

DESTINATION

Jack Skillingstead

Since 2003 Jack Skillingstead has sold more than forty stories, many of which have appeared in *Asimov's*. More stories are already slated for publication in 2017—including the David Brin/Stephen Potts edited anthology: *Chasing Shadows*. This book will present stories and essays examining the coming transparent society and will be published by TOR in February. It is produced in collaboration with the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human imagination. Jack's latest tale for us takes his unwitting character to an unsettling . . .

DESTINATION

"Brad, I'd like you to get out of the office for a few hours."

"Why?" Brad Ott had been sunk so deep in his design template that he hadn't noticed his manager enter. Now he looked up at Adelina Serna in her neat business suit and perfect makeup, standing before him hip-cocked with her arms crossed under her breasts, and he began to sweat. Brad liked to be left alone. He did good work. His apps came pre-loaded on every 3-D printed phone the government distributed to the masses outside the exclusive zones.

"Don't look so scared," Adelina said. "I just want you to play a game."

Brad was lost. "A . . . game?"

"Real world. Have you heard of Destination?"

"Where the car drives you around and you don't know where?"

"That's it."

"It doesn't sound like my thing."

"Today it's your thing."

"I have a lot of work to do here." He could smell his own sweat and wondered, embarrassed, if Adelina smelled it, too.

"This is about work, Brad."

"I don't—"

"You and some of the other creatives never leave the building. Brad, I don't think I've ever seen you go outside. Today I want you to get out there."

"But I don't like it out there. I like it in here."

Adelina smiled. It looked a little forced, the strain showing around her eyes. "It won't hurt. Besides, it comes straight from corporate. TTP initiative."

"Oh." That was that. TTP—Training Temperament Priorities—superseded everything.

"Corporate feels it will improve morale, shake out the cobwebs."

Until Adelina walked through the door, Brad's morale had been fine. "When do I have to play?"

"Right now."

Brad sighed, touched the jewel light on the corner of his desk. The design template folded up and dropped down the illusion of a bottomless shaft, then the surface of his desk assumed the appearance of a solid oak slab.

Brad stood up. "I don't know much about Destination. How do I start?"

"Surrender your lendings."

"What?"

"It's a phrase, part of Destination. It means give up your stuff, basically. Your ID, credit pass, phone—all that stuff."

"Do I have to?"

Adelina stared at him without blinking.

"Okay," Brad said, "okay."

It was hard to remove his wristband, which contained all the "lendings" Adelina mentioned. Not *hard* hard; simply difficult to part with.

"This makes me pretty uncomfortable."

"I know. That's part of it." She held her hand out, the mauve nails perfectly filed. Brad dropped his wristband into her palm and watched her tuck it into the slash pocket of her skirt.

"Now we go for a drive," she said.

"We're going . . . together?"

"A figure of speech, Brad."

In the garage under the AirVision tower, a row of jaunty white-and-blue, egg-shaped vehicles sat parked at the curb. Fully electric, as much window as body frame, the Destination cars were common driverless vehicles intended strictly for transport within the city. Thousands of them hummed around the streets of selected metropolitan areas—at least they did inside the exclusive zones. Beyond the barricades things were less orderly. Less clean.

Brad's fellow "creatives" stood talking to their department managers, or staring around the garage with bewildered expressions. Others already sat in their assigned vehicles, waiting for Destination to begin.

Brad rubbed his wrist, missing his lendings. In a way, what Adelina had said about never leaving the building was true. Brad spent all day at his desk. When he went home at night he rode the elevator down to the transit depot. From there, a train carried him across town to his conapt, where he rode another elevator to the thirty-third floor. There wasn't any need to go outside, he had everything he needed *inside*. Whatever Amazon couldn't deliver (virtually nothing) he could order sent up from neighborhood restaurants or whatever.

"It's like a scavenger hunt," Adelina was telling him. "The car takes you to a random destination. You bring something back to prove you were there. An artifact. It has to be a thing specific to the place, identifiable as belonging there."

