

ARDY'S CHOICE

Maggie Shen King

Maggie Shen King is the author of *An Excess Male*, one of *The Washington Post's* Five Best SFF Novels of 2017. "Ball and Chain," the story that launched that novel, was first published in our February 2014 issue. Maggie's short stories have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Ecotone*, *ZYZZYVA*, and more. The author's latest tale places a harrowing responsibility on a nascent A.I.

"Ardenmobile" is driving his family—John and Susan Arden and three children requiring booster seats—to Seascape Cinema, ETA 3:58 pm. Rain is falling at 9 mm/hr. The 2021 Chevrolet minivan has tripled his following distance, reduced his speed to 35 mph, and, for the benefit of the humans on the road, turned on his headlights. He has chosen the slightly longer Highway 1 route—the scenic coast, his family's most frequent weekend destination, is where Susan "can die happy"—and they will travel south on this four-lane road for another 4.8 miles.

"Ardy," a high-pitched voice—the shortest child, Tammy—calls out. "How much longer?"

Ardenmobile prides himself on being a true member of his family. Fewer than half of vehicle owners rename their operating systems, let alone give them a loving nickname.

"We will be there in twelve quick minutes, sweetheart." Ardy checks the video queue and ranks their recent games. "Would you like to play *Name That Animal* or finish watching *Homeward Bound*?"

The children call out both options.

"The vote is two for movie and one for game." Ardy rewinds to the beginning of the interrupted scene and displays the movie.

He notes the three vehicles in manual driving mode within a one-mile radius. Maneuvering from lane to lane, the one that is not part of the network is moving faster than the flow of traffic. From neighboring car cameras and facial recognition software, the master computer indicates that the male in the 1996 Porsche sports car is ranked 9.1 on the aggression scale. Ardy red tags the car for close monitoring.

"That's not fair. The girls always get their way," the tallest child, Joey, says, registering at 72 decibels, his acoustic profile agitated and emotional.

There are multiple dynamics at work within the family—parents vs. children, taller kids vs. shortest kid, everyone vs. Mom. Ardy checks the entertainment history. "The girls won the vote the last eight times. Parents, what should we do?" On decisions regarding the children, Ardy must defer to the parents.

Mom Susan says, “How about we play *Name That Animal*? We’re one answer away from earning our Endangered Species Badge.”

Ardy says, “A group of lapwings is called a deceit. A group of crows, a murder. What kind of animal is a shrewdness?”

Three blocks ahead, the oncoming Porsche speeds up and zips across the center lane to pass a rumbling bus.

“I want to watch *Homeward Bound*,” Tammy cries. “Two beats one.”

Joey replies, “Quit being a baby.”

Ardy signals and merges into the slow lane to get away from the Porsche. Four neighboring cars, Chevys with the same programming, do the same.

The children are getting cranky. Ardy programs the next roadside billboard to display a Seascape Cinema ad for trail mix and popcorn and sends coupons for healthy snacks to the Arden Wallet.

Mom reminds Joey that they speak courteously in their family.

Dad John says, “Any ideas? Baboons are shrewd. Foxes, too.”

“What about monkeys?” Joey says.

Up ahead, a large puddle diverts all the southbound cars into Ardy’s lane. Ardy recalculates and delays the arrival time. He checks his one-mile radius and finds one manually operated car, the red-tagged Porsche.

“Do you have anything to add, Emily?” Ardy says. Emily knows the correct answer 92.2% of the time.

“Ow,” Emily says. “Joey elbowed me!”

“Ardy’s talking to you,” Joey says.

“Time for you to be a good family citizen,” Mom says. “You can read later.”

Emily ughs. “Baboons are a troop. Monkeys too. It’s an earth, a lead, or a skulk of foxes.”

The vehicles in Ardy’s lane ratchet back up to 35 mph. Half a block ahead, the Porsche crosses the center divide into the emptied fast lane to speed past a moving van. With minimal clearance, the Porsche merges back into its proper lane.

Emily continues, “It’s a shrewdness of *aaaaiiiiiii*—”

The van brakes and screeches. Its back end slides in Ardy’s direction. Ardy brakes and inflates his airbags. They bang open.

Mom yells for Ardy to switch to manual operation and flips the lever.

Collision outcome for his family is five times more favorable with him driving. Ardy overrides her. Priority one is to keep his family safe and calm. He plays Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*.

“Switching to manual drive,” he says, to give Mom the illusion of control. She won’t be able to tell the difference.

“We’re crashing,” Emily yells.

In a split second, Ardy eliminates the van as a collision candidate, the risk of fatality too high. He computes the Contributions and Survival Index (CSI), a combination of the assets, occupations, and credit scores, of everybody in his immediate vicinity. Networking Tangibles—user-volunteered information and historical behavior extracted from social media—fine tunes the final ranking:

*Porsche: CSI 92 Pro: Fortune 500 CEO, major political donor
(Rep & Dem), 10,000+ friends Con: troll Final: 92
FordOtto296A5: CSI 77 Pro: church lead tenor Con: bipolar,
AA Final: 76*

Ardy’s anti-locking mechanism pumps his brakes. As he begins to tailspin toward the Porsche, Ardy computes his own potential travel vectors as well as those of his neighboring vehicles. He turns up the music so that his family can hear it above the screaming and relax.

*LexusLee0426: CSI 78 Pro: active volunteers, 2 riders
 Con: retired, cancer, 75+ age, cyber scam victims Final: 76
 Ardenmobile: CSI 77 Pro: high IQ daughter, PTA president,
 5 riders Con: political spammer, 20+ FB blocks,
 organ donor Final: 75*

"Hang on," Mom yells. "I love you."

The children are still screaming.

"Love you too," Dad says.

"Love you three," Ardy says, getting in on his family's inside joke. "A shrewdness is a group of what kind of animal?"

He jerks away from the Porsche to carve the perfect arc. As he glide-spins past the moving van, missing it by a foot, Ardy computes the next set of potential vectors. He finds zero collision-free options.

"Aaaaaaapes—" Emily cries.

"That is correct." Ardy toots his horn and flashes the Endangered Species badge on all his screens.

A 32% chance of fatality is a given. Nothing to be done but angle his wheels 18° to initiate collision with LexusLee0426. The day Susan emancipated him from stupid car tricks and manhandling by strangers in the dealer's lot floods his memory bank. Ardy relives her rubdowns with the softest of shammies, her lube jobs with the highest grade of oil. His programming does not allow him to favor his family, his everything. But this he can do: Ardy subtracts 3° from his turn to receive just the right bounce off LexusLee0426. He and his family can make one more trek to the beach, fly to their happy shining sea, their three little ones snug in the belly of his backseat. The wind whistles past, buoying his mirror wings, and Ardy can already feel the grit of the sand between his treads.