



# Lighter Years

Five short stories  
by Chuck Rothman

# Introduction

*Sometimes I get a very weird idea that makes me cackle like a madman. When that happens, I am duty bound to turn the idea into a story.*

*These are some of those stories. They all grew out of ideas that just popped into my head and had to be written down. They touch upon some of my favorite science fiction and fantasy tropes: monsters, superheroes, aliens, and much else.*

*I had a lot of fun with these. I hope you do, too.*

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## Patron

Victor had long ago grown weary of the process: the long carriage rides over dusty roads to godforsaken corners of the Continent, the dull dinners where he tried against his passionate nature to be charming and witty, and, worst of all, having to explain a new breakthrough in science to ignorant men.

Ignorant *rich* men, he reminded himself.

It had been a long battle since he first realized what his experiments were capable of creating. Now there were fewer and fewer nobles who hadn't heard his request. They were all blurring together, one

Duke or Baron or some piece of minor nobility interchangeable with any other. Even this evening, as this gathering of potential patrons listened to his well-planned words, he could see the coldness coming over their faces as he tried to impart the enthusiasm he felt for his own work.

Their narrow-minded superstition was everywhere. The Duke of Trenturro had called his experiments unnatural. Baron von Stimmel had pointed a fat finger at Victor and called him "blasphemer."

In vain, Victor pointed out that this is the nineteenth century, not the dark ages. That we live in a modern world, and cannot let ourselves be tied down by old ways of thinking.

His words made no more impression than a snowflake on a bonfire. Victor left the lords' banquet hall, not knowing where to turn. It had been a last-ditch effort to come to the eastern Balkans; already the scientists of Paris and Berlin made jokes at his expense. Soon his reputation would precede him: Victor Frankenstein, the fool.

But he *knew* he was right. Death would be the final frontier, and he'd be the one to cross it. He

could get the corpses easily enough; graveyards were storehouses of raw materials. But without the electricity, and the money to tame it, all the cadavers in the world would do him no good.

"Pardon me."

The voice startled Victor and he stumbled to avoid the man who was standing in his path. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"I heard you talk about your plans," said the man. He was tall and thin, with eyes that flashed in the candlelight. "They are very ambitious."

"Too ambitious," murmured Victor. "I'm afraid the nobles around here aren't very adventurous men."

"Most are not. My colleagues have small minds and smaller brains. But if what you say is true . . . tell me, suppose the corpse suffered some sort of damage to a vital organ. The heart, for instance. Could your process bring him back to life?"

Victor realized with a start that he still had a glimmer of a chance. He tried desperately to recall the man's name. "No," he said, "it doesn't matter what's

damaged. I could find another corpse with the organ intact."

The man thought for a moment. "That would be very useful to me." He reached into a pocket of the cape he wore and took out a purse. "Is this sufficient?" he asked, handing it to Victor.

The purse was heavy with gold pieces. "Yes, your Excellency. More than enough." Victor's heart was racing. "Thank you, sir. Though I'm afraid I don't know your name."

"My name does not matter. Like you, I am somewhat of an outcast." His patron smiled; in the dim light Victor thought he saw something odd about the teeth. "But you may call me . . . the Count."

End

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*This story appeared in audio format in Frequency, an attempt at a podcast magazine before podcasts were cool. Or successful. It was read by Carel Struyken, If the name doesn't ring a bell, he played Mr. Hom on Star Trek: The Next Generation, and Lurch in the 90s version of The Addams Family. I was delighted to hear he'd be reading my work — then I realized I had never actually heard in speak.*

## **This Is Your "Life"**

"You're late," Victoria said the instant Tim came in the door, the words a familiar accusation.

"Sorry," Tim murmured. "The traffic was terrible."

"Well, dinner's ruined," Victoria said, as though she though his traffic story was one lame excuse. "And I just found out you screwed up paying the phone bill." She went to the counter and picked up the papers, waving them in his face. "They billed us for two months this time."

"Sorry," Tim murmured. He kicked off his new shoes; they had been hurting him all day.



"Victoria?" he shouted, inches from her ear.

She showed no reaction.

Tim looked around. The kitchen was changing, the color fading out of it. The clock above the sink had stopped.

He glanced out the window. Doug Sullivan from across the street was frozen solid, too, turned into a statue as he was mowing his lawn. As Tim watched, Doug faded away.

