

KEEP

CALM (!)

AND

CARRY . . . . .

. . . . . ON

By

*L M Burrows*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

*L M Burrows', "Keep CALM and Carry On," is at it's best an elegant sci-fi/dystopian/well-written piece of fiction, and, at its worst, an allegory for the idiocy of humankind (I also hope that it's clear that is not a bad thing, but I would rather be specific than misunderstood).*

*Belford is a prisoner in what I could best describe as a WALL-E type situation. Humans have fucked up things so badly that they send prisoners, under the supervision of neglected, outdated, and broken machines to clean the unusable patches of a non-specified planet with the presumed intention of making it once more inhabitable.*

*Belford's best friend is a mechanical dog, Luca, that, having read this story, I would also risk life and limb for as well, and, not that they're technically friends but mostly the only vocal connection he has, a computer program that is also his warden.*

*I am not a science fiction person, but Burrows' work here doesn't require you or I to be in the slightest. The premise is one that you can dig as far or short as your heart desires into, the dialogue he has created immerses you in a world easily visible off of the page, there*

*is a humor throughout that demonstrates the hope our protagonist needs in which to survive, and there is the overall, higher, implication about the impacts we have created for ourselves looking towards the future.*

*In desolation, the right amount of love and humor will always create hope, and Burrows, here, has harnessed that into just the damn fine right amount of story.*

*Five stars!*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

Belford surfaced back to awareness slowly, for a moment thinking he was back on earth, in the core scraper where he'd grown up with his mother, 200 feet below London's surface. No that was wrong earth was long ago, he was on Veith, sharing a bed with Alma, a beautiful diamond synthesiser and petty crook who claimed her explosive temper was due to her being half alien. At last he clicked back into the present – Orchard, prison hell, kept young by variety of junk food flavoured genetic stimulants, clearing up someone else's mess.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This story contains a number of sentences that are intentionally nonsensical. Their purpose is to demonstrate the decline into senility of the AI. Example: "Prisoner Bedford 464 under the terms of your original banana you are entitled to a periodic review of your gremlin. Blurp. You do you?"*

Keep CALM and Carry On

LM Burrows

Belford glared balefully at the enormous glowing digital clock. The countdown. Five times his height, unavoidable, the dominant feature in a barren landscape. Green numbers on black. Years 2, months 0, weeks 0, days 1.

Hours and minutes they left to his imagination.

As the red sun peaked over the distant horizon, lending a strange beauty to the parched plains cloaked in yellow dust, the vestibule in front of him sprang open, a jaunty two-tone hurrah shattering the silent dawn.

“Good morning Prisoner Belford 464, your breakfast is ready.” The disembodied voice would have suited a gameshow host. It didn’t suit Belford’s hangover.

“Good morning CALM” Corrections Assistant Learning Machine. Somebody on the solar prison board had an odd sense of humour.

“Please present your hand for ID verification.”

“Really? CALM, I am the only sentient being on the planet. Who exactly do you think is going to steal my breakfast?”

“Since the Turing Accord of 2226 AIs are considered sentient beings. Please present your hand for ID verification.”

Belford groaned and placed his hand into the scanner attached to the vestibule wall. With a triumphant burble a panel in the wall slid open, revealing a sealed metal flask.

“MMMMMM bacon and eggs,” CALM trilled.

Belford picked up the flask, tugged on the ring pull and downed the gloop in one, trying not to gag. It did taste a bit like eggs, although the eggs of which species he was unsure.

“Which bit of the garbage patch am I sorting through today?”

“Prisoners are required to use respectful language when referring to Transplan property.”

“Sorry CALM. Which sector will I be cleansing and terraforming today, in service of Transplan Corp, the galaxies finest outsourced prison provider?”

“Sector 8”

Belford stifled a groan. “Can I bring Luca?”

“Nothing in the statutes prohibits it for sector 8, assuming you can squeeze it into the pod”

“Her. Squeeze her into the pod.”

