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boost the juice

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For some people suburbia can be wrist-slashingly dull. Take Buckeye for example. This place is ideal for raising a family but it's not the town for a social butterfly such as Terry. Leon promised they would have more time together if they both moved out here but the fact is they see a lot less of each other. Two or three times a week if they're lucky. Over the years they have entertained the thought of splicing children but not now. Things may have been different if Leon's research project wasn't on a fast-track.

Then again, Terry has too much time on his hands and they are surely idle out here in dullsville.

Mill Avenue is more to his liking. He can hear the gyms, the shops and the Rio Salado beckoning him to return. Terry could always cope with Leon's absence when they lived in Tempe. There were distractions to fill his day and when Leon did show up it was quality time for them, and usually one on one. Now in Buckeye, Terry has been subjected to hosting a dinner party for Leon's colleagues almost every Friday evening. Conversationally, physics is the most dreadful of subjects and when Leon and his staff get together all they talk about is boson this and Kelvin that, ad nauseum. At least in Tempe, after serving dessert and the second round of coffee, Terry could slip away to work on his thesis, take on a film, or rock-out at a bathhouse.

At 43.3°C the cool deck fails to live up to its name. Terry slithers up on a recliner and rolls over to sun his front side. He's the only redhead that he is aware of that can lay out like this. Even though he can tan without freckles, it's only thirty minutes a side or he'll burn to a crisp. Fifteen for Johnson and the twins. After four weeks Terry has managed a warm amber glow that highlights his

washboard abs and blends in perfectly with his flaming dreadlocks. It goes without saying that all his efforts, and metro primping, are going to be wasted here, in Buckeye, for yet another weekend.

Terry glances over at a notebook PC sitting on the table next to him. A clunker at 16 terahertz, he's kept it since the sixth grade because it has a QWERTY keyboard. Few people type anymore but retro-tech is in.

On impulse, Terry reaches over and touches an icon of a short, bulbous mushroom. With a stretching sound the icon inflates to three times its length and starts to dance about to a rumba beat. In some places the infrastructure to the internet is so archaic that it takes him all of a minute to link up to the tower. An agonizing sixty-three seconds to suffer through as this deranged mushroom—like some detached penis—bounces around the screen while chanting Leon's name.

Leon practically lives at tower seven anymore.

The nuclear generating station at Palo Verde is surrounded by half a dozen of these miserable thousand-foot failures, and it is believed that this one will end up being no different. Research on antigravity has produced a variety of practical applications but nothing that could be remotely looked upon as a booster vehicle. Even though the math says it's so—their efforts have yielded a resounding no; and as far as Terry, and most rational people are concerned, it's just another dead phallus in the desert.

Another group of loony-toons seeking the Holy Grail.

A window pops up on his screen showing the backs of technicians huddled around a monitor. Terry is a neat freak and he usually recoils when he sees the conduit, matted wires and hissing cryogenics inside the tower. Terry doesn't understand how these people can work under those conditions, but for once the chaos doesn't seem to bother him. Maybe it's because this time he really doesn't give a shit.

Suddenly, in the window, Leon slams himself down at the workstation and pleads with wide-eyed craziness, "This is not a good time for me, Red."

Leon really doesn't understand the gravity of his situation, "I'm dying here!"

"I promise we'll move back before the semester starts."

"I'm goin' back today."

"What!"

Behind Leon, a tech shouts over the noise, “Wow, Leon, you’ve got to see these peaks!”

Leon snaps his head around, “Loose the juice!”

Terry screeches, “Look!” He takes a second to compose himself, “I think you’re an ass-wipe for dragging me out here. So, hubby, I’m going back to the Rio until I get my shit out of storage. If you wanna be top with me you know where to look. If y’all can’t add an hour to your commute for me then you can just take your sorry, south-central ass, downtown and file the papers.”

The tech shouts back, “Did you say, boost the juice?”

“Yes, God-damn it!” Ready to pull chunks of his afro out, Leon snarls at Terry, “I don’t have time to hear you bitch right now, Terrence.”

