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## Look Alive!

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## Look Alive!

By Michael Somes

1.

The man had been melting in the street for six hours now. His arm was drooping to the ground, and his ear, which had been dangling upside down for quite some time, finally fell off. The man made no effort to catch it. His feet had already been reduced to blobs by the pavement, warmed by the New Mexico sun. His ankles were starting to liquefy, causing the man to tilt and shrink.

Ozzy Faust watched this from his window in the "Town Hall" which housed the main laboratory of the Faust Cosmetics and Preservation company. He rested his hand on the latch to the "in case of emergency" box that housed the flamethrower. Perhaps he ought to run out and put an end to the protester. He had purchased the flamethrower a few months before at the recommendation of his head of security, who feared that the hordes of plasticized men and women rallying in his street and melting might get unruly. Faust hadn't used it yet, except in the training session, but the feeling when the hose bucked and threw out a wall of heat and a focused orange jet of jellied gasoline made him reach for the handle on the emergency box each time he thought of it.

He would wait the whole two days for the protester to finish reducing himself to a puddle, and then he'd have his cleaning staff go out, collect the material, and recast him. Most of the protesters had stopped coming after that, even the most dedicated gave up after being dragged back to their bodies for the tenth time.

He hadn't asked any of them what they'd been so upset about. It would require him going outside, getting in the sunlight, starting to drip and then hours of pushing and careful application of ice packs in order to return to his normal self. Anyone he had sent out to ask why joined with the mass of people slowly melting to the ground. Best to ignore them, the bodies couldn't last in the heat anyway.

2.

A family walks down the street, a man, a woman, three children, the youngest is pulling on his mother's arm as he tries to break away. His high pitched squealing and the protests of the mother drown out the sounds of a truck hurtling downhill behind them; its brakes have failed; it's picking up speed. The child breaks free of his mother's grasp and runs out into the street, but the mother's quick hands catch his wrist. The number of children is reduced to 2.3 as the truck flies by, catching everything but the child's forearm in the radiator. It leaves behind nothing but a pink cloud and the faintest echo of a horrified scream. The survivors stand in mute terror, mouths agape as a geyser of blood from the severed forearm drenches them all. The video on stage cuts out. Ozzy listens to the mutterings spreading through the crowd. He's got them. He bursts out from behind a velvet curtain.

"Children are precious." He is greeted by applause. "We cannot afford to lose them. Faust Cosmetics, and now, Preservation has devised a means to keep them safe forever."

Same shot of a family, same truck, only now, in the aftermath, the family laughs with the truck driver in wreckage at the bottom of the hill as they scrape the putty that was their

son out of the radiator, throw it into a melt-o-matic™, and then recast their son back into the world.

The crowd is almost silent, except for mutterings of "it can't be true."

"The Faust preservation procedure! Now clinically tested and FDA approved. Become unstoppable!" Faust screamed, barely concealing his smile as he waits for his show stopper.

A man emerges from back behind the velvet curtain, wielding a machete. He runs to Faust, winds, and then swings through a full 360, sending Faust's head arcing through the air, before settling with a terminal plop on the stage. The crowd sits back, stunned.

A medical team runs on, soldering irons already hot, and grab Ozzy's head. They get the flesh around his neck nice and warm and plop his head back on, twisting carefully to ensure everything still lines up. An earlier crew had left him looking about ten degrees left of center; they were still waiting to be reconstituted in the vats. Meanwhile, the crowd lost it.

"And aren't you important too? Enjoy an eternity of youth with the Faust Preservation process, using advanced polymer technology. Become invincible!"

3.

Looking back, Ozzy wished he had included a warning not to stand on pavement, or anywhere in reflected, focused sunlight, or to sit in a car that had been in the heat all day with the windows rolled up. The resulting class action lawsuit had almost ruined him.

