

Hybrid Man

by J. E. Cammon

The day I met Griffin Burns was the worst day of my adult life. However, it wasn't a series of unfortunate events, one mistake which followed an unlucky break which followed a bad situation; nothing had really gone wrong. Nothing had gone anywhere, as a point of fact. I was looking out of my office window, down at one of the campus greens, at all the students lounging about, some in lectures, others not. There was just enough reflection in the window for me to see them, and my own face, simultaneously. A young girl, far too young and far too impressionable, a formless sort of person draped awkwardly in the times' fashions, helped me focus a bit more on my own features, which had become too fixed to be thought youthful. I was what I was, is what I thought then. It was a sobering realization, and only the first of the day.

A bit later in the morning, I was denied tenure. The room was wood, real wood, which meant it was old, and there were similar signifiers characterizing all my officious colleagues sitting behind the long table, judging me. It was the 22nd century. Everything had moved forward, leaped, except for academia. They massaged their words and chose their phrases carefully. It took an hour for me to finally be rejected on record, or, 'invited to pursue more suitable opportunities in more engaged environments.' It would be another semester before I would move all of my things out of the office, and it would be another year until my body forgot the route from home to the university.

Until then, I still had all the diaphanous trappings. My name would still be on the faculty listing.

So even though I had been terminated, my name was still in the cipher, and on the dynamic display at the entrance of the building, so the man named Griffin Burns could still find me. His knock brought me back from the window again, where I had decided

to spend my afternoon, shocked.

"Come in," I said, and in he walked. I might have expected a student but between virtual office hours and real ones, the latter might as well have never existed. Griffin Burns had a shiftlessness that was seated in his manner. He walked like his legs moved at different speeds and stooped his head to shave off a few inches of his already minuscule height. He was always looking up, and he was always shrinking himself, almost as if he was doing other people a favor. The man was dressed well enough, but the clothes hung off him strangely, as if he had a hangar for shoulders.

"You Dr. Hammond?" he asked. He looked up at the name on the door, still with a grip on the handle, then at me. There was no one else in the office.

"I am," I said, but I had something else in mind to say, something snappy and aggressive. He nodded, and spun in place, closing the door. He couldn't switch hands because he was holding an enormous computer. It looked like a data tablet, except fifty years old, so large he had to hold the edge of it because he couldn't enclose it with one hand.

"Okay, good. I'm in the right place," he said while his back was turned. When he came around to face me again, he lunged into a grin and handshake. "Hello there, I'm Griffin Burns, how are you today?" and gone was the slinking posture, but still present was the strange way of shuffle-walking he had. He was still looking up, too, because of his height. I had to lean forward to shake his hand because I hadn't bothered to step around my desk.

"I'm fine, Mr. Burns, how can I help you?" I lied and asked, and again, there was an instant where I thought to say something other than what I would've said yesterday, or the year previous.

"Well, Doc, I came by here with a bit of a consulting opportunity, was hoping you'd hear me out." What I heard were my colleagues, my soon-to-be former colleagues.

"You're a salesman," I said, and I wouldn't call it blurting. I was suddenly happy that I hadn't sat down. Griffin jerked his head back without moving the rest of his body, like only his skull and neck

had absorbed the impact.

"Isn't everyone?" he asked. He looked down at his computer briefly and used his free hand to manipulate some of the data on the screen then flipped it around so I could read it. "Isn't this just advertisement?" he asked. I was looking at my curriculum vitae. The man had a point, but instead of acknowledge that, I chose to try to observe myself as if I wasn't myself. What had I done wrong? It wasn't completely true that academia had remained unchanged over the years; times had come to require a person to do five times the work and have three times the degrees to be accepted. But I had all that. "Three doctorates in biochemistry, biophysics, and biomedical engineering," Griffin said what was on my mind, and then the tablet disappeared from my view as he turned it back to his own eyes, "two from this university, too. They must have one of those commissioned paintings of you in a hallway somewhere, right?"

