enough money to last her the rest of her life. Yes, it wasn’t safe to go outside, as even with the buddybot, it wasn’t worth the risk. But the loneliness wasn’t all that bad in comparison. She had other friends she could talk to, whether by holo or datalens. Carlene lived out in California, still played tennis every day. Babs always had money and ended up closer in Dudley. But neither would visit. It was Peachtree after all. Only Mary Grace stopped in time to time.

Early on, Edna had promised her mother that if she ever did get pregnant it would be with someone she loved. But neither of the two men she had loved proved capable, and by that point she was too old anyway. Her younger sister Eileen, Mary Grace’s mother, was never the jealous type, had allowed Edna to dote on her niece without interference. Like Babs, Eileen had also moved to Dudley. At best, she had until ninety, the consequences of a life of excess, so didn’t have to worry about the cost of the retirement center. But the last time Edna had left her apartment was to visit her sister. And yes, Dudley was lovely. She had the time of her life swimming in a real deal pool, meeting so many new people, how every night was movie night.

But even then, she could sense the place was living off borrowed time, that it was beginning to fade, like all things did.

When Edna heard the knock on the door, it was this impermanence she'd been thinking about. On the feed she'd seen a clip for a cryo center. "For those seeking eternity," the ad said. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was none the better, clinging on to dear life in her own little way. One hundred and ten. Would she make it? The knock wasn't unexpected. Brad had told her a security detail would stop by at some point for the gun. "Robot, please answer the door," she said. But the buddybot didn't move, and neither did it when she repeated herself, only stood there, staring up into the ceiling.

Leno took the long way down to the old woman's apartment. A walk of shame. He spent the whole time hoping she wouldn't make a big deal about it. Just his luck, a cross connection. Rookie mistake. He should've checked the room's OS source. Nothing he could do about it now. Best case scenario, he'd explain his situation, and she'd hand over the gun. Worst case, there would be hysterics, and he'd have to take the gun against the old woman's will.

He'd always had a knack for feed manipulation, but was fresh, still new to the game. He knew the risks, and any decent hacker eventually encountered violence in some form or another. "Got to get yourself a gun," Padre told him. "Hole up someplace grimy." Leno's pursuers were fortunately only small-timers who couldn't afford to keep looking for him. All he had to do was wait it out, and The Brimington seemed as good a place as any. But he needed the gun regardless. A can opener just wouldn't do.

He was surprised to find a buddybot linked to the old woman's apartment, for there to be such extravagance in so lowly a place, but it wasn't a problem. He'd just turn it off. Once MIMI's investigation unit figured out they'd been duped, he'd already be off and running. He had time, and the gun was too expensive to leave behind. Padre swore it was the cheapest design he could find, but Leno knew better, that he was getting fleeced, being fresh and all. He really hoped the old woman would see his side of the story, that it was a rough world out there and yeah, he knew the gun was illegal, but not everyone could afford their own buddybot to keep them safe at night.

He knocked and then walked in. The apartment was small but neat. Very yellow. A gray tabby hissed at him from the window. Everywhere there seemed to be knitted portraits of cats. He glanced over at the old woman in her armchair, another cat in her lap.

“Are you from MIMI?” she asked.

“Yes,” he lied. He never imagined he’d be mistaken for a MIMI rep, what on account of his black jumpsuit and combat boots.

“I was expecting you. And don’t mind Fluffers. He’s most feral this time of day. Come here, let me get a better look at you.”

He took a step forward. The cat hissed again.

“Fluffers, goodness. Tell me, what’s your name?”

“Phil,” he said.

“Well, Phil, if I can figure out what’s wrong with my buddybot, I hope you’ll join me for my afternoon tea. As you can see, I could certainly use the company.”

Sofie spotted the gun by the tea set.

“I said keep your hands where I can see them,” she told the kid.

“Phil is from MIMI,” the old woman insisted.

“Ma’am, he’s not,” Sofie explained for the third time.

“My name, Miss, is Edna Walton-Flemming.”

The suspect couldn’t have been more than twenty. He had some chops though. It wasn’t common for Sofie to encounter an unregistered, let alone someone who didn’t appear at all on her datalens. “What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Phil,” he said.

“Suit yourself.”

While he had the Buckhead look, crusty and in all black, he didn’t seem dangerous sitting there with his skinny arms raised, teacup and saucer held high. Sofie assumed the gun wasn’t loaded, and if this turned out to be true, he’d get more time for the registry failure than an unloaded weapon. They were somehow still ahead of schedule, and even though the search and

seizure didn't necessarily go as planned, she was sure to be lauded for figuring it all out, especially without the help of an OS.

Sofie pulled out the cuffs from inside her MIMI jacket, and Fritz came barreling in, face all pink and flustered. He leaned over, wheezing, his revolver loose against his knee. "Seems like you've got everything handled," he said. She turned to make some snide remark about conditioning and saw the gray tabby eyeing Fritz's dangling bolo tie. "Fritz," she warned, but too late. Pouncing from the windowsill, the cat lunged for the bolo. Fritz, being Fritz, lost his balance while swiping the cat away from his neck and fired an errant shot that hit the back of Sofie's thigh. "Dammit Fritz!" she yelled, gritting her teeth, clutching her leg. The old woman was now screaming, and looking up, Sofie cursed again. The suspect, of course, had fled.

"You see the new guy?" Leroy asked, sipping his coffee.

"My god, that cowboy hat," Dolores giggled.

"Guess who's the lucky fellow that gets to train him."

"No way. Who made the assignment?"

"Tiffany. She owed me."

"For what?"

"The luncheon incident."

"Which one?"

"Olive Garden."

"What a day that was. Are you going to take the money or PTO?"

"I can't decide. It's more PTO than I expected."

"I'm happy for you. Your first trainer bonus. A month off sounds like a dream."

"Keep it between us, but the guy's from security."

"Demotion?"

"Yeah. Big time."

"I bet he's got some stories."

"Oh, I'm sure he does."

About a week after, Edna had just gotten off the phone with Mary Grace when the delivery drone showed up. She was feeling good about herself. Years back, she'd helped Eileen lobby all the Walton contacts they knew to secure Mary Grace a job at Dudley's LuxWalmart, and finally, Mary Grace was set to become a pensioner. She would be better set than Edna, even Eileen for that matter.

USPS had already delivered that day, so she thought it might be another visitor. After the shooting, Brad had helped her find a lawyer. The two parties were still negotiating terms. "We're going get you the moon," she was told. Between MIMI's legal team, the police, and the cleaning crew sent in to scrub out all the blood, there had never been so many people in and out of her apartment. Fluffers had taken to hiding under the Treadcaster every time someone knocked at the door. Edna, however, rather enjoyed all the company and was disappointed when she found the little hovering machine. But then, the drone pulled out a can opener.

She waited, until seated once more in her armchair, to read the diginote:

Dear Edna,

After things quiet down, I promise I'll stop by. Give the cats a treat for me. Thanks again for the tea.

L