He rang for his son on the intercom. Russell, an awkward, lanky teenager stalked into the room. His bones and joints had been plasticized while they were still trying to fit together into something that could reasonably be called a coordinated human being. Faust had the procedure done on him when he was fourteen; he couldn't bear the thought of someone learning to drive being vulnerable to being crushed, or flipped, or flung through the air in a high arc, moving at over sixty miles an hour, before striking the hard pavement and having bone and skin and organs mix together in ways evolution never could have suspected. It was a good choice too, after having the procedure done his son had met with all kinds of accidents. He fell of several high buildings and a bridge. He accidentally drank sulfuric acid in the chemistry lab. Luckily they found him in time, or the material would have been eaten away and they wouldn't be able to recast him. His son had also gotten himself trapped in an industrial dryer, and lately had been blasting apart his face each time he cleaned his shotgun. For this reason, Ozzy had decided against giving him a flamethrower.

"You finish the coolant pack yet?" Ozzy put his arm around his son as he guided him toward the window. The man in the street's legs had melted below the knee, and his hands were becoming puddles as well now that they touched the pavement. "Do you see? They need it."

"It's delayed." Russell replied.

"You always say that. You are two hundred and... how many years?"

"I've lost track. It doesn't make any difference."

"The important thing is you're old enough you should be able to figure it out by now. You're like me you know..." Ozzy waited for his son to say something. Russell started to head back out. "Don't let them melt."

A few minutes later, his son came walking out the front door of the office and into the street. He doused the melting man in gasoline and threw a match on him. The man vanished in an orange flower as the flames wrapped around his torso. The heat caused him to twist and start to topple, but the melted material touching the street stuck fast, making his shoulders and head break free and splash into an ever growing plastic puddle. The whooshing sound as the fuel lit traveled all the way up to Ozzy's window.

4.

"It's like heaven, only your friends can come. The immortal colony of New Mexico, presented by Faust Industries." the television in Ozzy's office plays the advertisement on a loop. He always felt the pseudo 1860's western architecture looked better on TV than it did in person. He had created the colony after far too many old, crippled, or just plain unattractive people kept applying for the procedure. He tried turning them away and they would keep showing up in front of the office holding signs "We're worth preserving!" So he purchased three hundred acres in the desert and surrounded it with an electrified fence.

He'd been to a nursing home once, to visit his grandfather, and he might have been able to handle it if it hadn't been for the smell. The heavy floral scents of all the cleaners reminded him of a rotting fruit basket, and as he saw each of the old people hobble by he imagined them slowly shriveling and bits of them breaking off. His grandfather had talked in circles, each conversation going "how's it going?" "would you like a drink?", and then "when are you leaving?" He'd change the answers up each time, and then worry that he'd go to hell for doing so.

He pitied them, slowly degenerating with each other, pushed out of sight of their younger relatives. He told his father about this and his father said "I'll be old someday, and you will too."

No he won't.

5.

The finished coolant pack resembles a starfish. There is a central box for circulation and then five tubes for the arms, legs, and head. He couldn't believe his son kept facing delays, it was a basic pump really. Russell must have been overthinking it.

The front half of the protester's body settled into the mold. A lab assistant runs the tubes down his arms as a second brings the newly cooled back plate forward.

6.

Russell sits on his race-car bed chipping away at bits of his arm with a fork. His instinct to even wince or flinch at losing a chunk of himself had vanished a long time ago. He could only tell it was happening when he saw the fork fly in and plow neat lines in the "skin." He'd brush the shavings off, and then do it again.

How does he explain to his father that everyone is tired of it? That after the passing of one-hundred and fiftieth year of the project the town had unanimously decided they wanted nothing more than the undoing of plasticizing project? The decision had more likely been reached at one-hundred years, but it took the next fifty for people to start admitting that it was only when they got caught out in the afternoon, or were standing too close to their open oven doors. And when they looked down and saw the material sagging bending, and running to the floor. And in their terror of what would happen when they all

melted away they wondered: would they be a puddle, still alive, immobile, feeling their weight slowly shift and run downhill, maybe into a drain? How far would they go through the pipes, before cooling back off and resolidifying, becoming a clog down far below the streets? And would they finally feel something when the drain clearing agent hit, and they were slowly eaten away by the chemicals? And, only much later, when not telling anyone became too much to bear, did they admit to one another that their terrified gasps when they saw their knees start to bubble and shift as they got warm were the only times in the past two-hundred years that their breathing was anything more than a habit.