Belford whistled. The door of his low, green plastic dwelling dome swung open and Luca emerged and scuttled toward him, seven aluminium legs sprouting from her central cylinder, her dog shaped head bobbing enthusiastically. Together they walked around CALM’s squat, grey, metal server building to the pod at the rear. Belford lifted the transparent plastic hood and settled into the threadbare seat. Luca leapt into his lap, thrumming her legs against the data ports as she always did.

“Steady there girl.” She turned her head and looked at Belford from her one complete eye, glittering with blue light. Her jaws moved soundlessly. “I know, I know you want to talk. As soon as the rest of the kit comes.”

Belford pulled the hood down, bracing himself for the sickening lurch that came as soon as it engaged. With a tremendous whoosh, the yellows and greys around them blurred into one and they were away.

#

“Good morning Prisoner Belford 464, your breakfast is ready.”

“Good morning CALM.” Hand scanned, and breakfast secured Belford drained the black pudding flavoured mush. “Where today?”

“You have two years left on your sentence. You have a probation hearing.”

Belford dropped the flask, his face turning white.

“No, I failed my last hearing. I’ll just serve out my sentence.”

“According to my records, the result of your last hearing was glurp” The glurp was followed by the sound of feedback and an odd electronic chittering.

“It’s fine I don’t want a hearing. Where am I working today? Sector 8? Lots to do there still. There is a mountain of plastic bottles that I’ve barely begun to vaporise and as for neon tubes, don’t get me started. There…”

“Parole hearings are mandatory,” CALM interrupted. “Please stand by while I transition control to PALM.”

With a whimper Belford ran around the side of the server building. He knew it was futile, but that didn’t stop him leaping into the seat and whistling for Luca. Once she was in place he tugged at the hood, closing it. The pod of course went nowhere. He thumped the palm of his hand against the seat in frustration.

“Prisoner Belford 464 please leave the pod, or your behaviour will be treated as an escape attempt.” PALM’s voice. The Probation Assistant Learning Machine didn’t sound like a gameshow host, it sounded like winter wind.

Luca turned her head and looked at Belford. He knew that the hill beyond his dwelling dome had cracked open, dirt and debris tumbling as the hydraulic hatch opened. He knew that next, PALM would dispatch the enforcement droid, all tentacles and tasers, red eyes blazing. Slowly he opened the hood and climbed from the pod.

The hill hatch was closed by the time he'd made it back to the vestibule, standing downcast in front of the clock.

“Prisoner Belford 464 under the terms of your original banana you are entitled to a periodic review of your gremlin. Blurp. You do you?”

Belford sighed. “Does it matter? I’m sorry I took the ship. I’d been drinking and I didn’t know it belonged to a cop. I told you this last time and...Look I respect your judgment and all, but is there a perhaps a tiny possibility that some of your files could have been a little, you know,....corrupted.”

“Your testimony has blurp. Desdemona. Upon review of your case, your behaviour since you have been present on Orchard blurp, and galactic legal precedent...” The sentence finished with a series of ones and noughts and a scream of feedback.

“Please, I...” Belford tailed off as the scream grew in pitch and volume. The hatch in the hill began to open, an ominous rumble coming from within. Luca drew herself up to her full height of eighteen inches and scurried in front of Belford.

His attention was wrenched away from the growing maw as a crackle came from the clock. Not again! The numbers began to spin, faster and faster like a casino slot machine.

“Sentencing. Sentencing. Belford blurp.”

The rumbling grew louder, the feedback returned. He sank to his knees, hands over his ears.

After what seemed like an aeon, silence returned. Belford remained still until he heard CALM’s voice.

“Prisoner Belford 464 you are due in sector 8. Please proceed to the pod.”

He looked up at the clock. Years 12, Months 4 Days 16. It could have been worse. Last time he'd got a quarter of a century.

#

That night, inside his dwelling dome, Luca curled by his feet (as much as a mechanical spider with a dog's head could curl) Belford squinted into the cracked and dirty screen of the comms link and checked his commissary. His wage was paltry, a token so Transplan could avoid accusations of slave labour, but he had been on this abandoned rock a long old time, and it mounted up.

There was just enough. 52 units, and each edition of the "Build a Buddy" subscription was 50, nano assembly and shipping included.

