

INFRA-RED RIDING HOOD

A science fiction fairy tale by Dave Cochran



preceded by

THE HIATUS
A Robot Squid dramaticule



@talkymeat

@TheSquidbot



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THE HIATUS

transcribed from the sensor logs of The Squidbot

[FX: spaceship-interior noises - life support systems, alerts from computer systems, the hum of hyperdrives, etc]

SQUIDBOT: **WELL, THAT COULD HAVE GONE BETTER.**

KATY: I *told* you Robot Squid Geostationary was only ever designed to be an orbital station. The clue is in the name.

SQUIDBOT: **THAT'S THE LAST TIME I BUY REFURBISHED HYPERDRIVES OFF OF SHIFTY RIGELIANS IN SPACEPORT BARS.**

KATY: Oh yes. Dodgy Degobaxtifotuoimaronllehsisihtyhw.

DAVE: The clue is also in the name.

SQUIDBOT: **THE MAIN THING IS, WE GOT AWAY SAFELY AND IN ONE PIECE.**

DAVE: Excuse me?

SQUIDBOT: **DON'T TELL ME THAT PROSTHETIC HAND ISN'T TOTALLY AN UPGRADE.**

DAVE: OK, fine. Fuck it. Let's just get back to Earth orbit and pretend this never happened.

KATY: Agreed.

DAVE: I mean, we were only away for a couple of days, so...

KATY *...no-one need ever know.*

DAVE: Exactly.

SQUIDBOT: **I'M SORRY DAVE, KATY ... I'M AFRAID WE CAN'T DO THAT.**

DAVE: *What?*

KATY: Squidbot, we've heard your Hal 9000 impression at every Robot Squid Christmas Party since we launched. Please give it a fucking rest.

DAVE: So, what's the problem, Squidbot?

SQUIDBOT: **I FAKED THE SENSOR READOUTS. I'M AFRAID WE WERE ORBITING THE BLACK HOLE RATHER CLOSER THAN I LED YOU TO BELIEVE.**

KATY: But, *why?*

SQUIDBOT: **IF YOU HAD KNOWN THE TRUTH, THERE IS A HIGH PROBABILITY THAT YOU AND DAVE WOULD HAVE GONE INTO STATES OF EXTREME PANIC. MY DATA INDICATES THAT HUMAN BEINGS WORK AT OPTIMAL EFFICIENCY IN A STATE OF MILD PANIC.**

KATY: You bastard. You *utter bastard*.

SQUIDBOT: **WHY DO YOU THINK I MAKE YOU GUYS WORK TO DEADLINES?**

DAVE: I knew it!

SQUIDBOT: **I MEAN SERIOUSLY, I SAY "5PM ON FRIDAY, SHARP", BUT DO YOU REALLY THINK I'M EVEN GOING TO OPEN MY WORK EMAIL BETWEEN THEN AND MONDAY MORNING?**

KATY: So how long-

SQUIDBOT: **IN ALL HONESTY, MOST MONDAYS I JUST DICK AROUND ON FACEBOOK UNTIL LUNCH.**

DAVE: You don't even eat lunch!

KATY: How long have we been away from Earth?!

SQUIDBOT: **WELL, THAT'S ALL A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE, ISN'T IT? OR MORE EXACTLY, INERTIAL REFERENCE-FRAME. I MEAN, OUR PERSPECTIVE THAT IT WAS ONLY A COUPLE OF DAYS IS A TOTALLY LEGITIMATE, PHYSICALLY SELF-CONSISTENT READING OF EVENTS.**

KATY: How long, from the point of view of someone on Earth, waiting for new Robot Squid content?

SQUIDBOT: **A LITTLE OVER NINE MONTHS.**

KATY: Oh... *bloody hell.*

DAVE: Guess we'd better get a podcast out, then.

[cue Squidpod intro music]

INFRA-RED RIDING HOOD

by Dave Cochran

Once upon a time in the future, there was a little girl named Infra-Red Riding Hood. She lived with her mothers, fathers, and other parents, in nineteen litres of quantum computer, nestled into the roots of the biggest oak in the Old Forest, surrounded for kilometres by a small enlightened civilisation of uplifted squirrels.

Infra-Red was a good girl, who never complained when she was asked to audit the network traffic, or fix faulty memory-sectors. She knew that if she got all her chores done quickly, she could port into her favourite meatbody and go out to play in the woods for the rest of the day.

When she was out in the woods, she looked just like an ordinary palaeohuman little girl, if you looked at her with ordinary palaeohuman eyes; but, if you tuned your vision down to 999 nanometres exactly, you would see a halo of glittering, rippling comms picolasers which shrouded her and followed wherever she went.

You see, Infra-Red loved to play at being made of meat and bones and blood and embedded microcircuitry, just like humans used to be in olden times; but her third mother insisted that she add a utility fog of a trillion motebots, so she could protect herself if she had to; and this was how she got her name.

