

Turnabout

“Good evening, Professor Zucker.”

The startled Professor instantly ceased writing and dropped his pen onto his large oak desk in shock. “Pittfield! My word, how did you gain entry?”

Professor Pittfield held a small revolver firmly in his right hand as he began to observe Zucker’s study. “I thought it a pleasant night to pay you a visit. If my assumption is correct – and my assumptions generally are – you have secured it in your wall safe,” he casually stated as he glanced to his left. The wall he viewed was decorated with several fine paintings. But he eyed one in particular.

He managed to keep his attention on his captive as he surveyed the rest of the windowless room. The wall to his right was nearly consumed by wooden shelves, boasting an impressive collection of books, ranging from historical and classical literature to scientific and philosophical journals. Behind him, a stone fireplace was lit and a small sofa and a reclining chair were set before it. The mantel above the fire preserved several rare artifacts Professor Zucker had collected throughout the course of his lifetime and his travels. The door where Professor Pittfield had silently and surreptitiously entered was to the left of the fireplace along the same wall, opposite the Professor’s desk. Behind the desk were more bookshelves, several small statuettes he had personally sculpted, a world globe, and the American flag in the corner. Fine paintings, antique lamps and furniture, plush carpeting, and Old World chandeliers adorned the remainder of the room. The Professor had always enjoyed the finer things in life and his estate’s fine decor reflected his cultivated tastes.

“Ah, a pleasant fire, to warm the dear Professor on this cold autumn night. How quaint. Fine furnishings, an impressive collection of books, beautiful paintings, a fancy chandelier above me . . . You have excellent taste, as always, Zucker.”

“Thank you, Pittfield. And I, of course, have witnessed the dwelling that you have come to call home. Tell me, has it been properly condemned yet?”

“Still the same, arrogant Professor Zucker, I see.”

“You didn’t expect to find me changed, did you? But I assume you did not come here to critique my study.” The short, portly, Professor

Zucker remained seated, his hands folded before him, resting on his desk. He possessed a rough, deep, bellowing voice – irritated by years of chain smoking – a scruffy, gray beard, and thin graying hair. As always, he wore a dark suit and a vest without a tie.

“You are correct, Zucker. I am here to steal the equation.”

“Right to the point, eh? I admire your honesty . . . (Pittfield smiled and nodded) . . . for a change. But tell me, how did you ever manage to gain entry into my home? I possess a wealth of security devices that should have detected and prevented such an attempt.”

Professor Pittfield displayed his unique narcissistic smile. The tall, lanky gentleman, still maintaining his dark hair, possessed a long face and tiny devious eyes. He wore blue sweatpants, a heavy gray sweatshirt, and white sneakers. He was only ten years younger than Professor Zucker but appeared much younger in comparison.

“Did you really believe your amateur security features could prevent my efforts? Take the electric beam that encircles your estate, for example. Invisible, impenetrable – a twelve-foot fence that would confound the average burglar. But did it ever occur to you that with the proper reflective and refractive lenses, positioned at precise calculated angles, such a beam could be bent, but remain unbroken, while the trespasser easily passed through?”

“Actually, I have considered it,” Zucker replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Hmmm. Yes, I’m sure you have.”

“But the complexities of constructing such a device would be far beyond the ability of the average burglar.”

“Of course it would. But as we both know, my corpulent friend, I am well above average,” Pittfield snickered.

“Granted. Though I implore you to refrain from making your customary, derogatory remarks. If you are going to break into my home and rob me, at least rob me with some civility. Ah, but where are MY manners, eh? Would you care for some tea, Professor? I was about to prepare myself a cup, anyway.”

“No, thank you. I won’t be staying very long.”

“I see. But let us get back to the matter at hand – my security. What about my motion-detector? It was state of the art, they claimed. My model was even guaranteed to be foolproof. A formidable obstacle for

most. Tell me, how did you manage to thwart that?"