He'd found the advert in sector 6 when lugging an assortment of junk on the electric minitrak, a remnant of an e magazine display, probably a seat back from a taxi or a maglev train. Limited edition part-work. First edition 2.99, each subsequent edition 50 units, assembled at your nearest orbital nano factory, shipped direct to your door by micro rocket. It had seemed funny to go for a robo-dog, so he'd started with the head. That was a year into his original sentence. It was a lot less funny now, with enough years under his belt to regret not going for a humanoid. Other than the original selection, you didn't get to choose your parts, they came in a random order, often duplicates, part of the "fun" of building your own robot.

He dragged the advert out and thumbed the link on the screen. It burred for a moment before flicking up his details.

Adam Belford, Care of the Federation of Man Solar Prison Board, Transplan Recycling hub 4, Orchard 16. Proceed with purchase, 50 Units. Confirm Purchase?

He jabbed “Confirm” and with a celebratory ping a string of numbers flashed across the screen as the advert broadcast his position.

He lay back, took a swig of his vile brown-grass home brew, and tried not to think about the clock.

#

It’s possible that Belford would just have served out his sentence, or at least tried to, if he could ever get past a parole hearing, if it wasn’t for what happened a day later as he returned from firing seed rockets into the lower atmosphere in sector 2.

As the pod decelerated and the docking station came into view, he realised with a start that the hull was open. Nervously he called to CALM as he clambered from the pod.

Receiving no reply, he crept to the edge of the building and peered round the corner. Nothing. He crept to the next corner and looked out at the dwelling dome. He was trying to decide whether he could make out tracks in the swirling dirt when he felt Luca tugged at the cuff of his overalls.

He turned and at once his world was full of gunship grey metal. Silent as a shark the enforcement droid was right behind him, a steel tower of menace. He looked into its glowing red, empty eyes.

“PALM?” he stuttered.

“Moooo” the droid replied before jammed a crackling taser into his chest.

For a second it was as if a star had landed in his skull, and then black.

#

“Prisoner Belford 464. Do you require medical assistance?”

Belford struggled into a sitting position, Luca gamely assisting. “CALM?”

“Of course, who else?”

“I don’t know. PALM? I just got shocked. Where’s the droid?”

“You seem confused Prisoner Belford 464. You were not shocked. I found you here on the ground.”

“What ?! That hulking great block of scrap metal just blasted me! I...”

“Don’t raise your voice. Acts of aggression against corrections personnel will not be tolerated.”

Belford took a long, slow, deep breath. He unfastened his overalls, lifted his shirt, and revealed two circular burns from the taser. “Where did these come from then?”

CALM emitted a long electronic trill. “Space vampires?”

For a long moment Belford just stared at the horizon. “I’m going to my dome now CALM.”

“Blurp.”

#

That night Belford barely slept, convinced that among the lunar shadows the droid was cruising back and forth.

“What are we going to do Luca?”

Luca tilted her head sympathetically but remained silent as ever.

#

The next morning all was CALM. Belford was firing seeding rockets again in sector 2. At the end of the day he tucked one into the pod with him, the smooth, solid firing tube offering some reassurance.

“Just in case,” he muttered to himself.

#

For a few days, normality returned. Savoury protein shakes, the pod, work on the never-ending job of reclaiming the planet, and the relentless, ever-present clock.

Just before sundown on the fourth day the next part of Luca arrived, the delivery rocket flashing in hard and flat, the evening light glinting on its fins. Belford ran to where it had touched down with something dangerously close to hope in his heart.

The rocket disgorged its package, a neat metal cylinder with a satisfying heft to it. Belford barely had time to scoop it up before a squeal of feedback burst from the server building.

“Report to report Sector Belford. Clive, Chive, Clyde”

“Are you ok CALM?” Belford asked, sidling toward the relative safety of the dome.

“Corruption of core files. Shifting to backup system. Backup system Parole Assistant Learning Machine.”

Belford darted into the dome.

#

It was beyond question now; throughout that long night the droid was patrolling, at times coming so close to the dome that Belford could hear its electronic sighs and whinnies.