"What do you want, Mr. Burns?" I asked, tiredly. The little man grinned, and then he sat. He had an infectious confidence which made me want to sit, too. I didn't though, at least not at first, but then after he was sitting down and crossing his legs, I just felt ridiculous.

"What do you know about Smash Ball?" he asked. I frowned, recalling the posters and the popularity, but I knew little to nothing about the actual game. Sport.

"Not a lot," I replied.

"Not a fan?" he asked.

"Uh," is what I had said before I could think of something to say. It felt like saying anything negative would be like giving the wrong answer at a conference. Griffin dissipated my awkwardness with a gesture and began explaining.

"It all started with NASCAR, really. Motor sports. I mean, that's if you ask me," and he dropped his tablet against his stomach and leaned back in his chair, his hands gripped to in an invisible steering wheel. "You're going 400 kilometers an hour, literally strapped into a death rocket and you're speeding along, trying to stay ahead of the other racers. Not too fast or you'll kill yourself, but

not to slow or they'll blow past you," and as he spoke, he started to have an imaginary race, right there in my office. It was the strangest thing, watching him pretend like he was driving, trying to beat out a host of other manic speedsters. I opened my mouth to interrupt several times, but as the phantom race went on, the contest just got more frenzied and more desperate. Suddenly it was gone, the illusion dismissed and he was back in my office again. "People wanted faster, faster. Watching a guy run half a second quicker every four years wasn't fast enough. And all the NFL injuries, well, deaths," he paused to clarify, "it just got to be too much of a hassle." He leaned forward in his chair then, in the same manner that he had shot into the handshake from earlier. The computer flopped into one of his hands and he grabbed the edge of my desk in the other. His eyes were crazed. "But then someone like you stepped in Doc, someone just like you, and revolutionized everything." I frowned, but not in confusion. I was wrestling with my memory, because I had seen the article. I had been published in the same journal half a dozen times, but this other scientist's work had gone secular. The logical ancestors of protective sportswear married to a hydraulic chassis had resulted in a suit of armor that would let two human beings collide with each other at speeds comparable to the street speed of automobiles. And walk away unscathed. I imagined that sort of thing must be necessary for a sport called Smash Ball.

"I know of whom you speak," I said, though I still didn't know what Griffin was talking about. I supposed we were still in the expository portion of the lecture. It was the first time I remembered my initial reservations of the short man being in my office, and it had already been half an hour. Griffin nodded.

"Right, changed everything, and Smash was the result," and he sat back again, dancing into another of his strange conniptions. "You take the ballet of basketball," and then he clapped his hands together, with no regard for how much noise he was making, "and the collisions of football. But no injuries," and he seemed to think that point was important enough to take time to stress to me. "At least, not any major ones, not until recently." I found myself looking

at the walls of my office, and the door.

"I see," I said, trying to move things along. "Well, that's all very interesting, but I fail to see what any of this has to do with me." Griffin nodded, then, and smiled.

"Right, right, yeah that makes sense," he said and stood up. I stood up, too, though I'm not sure why. I guessed he was leaving so it only made sense to walk him to the door. No one had a large office, not even the Dean; there wasn't even a ten foot gap between the back of Griffin's chair and the door. "But I can show you, say, tonight, around seven?" I paused, stunned. I had seen movies where a line like that was said. The woman ended up on her back in both scenarios, but in one instance she was dead in an alley and in another she was alive, but wanted to die.

"Uh, I'm sorry, but,"

"I have tickets to see the Titans," Griffin said, and he revealed the virtual items with a spin of his tablet. They floated there, like magical artifacts.

"The Titans," I repeated.

"Local Smash Ball team," he said, but he didn't look exasperated at all by my slowness. "Won the Vegas Cup two years running. They have a game tonight," and he turned at the waist, to and fro as if he was casting another spell.

"And you want me to go with you," I said, not asking.

