

Machine of Death 2: PROFOUND INTERPERSONAL CONNECTION

by C. Liam Brown

Note: This story will make little sense to the reader outside of its intended context, which is a collection of short stories called Machine of Death. You may wish to visit their website, machineofdeath.net, before reading this story.

“What does it *mean*?”

Elizabeth was standing in the center of the room. Her body was all hard angles, elbows strung with taught wire and thin, arched shoulders. Her left hand clutched at her waist, and in her right she held a small piece of paper between dark-painted fingernails. She shook the paper at him menacingly as she waited for an answer.

Mario was staring at her jeans. He thought of how he had come home and lain his head on the warmth of her lap, becoming momentarily distracted by the fragile scent of her clothes, before telling her that he'd consulted the machine.

“Are you even listening? What does it *mean*?” she demanded again.

He looked up and saw that her eyes had lost all their kindness, that anger had once again clouded her vision until she saw him only as some menacing stranger.

His eyes drifted to the paper in her hand. He considered her question, and then he began to laugh, knowing even as the sound escaped his lips that it would only stoke her fury. He felt a secret delight as he watched its effect.

“This is *funny*?” she asked, almost breathless. “This is one of your stupid *jokes*?”

His smile dimmed, and he thought he saw a minor hint of triumph in her eyes. He sighed. He hadn't expected this to become another battle.

“No,” he said. “This isn't a joke.”

“Then why are you laughing? And,” she glanced at the paper again, “what the hell does this mean?”

“Well, you see, that's the funny part.”

She stared at the text. It was large, and bold, and written in capital letters. It declared, in a voice that was hollow, passionless, and booming:

PROFOUND INTERPERSONAL CONNECTION

She threw the paper towards him. It fluttered comically to the ground. She crossed her arms, shifted her weight on her legs, and took another deep breath, as if trying to summon up as much righteous indignation as she could.

“We both agreed not to get tested,” she said.

He leaned back on the couch and squirmed with guilt. “I changed my mind.”

“Without even asking me?”

“It’s *my* death. I don’t see why I shouldn’t be allowed to make that decision.”

“Oh, yeah.” She nodded, her ponytail bouncing in time. “You obviously thought this through.”

“I offered not to show it to you.”

She rolled her eyes, then glared at him again.

“You’ve broken a promise to me,” she said.

“Neither of us promised anything! We just agreed that it was a bad idea.”

“And then you changed your mind.”

“Yes.” He shrugged.

She pushed one finger to her temple.

“What does it even mean, anyway?” she asked in a weary voice. “Is this supposed to have something to do with me?”

“Honestly, at this point, I’m starting to doubt it.”

For the first time that day, he believed the hurt in her eyes.

“Do you know what it means?” Nick asked, holding the paper under the dim lamp hanging over the pool table and inspecting it as though he could will it to reveal some

new piece of information. Tiffany pulled on his arm to get a look. When she finally read the text, she snorted once and then turned around to line up her next shot.

“No,” said Mario, taking the slip back. “I was hoping one of you would.”

“Of course we don’t,” Tiffany said as her ball bounced off the edge of the pocket and back towards her. “Nobody ever does. That’s probably the point.”

“Some are more specific,” said Mario.

“Why’d you do it?” asked Nick.

Tiffany leaned against the table with the cue in her hands. “Maybe you’ll be in a mine and grab onto somebody’s arm while they’re being electrocuted,” she said.

Mario laughed half-heartedly.

“Why’d you do it, anyway?” Nick repeated.

“I don’t know. Liz says it’s dangerous to get a reading. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that not getting tested would mean consciously depriving myself of knowledge. Important knowledge.”

Nick was already taking his shot at pool. Mario supposed that Nick hadn’t heard most of what he’d said over the noise of the bar – the endless babble of conversations, each straining to be heard over the loud, shitty 80s music.

“She was pissed off, huh?” asked Tiffany.

Mario nodded. “And the whole time, the worst part was that I felt like she was never going to understand why I did it.”

“I’m not sure *I* understand why you did it,” said Nick, coming back towards them.

“Right,” Mario said absently.

“I guess everyone gets curious,” said Tiffany. “But most people realize it’s a waste of time.”

Mario shrugged again and took a drink. For the first time that night, he noticed that the beer tasted like rancid grains in the back of his throat. He swallowed quickly, then looked down in disgust at the frothy, urine-coloured drink in the glass.