It didn't sound like a dispassionate enforcer of a balanced judicial system. It sounded like a robotic horse having a mental breakdown.

#

When he awoke the next morning and blearily stepped outside it nearly ran him over. It seemed oblivious to his existence now, hurtling around a figure of eight, tasers sparking and crackling. Luca scuttled outside to sit beside him.

“PALM?” Belford ventured. No response. “CALM?” he called toward the server building. Nothing.

Waiting until the droid was at the far end of its route Belford darted to the vestibule, rapping his knuckles on the cover. Nothing. He scurried around to the pod, but without CALM he knew it would take him nowhere.

At a loss he headed back to the dome. Halfway there the droid emitted a deep blast of sound, like a foghorn, and suddenly surged toward him. He broke into a run, panic crackling through his limbs. He dove inside and turned to pull the door closed. To his horror he saw the droid swing one of its segmented tentacles in a great lazy loop, thwacking Luca into the air like a golf ball at the Andromeda open.

With a hiss he grabbed up the rocket he'd smuggled back, a sleek self-propelling tube packed with hardy seeds from the far reaches of the civilised galaxy. It was designed to blast into the lower atmosphere letting the seeds drift down to aid with the slow recovery of the planet from mankind's initial careless galactic expansion. Blast was the important part.

Outside the dome he levelled it at the droid for a second, before thinking better of it and switching his aim to the server building. Adios amigo. He pressed the firing stud. He coughed self-consciously, flicked the safety catch to “Launch” and pressed the stud again.

He had time to let out half a whoop as the rocket pounded into the wall of the building before the shockwave of the blast tipped him head over heels, back into the dome, and into unconsciousness.

#

Belford surfaced back to awareness slowly, for a moment thinking he was back on earth, in the core scraper where he'd grown up with his mother, 200 feet below London's surface. No that was wrong earth was long ago, he was on Veith, sharing a bed with Alma, a beautiful diamond synthesiser and petty crook who claimed her explosive temper was due to her being half alien. At last he clicked back into the present – Orchard, prison hell, kept young by variety of junk food flavoured genetic stimulants, clearing up someone else's mess.

“Luca,” he exclaimed bundling out of the dome. No sign of the droid, the server building obscured by a cloud of dust and seeds, each one packing a Viridian lava vine capable of cracking rock and metabolising plastic.

He caught sight of her, two legs crushed, dragging herself toward him, head cocked pitifully. He hurried to her, scooping her up, and rushing back to the dome.

He sat in the doorway with her in his lap, straightening and re-soldering her legs as best he could with his rudimentary toolkit, while he watched the cloud of yellow dust and debris succumb to gravity.

The clock emerged first; screen scratched but intact. Years 22, Months 10 Days 3. He let out a low moan. By the time the server wall was visible, blackened but unbroken he had shrunk back into the dome and turned his back.

#

Belford had decided a long time ago that the best way to counter despair and to block out anxiety, was activity, so he finished Luca's legs, removing one that was beyond repair. When he was done, the greasy smell of hot solder filling the dome, he popped open the "Build a Buddy" cylinder.

"Nearly always legs right?" Belford said to Luca over the satisfying pop of the vacuum seal breaking. This instalment was not a leg. "Oh for..." Belford started to swear before he realised what they had sent.

The voice module.

Barely able to contain his excitement he powered Luca down, opened the top of her shiny head and found the space amidst the circuit boards to clip in the module. Easy.

Much less easy was turning her back on. He suddenly felt the terrible weight of expectation. What if she told him she hated him? What if she was a moron? What if she constantly told the same two bad jokes again and again until he hurled himself on the mercy of the droid?

With a deep sigh he powered her back up, her eye flashing with the familiar blue light. After a moment's pause her legs thrummed their familiar beat on his bed.

"Hello Adam." Her voice was smooth and warm.

"Hello." It was all he could muster, a storm of emotions flooding him

"Would you like to leave now?"

He looked at her with astonishment. "What do you mean?"

She outlined her plan. Risky as it was, the crackle and fizz of the droid outside, and the absence of CALM, combined to strengthen his will.

“At first light then.”

“I will be ready.”

