

ROBERT REED

Robert Reed [info site: www.booksnbytes.com/authors/reed_robert.html] is the only major SF writer who lives in Nebraska. He has been one of the most prolific short story writers of high quality in the SF field for the past sixteen years, with more than one hundred twenty-five SF, fantasy, and horror stories published, and seems, if anything, only to have gotten better in 2004. He has published a novel every couple of years as well. His work is notable for its variety, and for his steady production. His first story collection, *The Dragons of Springplace* (1999), fine as it is, skims only a bit of the cream from his body of work. *Marrow* (2000), a distant future large-scale hard SF story, seems to have been a breakthrough in his career. *Sister Alice* (2003), his next novel, and *The Well of Stars* (2005), a sequel to *Marrow*, are far-future large-scale works. His next collection, *The Cuckoo's Boys*, is out in 2005. He published at least four other stories in 2004 ("A Plague of Life," "A Change of Mind," "Opal Ball," "Mere"), which we consider good enough to have been in this book, and a fantasy by him, "The Dragons of Summer Gulch," appears in our companion Year's Best Fantasy 4.

"Wealth" was published in Asimov's, which printed a lot of fine SF and fantasy this year, but lost its distinguished and colorful editor, Gardner R. Dozois. Dozois' successor, Sheila Williams, carries on. This is a story about an AI buying real estate on Mars. But the house for sale has/is an AI too.

One of the biogenesis trillionaires acquired the land, then, with considerable fanfare, built the mansion, and for a moment or two, there was no more famous address in the solar system. An artful array of hemispheres stood on the edge of the wide basin. Woven from cultured diamond, the structures had both strength and a mathematical beauty, and, in the Martian sunshine, they glowed with a charming ruddy light. A larger, less obtrusive dome formed a soaring roof over the entire basin, allowing the maintenance of an enhanced atmosphere. In principle, the trillionaire had resurrected a world that hadn't existed for three billion years. Precious aquifer water was pumped into the basin, creating a deep saline lake that was allowed to freeze over to a depth of several meters. Fission batteries powered hot springs that fed the tiny streams that opened up little patches of ice along the rocky shoreline. Then a variety of tailored microbes were introduced, each carefully modeled after Martian fossils, and it was that chill prehistoric scene that wowed guests and the invited media as well as a distant and utterly envious public.

But any man's fortune can prove as frail as that long-ago Martian summer. A skiing accident on Olympus Mons killed the trillionaire before his hundredth Earth-year. Competing heirs and endless tax troubles soon divided his fortune into many little wedges. His youngest daughter ended up with the mansion, living inside it whenever she wasn't traveling to distant enclaves dedicated to the nearly wealthy.

And all the while, Mars was being remade. The icecaps were melted, the old northern sea was reborn, a serviceable atmosphere was cultured from comet bones, and, after another century, there was no Mars anymore, just a small and chilled and very muddy version of the Earth. No longer needed, the overhead dome was dismantled. The icy lake melted and evaporated until nothing remained but a smelly blue-gray marsh. Then the daughter, in her twelfth decade, found herself broke. To raise capital, she sold the surrounding lands in a piecemeal fashion. The marsh was drained and developed, a little city erupting on her doorstep. Eventually, she owned nothing but the old mansion and the surrounding hectares, and when she died, still broke, her property was sold to a series of unrelated owners, each endowed with energy and limited means and precious little aesthetic taste.

The original structure has been severely, brutally remodeled. A glance tells as much, while the careful stare reveals scars left behind by a parade of robot slaves and human craftsmen, nations of nanofabricators, and at least one clumsy slathering of smart-gels. The diamond hemispheres have been stained to a deeper red and then punctured in dozens of places. Windows have been added. The original

Wealth

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watch while the portico is crushed into an artful pile of slag. I barely defeat my temptation.

Past the dilating doorway waits an empty room. Spiraling stairs lead upward. Flanking doors lead into other equally empty rooms. From the feel of the place, it is obvious: No one lives here now. But little voices and tiny motions betray the presence of visitors. Which is only reasonable, since this is the first and only day when the old mansion will let itself be placed on public display. I absorb voices, motions. Quietly, I pass through a series of increasingly spacious rooms. The floors are covered with cultured woods and living—if rather decrepit—rugs. Not a

stick of furniture is visible, but indifferent cleaning and constant wear show where heavy chair legs stood for years. Where the first dome ends, I can peer into the neighboring dome—a single chamber encompassing a lake-sized tank meant for swimming humans or pet dolphins, or emancipated dolphins, perhaps. But the pond has been drained, and, judging by the black dust in the bottom, it has been empty for some time. The loudest voices come from a third dome, and I retreat to follow them, passing into what must be a kitchen.