“Don’t you cut me off!”

“I’m at a critical stage!”

“And I’m on meltdown!”

“Take a cold shower!”

“Every time after...we...fuck.”

Leon has had enough, and as he reaches out to terminate the link the tech behind him laughs out loud, “Look at that spike!”

Before Leon touches anything, the transmission suddenly flickers out. The window drops back down to the mushroom—which hops back to its corner. Terry is so pissed off that he fails to notice the intense flash behind him in the distant west. He slaps the notebook closed and throws himself back on the recliner.

He grumbles with his eyes shut, “The afro has gotta go.”

Terry doesn’t have a clue that a large tract of desert has just been vaporized. As the heat wave from this multi-megaton blast rolls through Buckeye, Terry’s flesh ashes up and his hair touches off but the sensation doesn’t seem to register in his brain. Within the next few seconds, before the shock wave extinguishes his life, Terry calmly thinks to himself, *At least it’s a dry heat.*

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Now, on the East coast of the North American continent you have hurricanes, and on the other side of the continent you have earthquakes, and in between you have a tornado season of all things, but the people living in Arizona have always wondered what God had in store for them.

If you were to ask anybody in the Southwest nowadays they would have a definitive answer for you.

Everyone believed it was an impact event, but things didn't exactly add up. All of the radar and thermal images leading up to it failed to confirm a meteor strike but, then, nobody was looking in that direction at that time. Another oddity was that the crater was asymmetrical—somewhat shallow except for a deep center, which is totally out of character regardless if it were a rock or a bomb. Nobody could come up with another theory that made sense until they went to the project manager's residence, what was left of it, and recovered his spouse's notebook computer from the rubble.

With the recorded conversation, and the telemetry from the tower, the investigators were finally able to piece together what they think happened. It still didn't make sense to them, but all of thirty-some megatons in yield, without a fission/fusion mechanism, was a curiosity to say the least.

They were lucky it was a ground burst. If it would have been a device that had 'popped' a few thousand meters in altitude the shock waves, in resonance, would have taken a huge swath off the western edge of the Phoenix metropolitan area. As it was, the explosion went mostly up instead of out. Also, since most of the residents were inside trying to escape the heat of the Sonoran Desert, casualties were surprisingly few for the size of the blast.

That is, if you consider 123,000 just a few.

To avoid being buried by endless lawsuits, Arizona State University gave up 90% of their rights to the technology, and in return the feds would keep a lid on the whole ugly mess.

With the EPA's mega-powerful Alternative Energy Resource Commission stepping in to coordinate the effort, upstaging both the Departments of Energy and Defense, a consortium of universities threw together a shortened version of the tower on the moon. To avoid prying eyes they built the thing in an underground freight shaft at the abandoned Earth Climate Observation Facility located at 0° longitude by 0° latitude. Dead center on the near side this site was open to observation, but everyone figured they could claim another impact event if anyone thought to ask.

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At eighteen months, to the day, an order was given to 'boost the juice.' The scientists, sitting in a small mission control room at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, watched the telemetry as it spiked—then suddenly go dead. Since the lunar satellites didn't detect

an *event* their immediate thought was that the experiment was a dud, but when they zoomed the orbital cameras onto ground zero they were dumbfounded by what they saw.

A brand new crater.

Just under twelve-hundred meters in diameter, the hole was unusually hemispherical. As if it were scooped out by God's own melon-baller there was no causative evidence like compression ridges, ejecta, or the thermal residue from an explosion—or an impact event for that matter.

Noticing the Doppler radar going nuts, a technician, a geekish kid attached to the project from ASU, spooled back the surface based high-speed video feed and immediately cried out, "Holy shit!"

When the rest of the crew watched it replayed they all caught their hearts with their teeth.

It was the longest six minutes of their lives. The divot from the moon barely missed the Earth. High over the Aleutian Islands it broke apart as it tore a huge flaming gash in the ozone layer before it tumbled off into space.

No one could keep a lid on this one.