"That would stump most people. And you are correct, you do possess the finest model on the market. Only a genius could fool your motion-detector – only someone possessing absolute brilliance. Fortunately, I was well up to the task. I wore a special suit coated with a chemical residue that I developed in my laboratory. The suit, by the way, still lies on your front porch. And that is why you find me in such casual attire. The special suit is a bit bulky and I required light, comfortable clothing beneath it.

"The residue I've developed, is able to change colors to match its surroundings. It allowed me to become a chameleon, fooling the motion detector into thinking nothing had passed before it. The chemical residue changes colors slowly, so I moved very cautiously across the front of your estate. And, as I expected, it worked flawlessly. Indeed, even if you had been watching for me, my dear Professor, you would not have seen me. Oh, on an interesting side note, the army is quite interested in the chemical residue that I've developed. And it's no wonder. Soldiers that are perfectly camouflaged would make a formidable fighting force."

Zucker sighed, shaking his head in disapproval. "No doubt," he replied. "And it's no surprise that you continue to use your inventions for purposes that are clearly destructive. That has always been the way with you – always. However, I am impressed as usual by your ingenuity, Pittfield. You have demonstrated your superior mind once again. But that brings us to the final security device on the outside of my estate. And this one must have been your most formidable obstacle. Surely, the 'infrared' would have registered your body heat. How could you have possibly remained undetected?"

"That shall remain a secret, Professor," Pittfield abruptly replied. The cunning smile that he had displayed throughout their conversation suddenly vanished. The gun remained pointed at Professor Zucker who remained calmly seated behind his desk. Now in a tone of determination he continued, "But it is time to get down to business. The equation, my dear old friend."

"Do you really believe I would just GIVE you the formula that could change the world? You of all people? Surely, Pittfield, you underestimate me."

"Then I shall be forced to shoot you."

"You would KILL me? I never believed that you would lower yourself to this level. But then again, you were never one for playing by the rules, were you?"

"The equation, Zucker. I assume it's in the wall safe behind your dear, departed, wife's portrait. You have thirty seconds to open that safe."

"I'm not budging."

"Then I will shoot."

"As you wish."

Pittfield sighed as he raised his pistol. "I didn't want it to end like this, my rotund adversary. But I will not be prevented from acquiring that equation. Good-bye . . ."

But at the very moment Pittfield placed his finger on the trigger, Professor Zucker instantly and mysteriously disappeared. "What the devil!" Pittfield exclaimed in disbelief.

A cold metal object was suddenly thrust into Pittfield's back and he did not have to turn around to deduce what had happened.

"I've always said that you underestimate me," Zucker's victorious voice announced from behind. Pittfield dropped his gun, stepped forward, turned to face Zucker, and leaned up against the wooden desk. Zucker picked up the gun and placed it in his suit-jacket pocket.

"I should have known," Pittfield said, nodding in approval. "You were always an expert with holograms. The performance of that one was quite convincing."

Zucker bowed slightly. "Thank you. Years of programming can often be rewarding. That particular hologram, seated at my desk, is actually able to respond to my thoughts, a fact that allows it to nearly duplicate my own actions and words."

"Very clever. But I would like to know how you detected my presence outside. I was careful to take into account all of your security devices."

"All that is, but sound."

"No, I already considered that. It's true that sound would detect the presence of someone on your estate. But would such a device be of any use to you? Every time a branch fell from a tree or someone walked by on the sidewalk in the front of your estate, you would be needlessly and continuously alarmed. Remember, you are not in the country. You do have neighbors out here on the outskirts of town. No, Zucker, I have given that careful consideration."

"You are correct, the background noise would make it almost impossible to detect you traversing my estate. That is why the sound I have programmed the sensors to detect is unique only to you. You see, at the last conference we attended together in Milan, I had the foresight to record your heartbeat, Pittfield. A man can change the external sounds he produces in a multitude of ways. But he cannot change his heartbeat. That was what triggered the alarm. I hid in the hallway and saw you enter this Study. And for the last five minutes I have been waiting at the doorway behind me, watching you from behind."

"Very clever. Very impressive, Zucker."

"Thank you. Now, as we wait for the police to arrive, I hope you oblige me by answering some questions. First, why have you come here to steal the 'Antigravity Equation' from me? Why can't you develop the equation on your own? And what did you intend to do with it once you stole it?"