"I mean, if you want to know why I was here. Come on, Doc, what've you got to lose?" he asked, but then he put his hands up and stepped backwards. The tickets vanished with the screen. "Actually, you look like you need some time to decide, so I'll call later, you give me your answer then." He turned around, which hid him from the odd gesture I made, reaching out as if I'd spin him around by the shoulder. Thankfully, I had dropped the hand before he got to the door. He glanced back at me, flashed a grin, and then was gone. I was at the door moment later, as if it wouldn't stay closed unless I put my hand against it.

From that vigilant position, I looked around at my office, shelves on one side, degrees on the other, a single chair, a

respectably sized desk, and its comfortable counterpart. I liked to keep my computer in my desk to make the students felt like I was really listening, even though no one ever came by. And even across the cipher connections, all I ever heard mostly was that they didn't need anyone telling them what to do or how to do it. The pervasiveness of information and the speed at which it could be absorbed made everyone an expert on everything. To be a specialist, one had to either have a purview that was so obtuse it might as well have been useless or possess information that no one else had, which was theirs alone. And I had neither.

I went home early that day, forgetting Griffin Burns and how he would call me without my identity address. I did remember my childhood though. Going back to the beginning when things had gone wrong was a scientific approach to problem solving: retrace your steps to figure out where it was you first started to get lost.

They named me Charlotte because that's where I was born, my mother drugged out of her mind, and young, my father nowhere to be seen, never to be heard from. My grandparents thought that if it was a fine enough name for a city, then it was a fine enough name for a mewling little girl. I had grown up around old people who had old ways and liked old things. Through their eyes, I had an idea of what the 20th had been like, and of what good education was. It had all started to come apart when I was still a teenager, I always realized. I wasn't smarter than both of my grandparents put together, but I thought I was, and after my mouth caught up with my brain is when their ages caught up with their bodies. Joint replacements, wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and respirators, they could do little to restrain me physically to curb my mental rebellion. But I did want to help them. I just didn't have enough time. The conclusion I always came to was to embrace the chaos of the lack of design, that sometimes things worked out, and sometimes they didn't, and that any amount of schema could be introduced after the fact, but the reality of it was that we were all just atoms smashing together at random.

I spent a few hours considering how my home would have to

adjust to the imminent changes to my life. I moved a few paintings and rearranged some drawers in the kitchen. A few items in the garage transposed with one another. I stared at my vitae over a glass of wine and toyed with the font and spacing.

At about half past six my network alerted. Instead of a name, the man had changed his ID into a thumb-sized glyph of a primordial being. I defaulted to only connecting with the audio portion of the signal.

"Mr. Burns?" I asked to the air. The speakers in my den in spoke back to me in his excited voice.

"You got me, Doc, how you been?" he replied.

"How did you get my contact information?" I asked.

"Well, it's not like went to any trouble to hide it," which wasn't an answer. "So you want to come to the game with me?"

"No I do not," I said, vexed.

"Well, will you anyway?" Griffin asked, not skipping a beat. I made a questioning face at a couch cushion.

"Uh, No, Mr. Griffin," I said, trying to be clear.

"Okay, look Doc, I'll level with you. I've happened upon the chance of a lifetime," the room said to me. "And I know how that sounds, so I was going to take certain steps to show you what I meant, so you could believe me. I looked you up, obviously. I know that those designs you made really did some good, to help people walk again and what not." I wasn't sure why we were still talking, but I was flattered a bit that he would say that my work was useful. It was in contrary to most of the feedback I received. "I want you to help me, Doc. I got a dream." I paused, but I did not terminate the connection.

"You just want me to see the game?" I asked.

"Right, so,"

"Then I'll simply view it on the cipher," I said, interrupting. That felt good. "Then I'll contact you tomorrow, and you can elaborate on your dream." It was an odd term, an old word people rarely used anymore. The mind was the last frontier to explore, and since beginning that process, scientific jargon had been developed

to replace the archaic catch-all.