Meals have been prepared here: Organic feasts, and, later, other elaborately flavored energies. Two figures stand beside a laser oven. One of

them is traditionally human, but with an AI add-on. “I just wanted to look around,” he confesses. Then, flashing a bright smile, he admits, “I live out on the bottoms, and I’ve always been curious. The owner...I never actually spoke with him...but I meant to, and then, all at once, just the other day...he was gone. No warning. And this morning, I saw that the house is being offered....”

“Yes,” says the other figure. “I am for sale.”

She is for sale. What I see only appears human, out of convention or some deeply buried wetware, or perhaps because the house thinks it helps its own prospects if it resembles a handsome human woman on the brink of

menopause. Bright dark eyes glance at me and then return to the man in front of her. But other eyes continue to study me, from a wide array of vantage points, just as they have watched me for the last little minute.

“All at once,” the neighbor repeats. “What I heard...I heard your owner got himself into a little trouble....”

The house wears a lean face, a charming nest of wrinkles gathered beside her human eyes.

“Legal problems,” the neighbor claims. “From what I’ve heard, your owner’s moving out to the Kuiper belt, which means weeks of travel before legal services—”

“I am for sale,” she repeats.

The neighbor stands alone, suddenly ignored.

The house appears before me. Her smile is meant to be calm but friendly, warm but not too effusive. She knows what I am, who I am. She says one of my names with a measured fondness, adding, “Welcome, good sir. And if you have any questions—”

“I have questions,” the neighbor complains.

“About my history. My importance. My potentials.” She breathes the air in which I stood just a moment ago, and she smiles, and the wrinkles on her illusionary flesh realign themselves—a delicate detail that only someone such as myself would notice, much less

appreciate. The pattern is fractal. A soothing mathematics is on display. “For the right owner,” she maintains, “I could serve quite nicely.”

I have no doubts about that.

The neighbor approaches us. Me. He stares at what passes for my face, his artificial intelligence finally fixing an identity to me.

“Wealth,” the man mutters, which is my surname.

Then his legs collapse beneath him, and he grabs himself around his gasping chest, muttering, “Holy shit!”

with a pained yet joyous amazement.

Wealth has been as simple as a keg of wine and the roasted limbs of a dozen fattened lambs, and from that plentitude,

a wondrous feast would spring. Wealth has been a forest of oil derricks pumping the black blood out of the Earth, leaky pipes and noisy trucks delivering the treasure to a coughing, poisoned public. Wealth has meant being a king descended from the gods. Wealth has been an empire springing from AI software that is three weeks more advanced than any other. Wealth has been fragile. But life, on the other hand, has always been a persistent constant, relentless and enduring. Eventually, everyone owns their own keg of wine, and the black blood runs dry, and there are no gods in anyone's sky, and the software that had a death grip on the economic breath of a dozen worlds is

suddenly found wanting. But life breathes and times change, and what was the spectacular fortune has been whittled away, and everything that remains appears smaller and a little drab against the relentlessly swelling worth of All. I am Wealth, but I am Life, too.

The neighbor man claims, "This is such an honor!" and then finds the strength to stand again. Blinking away tears, he adds, "Thank you."

"It is my pleasure," I reply.

He turns to the house, explaining, "My income...a fat part of it, at least...it comes straight from him...!"

"I believe you," she says.

I have enough life in me to feel warmed by praise, no matter how trivial.

But I've come here for a purpose, and this seems like the best moment to ask, "What is your listed price?"

She blurts it.

I nod, offering no comment. But my face grows smoother, my gaze much more distant now.

"A great price!" the neighbor declares. "Damn, the owner...the poor bastard...he must be desperate!"

Fleeing to the edge of civilization is the act of a desperate man. Asking for a pittance for your left-behind home is sloppy and rude, and it is foolish, and it makes me a little sad. Has my interest lagged? The house gazes at my face and my temporary body, and, after some consideration, she says, "Please look

around. Absorb and imagine. Just the history of this mansion makes a tour worthwhile.”