Professor Pittfield dropped his head in embarrassment and sighed. It is never easy for an intellectual to admit when something eludes him. And Pittfield's colossal ego was damaged by his reluctant admission.

"I HAVE attempted to solve the problem of antigravity," he began, with folded arms. "However I am one-fourth of the equation short of completion. Are you aware, there are four factors that must be accounted for? And that all four must be completed before the other three hold any use? Yes, of course you are. Well, I have completed three of these factors but have been unable to compute the fourth. And I am aware that you have also been unable to complete the equation. But, in steal . . . I mean, acquiring, your equation, I had hoped that one of the factors that you had completed would be the one that has eluded me. And as for my intentions, that is my business entirely."

"A profitable matter, no doubt," Zucker surmised. "I might as well inform you now that I have also completed three-fourths of the equation. So you are correct to assume that the odds would be in your favor. At least three in four, I suppose. STEALING my equation might have provided you with the missing factor. But why, Pittfield? You are a genius and have accomplished so much in your lifetime. You invented the fundamental concepts of the hyper-drive system, perfected the fusion reactor, and authored a prodigious volume of books on mathematics and chemistry. Why didn't you allow yourself the time to complete the equation?"

"This one's too important, Zucker. This one will turn the entire world upside down. Think of what this will mean to technology and transportation. Think what this will do to energy consumption. No more dependency on oil, gas, coal, or uranium. Transportation will be

virtually instantaneous. Space colonization. Interstellar travel. If you can imagine it, then antigravity will find a way to fulfill it. Antigravity will change the world more than any other invention or discovery since the wheel. It is simply that monumentally significant."

"I agree. And I am pleased to see that you have considered the positive effects of this discovery. You have always possessed a rather dark side to your personality. And I was apprehensive that you would simply sell this equation to the highest bidder."

Pittfield suddenly snickered and his cunning grin returned. "Can you imagine what this discovery would do to modern warfare?"

Zucker grew angry and pointed the gun at Pittfield's chest. "We'll see how the police view a burglar and trespasser."

"Police? What police?"

"This entire house is wired, Pittfield. No door, no window can be opened without the proper codes entered on this little gadget." He removed a black, credit-card sized object from his pocket. "Without this, a call is sent directly to the police station. Now I suggest you wait quietly. Anything you say now can only be used against you."

"Are you sure that call reached its proper destination?" Pittfield asked with a smile. "Do you REALLY think I would overlook such an old-fashioned security device? I had considered cutting your phone line to the transmitter, but that would have been too obvious and might have cued you that something was wrong. Perhaps it would even set off an alarm. So, instead, I merely redirected your call to a friend of mine. It was accomplished with a simple device that I constructed some years back. You'll find it on the communication transmitter about a block down the road. The police were not notified, Zucker. And you might as well know that I also intercepted the automatic alarm that is normally set off when your front gate is opened without the proper code. The signal that was emitted was scrambled directly at the source. You'll find THAT little device still on the rod-iron gate at the entrance to your estate."

Zucker stared at Pittfield in silence. He had not expected his adversary to account for EVERYTHING. And of course, he did not. "Still, Pittfield, for all your brilliance, it is I who hold the gun now. You may either leave my estate in peace and we'll call it a night, or I will be forced to shoot."

Pittfield laughed. "You? You're not a killer, Zucker. And actually there are only two options available to us now. You may either shoot

me or allow me to procure the equation. The other option is moot, since I have no intention of leaving without it.”

“Then I will be forced to shoot.”

“Professor, like everything else, I had considered this possibility. I am younger and stronger than you, and despite your enormous weight advantage, you could not defeat me in a fist fight. And since you do not possess the will to kill me, I will merely TAKE the equation, once I determine the combination.”

Pittfield took a step toward the portrait of Zucker’s wife but Zucker instantly waived him away. “I don’t concede defeat, Pittfield. It is true that I could not kill you in cold-blood, but I too have foreseen the events of this night. This gun is not loaded with bullets, but with tiny darts that are laced on the tip with a potent – but not lethal – tranquilizer. Its effects will render you unconscious immediately.”

