

A
CANTICLE
FOR
ELVIS

A.J. Ragland

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Down On The Boulevard
My Friends
Sleepwalking With An Angel
The Pure Ascend
A Canticle For Elvis

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My Happiness:

Written by Borney Bergantine and Betty Peterson

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Michelle:

Portions of the lyrics from the song, Michelle by Paul McCartney, are included in passages of dialogue.

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– for *Elvis fans everywhere* –
and for *Ellaine*

OVERTURE

Between 1949 and 1954, a young man from Tupelo, Mississippi, kept a secret journal documenting the prophetic insights he experienced while sleepwalking. He hid the journal, together with other treasures, in an old hatbox his mother had given him.

Had scientists in his century detected the super-concentration of mitochondria that gives rise to a hybrid human every few thousand years, or understood the true nature of delta wave brain activity prevalent in the young and the gifted, they may have discovered as I did—

—this sleepwalking young man was not alone on his walks.

Gabriele Kendall, August 16, 2035

First Star on the Right and Straight on 'til Morning

The surface of the indigo sea was like a tranquil mirror, seamlessly reflecting the dome of the Milky Way. Towering cliffs of granite rose along the shorelines. Like sentinels, they watched over a sleek fusiform creature slicing through the warm substance that was both water and space.

A dragonfly appeared above the dark blue surface, skimming the undulating trail of ripples left by the great creature.

With amazing speed and strength, the dolphin suddenly ruptured the surface, sending a thousand fingers of indigo cascading after the annoying insect.

The green and golden playmate deftly zigged and zagged, evading every runnel and drop.

She laughed. "You'll have to do better than that, swivel-hips."

The dolphin twisted and rose high on his mighty flukes and slapped his pectoral fins against his sides.

"How's that for hip-swiveling, you green-eyed bird-bait?"

The banter was telepathic. The friendship, eternal.

The dragonfly zoomed to within a foot of the dolphin's head. In a sudden blur of motion, she metamorphosed into a dolphin of green and gold.

“Bird-bait am I?”

He whistled through his blowhole. “I love it when you do that.”

For an instant time stood still, suspended by the beating of their mighty tails. Then the creatures laughed as the warm liquid embraced their return.

Beneath the rippled surface of shimmering stars, the male dolphin spun, turning his partner as if on a dance floor.

“Not too shabby for someone who used to avoid going into the water, huh?”

She moved closer until their bodies touched.

“Is this foreplay, or are you just happy to see me?” she teased.

He spun her again. “Just happy to see you.”

She caressed his mind. “Sing my song.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, it’s not your song?”

“Sing it anyway.”

He began—

“Michelle, my belle.

These are words that go together well,

My Michelle.”

—and then he stopped. If a dolphin could frown, he did.

“I guess your presence means someone’s organizing a concert.”

“Don’t be cynical,” she soothed. “Couldn’t I just be visiting without wanting something?”

“So, you’re here, *only* for me?”

She stroked his bottlenose with her own. “Not *only* for you.”

They swam but there was no song.

In time, she led him to a nearby shore where gentle waves mingled with a beach of soft green moss and blue pebbles.

Rising twin moons cast apposing shadows as the two dolphins emerged from the waters and transformed into different beings. One, a stunning humanoid woman of green and golden flesh with four gossamer wings. The other, a tall human male with sapphire-blue eyes and brown hair.

They walked hand-in-hand up the beach, coming at last to a bed of moss where they sat.

He wasted little time before expressing an old feeling of jealousy. “If not *only* for me, then who else?”

She smiled. “Someone needs to work on their negativity.”

“Sorry. I guess 58 years ain’t enough time.”

“You know we don’t measure time in Heaven. What’s the point.”

He pressed a hand against the warmth of her thigh. “You’re right. Let me start again. I’m happy to see you, Michelle.”

Without missing a beat she responded. “And I am always happy to see you.” She paused only a moment. “Eve would be happy to see you, as well.”

The name was like a bolt out of the star-filled sky. “Whh-whh why?” he stammered.

Gossamer wings fluttered. And the angel rose.

She raised an arm above his head and pointed to the edge of the Milky Way.