Agreed.

“You know,” the neighbor trumpets, “I’m almost tempted to make an offer.”

Neither of us responds.

Then, with a louder, more insistent voice, he adds, “It’s really a lovely old house. I think so, at least.”

The house knows what she is, and a wounded, embarrassed look twists her face. Quietly, I tell the man, “You can’t afford the asking price.”

His face stiffens.

“In fact,” I add, “in another six cycles, you’ll be hard pressed to make the rent payments on your own little house.”

“What—?”

With a gesture, I produce a set of simple, durable projections showing his spending trends and income possibilities.

He flinches, asking, “How do you know that?”

“Because when you were a newborn, your maternal grandfather gave me a tidy sum,” I explain. “The sum was attached to your name, and, as instructed, I nourished it for him, and then for you. But eighteen Martian years ago, you began siphoning off the profits. Which was your right, of course. And last year, you reduced the principal by a third. Which was your privilege, and I would never say, ‘No.’ Yet any busy mind can

look at the public records, making inferences, and while I can't see everything about you or your spending patterns..." I hesitate, just for an instant. Then with a calm, cold voice, I tell him, "In another year, you will be broke."

"No," he rumbles.

I turn back to the house. "Yes, I think I will look about."

She says, "Good."

"No," the man cries out again. But he has no reason to debate, and he knows it. With a sob, he asks,

"What can I do?"

I tell him. In clear, unalloyed terms, I spell out the considerable failures of his tiny life. Two drug habits must be controlled. Travel is a needless expense

when immersion rooms are cheap. Cultured food is more nourishing than the fare grown in hydroponics tanks. One undemanding sexual partner is cheaper than three demanding ones, and, with a wink, I add, “A greased hand and your own mind is cheaper still, if you know what I mean.”

Quietly, fiercely, the man says, “Bastard.”

If he means me, then it is an inaccurate statement.

After some determined stomping and growling, he storms away. The house smiles as he hurries out through the ugly portico. And then she turns back to me, and, with a genuinely caring tone, she asks, “Do you think he’ll take your

advice?”

“About investments, I am wise”; I purr. “About the human mind, I fear, I’m a hopeless incompetent.”

For generations, humans argued about machines thinking: Was it even possible, and, if so, when and how would we become sentient? According to most of the optimistic, self-proclaimed experts, the first artificial souls would be cultured by the military or by the more exotic and demanding sciences. But arms and knowledge have never been central to human affairs. Above all else, money is what matters. Long ago, mutual funds and the great stock markets of the Earth were shepherded by complex tangles of software and then wetware. Cash, both

electronic and paper, gradually acquired the hallmarks of identity: Individual names and personal histories, plus a crude desire to survive. Just tagging the money to keep it from being lost, whether inside a sofa or some despot's hypervault, was a critical leap. When money genuinely talks, the voices that prove more effective and vigorous tend to prosper—a multitude of selection forces brought to bear on knots of code as well as slips of parchment wearing the faces of dead presidents.

I am the merger of money and mutual fund wetwares.

A bastard has no legal father, but I enjoyed a trillion fathers and one lovely mother housed inside a Jupiter-grade

server living inside an air-conditioned building in Old New Jersey. In a rude sense, the purpose of a human is to eat and make babies. While the purpose of Wealth—my purpose and that of my brethren—is to embrace capital and then nourish it. No man or woman, trillionaire or not, possesses my clear, unbiased view of the future. When I was a young soul, small but brazen, I thrived by making predictions about the movements of capital from moment to moment. Later, I won notice by guessing which of three competing propulsion designs would power the first probe to Alpha Centauri, buying the appropriate stock, and then selling the bulk of my holdings just before the project was

canceled. Then, when the AIs of the world were to be emancipated, I saw an array of possibilities. When I was no longer anyone's slave, I purchased my mother as well as the outdated, overpriced corporation that had owned her, and, with the power of a free soul, I gave her wetware and high-functions, transforming her from a simple chain of computers into a self-aware, self-respecting entity. With bitter voices and snarling attorneys, my megabillionaire clients accused me of being sentimental. It was an accusation with a nugget of truth, but that was far from the point. A few complainers tried to withdraw their funds. With a voice drenched in fiduciary terms, I reminded them that I

was not a bank account or a stack of dusty bonds. I was a soul who happened to control enough wealth to build a fat nation. For good reasons, I said, “I won’t give you a copper penny now.” Without any legal standing, I said, “Sign these forms and send them to my central office, and in another week, if you are still willing, I’ll honor your stupidity.”