Tiffany bent over the table again. Mario saw Nick staring down Tiffany’s shirt and tried to ignore it.

“I’m thinking of going out of town this weekend,” Mario said, to nobody in

particular.

“With Liz?” asked Tiffany.

“No.”

“Where to?” Nick asked, suddenly interested.

“I don’t know. Out camping or something. I want to get out of the city.”

“Shit, me too. But I’ve got to work.”

“What about you?” Mario asked Tiffany.

“Sorry, I’ve got plans. Besides, what if we got along too well? It could kill you.”

Nick laughed, but Mario didn’t respond.

Mario heard the dog coming before it burst out of the brush, a blur of black and brown. He shouted and fell backwards onto his pack, tensing as the animal leapt at him, expecting it to tear into his raised arm with its teeth. Instead, it stopped with one paw laid almost gently on his stomach, sniffed at his face, and licked the hand with which Mario had been about to push it away.

Then he heard a whistle coming from somewhere in the trees. The dog snapped its head in the direction of the sound, paused for a moment in an alert posture, and bounded away again.

Mario pulled his arms out of the straps and stood up. After a few moments, the dog returned, followed this time by a man.

He was somewhere between forty and eighty years old. He wore faded blue jeans with a small tear in the right knee and a similarly faded jean jacket over a dark red t-shirt. Though he was thin, something about his bearing suggested an ability to split firewood in two with one easy swing of an axe. His small, sun-lined eyes looked out from beneath the brim of a baseball cap, and a white and yellow moustache hung over most of the bottom half of his face. Mario couldn’t tell if he was smiling.

“Hello,” said the man. His voice was gruff but soft.

“Hi,” Mario answered uncertainly.

The dog came trotting back to his feet and stopped to sniff at his shoes. It was a mutt, with a caramel patch over one eye and streaks of brown and grey through the rest of its fur. Its tail, which curled up over its back, was wagging.

“Do dogs bother you?” asked the man.

“No, not at all.” Mario leaned down to scratch it behind the ears, and it immediately nuzzled its face firmly into his shin.

“Sounded like he caught you off-guard.”

“I was just surprised. I didn’t know what it was.”

The man nodded and waited patiently for Mario to stop patting the dog. Eventually, it leaned back to stretch its front legs, then wandered off towards a nearby tree.

“Well, are you ready to go?” asked the man as Mario stood up straight.

“Excuse me?”

The man gave a slight frown.

“Are you Mario?”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Yes,” he answered hesitantly.

The man nodded gingerly and looked out into the trees.

“You’ve been reported as missing. We assumed you were lost.”

“But I’ve only been gone two days.”

The man didn’t answer.

“Who reported me missing?”

The man shook his head. “I just work at the park.”

“This is bizarre.”

“So you’re not lost?”

“No, I’ve got a GPS app on my phone.”

The man nodded a bit more slowly, and then his eyes took on a new shape. This time, he was definitely smiling.

“Usually,” he said, “people are a lot happier to see me.”

He could clearly imagine Elizabeth pacing in her living room, holding her phone to her ear and waiting for him to pick up. She had probably tried him at least seven times, but there was no signal in the forest. Then she would have called Nick, who would have told her that Mario had gone camping for the weekend. And Nick didn't know that Mario had taken Monday off work. She was the one who had reported him missing – Mario was certain of it.

He stood there shaking his head and wondering what to do. He knew he wasn't far from the main trail, but the sun was getting low. He'd been planning to pitch his tent soon and head home in the morning.

“Ok, well, I'm going to sleep out here tonight, like I planned. I'll check in with the police tomorrow. But thanks for finding me, I guess.”

The man said, “I'll have to stay with you.”

“What?”

“Sorry. You're an official missing person. I'm supposed to make sure you get back.”

“Oh, no, I'm fine,” Mario insisted. “I've got lots of battery left.” He held up his phone.

“If you did get lost...”

Mario considered it for a moment. “Right,” he said finally. He looked up at the sky. “Well, I do think it's too late to head back tonight, anyway.”

The man nodded again. “C'mon,” he said under his breath, patting his leg. The dog followed him into the trees. Mario stood for a moment, baffled, then shrugged and began looking around for a good spot for his tent. After a few minutes, the man returned carrying a bundle of dead wood. He tossed it to the ground next to a clear patch of dirt and walked away again without speaking.