"Will do, Doc, will do," and it was Griffin who canceled the signal then, as if he wasn't being rejected at all. I frowned, again unsure as to what had just happened.

I watched the Titan game as if on accident. It took some getting used to, knowing that there were people inside the ten-foot suits of metal and plastic, knowing the forces that were involved in some of the collisions, the rank commercialism, the overt sexism. Once though, I saw one of the players clear the chaos occurring near the line of conquest and skip and hop and spin their way to the goal area. To reach the golden hoop, the runner had to jump, and after leaving the ground, for a moment, the ball carrier looked like they were flying, hung in the air like meteorologists did clouds. Then the ball was slammed home, and the player hung from the rim for a while, mocking the other team. It got my blood pumping, all the visceral terror, and when I went to bed, I did ruminate on the soaring moment after I entered my REM cycle.

The next morning, I stepped across a familiar street to begin my weekend rituals with coffee and found Griffin Burns already there with a cup waiting for me.

"I take you for the type that drinks it black," he said when I blinked at him, "to enjoy the full flavor of the beans, as Science intended." I walked over to the little stand where the cream and sugar was and there, grabbing ingredients at random, I composed myself. I sat down with the man only to avoid making a scene. I added some cream and some sugar to the cup to make him wrong. It tasted strange.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"You said you wanted to hear about my dream."

"I said that I would contact you," I corrected him.

"And you did, just now. We're contacting right now."

"This is inappropriate," I said, trying to restrain my voice.

"And what's appropriate done for you, exactly?" he retorted. I would've had a leg to stand on had I secured tenure, is what I thought. It was a bit melodramatic, but my failure also meant that

for everything I had done, all the rewards I had earned, I was still lacking something crucial. "So, the dream, yeah?" he asked. I sighed, glancing down forlornly at my ruined coffee.

"Go on."

Apparently, the major injury he had spoken of the previous day had happened to one of the Titan players. A grisly incident, caused by a malfunctioning suit which had been unsuccessfully repurposed, had resulted in a player losing the use of a limb. The man's name was Baldric Freeman.

"Lucky number seven," Griffin said, pausing to sip his coffee. I wondered how the eccentric man took his, "did you see him last night?" I concentrated a moment, and then remembered the flying man.

"What limb did he injure?" I asked. Griffin smiled.

"A leg, Doc," he said, with some satisfaction, "kid lost a leg." I wanted to frown, but my eyebrows wouldn't lower. Actually, I think they went up. Griffin's ridiculous computer appeared again, and he had a bunch of files for me to see, which apparently explained how all of what had happened was possible. "I talked to a different specialist about it, and he said it was all legit, if risky." I accepted the tablet and began flicking through the pages. It did not surprise me that some of my own work had been cited in the research done. Baldric had elected to become an amputee, and had been fitted with a prosthetic that would not only act like a replacement limb, but would also interface with equipment legalized for Smash Ball play.

When I shifted in my seat from the discomfort in my lower back, I realized how long I had been sitting there across from Griffin. His cup was gone and my own had stopped steaming. The patronage around us had completely changed, too, even the people who would be there for hours themselves. I put the pad down deliberately.

"So, your idea? And what do you need from me?" which made it seem like I was more interested than I was, I realized a moment later.

"Who do you think understands strength better, Doc, a weak

man or a strong one?" The answer seemed obvious enough, the way it was phrased, but asking at all meant that Griffin thought there was something there to be examined. He stood up from the table. "Take a walk with me?" I rose because I was happy to get out of the chair, but saying yes seemed part of the gesture of standing up. I threw the coffee away under the guise that it was ruined from the lack of heat.

He didn't say anything for an entire block. At a corner that wasn't busy with pedestrians and idling vehicles, he looked around, then up at me. When he saw that I was paying attention, he looked around again, then hiked up one of his pant legs to reveal a titanium ankle sunk down into his loafer.

