

Pet

Shuffling around the cluttered efficiency apartment, the old man sorted through mounds of papers and debris.

“Where is it?” he mumbled. “Where is that damn phone?”

Exhausted from the hunt, he plopped into an overstuffed arm chair and exhaled painfully.

“I know it’s here somewhere...”

Flipping the lid up on his laptop he smiled as the machine purred; its monitor sparked and sizzled to life.

“Bet *you* know where it is old girl,” he mused.

He reached for a pile of thumb drives sitting next to the machine. Sifting through the lot he located the one with the appropriate date, and slipped the portable device into an open port on the back of the computer. Immediately, images from the previous days’ events flashed up on the screen in tiny windows.

“Hmmm,” he hummed squinting at the tiny images. He drew his boney finger across and down the lit page. “Let’s see...phone...phone...phon...ah ha!”

A touch on his thumb pad brought the image to its full size. He chuckled out loud. “You *are* past it, aren’t you Francis?” Moving his hand beside the chair, he swept aside a small pile of papers on the floor.

“*There* you are!” He exclaimed shaking his head in disbelief. Raising the receiver to his ear, he waited for the device to clear itself.

“Number please,” a computer voice requested on the other end.

“Give me the Golden Cab Company.”

“One moment, I will connect you.”

The mechanical operator was quickly replaced by the familiar sound of a phone ringing on the far end.

“Golden Cab...” a burly voice on the other end greeted.

“Hello, this is John Francis Eberle, 42 Jesmond, and I need a cab.”

“Just a minute Mr. Eberle. Let me verify your information.”

After a short silence, the man returned. “Right, Mr. Eberle. We got a cab a few blocks away. He’ll be there shortly.”

“Fine. It may take me a minute or so to get downstairs, so please have him wait.”

“No problem, sir.”

Eberle replaced the receiver and stood from his chair. He grabbed the handful of thumb drives and jammed them into his wrinkled tweed suit jacket, closed the lid on the laptop and lifted it from the table.

“I’m *really* gonna miss you, Pet” he lamented staring at the compact computer.

Sighing, he carried the device out of the efficiency and made for the elevator.

A lonely, dirty yellow car with a Golden Cab sign lit on a tiny rooftop placard sat out in the dark and damp street. Its driver, a rough looking chap, chewed on the leavings of a tiny piece of a stogie. Eberle tottered out of the complex’s entrance. Cranking down the passenger side window, the cabby shouted in a gravelly voice.

“Hey bud...you Eberle?” The old man nodded. Opening the cab’s door, he fell into the back seat. “Where ya goin’ Mac?”

“The Recyc Center, please.”

“Recyc? I don’t *usually* go there...” he hemmed and hawed, “...’sides they got their own service.”

“I know. But I don’t want to go in one of those sterile vehicles. I want to go in a real cab with a real driver. I will make it worth your while. Now please...”

“*I dunno*, Mac; that place really creeps me out!”

Eberle took a fifty out his coat pocket. "Will *this* take care of it?"

The cabby's eyes boggled. Lowering the flag on his meter, he accelerated away from the curb. "Anything you say, Mac!"

Lamp posts and buildings, parked cars and umbrella covered pedestrians whizzed by the cab's rain streaked windows. But Eberle never noticed them.

"I'll miss you, Pet," he repeated, patting the laptop. "I'll really miss you!"

Glancing up into the rear view mirror, the driver caught the melancholy exchange.

"If ya don't mind me askin', what seems to be the problem?"

"The battery is nearly gone," Eberle groaned.

"Yeah...so what? Just replace it!"

"I'm afraid that's no longer possible." Eberle replied sadly.

"Oh..." the driver winced. "Sorry to hear *that*. Nobody looks forward to that, I guess..."

"It's difficult, certainly. We've shared so much together, the two of us. But I have come to terms with it. It's just a natural part of living."

"How long you had it?"

"It was a present from my wife years ago. It contains everything, my...our whole lives. When she died, it became my...well my family. I didn't have anyone else, at least no one close. They forget about you when you get old, you know." Eberle pulled one of the memory sticks from his pocket and held it up. A beam of light from a passing vehicle caught its silvered edge; the reflection shimmered in the old man's teary eyes. "Hard to imagine that an entire life can be consolidated onto a few thumb drives, I guess."