The fire was already strong by the time the sun began to fall below the horizon; its confident flames softened the lengthening shadows cast by the trees around them. Mario sat on the ground with his knees up. The man crouched near the fire, staring into it with a level gaze. Finally, satisfied that the blaze could make it on its own, he sat down

on a big fallen log. The dog, which had been lying nearby, looked alarmed and stood up, then stepped over to the man and placed its head on the man's boot. The man looked at it with a bemused expression, then scratched it behind an ear. After a moment, he looked up and saw Mario watching.

"He was a rescue," the man said, looking back down at the dog.

"He seems attached to you."

"I think each time I move he worries I'm going to leave him."

"How long have you had him?"

"Couple years," the man answered. After a pause, he continued. "Went over to the pound. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but none of them looked too good. Then I saw this guy and said, 'That's the one.'"

There was a gentleness to the man's voice; in the whispering darkness of the woods it sounded confidential, the voice of a man who has made an uneasy peace with the world and has no desire to break the truce through boldness or deceit.

"What's his name?"

"Alamo."

The fire snapped and glowed.

"What's your name?" asked Mario.

The man laughed softly. "Jim."

"You work for the park?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do a lot of people get lost out here?"

"A few every year."

"How many of them get found?"

"Most. It's not a very big park." After a moment's thought, he added, "Still, I was a bit surprised to find you so quickly."

Mario let the scent of the cooling forest and the burning wood wash silently over him for a little while before speaking again.

"I think my girlfriend must have reported me missing," he said. "I didn't tell her I was leaving, and my friends didn't know I'd be staying out here for an extra day."

“She's gonna be happy to see you, I suppose.”

Mario laughed. “I doubt it. That’s why I’m out here. Well, partly.”

Jim just looked at him.

“I got a reading on one of those machines. A machine of death.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t really know what to make of it.”

“I suppose it told you something you didn’t like.”

“I don’t know. Mostly I just didn’t understand what it meant.”

Mario reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the slip of paper, which had already become crumpled and worn. He leaned over and handed it to Jim, who opened it and read it, then chuckled.

“Hell of a way to go,” he said, handing back the paper.

“Any ideas?” asked Mario.

“Sure, some. But those things never mean much of anything.”

Mario sighed. “Well, whatever it means, it made me want to get out of the city. All those people, living right up next to each other but pretending nobody else exists.”

“And your girlfriend?”

“Right. Her main problem was that we’d agreed not to get tested.”

“I can see how that might bother her.”

“Me too.”

There was another moment of comfortable silence.

“Do you live in the park year-round?” asked Mario.

“Just the summers. The rest of the year, I’m mostly on the road, down south.”

“And the dog comes with you?”

Jim nodded.

On an impulse, Mario asked, “Have you ever gotten a reading?”

Jim smiled and looked at Alamo again. “My daughter insisted. Drove me there herself. I guess she was worried about me.”

Mario let the unasked question hang in the air.

“It just said DOG.”

“Dog?”

“Dog.”

“Like, as in Alamo?”

“If I could tell you that, maybe I could also tell you why you’re going to die because you got too close to somebody.”

“That’s not exactly what it said.”

Jim merely shrugged.

Running his hands through the fur on the dog’s back, Jim said, “Those readings aren’t important. A lot of people who have them seem to spend too much time worrying about how they’re going to die instead of thinking about how they’re living. Just like they’ve spent the rest of their lives worrying about everything that doesn’t matter.”

He looked around at the flickering ghosts of the trees and at the dark flame of the sky showing between the branches.

“But places like this,” he said, “they belong to the people who have woken up to life. And those are the only kinds of people I’ve ever met who’ve been worth anything.”

A short while later, Jim rolled out a blanket a short distance from the dying fire and went to sleep, with Alamo keeping a close watch.

Mario looked at his tent and then up at the sky. Eventually, he got out his sleeping bag, spread it out on a patch of grass, and laid down on his back.

In the warmth of the embers, with the night’s insects waking up all around him, he stared up between the trees and saw that the sky was clear for the first time since he’d left the city. He watched the smoke reach up and up towards the glistening stars which stretched across the sky, only to dissolve into the blazing emptiness beyond.