“First star on the right and straight on ’til morning.”

A smile curled his lip and a tear threatened to fall.

“*Eden?*”

Monday, January 8, 2035

4:34 AM CST - MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

By Gabriele's count, *Starlight* was the seventh miracle in as many days.

For The Preacher and other world leaders, the miracles presented immense national security challenges.

For the scientific community, the miracles challenged the laws of known physics. Particularly the latest dubbed *Starlight*.

For the clergy, *Starlight* presented unparalleled challenges to thousands of years of scripture.

In fact, the only thing the experts could agree on was—there were no explanations.

But for the multitude gathered beyond the panoramic windows of Studio 1A—to paraphrase the station's tag-line—*no explanation was needed*.

The pilgrims—for pilgrims they unquestionably were and had been since August 16, 1977—began arriving in the park at midnight. Now they stood quietly—65,000 strong—along the length and breadth of the Great Guitar. Holding candles aloft. Keeping vigil at the mansion on the hill.

Many were monitoring their personal iComs, listening to or watching news reports of the traffic gridlocking Memphis streets.

National news services were reporting over a million vehicles were on the interstates—all heading towards Memphis—

—Toward *Starlight*.

With its blue pulses coming closer together, the beam was now more blue than white.

Gabriele tried to ignore it and the news. Instead, she closely monitored the Trek's transmissions on her 3D displays. *That's All Right*, his first single, would end in fourteen seconds and she wanted to make certain the Treks were in position.

She glanced at the stern face of the Army colonel standing in the corner. His presence only heightened the tension in the room.

They each looked at the digital clock on the wall.

4:34:55 AM, CST.

Was it only seven days ago when I was watching a different crowd through a different window, she thought.

MIRACLES

I got in trouble for drawing pictures of Superman and Captain Marvel in class today. When I opened my notebook tonight, I saw that I had written the number 706 over and over. Don't know what it means . . .

The Book of Elvis: 3/16/49

My Happiness

MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 2035 – SEVEN DAYS EARLIER.
12:01 AM CST - MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Gabriele Kendall’s townhouse stood on what was once farmland on the Arkansas bank of the Mississippi River. From the balcony window where she was standing, she had a spectacular view of night-time Memphis, which seemed to float above the opposite bank. Unfortunately, she also had a view of the crowd gathered at a public riverside terrace, only a stone’s throw below her balcony. In fact, she wished she *had* a stone to throw.

The people attending the New Year’s Eve party apparently loved *Auld Lang Syne*. They were singing it now, loudly and out of key, for the third time as they made the transition from somber 3/33 memorial mode, to a wild New Year’s celebration. In a decade of rampant pessimism, the two-year-old ritual had already attracted millions of followers—each trying desperately to fill a half-empty glass.

Gabriele used to love New Year’s Eve. Now she couldn’t wait for the intrusive reminder to end.

“I *hate* New Year’s Eve,” she grumbled.

She hated the memorials and the endless speeches. And the after-memorial fireworks and parties. And the wall-to-wall media coverage. And she particularly disliked Robert Burns for writing *Auld Lang Syne*. Had she the power, she imagined resurrecting him

just so she could tell him how she felt: “*My brother and his buddies died singing your song, Mr. Burns.*”

Most of all, she hated *The Preacher*—the man responsible for most of the doom and gloom gripping the nation. The sense of hopelessness began when he took office and quickly tossed much of the Constitution on the fires of manufactured necessity. Then he made things far worse by pushing the world beyond the brink.

Known as the shortest war in history, the nuclear exchange—almost entirely one-sided—lasted less than six hours. When it was over, two rogue nations had been reduced to rubble. The media was fast to label the war 3/33 because—well, it was number three and it happened in year 33. And let’s face it, the media loves catchy tags. More importantly, 33 million souls were thrown away. Including Gabriele’s brother and the 24,000 American troops he was stationed with in South Korea.

That was why Gabriele hated New Year’s Eve, *Auld Lang Syne*, and the President of the United States—known as The Preacher.