"You keep callin' it *Pet*."

"That's its *name!*"

"You *named* yours?" The cabby quizzed raising a dubious eyebrow.

"Of course. Don't *you* name *yours*?"

"Nah! It's just another machine!" he replied sharply.

"How can you say that?" Eberle whined. "They ask so little, but give so much!"

"Yeah," the cab driver cleared his throat, "well, all the same it's still a shame, Mac. So *how do ya know* it's time?"

"You can just tell, can't you? The picture fades in and out mostly. It's..." Eberle slumped back in his seat and sobbed.

"Hey, hey..." the cabby pled. "Sorry. We don't have to talk no more about it."

Eberle nodded as he stared out of the window, tears welling in his sad blue eyes.

The cab came to a slow stop just in front of a modern gray building; a large neon sign above its main entrance shouted the location.

"This is it, Mac...Recyc. Hope...uh...well you know."

"Thank you, young man." Eberle handed the cab driver the fifty and slid out of the back seat. The driver watched intently as the old man hobbled through the entrance.

"Shame," he growled, chewing on his cigar butt. "Real shame."

A young, pretty receptionist sat at a semicircular desk. Above her head the words "City Recycling Center" stretched across a fluted pillar.

"May I help you, please?" she greeted cheerily.

"Eberle...John Francis Eberle."

Turning to her screen the girl scrolled through a long list of names on her calendar. "*There* you are," she bubbled pushing a button on her switchboard. "Have a seat, Mr. Eberle. Someone will be down to get you shortly."

Eberle looked over the empty lobby. Banks of black chairs with plastic cushioned backs and seats stood at attention, waiting for someone to use them. Eberle took one closest to the reception area and plunked himself down. He sighed heavily, fighting back a flood of emotion and tears. Finally, a door on the far side of the room opened.

"Mr. Eberle?" A young male voice announced.

Eberle stood and made his way to the attendant.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“It’s time,” the old man answered reconciled to the situation.

“How do you know?” The attendant queried.

“You can just tell, can’t you? The monitor fades in and out.”

“Oh...I see. Please, come this way.”

The two men walked down a hospital white corridor just past a large central station where numerous attendants monitored racks of machines.

“Here we go, Mr. Eberle...” the attendant smiled, “...2C.” The pair entered into a small clean room with a single overstuffed chair and end table in its center. “I know you want to spend every last moment you can with the computer before we take it. Do you have your thumb drives?”

Eberle nodded, scooping out the handful of drives and setting them on the table.

“Then I’ll leave you two alone for a while.” The attendant turned and exited the room closing the large wooden door behind him.

Eberle opened the lid of the laptop. Immediately, its monitor flashed on.

“There’s a good girl,” he choked.

Grabbing one of the tiny drives, the old man loaded the machine with images of his life: pictures of his wife and friends, his children and grandchildren; it was all there. As the memories and images of his life flashed before him, the old man wept.

“I can’t believe it,” he sobbed. “I simply can’t believe it. Thank you, Pet. Thank you for everything!”

Out at the attendant station, the monitors for room 2C suddenly went dark. A low alarm sounded and a man on a wheeled desk chair rolled to the unit and stared it down.

“Jonesy, better go check it out!” the station manager commanded.

Bounding down the hall, the young man gently opened the door.

“Mr. Eberle,” he spoke softly. “Mr. Eberle.” But there was no reply.

The old man sat in the overstuffed chair motionless, his eyes closed. On his lap, the computer continued to roll images of his life in silent tribute to its fallen owner.

Closing the machine’s lid, the young attendant lifted it reverently from the dead man’s lap. He carried it to the station and set it on the counter.

“Mr. Eberle is dead,” he said flatly.

“We will take care of the body,” the shift manager replied. “You take the laptop downstairs for a refit. It will go out to a new owner tomorrow.”

“What about the old man’s battery?”

“We’ll get that before we toe tag him. It can’t be reused and we have to dispose of it separate from the body.”

“And the thumb drives?”

“Take them to maintenance. They’ll wipe and recyc ‘em as well.”

“Yes sir.”

Dave and Rose Cox (www.bablbar.com) are the authors of *The Sons of Maeve Trilogy*, Published by AuthorHouse, Inc. USA.

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