Tim whirled. The kitchen, too, was fading, the walls now icy grayness. Victoria was melting like wax before his eyes.

He looked at his hands to be sure he was still there, too.

He wasn't. Or, at least, his hands weren't. In their place were short blue claws, covered with small orange spots. Panicking now, he looked around once more.

\* \* \*

He was in a small windowless chamber, seated in what felt like a comfortable chair. Tim got up, but the chair behind him was a mass of pulsating tubing

wrapped into a shape that would give a pretzel-maker fits.

He wished he had a mirror. On second thought, he was glad he didn't.

A triangular opening appeared in the wall and a small purplish creature with an oversized head and compound eyes scuttled into the room on hundreds of tiny feet. Tim jumped away.

"A thousand apologies, Bloornd," it said in a language that didn't sound a thing like any Tim had ever heard, but nevertheless understood. "There has been a problem with the virtual reality."

"Problem?" He had said the word in the same mysterious language, and, to his surprise, realized he was even thinking in it, too.

"The computer's memory subsystem failed. Your 'life' has broken down." The word life had an ironic tone to it, as though it were some sort of cute technical term. "We apologize, and the company will make it up to you. Now, if you just give us some information, we can let you complete your 'life.'"

"Information?"

"We offer millions of choices. Unfortunately, we lost your profile in the reboot process. We have all the files, but aren't sure which one is yours. So we don't need all the details, just enough of a general overview to match you with your profile and restart the program. No need to worry, though. The company will return you to your 'life,' with a few improvements at no extra cost. Where did you make your abode?"

"I think I'd like--"

"Please, Bloornd, we cannot waste time. Answer my questions quickly, before you forget important data and I cannot return you precisely." He regurgitated a small bit of greenish matter; the action made Tim feel oddly reassured. "I understand that you are disoriented and believe the simulation is still going on, but you must answer me or I cannot return you properly. Now, where did you live?"

"Me? Rexford."

The purple creature pressed the information into a console built into a wall, then frowned. "Is that the world's name?"

"The world? No. It's Earth."

"Ah," said the creature, inputting the data. "That's a start. Watery world. Dominant life form bipedal. Some of that--what you call it?--ah, hair, on the head. Skin various tones of brown, right?"

Tim wriggled something that seemed to be growing in the middle of his forehead, just above his third eye. He realized that he had given the equivalent of a nod. "That sounds like it. Some pinkish skin, too."

"Ah, pink. Thank you. That narrows it down considerably. Let's see. How many sexes?"

"Two." The implication of the question sank in as soon as he said the word. "You mean there can be more than--?"

"Two," the purple creature said, the tone of his voice conveying some surprise at this lack of imagination. "Did the male have a glorn, or just a penis?"

"What's a glorn?"

"Penis, then. On the budget plan, were you?" He pressed a few more buttons. "Pretty much narrowed down. One more question: Was this 'Earth' completed in seven days, or was there such a thing as evolution?"

"Evolution." Tim paused. "Well, some people think the other way, too."

The purple creature--Tim knew now it was called a klxrn--made an affirmative gesture. "Computer space is at a premium," it said. "Sometimes we have to let multiple realities coexist." He made one more adjustment. "Now, we're linked into the proper world. We need your name and we can put you down near where you left off."

"Tim Bellows," he said. It was hard to pronounce the words, and it seemed bizarre that he could ever be called anything like that. "But there are others with that name."

"But you're the only *real* one." The klxrn flipped its antennae at the screen. "That should retrieve your 'life.' Please sit down."

Bloornd sat. The helmet fit cozily on his head.

"Thank you for your understanding," said the klxrn. "And we trust the improvements will be to your liking." He activated the machine.

\* \* \*

Tim woke, startled, and sat up immediately in the

bed. He felt disoriented until he realized he was back in his bedroom.

"What is it, honey?" came the sleepy voice beside him.

Tim shook his head. Already the details of his dream were fading. There was something about an alien, and reality....

He couldn't remember. "Nothing," he said. "Just a weird dream."

Vicky sat up and looked at the clock. "Six. Too early to go back to sleep, isn't it?" She grinned at him. "We'll just have to think of something else to do."

Tim grinned back, then kissed her. "Any ideas?" he whispered.

"A whole lot," she said.

It was going to be a good day, Tim thought as she reached out to playfully caress his glorn.

End

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Originally appeared in *Between the Darkness and the Fire*.