“Excellent, Zucker!” Pittfield commended him without moving. “However, I will not be deterred from acquiring that equation. Therefore, you will be forced to shoot me.”

“I am not joking,” Zucker warned him.

“Nor am I, my pudgy friend.” Pittfield took another step toward the painting.

“I warned you,” Zucker said in a regretful tone.

He fired a shot. And then a second. But Pittfield mysteriously remained standing.

“I don’t understand!” he cried out.

“Hmmm, no effect,” Pittfield snickered. “I can’t imagine why.”

Zucker was astonished to see his adversary still standing, and he proceeded to empty the revolver into his body. Still, there was no effect.

“I simply can’t believe it!” Zucker quickly examined his revolver, searching for an explanation.

“Yes, life is surprising that way,” Pittfield chortled. “But I believe my work here is done. Now, if you don’t mind, Professor.” Pittfield suddenly seated himself on the carpeted floor just in front of the oak desk. He faced Zucker. “I must say that I rather enjoyed this little visit. A challenge as always. Thank you.” And he proceeded to

mysteriously lie back onto the floor. His eyes were closed, his arms rested motionlessly at his sides.

Wary of another trick, Zucker cautiously approached him. He stood over his antagonist's immobile body, bewildered by the strange and inexplicable course of events. Suddenly, he heard a click of a gun . . . BEHIND him!

"Well, well, Zucker," Pittfield laughed. He thrust his revolver into Professor Zucker's back.

"How in blazes did you manage that?" Zucker cried out in exasperation. "That isn't a hologram!"

"A hologram? No. But it is a sophisticated android. Tell me, what do you think of our likeness? Rather amazing, wouldn't you say? We are as identical as twins. I find him rather handsome – in an intellectual manner, of course."

Zucker scrutinized the android, which remained stationary on the floor. He searched for flaws, defects, anything that would reveal its status as an imitation. But everything appeared absolutely perfect. Zucker finally turned to Pittfield, who held the gun waist-high. "Incredible!"

"Thank you, Professor," he replied as he bowed. This Pittfield was wearing dark denim jeans, a gray suit-jacket over a striped, tan, buttoned shirt, and the characteristic white sneakers. "It took me years to achieve such perfection."

Staring, once again, in amazement at the android, Zucker noted, "It's years ahead of anything that exists today. Its functions, so fluid – so convincing. A positronic brain, I suppose?"

"What else? By the way, it was the android that passed through your infrared scanners. When he reached the house, he simply switched off that archaic device. And I have been observing you for the last ten minutes from the hallway outside this Study."

"I might have known." Professor Zucker suddenly sniffed the air. "Yes, I should have noticed that – I'm disappointed in myself. You never were one to maintain proper hygiene. Your android's lack of odor should have warned me that something was wrong. I have grown too accustomed to relying on my sense of sight."

"Still with the hygiene jokes, Professor?"

"As always, my rancid adversary."

"I hope you have enjoyed your laugh, Professor, for it is time to conclude my business here. I have grown weary of this night. There are no more tricks left to you. And it is time for a little transaction. The safe, please."

"You're an ingenious one, Pittfield. But what makes you so confident that I don't have a trick or two left up my sleeve?"

"Perhaps. But now, I have the gun. You are NOT a hologram. And I am not unwilling to take your life. So again, I say: the safe, please."

Zucker sighed and approached his wife's portrait. Dejectedly, he removed it from the wall and placed it on the floor. A simple wall safe was now visible. To its right were buttons labeled zero through nine, and an ENTER and a LOCK button.

Zucker gestured to the safe. "Be my guest."

Pittfield's eyes grew wide and he quickly hurried closer to the safe. "What's the combination?" he asked eagerly.

"Two hundred and seventeen – which by the way is my I.Q. – followed by zero-eighty-four. The latter number, I have estimated, Pittfield, to be your I.Q."