"Goes up to my hip," he said to my obvious question, and then he crossed the street. His funny walk made sense then, and was simultaneously less funny. In actuality, I realized that for the size of the prosthetic, Griffin actually walked mostly normal. He must have learned to compensate. "Anyway," he said, a few moments later, "after the thing with Baldric, it occurred to me that there was an avenue for incomplete folks to be whole, better than whole. Paid."

"I see."

"No, with all due respect, Doc, I don't think you do," he said, with a little bitter in his voice, "what I need from you, though, is the legitimacy angle. When people ask, they need someone to give them answers, someone who actually knows the science of it, you know?" I thought about that for a moment.

"You are a salesman," I said, which made him stop and look up at me. Though, he didn't smile this time.

"Never denied it, Doc." He kept walking, and the distance between us stretched. It occurred to me then that for all my belief in the chaos of things, I was always looking for some order. Some instruction. I even looked around as if for a sign. Overhead, a train flew by, whisper quiet.

A year after one of the worst days of my life, the day I had met Griffin Burns, I had one of the best, and Griffin was there for that, too.

He had done his research, on the medical advancements, the prosthetic techniques, even the potential subjects. He gave me a month to prepare to commit to the opportunity he spoke of, and during that I finished all the paperwork required to leave the university. I still went to the meetings and smiled at the other faculty; I lied about what I planned on doing with all the free time I had now that I had decided to leave.

Then, Griffin and I went on a road trip, and I say road trip because we actually used the road. We took a car across the United States like friends of my grandparents talked about sometimes. I saw America, the only surface between me and the scenery whizzing past was the polymer of my window, sometimes driver's side, sometimes passenger's. As we went, Griffin told me a bit about himself, though he never came out and said any of it. Everything about him was like his leg, tucked away deliberately and masked with adept muscle control; every now and then he would let a little of it show and I'd learn something new. He believed that the world had grown small enough that connections happened every day, naturally like a vine growing up around a fence post, but that there was a marketable skill in making the best connections than the ones that occurred randomly. He had never denied being a salesman, but he had also never come out and said it.

For me, I wondered if this was the kind of situation that existed before the traditional wedding vows changed, before there were marriage terms. I had done the undergraduate years' buffet of experimentation, and had substituted my relationships of advancement for that much more curricular study. I was looking forward to finding a similar mind to spend my middle years with, but I knew that along with that mind came certain expectations of professional excellence, and I didn't even know what professional excellence was anymore. I was alone, and would be for a long time, evidence suggested. That thought during those months always prompted me to look over at Griffin. Not alone, just dissimilar.

Things changed again for me, a few months after that, in a living room in west Texas. I was sitting next to Griffin on a couch,

him leaned forward, excitedly, me leaning back, waiting. An amazing thing about those visits was that even after sitting down and hearing what sounded like a spiel, I had never once heard the same thing come out of Griffin's mouth twice. It was like he had spent the first forty years of his life learning stories, was spending the next forty telling them. I had become convinced that he would spend the last forty having stories told about him.

"You've heard of Baldric Freeman, right?" Griffin asked. The young man in the chair nodded his head excitedly, mostly because it was the only part of him that could move. Poster paper lined his room in his parents' house, queued up to visualize all the popular posts and a few meant just for someone whose body was also broken. "Freeman lost a leg, had this procedure done, and was right back on the field three games later, good as new. No, better." Even though the words were different, the emotion in the room was the same. Griffin created a fire out of nothing, and then fanned it with his own breath. I was the one that cooled everything off. "I don't think this is working," I had told him once, over dinner at a diner.

"It's fine," he had said. "They need to hear the truth. Nothing like having the rug pulled out from under you."

The first time it had happened, the young woman blanching at my description of the invasiveness of the procedures and the chance of success, I expected the partnership, his word, with Griffin to be over. He hadn't said anything, but nor did he seem angry with me. It happened over and over again, but not once had he turned into the people I was slowly forgetting back at the university.

So, just like every other time, Griffin looked at me then, when he was done, and turned back to the young man who only had words to interact with the world.