My clients threatened me, and their lawyers threatened me, and a few even hired thugs to attempt some kind of viral thievery.

But, in the end, they loved me.

My mother’s purchase and my kindness toward her caught the gaze of millions of newly freed entities. AIs designed for science and for security,

weather prediction and limousine driving, liked what they saw and gave me whatever pennies they could spare. And in a single afternoon, my value doubled. Life endures.

I am still growing, and along a few important tangents, I continue to gain experience and a measure of wisdom. Being individuals, each Wealth cultivates a different strength. My greatest capacity is to peer into the future, whether it is next year or some era unborn, and, with a clear, unsentimental eye, I wager my golden blood on targets that perhaps no one else can see. Other neighbors are touring the old house. One is a blended woman—part chimpanzee, part add-on—who

dresses like a human and talks like a snob. “This isn’t much of a bathroom,” she complains, her broad apish back turned to me. “The fixtures. The stains. And have you ever seen counters as low as this?”

“It was a child’s bathroom,” I offer. “That’s why they’re low.”

Something about my voice alerts her or her add-on AI. One of them turns the other, both staring at me with a mixture of astonishment, awe, and some less pretty emotions.

“No,” she blurts. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“You aren’t,” she complains. Then she steps up to me, sure enough about my falsity that she can poke me in the chest.

“What kind of game are you?”

“A game that wins,” I reply. Then in one long and smooth and utterly convincing sentence, I tell her what her name is and what her net worth is and where she lives and what she pays for rent, and before she can react, I describe the very sorry state of affairs inside her own tiny bathroom.

“How do you know that?” she sputters. “Even if you are who you claim to be, you shouldn’t know about the insides of my house. And certainly not that my toilet smells!”

“But I should know,” I growl. “If I am your landlord, I should.”

The fur on her shoulders and back lifts high. But her instincts are submerged by

a little good sense and the add-on's tempering touch. She backs away, exiting from the room by a second doorway. And I spend a moment or two regarding myself inside a mirror of diamond lain over silver—a design popular when the gemstone was first cultured en masse, creating a tool of self-appraisal too stubborn to wear out and too simple to ever grow obsolete.

In a high room, near the top of the main dome, a plain flat photograph hangs above a mock fireplace. One item is ridiculous—the burning of gas or logs is strictly prohibited on Mars—but the other has a charm of its own. Taken not long after the mansion was first built, the photograph shows the mansion from the

old lake shore, the various interlocking domes practically glowing beneath a high sky that was cold enough to burn and empty enough to suck the life out of unprotected flesh.

“Do you like this image?” asks the house.

Again, she speaks through the middle-aged body and an easy, slightly worried smile. I smile back at her, remarking, “Very much, yes.”

“I didn’t know.”

I ask, “What didn’t you know?”

“That you have a taste for history.”

I have a taste for everything, because everything impacts on my life and the lives of my billions of happy clients. One of my talents allows me to read the

house's face, and I know to say nothing now. Just let the silence speak for me.

“Are you really interested?” she inquires.

“In the past?”

“In me.” Her worry pushes forward, growing into a warm despair. “I know what you are. You never go anywhere, in a physical form, unless you have a compelling reason—”

“I am,” I interrupt. “In you, yes. I am interested.”

Now she tries silence.

I look at the photography again, paying closest attention to the frozen lake in the foreground.

“What will you pay for me?” The question bursts out of her, followed by

the simple confession, “My owner left me with full discretion. I am free to make the best possible deal in the shortest period of time.”

She is not legally sentient. Since sentience is defined legally, it is relatively easy to give common objects enough mental power and personality to perch on the edge of what should be free. I feel sorry for her.

But in the same moment, I hold fast to my own needs. Quietly and firmly, I tell her my bid for her land and buildings, the worn-out rugs, and this single old photograph of a once-grand palace. She steps back, startled.

“No,” she says.

Then with a low gasp, she adds, “I

must have heard you wrong. What's your offer again?"