"My tubby friend, this time your inane humor will be of no help to you. You may have created viricillin and developed the neurochip processor for computers but this time I quite clearly hold the upper hand. Now if you will please move your enormous body aside while I remove the 'Antigravity Equation' from your safe."

"I wonder, Pittfield, how many of your other achievements came at the expense of others. How many ideas have you stolen? Was that android even yours?"

"You talk entirely too much, Zucker. Now be quiet! Or I will be forced to take your life along with your equation."

Pittfield surveyed the safe carefully. Months of planning and anticipating his adversary's every move had culminated in this monumental moment. He had played this scene standing before Zucker's wall safe repeatedly in his mind. And each time he discovered . . . Suddenly his smile vanished. His eyes quickly darted up and down the wall, above him, below him, behind him. This was too easy. Each time he had played this scene in his mind, he discovered yet another obstacle that Zucker had prepared for him. Before touching a button, he backed away.

"Is there a problem?" Zucker asked in surprise.

"You open it."

"But I . . ."

"Do as I say." He aimed the gun as Zucker's head and continued to back away. Zucker shrugged and took his turn before the safe. Pittfield glanced up at the chandelier above him. Would it collapse if the safe was opened? Was there a hidden panel somewhere where guns would suddenly emerge and commence firing at the thief standing in front of the safe? He didn't know, but he couldn't believe that Zucker would make it THIS easy.

"Well, what's the delay?"

Now it was Zucker's turn to appear apprehensive and Pittfield saw perspiration forming around the Professor's neck.

"What is it, Zucker? What do you have planned?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Then what's the delay?"

"Nothing. It's just that I'm being robbed. Surely even you must possess some sympathy for the innocent victim of a burglary." He entered the first digit. Then the second digit.

"You have remained calm up until this point, Zucker. Why do you keep glancing at that painting of the ocean to your left?"

"I'm not," he replied uneasily. He entered the third digit. The fourth digit.

"You keep looking that way," Pittfield insisted in a raised voice. He backed away from the painting. "What's behind there?"

"Nothing," Zucker repeated. He entered the fifth digit. The sixth digit. Then he stopped, stared at the safe, and took a deep breath. Pittfield observed his reluctance and noticed him still eyeing the painting of the ocean.

"Well? What's the problem?"

"No problem at all. The combination has been completed. All I need to do is press the ENTER key and the safe will open."

He raised his index finger to press the final button but Pittfield

quickly intervened. "Not yet, dear Professor. Not quite yet. If you would please take a step back from the safe. Thank you. Now, what is hidden behind this other painting?" Keeping one eye on Zucker, Pittfield cautiously approached the painting hanging just to the left of the safe. He quickly scanned the floor beneath the painting and the ceiling above. Nothing seemed unusual. "Well, what is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Pittfield eyed the sweat trickling down Zucker's forehead.

"Forcing me to find out for myself, eh? All right, then. We'll play your little game." He removed the painting from the wall and a small, square wall-compartment was displayed. It was enclosed only by a glass cover and was unlocked. Pittfield suddenly realized the significance of what was inside.

"A gas mask!" He cautiously opened the compartment and removed the mask. "Very clever. Very clever, indeed. But your own anxiety betrayed you, Zucker. When the door to that safe is opened, a gas is released into this room, rendering its occupants unconscious. Is that it? You, on the other hand knew of the only answer to such a dilemma. I saw the perspiration on your forehead and guessed that you feared something. And the fear is being consumed by the gas. But perhaps I have even underestimated you in that. Perhaps the gas is deadly. You, all the while, grew apprehensive. Could you open the safe, remove the ocean painting, grab the mask, and save your own life in such a limited amount of time? You weren't sure, so you began to perspire. Of course, without the mask, I would either be killed or rendered unconscious. But now it is I who will survive this encounter. And you, Professor, shall suffer the fate of your own devious imagination." He motioned to the safe and demanded, "The equation, please."

Zucker sighed in resignation. "You have beaten me, Pittfield. If not for your malevolent intentions, I would say that you have earned the equation. Perhaps it contains the part that eludes you."