"Like a T-shirt with the name of the neighborhood on it?" Brad thought in terms of neighborhoods because he never left the barricaded exclusive zone. It was like the thing about never going outside. But outside within the city was still *inside* as far as the greater world was concerned. The greater world where his AirVision apps proliferated, entertaining the masses and creating revenue streams. "But without my wristband I don't have any money," he said. "How am I supposed to bring something back?"

"You have to *talk* to people, Brad. You have to interact. Destination is a social challenge game. It's supposed to take you out of your comfort arena. And I hope you will be more creative than a T-shirt."

Brad envisioned the awkwardness of procuring an "artifact," without the aid of his wristband, from somebody else's neighborhood. "I don't know—"

"It'll be fun. Besides, the Destination car won't return you without an artifact."

“Have you ever played?”

“God, no.”

Brad doubted it would be fun. On the other hand, it wouldn't be difficult. Destination was a popular game, and there were only so many neighborhoods inside the exclusive zone. People must be used to scavengers piling out of eggs and, essentially, begging for stuff. Some more high-minded types complained that Destination mocked actual poor people. Brad could see the point. While his parents had certainly not been beggars, they *had* been working class, living well outside the exclusive zones, surviving on factory pay. Until age nine, when Aptitude Assessment placed him in the top percentile and he was whisked off to an education inside the Seattle exclusive zone, Brad had lived with them in a government housing block. Not like the old-style tenements. A decent place, or decent enough.

“How do I win?”

“Win?”

“The game. Destination.”

“You don't win. You play. Winning isn't the goal. It's social. It takes you—”

“I know. Out of my comfort arena.”

The other eggs began to pull away from the curb.

“Better get going now,” Adelina said.

He reluctantly got into the car. The door locks engaged. He swallowed, waved at his manager, who turned briskly away. Adelina could be a pain, but he didn't blame her for making him play Destination. When TTP issued marching orders, you marched. Period.

The car rolled up to the surface streets and accelerated. It was raining. For a couple of blocks Brad's electric egg traveled in a parallel lane next to an identical vehicle. Ted Lee, from AirVision's art department, looked across at him. His face behind the fogged glass appeared confused, nervous. Ted was a stone introvert. Destination was going to be tough on him. Brad waved, then his vehicle made an abrupt left turn, and he never saw Ted Lee again, except in a video capture that made Brad sick every time he thought of it.

* * *

Inside the Destination car, Brad closed his eyes and tried to relax. In a couple of hours he would be back in his office working on the RATATTACK! upgrade. RATATTACK! was a real game, not a pointless driving-around exercise designed to make people uncomfortable. Part of the Urban Legends Series, the RATATTACK player scored by “shooting” real-life rats with her government-distributed phone. Of course, if your home turf was short on real rats you could substitute cats, or dogs, or crows, or whatever, and the app would score those as rat kills. Naturally, you weren't really killing anything. RATATTACK! overlaid a targeting sight on the phone's camera. The screen flashed red when you scored a kill. The real creature scurried away, albeit marked in the phone by the physical characteristics recognition software, so you couldn't score on the same rat twice.

The upgrade would make the chosen species *look* like big fat urban rats—on the screen, at least. The kickass thing about RATATTACK! was how it interfaced with the real world. Millions of players around the earth competed for the highest score within regional and species parameters.

Brad closed his eyes and tried to sort out a coding problem. The day passed. The egg's electric motor hummed. Rain pattered on the roof. He lost track of time. A rough patch of road surface rattled the car. Brad looked up out of his thoughts. He used his shirtsleeve to wipe fog off the window. Dingy stone buildings, none higher than ten stories, slipped by. Metal grates covered shop windows. An old black woman in a rain-saggy sweater and knit hat pushed a rusty shopping cart piled high with

junk. She leaned into it, like Sisyphus and his rock. A panel truck with a human operator passed him.

Fuck. He had departed the exclusive zone.