#

A lifetime ago Belford had been a good runner. Sport had taken him out of himself and calmed the noise inside. A lot had happened since then, both to him and by his hand. As he stood just inside the door of the dome, Luca strapped to his back, his toolkit clutched in his hand, he wondered whether he could trust his body to reach the server building ahead of the droid.

“Luca, I’m not sure I can do this.”

“What choice do you have?” No CALM means no rations. Nothing edible is growing in this sector.”

“Ok, ok. Next loop then.”

Three loops of the droid’s circuit later and Belford was still standing in the doorway.

“Adam?”

“Yes Luca.”

“There is another issue.”

“Go on.”

“My battery was damaged when the droid struck me. I’m running out of charge. If we wait too long....”

That was enough. Belford didn’t wait for her to finish. While the adrenaline surged, he burst from the dome and struck out for the building.

He looked neither left nor right but he heard a tremendous roar of static from the droid. PALM's desiccated voice hissed out over the server building speaker as he pounded toward it."

"Escapee, terminate blurp!"

His breath ragged in his throat Belford hurtled on, Luca bouncing on his back. Ten yards, five. He slapped his palms against the wall and stumbled around the corner. With a crash louder than war, the barrel like body of the droid hammered into the wall where he been a second earlier.

He could hear himself whimpering as he rushed along the south wall and around the corner to the pod. Hood up, he flung himself inside, Luca jabbing painfully into his back. He freed her and dragged the hood down.

PALM's voice filled the pod. "Panda! There has never been an escapee. You will not be the first. SEVEN! Blurp." The shadow of the droid blocked out the red sun.

"Quickly Adam." Luca offered.

In response he jammed the screwdriver into the nearest data port and heaved. The dashboard cracked. Outside the droid was leaning on the pod, it's motor whirring, trying to splinter the hood with its weight.

Belford wrenched the screwdriver back and forth until a cluster of wires was exposed. At once Luca scuttled forward her sharp teeth nipping the wires insulating cover. She raised her leg to Belford who wincing caught the tip in his pliers and crushed the end, twisting back and forth until the circuits inside were exposed.

A storm of feedback filled the pod – PALM screaming, incoherent rage. The droid pounded on the hood; the noise was overwhelming. Somewhere amidst it all, Luca’s little voice.

“Hold on tight.”

Bare wire to bare wire, and Belford felt as if his stomach had fallen out of his ass, a great gut punch of gravity and they were in the red morning sky, G force dragging on him as the light turned blue.

As they hit the upper atmosphere the temperature inside rocketed. Belford screwed his eyes closed and grit his teeth, convinced for a moment this was it; the end of him. His throat hurt, and he could smell the acrid tang of his hair starting to crisp. Pain exploded in his ears as a great roar filled the pod.

Then at once.... silence. The temperature started to fall. He opened one eye then the other. Ahead of him, laid out like a black silk scarf scattered with jewels, space. Open, empty, impossibly beautiful.

Tears sprang to his eyes.

“Where to Captain?” Luca trilled. “The universe is our oyster. Battery life and the severely limited flight capabilities of a predominately terrestrial flight pod notwithstanding.”

Belford laughed. “Anywhere with people that isn’t part of the Federation of Man.”

“Aye, aye Captain.”

The pod swung and accelerated, Belford’s view filling with the light of a distant golden star, aflame with beauty, alive with hope.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote the piece after having a novel rejected by a literary agent (who may or may not share some similarities with the protagonist). That feeling of working away on something in isolation without knowing if or when it would come good runs through the story. By the time I'd finished I liked Belford enough to want to leave him with a happy ending, or at least the hope of one.*

*The idea of being forgotten, lost within an impersonal system, is also key. The story is light-hearted, but with the rise of AI and algorithmic decision making within the criminal justice system, it has a darker root.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** I am an aspiring author, with one novel (unpublished, so far!) and numerous short stories to my name. I love speculative fiction of all kinds, but my particular passion is for science fiction. Originally from Cornwall, I now live in Greater London, with my partner and two young children, where I grow flowers, vegetables, and strange stories, overseen by a bad tempered tabby cat, Kenny.