Pittfield secured the gas-mask over his face just as Zucker pressed the 'ENTER' key and opened the safe. Seconds later there was a loud thump behind Professor Zucker. He turned to discover his adversary lying unconscious on the Study floor.

Now it was Zucker's turn to snicker. "Poor Professor. You have fallen for the oldest trick in the book. It wasn't my anxiety that betrayed me but your paranoia that betrayed you. The only demobilizing gas present in this room resides in the gas-mask that I have tricked you into wearing. It is I who have won this battle." He paused and sniffed the air just above Professor Pittfield. "I must remember to purchase a bar of soap for him as a gift during his Christmas holidays in jail."

No doubt, it will be his first bar of soap." He turned, took a deep breath of satisfaction, and cheerfully exclaimed, "And now it is time to contact the police."

Professor Zucker reached for the phone on his desk when he was startled to hear a voice behind him.

"Well, Professor Zucker," the familiar voice began. Zucker quickly turned and found Pittfield's android sitting upright on the floor. It continued, "Somehow you have rendered the brilliant Professor Pittfield unconscious."

"Don't tell me," Zucker interrupted. "His brain waves are interconnected with your positronic brain's sensory receptors."

"That is correct. In the unlikely event that he was rendered unconscious, I was programmed to reactivate."

"Is there no end to your trickery?" Zucker grumbled in dismay.

"You are now about to find out." Without moving, the android suddenly emitted a loud, continuous, piercing sound that virtually incapacitated the Professor.

"You haven't won yet!" Zucker cried out. His legs weakened and he tumbled to the floor. He battled to remain conscious. He struggled to rise off the floor. But something caught his eye. The gun! The gun that Pittfield had dropped was within his reach. He made a grab for it. Clutched it. Aimed it. Fired it!

It was a fortuitous shot, striking the android in one of its few vulnerable areas – its left eye. There was no shower of sparks but a small puff of smoke was released from the empty socket. Then the android dropped back down to the carpet in silence.

Professor Zucker fell backwards, falling face up. The piercing sound the android had emitted had been potent. The room seemed to be spinning around him. His equilibrium had been disrupted and he lied there in confusion. Then he lost the battle and slipped into unconsciousness.

But the two unconscious men and the android were suddenly no longer alone. A burglar had been casing Professor Zucker's home from a distance and had made his move. He was surprised by the easy access through the front of the estate.

He stood silently at the front door, cautiously observing the area of the estate he had just traversed from the street. Too easy, he thought

to himself. Why were there no security measures?

A dim light was on inside but everything remained ominously silent. Wearing gloves, he slowly opened the front door and quietly followed the light to the Study. He was startled to encounter the three bodies lying motionless on the floor. Suspecting that a trap had been set for him, he slowly entered the room, ready to quickly depart if anything went wrong. He cautiously approached them and then checked them for life signs.

Two of the men were breathing. The other had no pulse. The dead man's left eye was missing and the burglar speculated that it was an artificial eye.

"They must've killed him," he muttered to himself. Then he observed the android and Professor Pittfield. "Twins?" he asked in confusion.

The wall-safe remained invitingly open and the burglar eagerly inspected its contents. There was a large piece of white paper containing three long and complicated mathematical equations. Insignificant, he thought. He quickly tossed it aside once he laid eyes on a bundle of bills buried in the back of the safe.

It was a single stack of twenty-dollar bills that totaled about a thousand dollars. "That's it?" He turned to address the bodies below him. "That's it? What the hell do ya have a safe for to hold a lousy grand?"

Fearing that the authorities may have been notified by the opening of the safe, he quickly jumped over the motionless bodies and departed the estate. As he drove away, he reconsidered his fortune. Sure it was only a lousy grand, but it was the easiest grand that he had ever taken. People of such affluence should really spend the money for some home security devices. Sometimes, it seemed to him, the rich possessed less intelligence than the common man.

The piece of paper with the equations rested on the carpeted floor between Professor Zucker and Professor Pittfield. And all the brilliance, creativity, and imagination that they possessed mattered little now. The prize – the possible secret of antigravity – would ironically be claimed by whoever was fortunate enough to awaken first.