They started gathering in the street and all melting together. The problem with this plan was the assumption that Russell's father was like them. That he also secretly liked to melt, and when he saw they all did too, he'd try to undo the process. His father instead saw it as a need to build a cooling system for them, to protect them from the dangers of excess heat. They didn't realize he was the kind of man who still felt a race-car bed was appropriate for a two-hundred and thirty-six year old because he still looked fourteen.

7.

The protester sat up on the table as the lab assistant finished tightening the screws on the coolant pack. Ozzy walked over and threw the switch on the box, and a low hum began as the coolant circulated. "That'll put a stop to the melting problems." Ozzy patted the protester on the back.

The protester looked at Ozzy with wide eyes, "why?"

Ozzy chuckled, shook his hand, and walked out.

8.

The coolant packs were failing. The material was getting so cold it would stiffen up. Russell had fallen down the stairs and his frozen legs shattered. His staff had tried to clean it up, but they kept stumbling around and dropping things as their tools fell out of their useless flat hands. Ozzy had to sweep up the bits of his son himself and put them into the melt-o-matic. He was lucky his fear of being recast kept him from ever having anybody install the coolant pack on him. He tried to reattach the legs, but the cooling solidified his son's legs faster than the soldering iron could make them pliable.

He tried turning the pack off, but it was so cold the switch had frozen in place. Dammit. Only Russell's eyes could follow Ozzy around the room as he rushed around, looking for a tool to pry the box of his back. He realized the only thing to do would be to hurl his son into the melt-o-matic and hopefully destroy the box.

His son's lower body was passing through the mouth of the machine, it was going to work. He was up to where his ribs would be, and the edges of the coolant box were beginning to melt. The reservoir of coolant broke, icy jets sprayed into the machine, solidifying the molten plastic within, jamming up the mouth of the machine with solid plastic that was slowly reinforced as Russell's torso finished sinking in, and then set. Only his head poked out of the machine. Ozzy was reminded of pictures of people in iron lungs that he saw in grade school. The warmth still being created by the machine was enough to loosen up Russell's head. Russell swiveled his head around, taking in his situation before turning to his father. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Hey that's no way to talk when you're..."

"Two hundred and thirty-six years old?"

"So you do remember."

"Of course I remember, it's been two hundred and twenty two years since I was last able to eat food, feel the warmth of blankets, or have my height marked in pencil on the wall and actually have it be in a different spot. And each subsequent year has been more unpleasant than the last... and if you'd only" The melt-o-matic gave out with a final rattle. Coolant pooled over Russell's head, sealing it in place.

Ozzy ran to his widow and looked out over the main street as he saw the protester storming towards the office, he had a lurching gait and his strides were narrowing as he moved forward, before his legs locked in place and he fell facedown. He couldn't extend his arms to catch himself. Ozzy opened the box for the emergency flamethrower, and ran outside.

9.

The town burned behind him as Ozzy ran toward the electric fence. The road beneath him was cracked and full of potholes, sections of grass several feet wide were growing up through the spaces in the pavement. Someone had to be there, right? The heat radiating from the constant stream of the flamethrower caused his forehead to run down into his eyes before he could throw it away. His vision was already starting to darken as his jaw shook loose on the most recent rise and fall of his feet. His arms were steadily getting longer in the heat of the sun, his hands were already hanging past his knees. He caught his foot in a pothole and it broke clean off, he collapsed face first with a wet smack onto the pavement. He was going to deteriorate, like them; with a final effort he managed to spin to look up at the hot desert sun. His arms separated from his torso. Although he couldn't make out shapes anymore the sky was so bright it burned his eyes. "I'm going to..." he thought, but he couldn't remember the word.