The cacophony of fireworks exploding, car horns blasting, and noisemakers tooting and whistling, drove her away from the window. She had been conducting her own private service for her brother, but the noise now made continuing impossible. She passed a hand over the controls of the iHolo holographic sound system. The sweet music of *Where No One Stands Alone*—from her brother’s favorite gospel album—collapsed spatially to a one-dimensional source and then fell silent.

“Goodnight, Mickey,” she sighed. “God bless you, and have a happy life in Heaven.”

The sudden absence of music seemed to magnify the noisemakers

and elevate her irritation. Without thinking—or maybe she was thinking—she lifted a pillow from the sofa and flung it across the large room. The instant it departed her finger tips she regretted the rash action and reached for it. Too late. She flinched before it bounced harmlessly off the far wall.

“Bad girl—good toss, Gabby,” she chided aloud. *Better go to bed before I do some real damage—like eating half that cake hiding in the back of the fridge.*

She suppressed a nagging yawn and shuffled her fuzzy slippers toward her bedroom. On the way she poked her head into the *boys’* room. A sign on the door proclaimed: Where No Droid Has Gone Before.

That pretty much says it all.

As usual, her little Treks were immersed in a classic TV show—an old Perry Mason episode. She cringed at the inevitable parody awaiting her in the morning: *“I’m a lawyer, Gabby. I take people like you, who are so obviously innocent that a blind man could see it, and I make a fool of the police, the District Attorney, and the entire California judicial system by tricking the guilty into jumping onto the back bench and screaming at the top of their lungs—I DID IT—without a shred of credible evidence.”*

She quietly closed the door.

Separating her terrycloth robe from her flannel PJs was always an exercise in futility. Often she would just give up and collapse exhausted into bed. Thankfully they were going their separate ways tonight. A practiced snap released the clasp holding her long auburn hair in a ponytail. Then she slid between the sheets. Her giant Maine Coon grudgingly moved two inches, allowing her barely enough room for her legs. He also hated New Year’s celebrations. The big

cat curled into the crook of her legs and covered his ears with a huge paw. Her iDroid housekeeper, Annie, was to wake her at 7:00 AM.

Gabriele pulled a pillow over her head.

And the noise stopped.

It took a moment for her to realize the noise really had stopped. Silence had suddenly closed in like a heavy blanket. For a frightening moment she believed she had gone deaf. Fireworks were no longer popping. Car horns were no longer blasting. Even the normal background sounds of the river and the city were gone. What remained was a deathly silence.

She pushed the pillow aside, ordered the lights on—and was relieved to hear the sound of her own voice.

Her cat was sitting up alert with ears perked.

“What is it, Elvis?”

The cat hissed.

And the music began.

*Evening shadows make me blue
When each weary day is through
How I long to be with you
my happiness*

She rolled out of bed and dragged herself back into the living room.

“I swear I turned that fool thing off.”

My Happiness, a song popularized by Connie Francis in the 1950s, was playing on the iHolo. She owned a number of the pop star’s recordings. But as she approached the iHolo she realized she did not own the version now playing. She had never heard it before. In fact, she was certain no one had *ever* heard it before. It was a

completely original mix. A duet between two of rock and roll's most iconic singers: Connie Francis and—*Elvis Presley*.

*Every day I reminisce
 Dreaming of your tender kiss
 Always thinking how I miss
 my happiness*

Every fan was familiar with the legend of the song—how eighteen-year-old Elvis recorded it in 1953 as a birthday present for his mother, Gladys. The \$4.00 acetate with *My Happiness* on one side and *That's When Your Heartaches Begin* on the flip-side never made it to his mother. Elvis had left it with a friend and it was never heard again until 1988 when the demo surfaced.

Now, apparently, there was a new version—58 years after Elvis's death. She was certain the duet had to be a fake. Dozens of previously unknown Elvis recordings had been surfacing each year as the entertainer's centennial birthday neared. Some were pretty good. Most were forgettable. All were imitations. There was no record that the 'sobbing' Francis had ever met the 'rocking' King, let alone recorded a duet with him.

*A million years it seems
 Have gone by since we shared our dreams
 But I'll hold you again,
 There'll be no blue memories then*

Then again . . . the vocals certainly sounded like the two singers. No one *cried* lyrics like they did.