Annoyingly, the GPS display was blank. Was that part of the game, or was it simply broken? Either way, Brad didn't like it. If the latter, then why? Was it so hard to maintain things? Brad did his job, why couldn't others do theirs?

He had passed through the barricades without even knowing it. No one stopped you going out; getting back in, without his wristband, that was going to be a bitch.

"Hey," Brad said, "there's something wrong here."

The egg jolted over uneven pavement. It wasn't built for driving outside the well-maintained city streets. The car had *little* tires.

"You need to turn back," Brad said. "Turn back now. Are you hearing me?"

The car did not reply. Every car Brad had ever been in since moving to the exclusive zone replied to passenger voice inquires, if not commands.

A freeway sign swept past. The Destination car swung onto the ramp. Both gas and electric-powered vehicles, all much larger than Brad's fragile egg, soon crowded him into an aggressive traffic flow. It was a mixed highway, driverless intermingled with less-predictable human operators. Brad shrank down in his seat as tractor-trailer rigs rumbled past like dinosaurs.

"Take me back, take me home," Brad said. Then he shouted, "What's *wrong* with you?"

Humming to itself, the Destination car kept going.

* * *

Hours later, beyond the great ex-urban sprawl, traffic thinned out. For a while, the scenery turned green. Brad wiped another hole in the constantly fogging side window. A dilapidated barn stood in a field of high, wet grass, half its roof collapsed into the hayloft. By the time night fell, Brad had given up any hope that the car would turn back. The headlights made shallow penetration into the dark.

Brad was hungry and thirsty. He racked his seat back as far as it would go, folded his arms, and tried to sleep. In an anxious dream he found himself, a child, buried under the junk in the old black woman's shopping cart. He tried to tell her to stop, but his weak and frightened child's voice couldn't be heard over the rattling junk and the cart's rusty-squealing wheels. He clawed frantically to get out. When had the old woman's face become his father's?

Brad started to cry, just as a jolt through the floor of the Destination car brought him out of the dream. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. He was stopped at a charging station. There were no other vehicles. The Destination car had mounted the charging-stud, and that was the jolt that had awakened Brad. Immediately he pulled on the door handle, but the lock was still engaged.

"Car, unlock the door."

The car went on charging and did not unlock any doors. In the window of a little pillbox structure, a man in a baseball cap stood talking on a phone. Brad waved, trying to get his attention. The man waved back, enthusiastically. He looked really happy, and he was talking animatedly into his phone.

Brad yelled, "Hey, I can't get out! Help me!"

The man began laughing. Brad drew back. What the hell? There was a clunk when the charger uncoupled. The engine started, and seconds later the charging station and the crazy person in the pillbox retreated rapidly into the dark.

* * *

The car drove all night. Early the next morning it exited the freeway. Brad sat forward, suddenly wide awake. His stomach started cramping when he passed the WELCOME TO DUPREE, CALIFORNIA sign. Dupree was his hometown, where

he'd lived until he was nine, when Aptitude Assessment hoisted him away to better times. His parents had worked in the tire factory, two jobs being necessary to maintain even their modest circumstances. This wasn't a random destination.

If the car stopped, Brad planned to kick the window out. A horse stood at the top of Main Street shaking its head, like an old man who couldn't remember where he was supposed to be. Out here, for some, horses had come back in service. The Destination car swerved around it, continued down the street, then tucked itself into the curb behind a large fossil-fuel pickup truck with rusted wheel hubs and a broken taillight. The engine turned off, the instrument panel went black, and the door locks clacked open.

Brad climbed out and stretched. He felt stiff, and hungry and thirsty. Also, desperately in need of coffee. His caffeine headache was like a little hand squeezing his eyeball. The stomach cramps probably resulted from hunger. It didn't mean anything that they felt like those cramps that had doubled him over when his mother sent him outside to wait while his father "unwound." Unwinding had been the family code for a process that ended when his dad passed out. Brad used to imagine a tight spring in the middle of his father's chest gradually uncoiling, as if his father had been a robot with a faulty mechanism, the loosening spring making him talk too loud, stumble around, sing weepy songs, break plates, lapse into sullen and distant gazes before the spring unwound all the way and he slumped over. Outside, Brad had waited in the cold and dark until his mother called him in. Why had she let it take so long? Of course, she'd had no choice.