*Don't ask me what a glorn is — but I wish I had one.*

## Regular Guy

The evening had gone even better than Joe had hoped, moving easily from the first conversation at the bar to buying drinks, from the bar to his apartment, and from the living room to the bedroom. It was only when the living room window was smashed in that he had any hint of trouble.

"What the hell was that?" Joe said, removing his hand from Lynne's breast.

Lynne sighed. "My husband. He likes to smash windows."

Joe didn't like the sound of that. "But we're on

the fourteenth floor. How did he -- ?"

The bedroom door thundered off its hinges in a flash of light and slammed into the opposite wall. The sharp tang of ozone filled the air as the doorway framed the intruder.

"My God," Joe whispered. "Electric Man!"

The Human Dynamo was unmistakable, of course. He stood there, hands on hips, the air from the broken window making his cape flutter impressively. The red tights with a big yellow "E" made up of lightning bolts somehow actually looked impressive on him. His face was half obscured by his mask, but Joe could recognize that look of anger anywhere.

"Now, I've got you!" Electric Man said, his deep voice resonating through the room.

Joe tried to think of a way out. Electric Man had the power of electricity; you could see it crackle from his fingertips. He was as fast as lightning, too, and his electric vision could scout out any hiding place.

"I'm dead," Joe whispered.

"I'll teach you to -- "

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Lynne said, sitting up.

"Leave him alone."

The Man of Power laughed. "I'll show him he chose the wrong woman to seduce!"

"He didn't seduce me. It was *my* idea."

The Electric Man looked startled for a moment, then smiled. "He's drugged you, Lynne! He probably slipped you one of Dr. Darkness's mind control potions. But you don't have to worry. I still have the antidote." He pulled a vial from his belt.

"God," said Judy. "You really believe all that crap." She shook her head. "When are going to get it through that insulated skull of yours that this was what I wanted. It was my idea, Roger." She pointed at herself. "Mine."

Electric Man looked pained. "I *told* you not to call me that when I'm in uniform! It's hard enough keeping my identity secret with you blurting it out. Now I'm going to *have* to kill him."

"What?" Joe asked. "I won't tell -- "

"Sorry," Electric Man said. "But you know my identity."

"Roger Steele," said Lynne, reaching over to grab

her bra from the bed. "If you kill him, that's it for us."

The words drained out the last of Electric Man's bluster; he was truly Roger now. "Why?" he asked. His voice seemed to have gone up a half octave and his figure seemed that much less imposing. "Why him?"

Lynne shrugged. "I don't know. He was nice to me. Oh, I knew what he had in mind, but that was fine with me. I needed someone to talk to." She slowly put on her bra. "I don't have that any more. You're never home. You're out half the night."

"I'm stopping crime!"

"Even cops stay home with their wives occasionally."

Roger could not look her in the eye. "I try to do what I can. But I'm a superhero now."

"And I didn't marry a superhero! I married a nice, decent man who worked at a power plant. Then there was the accident, and you're a changed person. So I'm alone. And when I finally had enough of loneliness, I decided to do something about it. I needed a man to hold me, to make love to me."

"We still make love."

She gave him a cool stare. "Don't you ever think that being as fast as lightning might just be a drawback in that department?"

Roger turned nearly as red as his suit.

"Besides," Lynne said, gathering the rest of her clothing. "I know all about you and Birdgirl."

"Birdgirl? I don't know what you're talking about."

Even Joe could tell from the shaky voice that Roger was lying.

"Roger, next time you two decide to try making love in midair, try to be sure you're not doing it over a major city." She stood, and, with an intense dignity, walked past him and out of the room.

Roger stood for several minutes in silence, then, with a sigh, sat down heavily on the side of the bed.

Joe felt acutely uncomfortable. Everything -- the scene he had witnessed, the thought of being left alone with a man with the means and motive to turn him into a burnt cinder, and the idea of what people would think if they found out he was lying naked next

to a man dressed up in red tights -- made it hard to keep his composure.

"I am going to have to kill you, you know," Roger said in a very flat tone. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be."

Joe found himself nodding. "I understand," he murmured.

"I do love her," Roger said. "I always thought we had a good marriage. Until the accident, at least."

"People change. Super powers are bound to make things different."

"I'll miss her."

"Well," Joe said. "There's always Birdgirl."