Gabriele ordered her iHolo off with a verbal command. It refused to shut down.

Puzzled and too tired to investigate, she was about to sever the wireless electric current to the device when she heard voices coming from beyond the balcony doors—voices of people singing.

Most likely the party was still going strong—although, why they would be singing *My Happiness* was beyond her.

She hurried across the room and opened one of the French doors to the balcony. A blast of winter chill met her as she approached the short railing.

*Whether skies are gray or blue
Any place on earth will do
Just as long as I'm with you
my happiness*

What she saw and heard stunned her.

Hundreds more people were now gathered in loose groups near the riverside terrace, and they were all looking skyward. None of them were singing.

The voices she heard were coming out of the black, starless sky. They were the voices of Elvis and Connie Francis singing *My Happiness*.

Gabriele stood there, shivering, listening, mesmerized.

When the song repeated a second time she found herself singing along. “*Evening shadows make me blue, when each weary day is through. How I long to be with you, my happi . . .*” She stopped singing when she noticed the variation. The song coming from the sky was now in French. An easy language to recognize but not easy for her to understand.

She spun around and hurried inside to listen to the song playing on her iHolo.

*Chaque jour, je reminisce
Vous rêvez de votre tendre baiser
Toujours penser comment je me manquez
mon bonheur*

“What in blue blazes is going on,” she asked the empty room.

The room was not empty for long.

The four droids drifted into the family room, singing.

Annie walked in from the kitchen, also singing.

Then the intercom system and every TV and media device in the house started playing the song.

The entire household was singing along, in harmony. It was as if every electronic device with audio capability was under some invisible control.

When commands to stop failed, Gabriele finally sat down on the sofa, dumfounded and defeated.

The song continued in French until the last verse, which was sung in a curious language she could not identify but seemed familiar.

The song repeated eighteen more times, in as many different languages, with the final verse always in the same, unconventional language—a language that seemed to inhabit her mind.

On the twentieth and final rendition, Elvis and Connie sang *My Happiness* entirely in the new language.

When it ended and the house was again silent, Gabriele discovered she could barely keep her blue eyes open. The sudden absence of sound was like a narcotic, drawing her to the deserted bed.

She was swimming with dolphins. She was a dolphin. The water was blue and dark and the Milky Way reached down into the sea. The sensation was of swimming in both water and space. Towering cliffs

stood on either side. She could feel the warm liquid slide over the smoothness of her body. She swam deep and long before coming to her home in the sunlit caves beneath the surface. They were waiting for her. Dolphins of amazing grace. They were singing to her in the new language.

And she understood every word.

When Annie woke her at 7:00 AM, her head was still under the pillow. She ignored the iDroid's irritatingly sassy tone and returned to her underwater sanctuary.

After the Music Ends

2:00 PM CST - MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

The sun was high when Gabriele dragged herself out of the cocoon of warm blankets. After a much-needed visit to the bathroom, she trundled into the family room, trailing her terrycloth robe behind her.

Everyone was gathered in front of the 3D-Wall, watching a *Simpsons* marathon. Annie was sitting in a wingback chair grooming a demanding Elvis. The four Treks—Gabriele called them her *boys*—were hovering above the hardwood floor, happily mimicking every word Homer and his clan spoke.

It was as if the previous night's musical entertainment never happened. When questioned, the Treks and Annie played dumb.

“What song, Gabby? We were watching Perry Mason.”

“I don't sing, Gabby. Singing is not one of my protocols. Anyway, I was cleaning the kitchen.”

Gabriele ignored their attempts at deflection. She wondered, not for the first time, why she had activated Annie's familiarity subroutine. The answer was always the same: After one week of *Yes Miss, No Miss, Would you like some tea, Miss*, she'd had enough of Miss Manners.

She also ignored their protests when she ordered the 3D-Wall to

switch from *The Simpsons* to the four most reliable news channels.

After watching those programs for a few minutes, she scanned the viral V-Net, the old Internet, and a dozen of her favorite talking T-Heads. She also phoned her studio.

Twenty minutes later her head was swimming in utter confusion.

