

Excerpt From

“JANIBOTS, INCORPORATED”

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First published in “Unparalleled Journeys: Tales From the Writers of Amazing Journeys Magazine.” Edited by Edward Knight and David M. Fitzpatrick, Journey Books Publishing, 2005

“SORRY, Mistah,” Glenn mumbled, fumbling with the auto napkin dispenser as I stared at the whisky spreading over my crotch, “made a mesh...clumshy ob me. A dam filthy mesh...”

...And that’s how the whole thing started: a lousy spilled drink in a lousy working man’s autopour-pub. Hi, the name’s Lou Staminsky, and sure, I know you know me—now everyone knows me--same as everyone knows Glenn--but on that cold, drizzly November afternoon, having just finalized my divorce, I didn’t know anybody, didn’t want to know anybody, and didn’t anybody but Glenn want to know me. And Glenn—well, Glenn was just another jabbing elbow in O’Nelly’s neon sour bar funk, an accident that, according to one of Einstein’s forgotten theories, had probably already happened in some alternate time/space and was now waiting to happen again... Only this time I was the one with a puddle in my lap...and yeah, as it worked out, the rest of the world was in for a soaking too.

“It’s all right, Mac,” I lied, squirming as the whisky worked unpleasantly into my boxers, “it’s OK—”

“No!” Glenn slurred, pounding a fist on the aluminum bar, drawing the disapproving glances of O’Nelly’s disheveled patrons, and rousing a tin-voiced rebuke from the chromed auto server. “No-o-o, it ishn’t! Don’ like makin’ meshes. Brees dishorder. Chaosh!”

I glanced at him, trying to decide if he was crackers, on the level, or both. “Yeah,” I said, still undecided, “and cleanliness is next to godliness. Say, just buy me another round, eh, Mac, and we’ll call it square, OK?”

But it didn’t seem to be OK. Claiming a mess of rumpled napkins that he’d shoved my way, I saw that his thick-rimmed glasses lay cockeyed from drink across a very serious face. His blue eyes were brightly glazed—but serious—his long nose was straight—and serious—and his pursed lips were thin—and you guessed it...serious. Stringy blond hair spilled across his broad, thoughtful forehead (appropriately creased with worry lines) and his quick, nervous hands tried unsuccessfully to push the brown-yellow stuff back again. Meticulously heeled from the starch of his button-collared shirt and cardigan pullover sweater to his pressed dress slacks and patent leather loafers he was a little wrinkled from the recent going over by Mr. Jack Daniels, but all in all, I thought him the neatest drunk I’d ever seen.

“Look, Bud,” I said reassuringly, knowing the signs of desperation from years in the holo-ad game, “it’s really OK, I promise. Hell, one more stain ain’t gonna hurt these slacks any. It’s about time I gave ‘em a good scrubbing anyhoo. Now why don’t you tell

‘ol Lou what’s eating you? I might not be able to help, but Lord knows it’ll do me good to hear about someone else’s trouble for a while.”

Glenn focused blurrily on me in what passed as scrutiny, emotions flickering across his wide-open, puppy-dog face quicker than a scene cut in a music holovid—then he nodded and smiled as if satisfied.

“Name ish Glennard Marcus Newcomb the Thirt.... Invennor of the Janibot.”

“OK, I’ll bite,” I said, trying to keep him calm, “what the heck is a Janibot?”

“No,” he mumbled, shaking his head in jerks and nods, “nosh here. M’place. Show youse.”

I stared at him dubiously. Crackers maybe, but he didn’t appear to be a pervert—of course you never knew. But, I figured I could take him if he decided to get frisky--and besides, my curiosity was getting the better of me.

“OK, Pal, lead on,” I said, despite the better judgment that was howling in my ear like a turbovac. “And don’t forget—you still owe me a drink.”

Glenn’s apartment off the light towers of Canal Street was pretty much what I’d expected—everything had its place and was in its place--and I mean everything. His soulless five by five by five-meter cube was scrubbed like a chip manufacturer’s clean room, his retro aluminum-legged chairs and couches glimmered in even, carefully spaced intervals. An older model holovision set squatted in the corner, an idol of cleanliness; a rack of books and holo-vids stood title-order on a plain chromium bookstand like soldiers at inspection. His kitchen compartment was as spotless as an albino Dalmatian—no dirty dishes, no visible clutter, no sign of food. Point of fact, he didn’t have much in the way of gemcrackies to clutter anywhere—but then I didn’t give a hot buttered damn. I was too busy staring at the contrivance that had motored smack dab into the middle of Glenn’s living room.