In the early stages of unwinding, Brad's father had once taken a swing at a policeman and was beaten badly. It was a beating from which he never fully recovered.

It felt unreal, standing on the main street of Dupree. He'd never been back, not since Aptitude Assessment. His parents had received passes to visit him in the exclusive zone, so there was no need. His AA had created a bubble of privilege, and he especially wanted his father to see it. But his father had never come. And now both his parents were long dead.

Across the street, a door banged shut. Brad turned toward the sound. Locals sat in the plate-glass window of the Sunshine Diner. Brad rubbed his naked wrist. Without his wristband he couldn't even buy a cup of coffee. He started across the street anyway. The Sunshine Diner had always been there.

Standing inside the doorway, conspicuous in his expensive suit, Brad felt at a loss. There were maybe ten customers in the cafe—eleven, if you included the dog, a sloppy-looking animal with muddy paws. It lay panting on its side next to an empty bar stool, as if it were waiting for someone, or had maybe fallen off the stool.

"Coffee, mister?"

A middle-aged woman with curly gray-and-black hair held up a pot of coffee. Brad's reflexive response was out of his mouth before he could modify it to include his financial circumstances, which probably wouldn't have helped, anyway. He doubted Dupree got a lot of Destination gamers. "Yes. I mean—"

She held the pot poised above a thick mug she'd placed on the counter and looked a question at him.

"Yes," Brad finished. "Coffee."

She filled the mug and turned away. Brad sat on the red vinyl stool, a tear in the seat repaired with duct tape. He added cream and sugar to the coffee, and took his first sip. He'd have to run out on the tab or beg poverty, but how much could a cup of coffee be? When he got back to the city, he would send them the money. He wasn't a thief. But he couldn't bring himself to beg, not in Dupree. This place was behind him, and outside of the exclusive zones begging wasn't a game.

He needed a salvage artifact, so the car would take him back. Brad cast his gaze around the diner for matches, or paper napkins, or anything that might bear the

name of the town on it. A menu would have been perfect. But there weren't any, just slow-scrolling video displays embedded in the counter under cloudy Lucite.

A glass-fronted case next to the register displayed racks of pastries, cookies, and cakes. It would be so easy to reach around the counter and take one. On top of the case, a single dried-out Danish stood propped on a little easel, as if it were a work of art. Next to it was a slate chalkboard, about the size of a tablet device, with a cheerful red border. "No one saves us but ourselves" was written on the board, "so what are you waiting for?"

"That's our Buddha," the waitress said.

"Your Buddha?"

"Look at it."

Brad looked at it.

"He's got his own Flutter account," the waitress said.

"Who does?"

"The Danish—Buddha. At Dupree Buddha."

Brad squinted at the pastry. It did look a little bit like a Buddha figure.

"A customer saw what it was and showed Al, the guy who runs this place? Al gave the customer a chocolate croissant and kept the Danish. The Dupree Buddha is famous, at least on Flutter. Check it out."

She retrieved her government-issued phone and showed him the screen. Flutter was an approved media that seemed to encourage social bonding while actually effecting isolation. @dupreebuddha posted *a lot*. Probably it was a random quote-generator. Brad recognized some sayings from other historical figures, too, including JFK and Malcolm X. Some of the quotes looked legitimate, others had been jiggered (*Ask not what you can do for your country, because your country won't listen to you anyway*). @dupreebuddha had eight hundred thousand followers. Was that even possible for a pastry? There was a picture of @dupreebuddha propped on its easel.

"This one's Emerson," Brad said.

"Which?"