The news reports stated: The song began precisely six minutes after the hour—everywhere in the world—in every language. The song played on every audio-capable device available to man. Attempts to switch channels, turn off or unplug devices had no effect. The song was heard on airplanes, trains, subways, cruise ships, submarines—in shops, theaters, hospitals, churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. It was heard in deserts, on mountaintops, in jungles and at the poles. It played in the most secure military and intelligence facilities on the planet. It played on the COMSTOC Space Station. It even played at Mars-1 Habitat and Moon Base. And where there were no electronic devices, the song sang from the sky. The song played twenty times in 40 minutes—and then it stopped.

Gabriele stared at Annie and the four Treks. They returned her stare. It seemed everyone on the planet heard the song except her house mates. It also seemed everyone on the planet now understood one another, regardless of the language they spoke—except her and her housemates.

Everyone had an opinion on the cause: Half the world blamed the Americans. On the other hand, Americans were busily blaming sunspots, global warming, terrorists, aliens, pirate radio, pirate satellites, pirate government, and plain old pirates. Gabriele's chief disc jockeying competitor at the Jackson Channel, a sallow

looking character who always wore purple socks, actually accused her of running a publicity stunt promoting the upcoming centennial birthday celebration. A growing majority was buying into an idea that the song had been transmitted by Voyager I, an unmanned spacecraft launched September 5, 1977—twenty days after Elvis’s death. Voyager was now the farthest man-made object from Earth—at least that was what everyone believed. Gabriele even liked that one. After her producer, Big Al, shared it with her she said, “Tell me it’s so, Big Al.”

What made matters worse was the fact that there was no hard evidence that the event even happened. Apparently, not a single audio recording of the event had surfaced. Automated surveillance devices like CCTV only recorded video, not audio. So a video of a bunch of people standing on a street corner staring up at the sky only proved that—a bunch of people were standing on a street corner staring up at the sky. Granted, 5 million videos of people standing on a street corner staring up at the sky would make anyone, particularly security agencies, pause and wonder.

InstaPoll results fell into four categories: Those who were frightened (12%). Those who were a little nervous (20%). Those who proclaimed the song to be a miracle (26%). And those who thought it was really cool (42%). Governments announced that they would have more information later. So stay tuned.

The results did not surprise Gabriele. After decades of rising seas, food wars, water wars, civil wars, world war, and a slew of evermore realistic looking disaster movies, the world had grown numb to bad news and threatening events. It would take far more than harmless music from the Heavens to raise fears.

“After all,” pointed out a White House talking head, “what was

wrong with finally being able to understand what your Mexican gardener or your Chinese dry-cleaner was calling you?” The fact that the White House was run by a bunch of homophobic racists, or that your fellow hard-working citizens could also understand your own snide remarks, made the old adage doubly true: If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything—or something to that effect.

Gabriele switched the 3D-Wall back to *The Simpsons* marathon, and to a round of cheers from the droids. At least they always made sense—the cartoons, not her family.

The sudden realization that her family—a cat, two humans and five droids—resembled *The Simpsons*, pushed her frown into a broad smile. It also produced fond memories of the past—of flying record players and a boy named Doris:

Flying Record Player

Gabriele recalled her 14th birthday when her dad, John Kendall, showed her the world's first fully functional flying saucer.

She was resplendent in her new blue birthday dress. He was blindingly garish in his typically tacky tropical shirt, shorts and sneakers—his standard high-tech lab attire. She always kidded him that he looked like a Harrison Ford retread acting like a Tom Selleck wannabe in a *Magnum PI* remake. The actors were two of his childhood favorites.

The year was 2021. The invention, #345. Just another contraption, as he called them, to add to the long list of astounding devices that helped make him one of the ten wealthiest men in the world.

“The secret, Gabby,” he whispered as he glanced around his lab with a mock conspiratorial look, “are these two discs inside the Harmonic Phase Engine—or HPE. They make it possible for a droid to fly.”

He turned the silver twelve inch saucer on its back to reveal the transparent polycarbonate underside and the discs within.

“They’re as thin as a sheet of paper, weigh about the same, and are separated by less than a micron.”

She could only see the lower of the two discs.

“What’s a micron?”