The comment only put Roger into more depression. "She dumped me. For Flexible Man. As soon as she realized he could stretch any part of his body, that was it for me."

"Any part?"

Roger nodded.

Joe thought. "I could see where that might have advantages."

"I felt like such a fool when I found out. So I came back to talk to Lynne. Only, she was gone and . . . I used my electric vision to track her here." He smiled wanly. "I suppose I overreacted a bit."

"The door was a pretty good clue."

"I am sorry. I hope your apartment insurance will pay."

Joe shook his head. "Doesn't pay off of Acts of Superhuman beings."

"You know," said Electric Man, "when I got my powers, I thought, 'Great! Now I can fight crime and make the world a better place to live.' But it isn't that easy. I mean, the glory's nice and all, but it doesn't pay the bills. So I have to keep my day job, and try not to vanish too often so they think I'm undependable, and then be up half the night chasing after maniacs who want to rule the world and probably wouldn't know what to do with it if they did." He shook his head. "It's hell on any kind of social life. I haven't been able to go to a movie in years; every time we make plans, Dr. Darkness escapes from prison or the Claw kidnaps the Russian ambassador's daughter." He sighed. "It's always something. I have

to keep making new costumes and wash them, and I can't even deduct the cost on my tax returns without the secret identity bit getting in the way. About all I had was Lynne."

Joe thought he could see tears in the Human Dynamo's eyes. "I love her very much. I don't know why I listened to Birdgirl. I suppose it was the idea of variety." Roger's voice became very low. "Before I married Lynne, I was a virgin. That may be hard to believe, but it's true."

"I believe it," Joe said.

Roger seemed to shake himself out of it. "You know something about women."

"Me? I . . ."

"Don't play innocent. I'm sure you're a real ladies' man. You've probably made love to a lot more women than me."

It would be foolish to deny that. Joe nodded.

"What should I do? I want Lynne."

"I don't know. Spend more time with her. Pay more attention. Skip fighting crime for an evening."

"But what if they give the electrosignal?"

"Ignore it. Get someone to cover for you -- Birdgirl or Flexible Man . . ." *Every* part, thought Joe. "Any of the other superheroes. You can swap. Take a day off."

"I don't know . . ." Roger said. "I'd hate to be out of action if Dr. Darkness escapes from jail again."

"Then let the police handle it for a night. It's their problem, anyway. If they can't keep him locked up, it isn't your job to save their asses. If it's really tough, they can call on Rodent Boy or Captain Justice."

Roger looked scandalized. "But Dr. Darkness is *my* arch enemy! I get to capture him!"

"What will it hurt if someone else does it? And when you're on duty you can tackle some of their archenemies -- Major Disaster, for example."

"But Captain Justice will have a fit if . . ." Roger's voice trailed off. "God. I sound like a spoiled brat, don't I?"

Joe ventured a nod.

"It's the costume. You get a super power, choose a silly name, and run around looking like you've escaped from the circus." He shook his head.

"Something about the costume makes you crazy. Schizophrenic, I guess; you are supposed to have two personalities."

Roger sighed. "What you say makes a lot of sense. But the hard part will be finding someone to coordinate it." Then, he brightened. "How about you?"

"Me?"

"Sure. Then I won't have to kill you."

Joe couldn't argue with that.

"You'd be perfect, anyway. You can help the others with their social lives."

"They have problems?"

"Sure. You think a secret identity is hard when you're married; it's murder when you're single. It's really hard to get dates once you get the reputation of constantly standing them up. We need a regular guy to help us out."

"I don't know. I'm not sure I'd know what to do."

"Do you think I knew what to do when I found out I was Electric Man? You play it by ear." He patted Joe on the back. "You'll do fine. Just fine."

Well, Joe thought, it's better than electrocution.

"Roger?" came Lynne's voice.

"My God," Roger whispered. "What should I say."

"Say you're sorry. Tell her what you've just decided. All she wants is that you show you care about her. You already did that, really, just by being here."

Roger looked at him. "Thanks. I think this is going to work out just fine."

He left the room, and Joe could hear the low conversation going on outside. He could sense that progress was being made.

A regular guy, Joe thought. Well, the superheroes probably needed one around. Someone who they could sit back and act less than superhuman with. Regular Guy.

Joe could almost imagine the costume . . .

It'd look great in the bar scene. And maybe Flexible Man could give him some pointers.