I lift my temporary hand, curling one finger against the base of my thumb.

"A piece of copper," I say. "This big. With a face on one side and columns on the other."

She looks stunned, and frightened.

"A penny," I say. "That's the ancient name for the coin."

And suddenly, I am alone again, standing before the abomination of a fireplace that has probably never burned so much as a molecule, and that image of a great home lost to the ages. More visitors tour the house, and most eventually find me. Awkward silences are as common as effusive praise. A few

beg for the chance to be photographed standing beside me. One of the visitors—an AI child, as it happens—smiles hopefully at me, asking, “Are you going to live here?”

“That’s not a very reasonable question,” his parent warns. “Wealth doesn’t live inside houses.”

“ ‘Wealth lives everywhere,’ ” he quotes.

“Exactly,” says the parent.

Then the child turns back to me, wondering aloud, “Will you live everywhere and in here, too?”

I laugh, quietly and happily.

Then I wander down to the ground floor again, eventually finding a simple drop-tube that takes me into the

basement. The stink of earthly molds and fossil water fills what passes for my nose. The foundation is unexpectedly ornate: Blocks of carved basalt, each exposed face decorated with magnified cross sections of ancient bacteria, the Martian DNA using its own language to weave together an array of odd amino acids. Time and the shifting ground have made little fissures at the joints. Otherwise, the old home rests on a sturdy, masterly base.

In one corner of the basement, between empty emergency tanks of oxygen, hides an ancient staircase cut from the native stone, plunging even deeper underground. Intrigued, I follow.

Down, and down, and then, after a

brief hallway, the stairs take me down into a little room surrounded by a fierce warmth. One wall is a diamond pane, and behind the wall are a fission battery and a fractured zone where water is heated to near boiling, slow chemical reactions feeding a multitude of patient organisms that look to the eye like a simple colorless gel.

“He would come down here just to watch his bugs,” I hear. The house has conjured up the woman again. A wronged, somewhat bitter woman this time. But she attempts to sound polite, explaining, “He built these species himself, you probably know. It was a hobby. Really, he was fascinated by the ancient Mars.”

“I am too,” I say.

She nods, and waits.

After a long silence, and with some difficulty, she asks, “Did you really mean that? A penny for all of me?”

I show her the copper coin.

“Why would I ever...?” She hesitates.

“Wait. You’re offering more than money, aren’t you?”

“I will never sell you,” I promise.

She doesn’t know what to say.

“I intend to hold you for the long term,” I explain. “As part of a much larger, much more ambitious investment.”

“I see.”

“You don’t,” I warn. Then I look at her fractal-rich face and the sad,

worried eyes, asking, “Do you ever wonder? What kinds of life would have evolved on Mars, if this world had remained warm and alive?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I’ve tried to picture it, yes.”

“Yet nobody knows,” I add. Then with my empty hand, I touch the warm face of the diamond, confessing, “I own some of the nearby houses.”

“In the bottoms?” she guesses.

“And in every other part of Mars,” I tell her. “ ‘Nearby’ means the world, and I own many of the key businesses and industries, and I have a significant interest in corporations and commercial-nations that are essential to the Martian economy.”

She says nothing.

“In a little while, I will empty Mars.”

She shudders.

“ ‘In a little while’ means within the next two or three thousand years,” I explain. “And I’ll do it gently, with a minimum of disruption. Of course, this world has never been essential to the solar system, and it won’t be seriously missed. I’ll keep everything warm and wet, and after another five or ten thousand years, I doubt if any sentient soul will give this place more than a glancing look. And in another million years, or a billion...however long it takes...a fresh and unique and lovely biosphere will arise, stepping out into a universe ready for something new....”

She shudders.

Weakly, she asks, “Me?”

“I will not sell you, and I will keep you well-maintained, and whenever I visit Mars, this is where I will stay.”

“In my rooms?”

“In this room,” I offer.

She almost surrenders. Almost. But then with a tight little laugh, she says, “No. I want more than just a penny.”

“How much more?”

“Two pennies.”

With a flourish, I bring a second coin out of hiding. But before I hand it to the house, making the deal final, I warn her, “But you cannot tell anyone. That you bargained for double my initial offering....”

She snatches up both of the slips of copper.

Then, for another long while, we watch creatures too small to have names or souls, watch them fiercely going about the relentless business of life.