“Let’s just say that one strand of your pretty brown hair is a hundred times thicker than the space between the discs.”

She knew better than to use the word impossible around her dad, so she said, “Uh huh.”

He smiled. “The discs are suspended in an invisible magnetic field, and rotate at extreme speed in opposite directions. They—”

“How fast, Dad?”

“Fast enough to make a young lady’s head spin—and fast enough to generate an artificial zero-point state around the device.”

“Huh?”

“Makes the saucer weightless, sweetheart.”

“Gee. A real *flying* saucer?”

“When a force is applied to make it move.”

He turned the saucer over and placed it on the lab table.

“I call this one Zero. It has an AI that manages the flight controls and responds to voice commands.”

She knew that AI was short for artificial intelligence. She was also familiar with flight controls because she was studying for her promised sixteenth birthday present: helicopter flying lessons.

“Zero. On,” he commanded.

Nothing appeared to happen, and she stared at her dad.

“Zero. Up one meter.”

A slight hum could be heard as the small saucer lifted into the air and stopped to hover three feet above the table.

The sudden movement took her by surprise and she jumped back with a giggle.

“Dad, it sounds like a bumblebee. Or like those cheesy flying saucers in those cheesy 1950s films you love so much.”

He chuckled. “Hey, I like that, kiddo. We’ll call it the Bumblebee Drive. Watch this, Gabby.”

He raised an arm and barely nudged Zero on the side with a finger. The device slowly floated across the huge lab.

“That’s called inertia, Gabby. Zero will continue in that direction until an equal or greater force stops or repels it. If we let it continue it would bounce around the lab, practically forever. Why don’t you tell it to stop, sweetheart—preferably before it hits one of my assistants in the head?”

She was thrilled. “Zero. Stop.”

The saucer came to an immediate motionless state.

“Why does Zero have that eerie hum?”

“There’s a small acoustic transducer mounted above the discs. When an electric current is passed through the zero-point discs a *magic* frequency is generated that drives pressure waves against the atmosphere—”

“Magic, Dad? I am fourteen, you know?”

“I forgot. Sorry, sweetheart.” He leaned over and whispered an obtuse mathematical formula for the frequency in her ear. “Is that better, smarty?” he grinned.

She looked at him with crossed eyes, making fun of his technobabble.

He ignored her funny face and continued. “The result is lift—and your eerie hum. Small vents around the perimeter provide attitude control and horizontal motion.”

Then it suddenly dawned on her. “It’s a flying record player!”

He burst out laughing and she joined in.

For the next hour they played with Zero, trying to avoid, with little success, the other scientists working in the lab.

The following year, in 2022, her dad put the droid concept on a back-burner and founded a new enterprise focused on building the first flying car. The four-passenger vehicle was a bust—too much weight. But the two-seat, *ultralight* Harmonic Phase Transport, or HPT, flew like a dream.

In 2029, the first models for low-altitude transportation were zipping between cities—pilot’s license required. The HPT wasn’t intended to compete with the electrics and hydros plying the concrete and polycrrete highways. By 2029 she was a seasoned helicopter pilot, and because her dad owned the company, she was presented the first model off the assembly line.

“My HPT,” she was fond of pointing out, “stays aloft due to the four articulating HPEs under my butt.”

“But, Gabby,” her boys would exclaim in four-part harmony, “you’re not fat.”

She always laughed at their lame jokes.

Her *boys* were a gift from her dad on her 23rd birthday, ten months after she became the youngest female DJ in America. The droids quickly became part of her gig, making live on-air 3D and holographic coverage a thing to behold.

Her dad called the droids VENTURES: Virtual Entertainment Ultraflight Robotic Eye Systems. Twice the size of the HPE prototype, Zero, Gabriele’s little rascals looked and performed like true flying saucers. Two concentric and independently rotating upside-down saucers formed the droid’s body. The smaller saucer on top served as a platform for recording and communication devices. The larger saucer served as the housing for the HPE rotating discs below. The dual-camera lenses, and horizontal attitude control vents contributed to the VENTURES’ facial characteristics. Features

their sophisticated AI and personality chips soon took full and often overindulgent advantage of when making excuses for their childish behavior.