The moteware was very useful. They allowed her to see around corners and feel the roughness of tree-bark and the soft, damp coolness moss for metres around. If it rained, she could steer the raindrops around her. If she wandered too far and needed to fly to get home before dark, she could condense them into a pair of wings, cobweb-thin and space-elevator-cable strong. If she needed rope for a swing, she could make a rope. If she needed a knife, she could make a knife. If she was climbing, and needed extra arms and legs with microciliated gecko-grip hands ... well, I'm sure you can guess what she did.

And so, one day, Infra-Red asked Dad2 and Mum1 if she could go over to visit Grandma X. Grandma X was the only grandparent Infra-Red had left in the solar system, and she lived in a server behind a waterfall, on the other side of the loch.

“Of course you can, kiddo,” said Dad2 “I’ll call her to let her know you’re coming.”

“Just give her a few minutes to get ready, then you can email yourself over,” said Mum1,

armpit-deep in cytoplasm, shuggling a recalcitrant mitochondrion.

Dad2 and Mum1 were busy with a new design for vertebrate neurons, having shrunk themselves into a temporary simspace where they could tinker with the ion channels by hand. Infra-Red liked to find whichever parents were most busy and distracted, if she wanted to ask permission for something they might say no to.

“No, no,” said Infra-Red, ducking a calcium ion that went ping-ponging past her head, “I don’t want to email myself. I want to go in physical space, on foot.”

“Oh, that’ll be nice,” said Mum1, “wait - *what?*”

But Infra-Red had already left the simulation.

The trouble was, by foot, in physical space, the only way to Grandma’s server was through the abandoned village.

The village was abandoned when all the people recycled their meatbodies to make moteware running simulations of their brains. Because they wanted to share thoughts and memories, over the years they used every yottaflop of computation they could spare to make neural transcompilers, one for every possible pairing of villagers.

The Mackay twins got theirs first of course, as their neural encodings were already so similar, and straight away they started passing memories and sensations back and forth until not even they could tell themselves apart. Eventually, the network of minds became small-worldy, and phase-transitioned into a soup of distributed mentality. The mist of motes that coiled around the village wasn’t coherent enough to become a metamind, but it was no longer granular enough to be a collection of individuals either.

Instead it began to separate out, as similar thoughts tended to be drawn together. The happier thoughts moved into the forest. There was a spot below the Squirreltanian Tree of Parliament which told rude jokes, an island on the loch full of good soup recipes, and a clearing where the morning haze told stories about first kisses.

The meanest, miserablest, pettiest and most spiteful thoughts, on the other hand, lingered gloomily around the ruins of the village.

When Infra-Red’s eyes came open, she was already standing free of the tree, in good boots, sturdy walking-clothes, and a small pack with fruit and sandwiches for herself, and nuts to share with the squirrels.

“Infra-Red, wait!” said a voice behind her

She turned to see her 1st Other Parent, only halfway budded out of the trunk.

“Come on, PaMa, it’s not far! I know the woods and I’m friends with the Squirrels! Ever since I stopped those Badger terrorists from blowing up the Museum of Nuts.”

PaMa coughed. Hir skin still looked rough and barky, and zhe had little leaves still growing out of hir fingers.

“I didn’t come to tell you no. I just wanted to tell you to be careful, OK?”

“OK.”

“Don’t go through the village. Make wings and fly over.”

“I can do that,” Infra-Red said, factually.

“OK, take care!”

PaMa gave Infra-Red a leafy hug, and sent her on her way.



Infra-Red knew PaMa’s advice was good, but three hours later, when she got to the edge of the village, she remembered that all the most interesting stories start by ignoring good advice, and kept walking. What she liked about physical reality, after all, was that there were dangers, and consequences. The first time she ventured into the physical world, she had skinned her knee. It had seemed terrible at the time, and she ran home crying; but afterwards she found herself getting bored in safe, reality-edited, rate-limited, revertible virtuality.

The woods had been sunny and warm, but the village was wreathed in mist, and before she had taken five steps, it felt like November. She heard a directionless susurrus of voices, each syllable clear and distinct, but sounding exactly the way a voice sounds when you only imagined it.

Oh, never mind, it’s only her...

Meh.

Oh my god, what is she doing in that ridiculous human body?

*She must think she's being ironic.
I bet she thinks she's quirky!
Hipster!*

Infra-Red shivered, and walked faster. She shouldn't listen. She knew what they were. They couldn't help it. All their better thoughts had run away, and if they...it...they ever managed to have a good or cheerful thought again, it would run away too. But they had touched a nerve, and now she felt self-conscious about her retro tastes in biological existence.

In a tiny spot front of her, spicules of soot were condensing out of the air, and joining together into something spiky and angry-looking. A black spider the size of a chestnut hit the ground and ran straight up her leg.

It had got as far as her knee, when she condensed a rhombicosadodecahedral cage of motes around it. It fell helplessly to the ground.