"Life is not a destination but a journey, so why aren't you moving against the ones who want you to stay in one spot?" That's Emerson, not Buddha. The first part is, anyway." Brad smiled to show he wasn't being an asshole. The partial Emerson quote struck Brad as providential. Here was his Destination artifact, a Flutter-famous artifact tied to a specific location. Of course, this wasn't an ordinary game of Destination. But he could sort that out once he was home.

"No kidding," the waitress said, sounding as though she didn't care whether he was kidding or not.

Three teenage boys in a booth by the window started laughing. The waitress shouted past Brad, "What's so funny, you kids?"

One of them held up his phone, a video playing on the screen. Hardly able to get the words out past his cackling, the boy said, "The scared-looking dude is in some serious shit!"

"Oh, yeah?" She quickly tapped up a different screen on her phone, stared for a few seconds, and chuckled. "I guess he is."

"You ever play RATATTACK on that thing?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"I hear there's an upgrade coming."

"Got it already."

"What—? You can't have it already." He wanted to add, *Because I'm still working on it*, but didn't. The waitress fiddled with her phone again and handed it to him. An ad for LitesOut sleeping pills ran, the Git-It-Now buy-button blinking so urgently Brad almost tapped it, as he had once been conditioned to do. Then the screen cleared

to the familiar RATATTACK gun sight. Since the lens on the back of the phone was pointed at the waitress, she appeared as the target. The software transformed her out of her waitress uniform into a fashionable business suit and changed the background to a luxurious conference room—tricks the current version of RATATTACK! certainly could not do. Even Brad's upgrade wouldn't be capable of *that*.

"Go ahead," the waitress said. "Take your kill."

Brad pushed the physical button on the bottom of the phone, and the business-suit version of the waitress exploded in a burst of blood and wriggling guts. Jesus Christ, it was vicious. He handed the phone back. "Did that download from the regular network?" It was a stupid question. Everything on the gov-ish phones downloaded automatically from the same network. That was the whole point.

The waitress looked at him. "Sure. The regular network."

Brad unconsciously rubbed his left wrist. No one inside the barricades bothered with phones anymore. The wristband projected an interactive Ghostware cloud that was much neater and more convenient. Inside the zones, you got the choice.

More raucous laughter broke out from the teenagers in the booth. One of them said, "That scared-looking guy is *doomed!*"

When the waitress retreated into the kitchen, Brad checked that no one was looking, then leaned over the counter and grabbed a Danish out of the display cabinet. He swapped it with the Buddha, which he slipped under his jacket. His heart was racing. He had never stolen anything before in his life. He'd never *needed* to.

Outside, he all but ran for the Destination car. Halfway across the street, he stopped. Someone was already sitting in the car. Brad looked around. Probably he appeared as lost as the horse still loitering at the end of the street. Since there was nothing else to do, Brad finished crossing the street and opened the car door. A scruffy-looking kid, maybe twenty years old, sat in the second seat. His Levi's had a hole in the knee, but not a stylish one.

"Who are you?" Brad said.

The kid pushed a flop of glossy black hair off his forehead. "You can call me Xavier. You better get in."

Brad hesitated, then, because there was nothing else to do, he got in and pulled the door shut. The Destination car stood out in the same way his suit did, marking him as an outsider. He wanted to be gone out of there, and fast.

"Go on," Xavier said, "start this thing up and let's get rolling."

"I—"

"Don't bother lying. I know you have the Danish."

Sheepishly, Brad withdrew his hand, clutching the Buddha, from inside his jacket. He held it up to the dashboard. A thread of red laser light slipped over the stale pastry, scanning it, and for the first time the car spoke: "Artifact authenticated."

The engine hummed to life and they started moving.

Brad turned to Xavier. "How'd you know? Who *are* you?"

"I'm your driver."

"This car doesn't need a human operator."

Xavier shook his head. "Not the car. I'm *your* driver. If you decide to join the cause, I'll be the guy that guides you in the right direction. I'll be your manager, if you want to look at it that way."

"My manager." A picture of Adelina appeared in Brad's mind. Xavier did not exactly match up.