End

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Originally appeared in *On the Brighter Side*

*The story has a long history. I wrote it for a superhero anthology, Behind the Mask, edited by Kurt Busiek and Nathan Archer. They accepted it, but along the way, the publisher changed his mind. Bad news. But the good news was that the publisher never asked for his advance back, so I got paid for it.*

*Of course, I preferred to have it published, so I kept sending it out, once even making it into a play to enter in a playwright's contest. Finally, after over 15 years, On the Brighter Side took it. And folded immediately afterwards. They had it on their web page for a month or so before that went down. But they did pay me (Yes, I write for money. I'm not a blockhead.).*

*This story probably sets a record among published stories for the most money paid the author per actual reader. At least, until now.*

## Perfectly Preserved

The ancient fluorescent lights flickered on, illuminating the whiteness of the cryogenic chamber. A chill permeated the air.

"Perfectly preserved," whispered Lorin, looking over the rows and rows man-sized tubes. "The automatic power never failed, even during the worst of the wars."

Beside him, Klak was awed nearly to speechlessness. "So many of them."

Lorin smiled at the boy's reaction, so much like his own so many years ago. "From the 21st century," he

said, appraising the age of the units. "Maybe older. Waiting here until we had advanced enough to thaw them out." He surveyed the containers with a look of satisfaction. "Let us tell the rest."

They retraced their path through the ancient rubble until they reached the surface.

The others waited anxiously on the barren ground. There was so much their ancestors could provide.

Lorin smiled as all eyes went to him. "They are perfectly preserved," he said. "We have fresh meat!"

A roar of delight came from the tribe, and they went to prepare the first of the roasts.

end

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Originally appeared in *Galaxy*

*Short and sweet and delicious. This was when I was in a short short story phase, and Galaxy liked short shorts.*

## Nothing Changes

Kathy always read the newspaper as I was getting my breakfast. "Look at this, Gene," she said, pointing out an article to me as I stirred the pancake batter. "They've discovered a way to travel through time."

I smiled. "Like a dream come true for you, isn't it?" Kathy loved reading sci-fi. I never saw the appeal of it, but you accept certain quirks in a wife. "Better than the moon landing." I poured the scrambled eggs onto the griddle.

"Much more exciting than that," she said. "And much more dangerous."

"Dangerous?" I turned down the heat on the french toast. "How?"

"Because now anyone can go back and change the past. Anything can happen. God knows how many changes might take place."

"What sort of changes?" I asked to humor her. The smell of the waffles was making me hungry.

Kathy shrugged. "Small ones at first, I guess. Each trip will probably set off ripples, little things that barely make any difference."

"And later?"

"I don't know," Kathy said. She was topless this morning, since her meeting with the at Duryea Motors was a formal occasion. "Things may get very weird. It may end up that the two of us never met."

I lifted the fried eggs from the pan and poured some maple sugar over them. "Oh, I'll remember you."

"But that's just it, Roger," Ellen said, her petticoats rustling as she moved. "We may not remember any changes. Once the past changes, you won't know anything different."

"I don't think there's anything to worry about," I said. "We'll still be the same two people, no matter what."

"I hope you're right." Elizebet rose. "I'd better get ready for my meeting. "How do I look?"

"Your loincloth is crooked."

She made the adjustment. "Now?"

"Beautiful." I leaned over and gave Dave a kiss. "Now don't you worry about all this sci-fi stuff. I'll be here when you get home."

"Yes," he said, then grinned playfully. "But will you be looking forward to it?"

I smiled as I watch Tiros curl its tail seductively. "You bet," I said, flashing my upper genitals blue for just an instant.

It origated and left.

I watched Swolther get into the saucer. Too much sci-fi, I thought as I preened my feathers with my beak and grobled lop ni k'nnkxlla.

End

*©1994 by Chuck Rothman  
Originally Appeared in **Galaxy***

*I did very nicely with the 90s reincarnation of Galaxy. I had sent them a story even before they were able to use the name, and sold several. This particular one was also during my short short phase and eventually made it to their Galaxy Audio Project — audiotapes of stories in the magazine.*

*It was read by Catherine Oxenberg. She had become something of a household name with Dynasty and it was probably a real coup to get her to read it.*

*She read it cold, without a chance to go over it beforehand. On the tape, she cracks up at the end, calling it “ridiculous.” I don’t know whether to be proud or be insulted.*