She picked it up for a closer look. It reared up in the cage and hissed.

“Guys, I'm pretty sure spiders don't hiss,” she said.

*Oooh, Little Miss Expert!
Well, of course she knows all about spiders! - evolutionarily, she almost is one!
Or a tarsier!
Or an acorn worm!
Or a coelacanth!*

“Guys, *whatever.*”

She shrunk the cage around the spider and pulled it apart, molecule by molecule, reverse-engineering as she went. Its mandibles, besides containing venom, also injected SSRI's, retroviruses, and malicious C++.

Barely-visible strands of white silk began to condense and fall around her. The ends stuck to her skin and clothes. They merged to make longer, thicker fibres, and she could feel them pulling her motes out of the air. She broke into a panicked run.

She condensed more motes to her fingertips, into long, curved, scalpel-blades, to cut at the fibres as she ran, but they were too many and grew too fast. Before she could reach the ruined satcoms tower in the village square, she looked like a ragged ghost, borne

down by her weight again in fibres. The trailing ends grabbed clods and pebbles, then the long train that hung from her pack grabbed asphalt and yanked her to a jarring stop. She tried to ditch the pack and run, but her feet were anchored too.

Oh, please, please, don't leave us!

Stay forever!

Join us!

Become us!

Tendrils of mist crept towards her. Infra-red made a facemask with eyecups and breathing filters.

“I DON'T WANNA BE MOTEWARE!”

No, don't be moteware...

Stay just the way you are.

Right here...

Forever...

Merge with us...

Have happy thoughts that can't run away from us...

We want you to be happy...

We need you to be happy...

We'll punish you if you aren't happy enough...

Infra-Red slashed desperately, not caring about the blood that flecked her fingers, but new fibres formed and she was pulled to her knees. Barbed fibres snaked behind her mask.

Just then, she heard a roaring whoosh, and twenty squirrels with jetpacks came flying towards her and snipped the fibres with diamond scissors. She broke free and ran.

One of the squirrels landed on her shoulder, and said “Ffft-ttftt-tt-fttst-tt-tt” in her ear. She nodded in agreement, and condensed all her motes into wings, just before the squirrels released their smoke-bombs, rendering the air opaque in the infra-red. Unable to communicate, the hostile motes fell like hail. Infra-Red turned to see them beading and congealing into a shape tall as a house with teeth like daggers; a Big Bad Wolf.

Infra-Red pounded the air and flew, flanked by squirrels. The Wolf gave chase haltingly, hampered by the squirrels' covering fire, until they reached the bridge at the edge of town. There the squirrels could go no further, for though Squirreltania and Birdonia had

not been at war for a decade, relations were tense, and they couldn't afford a diplomatic incident. Alone, Infra-Red flew as hard as she could, with the wolf at her heels the whole way.

She didn't dare take the narrow path behind the waterfall, but instead, flew high, plunged steeply and levelled out, hoping to torpedo through the roaring water, and land safely in Grandma X's cave.

She was wrong.

The water slammed her down and everything went black.



The next thing she knew, the wolf was towering over her, giving her chest compressions with a massive paw. She spewed a litre of water from her lungs, lying on the riverbank.. The wolf bent down, sniffed, and swallowed her whole.



The wolf didn't have a stomach, really, nor any flesh-dissolving enzymes; but Infra-Red felt hundreds of hyphae, thinner than hairs, pricking her skin and tunnelling between her cells, groping for nerves and circuitry. There wasn't enough air to scream.

Instead, she thought *two can play at that game*.

She had decompiled the malware in the spider. She knew what the wolf was doing, how to defend against it, and how to mutate the virus for her own uses. She made hyphae of her own, burrowing back out through the wolf, seizing its motes and running Monte-Carlo attacks on them.

The Wolf slumped, and she found she could see out of its eyes - just in time to see Grandma X in a new body, four metres tall, six-armed and screaming, running at the wolf swinging battleaxes. She buried one deep between Infra-Red's eyes.

No, not Infra-Red's. The Wolf's.

No, not the Wolf's, Infra Red's.

Grandma peeled the wolf open until she could see Infra-Red's face, grinning, bloodied,

and wild-eyed with adrenaline.

“Thanks Gran!” she said, ”This body’s mine now! You distracted it just at the right moment.”

Infra-Red re-sealed her wolf-body, stood taller even than her grandma, and howled her victory.

Grandma X holstered her axes, and patted the wolf . “That’s lovely dear, now come inside and you can have tea and scones.”



If you survive for another 30,000 years, and I’m sure some of you will, and you went to the Old Forest where this city used to be, you might meet a seemingly palaeohuman girl, climbing trees and exploring the woods around her home; you might see the old village, which was no longer haunted by sad and spiteful thoughts, but became a place of peace and concord for the squirrels and the birds; and if you went out on a clear, crisp night, you might hear Infra-Red Riding Hood, running in her wolf-body, and howling at the cities on the moon.