She named her droids, Mel, Nokie, Bob and Don—after the original classic lineup of the '60s rock band, *The Ventures*.

A Boy Named Doris

Her boys were still watching *The Simpsons* marathon, mimicking every word and action. She wasn't sure which concerned her the most: the fact that they consumed classic TV like she consumed potato chips, or the fact that they were learning from the experience while she was not.

Excess was an attribute she had acquired from her dad. Sometimes that was a good thing, as in their shared work ethic which had driven them both to top of their professions—although, spinning new records could never compare to creating new life forms. Now one of his new life forms was elevating excess to a new art form.

One day, after a month of watching thousands of hours of classic TV and motion pictures, the droids surprised Gabriele and her dad by insisting on renaming themselves.

“Gabby, their desire to name themselves,” her dad proclaimed like a proud father, “to recognize their unique selves, to use pronouns better than many of my colleagues—when they aren't fooling around, that is—proves they have attained Strong AI.”

She had responded with her pat ‘uh huh’ which was shorthand for *I'm stupid, please explain*.

“They can perform any intellectual task you or I can, sweetheart.”

“Can they boil water without burning it? Because I can’t.”

“Give them a chance and I bet they could find a way.”

Like her dad, Gabriele believed that all intelligent life deserved the right to freely evolve—even artificial life.

“OK. I guess they can rename themselves, then.”

Following a quick celebratory flight around the lab, beeping, bopping, ping-pong, and cheering, they did. Their first order of business was to re-designate their species. Mel was elected the spokesperson.

“In honor of the 35 *Star Trek* movies,” he began. “And because we are on a journey of exploration. We wish to be called Treks . . . with a capital T.”

Gabriele remembered trying hard not to laugh or make fun of their names, and not succeeding. “Sure you wouldn’t rather be called *Tribbles*?”

“Wow! How did you know? That was our second choice, Gabby.”

Then they proceeded to name themselves.

Mel was hooked on classic-rock and proclaimed his name to be *Mel-O-Jello*.

After she and the other Treks stopped laughing he reluctantly settled on just being *Mel-O*.

“Because I’m well-aged and smooth, and full of character like a fine Cabernet,” he explained.

“Full of smelly liverwurst is more like it,” Nokie declared.

Gabriele had offered her own bad pun. “Put a cork in it, boys. Mel-O it is.”

No one laughed.

Bob was a huge John Wayne fan and insisted on *Duke* as his handle.

No one objected, although a couple of the Treks muttered, “Borrriing”.

Don was thought to be the most sensible of the foursome, until he proclaimed with a flourish—“Call me *Doris*.”

This was followed by more muffled snickers and giggles.

“*What!* I love Doris Day movies. If Sue can be a boy’s name, so can Doris—ask Johnny Cash.”

“He’s dead, muffin-head. How can we ask him?”

Nokie was perfectly happy with his name. “Personally, I think our upper system platform resembles a pasta bowl, not a muffin.”

With that they were off testing and abusing their personality chips and each other.

“Doris! That’s a *girl’s* name, dummy.”

“It’s better than Jello.”

“Not Jello, panty-waist. Mel-O, with a *big O*.”

“Big-mouth is more like it.”

“He called you panty-waist, Missy. You gonna take that lying down, or fight like a—sissy?”

“Oh, shut-up, Duchess.”

“That’s D-U-K-E, as in, *somebody oughta belt you in the mouth. But I won’t, I won’t, the hell I won’t.*”

“Hey, the Duchess can spell.”

“And she said a naughty word.”

“Gabby, tell these losers the Duke was a man’s man.”

“Cheese-eating surrender-monkey more like it.”

“Put a cork in it, Nokie. Do I look French?”

“No fair using Gabby’s lame joke.”

“I don’t wear panties.”

“Chantilly lace, what a pretty face, a wiggle in her walk, and a giggle in—”

“You never get the lyrics right, moron!”

“It’s a derivative work in progress.”

“You mean you stole it.”

“I don’t wear panties—do I?”

“You look great in panties, Doris.”

To learn more about the author and his other books, please visit www.storytellers.com.