"This is Doctor Hammond," Griffin said, "she's going to explain what's required to get from here to there. It won't be easy, lemme tell you. So, you listen to what she has to say, and give me your answer when you've taken your time." I sat forward then to explain. As was my nature, I had refined my presentation for clarity

over time and it only took a few minutes for him to stop me.

"I don't care," the young man said, "if it means getting up out of this chair, if it means walking, I'll do it." I was stunned, firstly by the young man's words, secondly that they had stunned me at all. I had to admit to myself that I hadn't planned on succeeding at all. Griffin sat forward like he wasn't surprised by this success, or by the other failures.

"It means a lot more than that, young man."

The procedures took weeks, during which the resolve of that first subject was severely damaged. Watching pieces of yourself cut away, replaced, would affect anyone, I supposed. Griffin and I were there, though, for every step of the way. I was able to consult to the doctors, and they listened. I realized then that Griffin could've gotten any patient who assented this far, but he couldn't go a step nearer his goal without someone like me. It felt good to get something in exchange for all those road-weary months, but it felt even better to actually be needed.

Halfway through the process I even learned the young man's name, not like I learned the names of students and then forgot them after a few semesters. I knew his name like I knew Griffin's name wasn't really Griffin. By the end of the process everyone else knew his name, too: Harper Price.

So the next time Griffin offered me tickets to see a game, I could not refuse. Truthfully, I might not have refused even if I didn't have anything vested. I don't know what class of ticket they were previously, but this time we were in a skybox. There was thick carpeting, a drink stand, and a private kitchen stocked with wait staff. Before the game started, men with expensive taste and the money to satisfy it showed up and shook our hands, even kissed mine. Old money gave them old ways, and Griffin spun his stories for them, too, though he did them the dishonor of rehearsing mostly old tellings. Their statements had reservations in them, conditions and clauses. Griffin only had nods and smiles for them; he even shielded me once or twice from the kind of posture that would chip me off into a private, corner concert. The one-legged man danced and

worked magic with his hands full of confidence.

When the game started, we were together at the foremost glass, standing.

"You ever think about kids, Doc?" Griffin asked me.

"I thought about adopting," I replied honestly, which he had earned long months previous.

"It's the right thing, yeah, with all those orphans out there," he said. Griffin was not a smart man, but he read a great deal, which at times made me revisit my doubting his intelligence. Just like my grandfather's. Einstein said if you wanted your children to be intelligent, to read them fairy tales. I knew Griffin's parents never read him any of those sorts of things, or anything at all, but somewhere along the way he had come to believe deeply in them. "All I was saying is that you were like the kid's mom," he said, gesturing to the field. "But I guess you had that experience coaching up students back at that school."

"I just told them what they needed to hear, what they deserved to hear, and helped them when they asked me to."

"Mm," Griffin said, feigning a full mouth, which left me alone to ponder my mother and my grandmother and the years I had lost. I looked over at Griffin once or twice, too, for reasons left unexamined.

The cheers were a pleasant distraction. Harper's story had wormed through the cipher and taken root in people's minds like a delusion. Lucky number 13. When they saw him, they cheered even louder. Later, when he scored on his way to breaking every rookie record available, things actually grew so loud they became quiet, like there was some wisdom to gain in the deafening roar.

Even later than that, Griffin handed me a very large check. It was interesting to see paper, but then, the way Griffin was, it didn't much surprise me.

"Your half of our agent's fee for the contract Harper signed today. Thanks again for all your help, Doc," he said. "Doctor Charlotte Hammond. What we did is going to be good for a lot of folks." I stared down at the little man, shaking my head. "And the

residuals for the intellectual property will add up to much more than that."

"I can't tell who you did all this for," I said honestly. He did smile though, then turned, and walked away from me, in that unique way of his. It would be the last time I ever saw Griffin Burns. He could find me, but apparently I couldn't locate him even when I finally tried.

