

Farewell Dinner

by Jakob Drud

Jakob Drud lives in Aarhus, Denmark with his wife and two kids. They have—in their own sweet way—managed to transform him from a novelist into a short story writer. But someday he will write the expansive science fiction trilogy he has outlined in his head. His stories have appeared in Alienskin Magazine, The Fifth Di, and OG’s Speculative Fiction.

Home is never the same after Mom dies, especially not in this story.

Visiting Dad entailed a journey that André dreaded: from the ordered lawns and brick edifices of the Chicago Technical Institute into a landscape of shoddy res-blocks erected to re-house refugees from the flooded coastal regions.

So dismal was the land that even the graffiti-removal robots sported tags. And the elevator in Dad’s res-block had taken new beatings from clubs in the six or seven months since André last stopped by. The bent wall panels rattled as the elevator rose, accompanied by a soft female voice from hidden speakers assuring him that a luxury apartment could be his, too. The dishonesty almost made him turn tail, but Dad had to get the news tonight. Mars would not wait.

The door opened on tenth to let a ray of hope for humanity’s future into the elevator: light from the Martian-invented bio-illumination panels. André shuffled out into the concrete hallway. Five doors to the right of the elevator the usual piece of cardboard announced the residence of Jorge Anderson. A crudely stenciled metal sign with the name ‘Merita’ had joined Dad’s nameplate, and a closer look at the cardboard revealed that someone had crossed out ‘Bjornfeldt’ with a black marker. Dad had taken that middle name from Mom, and André felt a sting of annoyance that Merita had pushed Mom away so fast. Dad couldn’t have known her more than a few months.

He composed himself and rang the bell. A moment later the door creaked open, revealing Dad and the one-room res inside. Both looked cleaner and cheerier than André remembered them, a sight to feed his faint hope that Dad would be able to deal with the news.

They shook hands in the formal manner they had adopted since Mom died, and Dad said, “Come on in. “ After a pause where both admired their shoes he added, “Merita’s waiting with the dinner.”

Except for an uncanny neatness the main room revealed no trace of Mom’s replacement. Only when André saw her through the doorway to the small cooking-alcove that the res-block builders called a spacious kitchen did he sigh with a mix of disappointment and relief. Merita was simply a Jones-Corporation home-assistant robot. From commercials he recognized the ‘full female design’ model, whose womanly illusion was marred only by ungainly metal joints covered in rubber veneer.

Merita came to the door, a cold gaze observed him from her plastic face.

“Good-evening, André. Your father didn’t teach you to take off your shoes, I see. But don’t you worry about the floor, I’ll clean that later. Now we eat.”

André composed himself. He must give her a chance, if only because Dad had smiled on the gridcam when he first mentioned her. In the five years since Mom died, it had been more in character for him to let André string the silences together with hollow pleasantries. This more than anything had led to their estrangement over the last couple of years.

“Merita’s shopped at the market,” Dad said, his considerable pride apparent as he took a bowl of potatoes to the foldable table at the end wall of the res. For the first time ever a tablecloth adorned the surface, a deep indigo cotton weave that complemented Mom’s dark oak chairs. He hung his jacket on the back of one chair and sat down while Dad got a bottle from Mom’s oak cupboard, the only other piece of non-plastic furniture in the res. “Look what she found. Real wine.”

“What? You’re into that red piss now?” André said, genuinely surprised. If he and Dad agreed on anything it was that a good beer beat wine seven days of the week and damn the snob who said otherwise.

Dad didn’t laugh, though. “No, I..well, I’ll get you a Carlsberg.” He stood up.

“My cooking deserves a bottle of good Bordeaux,” Merita said from the kitchen. Incredibly, Dad sat back down when she spoke, rubbed his palms on his jeans, and then poured wine in the two glasses.

Merita set two dishes of vegetables and a leg of lamb on the table. A carving knife slid into her hand from a canister in her arm, and to the tune of slight whirrs from her servos she sliced off two servings of meat. With all the skill of a Cordon Bleu chef she arranged them on each plate with a selection of delicious-looking steamed vegetables, before withdrawing to the kitchen door. “Eat.”

Despite the clatter of forks and knives, silence descended over the table; not quite tense, not quite awkward, only strikingly familiar. André had only recently realized how well Mom had tied the family together. Now that she was gone her special glue had dissolved. Glancing at Merita he wondered if she would have had the same effect on their relationship. But that was too much to hope for; she wasn’t Mom. But perhaps she could cushion the news he had for Dad.

“You graduated, didn’t you?” Dad asked between bites. “Two weeks ago?”

“Yes,” André said. “Got my best marks in a project about nano-coating in hostile environments.”

“Congratulations.” Dad topped off their glasses and raised his own in a sluggish up-and-down movement. “Why didn’t you call?”

A typical Dad statement. He sure knew how to get those barbs of guilt in, sneaked in with a voice of loneliness that trumped any rational thinking, as if André was all that stood between Jorge Anderson and infinite solitude.

“Dad, please forget that right now. There’s something I need to tell you. You know how much they need technical experts on Mars?”

From the kitchen door Merita said, “Don’t you boys mind me at all. You just leave me right out of the conversation where I belong, ok?”

A fine, barely audible stutter from her speakers shattered the illusion of a natural voice. For the first time that night André noted how Dad seemed to shrink; his