It looked, no fooling, like a giant aluminum horseshoe crab, an inverted salad bowl with two extended front pinchers and a whipping vacuum hose for a tail. Mirrored solar panels scaled its hide, and digital sensors glowed crimson from its “face”, like the eyes of some otherworldly creature in a B-grade Sci-Fi holovid. It trundled across the floor on tiny rubber wheels, and seemed capable of going anywhere that didn’t require climbing or stepping. But the down and dirty that really set my head to spinning, the thing that had me wishing that I were back in O’Nelly’s with an empty tumbler and a spreading whiskey sour stain on my crotch, was the considerable menace implied by the damned thing’s pincher arms. Thinly-rodged and intricately jointed, the Janibot’s appendages were designed to flex, thrust and grasp without the assistance of pulleys or cables or mechanical muscles. And as it clicked and clacked those horrible claws, as it crouched at my feet expectantly and regarded me with its red glowing eyes--I began to feel very much like even O’Nelly’s might be too close, and that a better wish-destination might be a pub somewhere in, say, Australia.

Shrinking back, I had just about decided to pound out a hasty retreat, when, with a lightening quick whish of its pincher claw, it reached out and whisked away a piece of lint from my pants leg.

I shrieked; my heart did trampoline jumps in my chest; I climbed air on my way to the ceiling. Clutching the lint, the robot withdrew: a mechanical tiger with a dust mote antelope haunch fixed in its jaw, its red sensor eyes glowing with satisfaction.

“Jesus,” I asked, lighting a cigar with a shaky hand, “What the Hell is that...that...*thing*?”

“Thash, Lou,” hiccupped Glenn, as proud as a new father with triplets and a million dollar bank account, “ish a Jani (hic) pot.”

And so, emboldened by my yelp, Glenn proceeded to yak out his life story and the origins of the *Janibot*. He told me that he was an engineer (mechanical, electrical, computer—you name it, the man was a certified frickin’ genius) who, for several years, had been employed by Computoprod, the giant chip manufacturer. In his spare time, Glenn had tinkered, and his tinkering had paid off in the creation of the *Janibot*.

Now the *Janibot* is exactly what its name implies—an electronic, computer driven device designed expressly for home and office cleaning. And yeah, I know, the automated machine is not a new concept, but at the time, the *Janibot* was something entirely, completely, and labor-savingsly different. Its unique features included the use of electromagnetic energy to act as “muscles” to power its pincher arms—which could do almost everything a human hand and arm could do without having to rely on bulky pulleys or mechanics—solar power as an inexhaustible source of energy, and, a tiny, super powerful computer-micro processor that gave the *Janibot* the ability to “think.” Perhaps “think” is too strong a word—but only just. A fully equipped *Janibot* was endowed, as I was to discover, with an almost cognitive sense of reason. It could literally anticipate dirt, disorder—or as Glenn would put it, chaos--then adjust its routine to respond accordingly.

Anyway, when Computoprod went belly up in the corporation crisis of 2055, Glenn had been left without a job. And though Glenn had what he knew to be a billion—or perhaps even trillion dollar idea in the *Janibot*—he was also savvy enough to glean the potential pitfalls of playing patty-cake with cutthroat financial and corporate types. Nearly broke, sans rent money, Glenn had retreated to the sour-smelling comfort of O’Nelly’s to consider his options, and as it turned out, to rattle the ears of yours truly.

So I listened, chain smoking and flicking cigar ash (which the *Janibot* dutifully vacuumed with a quick swish of its tail) and nodding to Glenn as he spilled out his guts. And all the while my mind was working the angles, doing the math, and calculating the profits with my mental cash register—and brother, the numbers I ran. But Glennard, I knew, was a cliché by Barnum. God’s own sucker, he was virtue walking: Sir Galahad with a laptop in lieu of a lance--and I had no doubt that the corporate piranhas would gobble him up for a noontime snack, spit out what was left, and then grind up his bones for fertilizer. Clearly, Glenn needed protection and more than a little help. So I, in a sudden burst of altruism, offered to be his partner.

Wisely Glenn, who had passed out five minutes earlier, accepted...