"You think we're kidding around?" Xavier said.

We?

"What do you think you're doing here, bro? Playing Destination? We hacked the cars and *gave* them destinations. I personally gave you *this* destination."

"I don't think you can do that."

"Man, it's done."

"How?"

"The Network is vulnerable. Sure, they got sophisticated firewall protection, but we find our way through cracks so small they aren't even noticed. I got into the Destination server by, you know, collapsing my skeleton and squeezing through. Like a rat. Hey, Brad. It's a freaking rat-attack!"

Brad went cold. "How do you know me?"

The Destination car swerved around the horse.

"I know all about you, Brad. We've been inside AirVision's servers for months."

A couple of dogs ran alongside the car, barking and snarling, then fell back. A boy, maybe eight years old, picked an aluminum can out of the gutter and dropped it in a paper shopping bag. He glanced up when the car hummed past him.

Xavier nudged Brad's shoulder. "Anywhere you can score a couple of nickels, huh, Brad?"

"What?"

"Seventeen-buck universal minimum wage outside the privileged zones is crap if every job is a minimum wage job, and the Network sets the prices and tells you what to buy. Pay before content, and everybody's hooked on content. You know what I'm saying?"

"I don't think you should be in this car."

"But I *am* in this car. Where we are now, Brad, is that people are pissed. Even the ones who don't yet know they're pissed, are *pissed*. The situation is going to be addressed, and that can go a couple of ways. Let me show you something."

Xavier held out a 3-D-printed government-issued phone. The case had been cracked (supposedly impossible to do), the back plate removed, and the original unit mounted on brackets attached to a larger, exposed board. Xavier touched the screen and a video started to play—without the Git-It-Now button flashing. Police drone shot of some kind of chaotic street scene. The drone swept down on a seething mob, which dispersed, revealing a white-and-blue Destination car, the windows smashed, the egg-shaped vehicle rolled on its roof and—my God!—Ted Lee, the AirVision art department guy—crawled out of the windshield frame, blood on his white shirt. *The scared-looking dude is in some shit!*

Brad shook his head, disbelieving. "Where's that, where'd that happen?"

"Your friend wound up in Oakland. That wasn't my call, by the way. I don't want violence." He shoved the phone in Brad's face. "This is an example of the wrong direction. The barricades are gonna fall, Brad. And not everyone wants it to be . . . orderly. Pissed, remember? An inside man with your talent could help things go easier."

"Let me see that phone."

Xavier handed it over. Brad turned it in his fingers. "You shouldn't have been able to modify it. That's not supposed to happen. And there's no public feed on police video. We don't even see those."

A second video started playing, this one a citizen upload. Brad stared at himself waving frantically from a charging car, the word-crawl under his face spelling, *Hey, I can't get out! Help me!*

The little fist squeezed Brad's eyeball like a gorilla.

Xavier plucked the phone out of his fingers. "We, huh? Well, we minimums out here in the world are not all as dumb as you want to think. And we don't like your definition of 'inappropriate' technology. We can selectively distribute videos, software upgrades, whatever, and the Network can't detect it."

"How'd you trick AirVision into sending us out in Destination cars? That was a TTP directive."

"Bro. We *are* TTP."

“What?”

“We have been for the last couple of years. We’ve got tunnels all through AirVision. In a couple of years we’ll own the Network, not that anyone inside will know it. And we’re making rat tunnels into the multinationals, too. It can come down in blood, or it can come down like a dream—you know, the way reality shifts around you when you’re right in the middle of it? Brad, I’m offering you a position with our revolution. You can get in on the ground floor. You can help make the dream version happen, or you can hide behind the barricades and wait for chaos and blood. We need people with your skills, working on the inside. What do you say, bro?”

“I don’t believe any of it. Okay, you hacked the Destination server, but that’s not a revolution. It’s just . . . a glitch.”

Xavier laughed. “Oh, you believe it, all right. You believe all of it. You just don’t want to.” Xavier glanced out the windshield. They were approaching the freeway ramp, slowing for the Yield. Xavier quickly put his phone away. “I’m gonna be in touch,” he said. “It won’t be that obvious, but keep your eyes open. You know, a long time ago in France they chopped heads off. Let’s try to minimize that shit.” The left front tire of the Destination car jolted into a pothole so deep it almost didn’t roll out. “Fucking infrastructure. We’re gonna get to that.”

The car started to turn onto the ramp. Startlingly, Xavier shoved open the door and jumped out. Brad wrenched around. A fossil fuel sedan swung in front of Xavier, he climbed in, and the car sped away.

* * *

As he approached Seattle, heavy traffic, big trucks and cars, hemmed in the little white-and-blue egg, and Brad could taste the exhaust of fossil fuel behemoths like a film on his tongue—like a taste out of the past, when he’d lived in Dupree. A poisonous memory toggle. They had beaten his father. Resisting arrest, according to reports. And Brad could believe it. From the security and distance of the exclusive zone, it was easy to remember his father as a loud troublemaker who drank and made everyone unhappy. Easy to tell himself the beating had been more or less deserved. Hadn’t Brad himself, as a kid, harbored a secret fury toward his father?

Xavier probably thought he was being clever, essentially kidnapping Brad and bringing him back to Dupree, where memories might awaken. Well, they had. But so what?

At the barricades, they took Brad aside to verify his identity. He had expected it, but wasn’t in the mood, after twenty hours on the road. Although the retinal scan ID’d him, the black-uniformed border agents seemed put-out, even angry, about the inconvenience. *We’ve got better things to do. Who goes outside without his wristband?* It was an ugly little room that smelled like sweat, the raw fluorescent light exacerbating his headache. And Brad *belonged* inside. What would these guys do if they had Xavier or the Sunshine Diner waitress in this room? He already knew what they would have done to his father, because they, or some other guys just like them, had already done it.

“You know what?” Brad said to the agent with the long gray sideburns. “You guys are dicks.”

A muscle jumped at the agent’s jaw, and for a moment Brad thought the man was going to slug him. He didn’t, though. He opened the door and stood aside. Almost disappointed, Brad stepped out. He used to imagine his father’s beat-down, an event he hadn’t witnessed. Policemen swinging truncheons, his father curled in a fetal position. What a dumb thing, trying to provoke a border agent. Brad didn’t know what had come over him.

* * *

The Destination car descended to the garage beneath the AirVision tower. As Brad

climbed stiffly out of the vehicle, another Destination car's engine started and pulled out. Adelina Serna sat in the passenger seat, a tense, frightened expression on her face. It was the middle of the night. But when TTP issued marching orders . . .

In France they used to chop heads off. Let's minimize that shit.

Back in the office, Brad dropped into his chair. He should have been starving, but the empty sickness in the pit of his stomach didn't beg for food. He still had the stupid Buddha Danish. He tossed it on the desk. On the touch surface virtual ripples radiated away. Brad passed his hand over the jewel light on the corner of the desk, and a Ghostware cloud formed. He navigated to @dupreebuddha's Flutter feed. Despite its theft from the diner, the Danish's posts had continued to be fecund. Brad scrolled through them, reading mangled quotes. He came upon what he'd been looking for without understanding, before that moment, that he had *been* looking for it.

@dupreebuddha: "Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single flame, and it looks like you need a new manager."

Brad turned off his desk and got up. He had to think things through. Clear the cobwebs. So he went for a walk.

Outside.

"Little did I suspect back in 1977 when I idly paged through the first issue of Asimov's that in 2017 my own work would be appearing in the fortieth anniversary year. My modest contributions aside, short fiction has always defined the best of what science fiction has to offer, and for decades Asimov's has been at the leading edge. This magazine continues to define the face of our genre, and I'm thrilled to be here. Making my first pro sale to Asimov's opened a door to significant change in my life, and for that I'm grateful. But mostly I'm grateful for the stories, the wonderful stories."

—Jack Skillingstead