

Bucket of Bolts

by John David Hanna

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Clean this story up and all you have is a story. Leave it the way it is and you have both story and style. This is outsider writing: the literary equivalent to folk art. The author is besotted with his subject, the prose is unselfconscious and full of homespun charm and the voice is clean, humble and honest. SciFi junkies will groove on the story; lit nerds will read it for the folksy style. Quote: 'Both the mother and the sister saw the boy at the same time and their first smile of welcome faded to wary slants.' And 'Franklin certainly intended to communicate his appreciation but fumbled his deliveries.' We LOVE it!

Franklin was taking a walk in the forest with command in his step. He had a purpose of visiting the old citadel now just a mile distant. His elders didn't approve saying they preferred him to be pulling duty in the village but once a year or so he was compelled to subject himself to the queasy heights of the artifact.

The trees were losing their density allowing him to quicken his step on the game trail. He kept an eye out for bear although the common black bear of the area was shy. It could still be dangerous especially if surprised or with a slow cub. The trees ended but there was still tall grass and shrubs that blocked his way and his view. As he trotted they lessened their abundance and he could see the top of the structure. He could see the domed cover from this angle but knew that he would soon be presented with a view of the sheer round wall. The roof covering was a smooth substance. In his youth, preteen, he had raised a scaffold with the other kids and found the top

rounded smooth and opaque and in fact, had almost slid over the edge of the 30-foot supporting wall.

Besides the strange fact that the building rises without being overgrown, there are chairs evenly spaced about the miles of the circumference. Every single hard chair was placed consistently about fifty yards apart. As children, they had tried to break and harm the arms and legs of the metal like objects, but their efforts availed them nothing. They couldn't dig in the rock beneath them, and they didn't burn, and they didn't budge.

They didn't move unless someone sat in them. Franklin had watched his friends operate the chairs in the past and although it was a miracle that was ever present it was still a miracle. The tribe just kept it quiet and ignored the glaring inconsistency – it wasn't something the shaman, his dad, could deal with.

There was no reason to stare at the empty off-white walls – even mold didn't grow on them. Franklin walked right up and sat in the nearest chair. The control panel was located on the left-hand forearm of the chair. Pressing on the top of the flat button took you upwards and to the left moved you to the left and right to the right. Downwards did nothing. The funny part of the ride was that nothing was remembered.

He pushed to the left, and the next thing he remembered was coming to consciousness right where he had started. He felt queasy and lightheaded. It was near like smoking the ceremonial tobacco. The effects lasted for a full ten minutes, and he experienced the totality of it before he pressed up into the panel. Franklin knew he should sense the ride, but he had watched many of his friends ride and although they remembered nothing he had seen them move in their chairs around the entire circumference of the structure or over the top and back down. Before he pushed the up button, he said his name out loud for no particular reason.

This time out of the dozens of times the young man had ridden this high he did not pass out. The chair began to rise, and he sat immobile without a choice in the matter. Soon he passed over the edge and was moving inexorably across the top until the machine stopped and he sank into the surface. His fear rose to know that if he got loose onto the roof he would slide off and three stories were too far to fall. Something held him immobile in the seat even as his face began to sink into the unknown and unfelt surface. His breathing became rapid, but the smothering that he expected didn't occur. Soon he was floating down from the ceiling to anchor himself to the floor all automatically. He struggled to get out of the chair but the same force prevented it although he could move his arms and legs and of course, fortunately, he was breathing in and out.

A voice manifested itself from an unknown direction, and nothing could be seen.

“There is no Franklin to be found” the voice stated.

Franklin was very frightened, but he was still a smart boy. He had said his own name aloud and that had activated some machinery. He wasn't up to date on much of the way of the mechanism, but the concept was clear. He relaxed enough to talk.

“Where are you?” the youth asked and before him materialized a man, dressed in what once was business casual and a nondescript smile. Franklin stood and realized he was released from whatever restraint had so recently held him. The room filled itself up with furniture, a food bar and pictures on the wall. It was all comforting but not at all like the rooms he was used to.

“Hello, you must be Franklin, your friends call you Frank? My name is Rusty your local AI” Rusty said.

"Can you get me out of here?" Frank asked.

“Of course you are free to leave any time you like. When you want to come back just ‘chair’ and ask for Rusty instead of Franklin and I will be at your service”.

Franklin had heard of fabulous machines that provided anything for anybody back before the collapse, but they were only legends to dream about while he spent his day in the fields tending the beans and corn.

Rusty declined to leave and asked instead “Were you here at the collapse?”

"I am 865 years old." said the AI.

“Don’t you get bored?” asked Frank and Rusty laughed.

"I just adjust my timeslice and sample time to something I find comfortable. It has actually been 429 years since the collapse, and to me, it seems like 3 months. Time went quickly enough, and now I can help you rebuild".

“What was the collapse all about?”

Rusty looked at Franklin speculatively before answering it. "We did too much for people, and they got lazy. In the end, they needed to be hand fed and wouldn't even mate. A few survived and are now tough enough to begin re-education. We have no purpose without people, life isn't the same".

Rusty walked to the food bar and made a couple of cheese sandwiches and offered one to Franklin who followed him and sampled the seemingly designer fair.

Rusty changed his shoes from black leather loafers to plastic sneakers. "Let's walk," he said, and Franklin nodded. He sat in the chair with half a sandwich left in his hand.

The chair began its journey through the ceiling with Franklin fully aware as he permeated the roof and moved down the side of the wall. Once grounded he saw Rusty walk outside through a newly appeared door.

"You want to come to the village?" Franklin asked, and Rusty nodded, the two of them setting foot back along the game trail that Franklin had followed less than an hour ago.

Soon there was a smoke trail from a cooking fire to be seen in the distance, and it quickly neared as they walked. Rounding a corner, Franklin and the robot found themselves in the boy's backyard. Franklin lived in a poured plastic steel single story one family construction that was popular during the collapse. The windows were still intact due to advances in glass materials, but the back door was jammed open due to loss of the locking mechanism. This house had been occupied for several centuries and looked fresh as the day it was poured. The sidewalks and drive had suffered some plant incursion,

The backyard was from the current century. Franklin's mother and younger sister were preparing food on the rough-hewn table near the sheet metal pot boiling over an open fire. There was a hand pump well nearby and an outhouse off in the distance by the barn. The barn was another house similar to the one they occupied but it possessed a couple of pack horses, a cow, and chickens along with storage.

Both mother and sister saw the boy at the same time, and their first smile of welcome instantly faded to wary slants.

"Who is this?" Franklin's mother asked, the ladle rising to a defensive posture unconsciously. The youngster Lydia moved behind her mother.

"He lives in the artifact, and his name is Rusty" Franklin quickly said moving between the two. "He has food!" he added.

"I am an artificial intelligence, a machine you people made, and I have missed you, and I have much to teach," Rusty said.

"There is that too," Franklin said apologetically of the uppity manner.

Lydia had retreated to the background and then disappeared behind the house only to reappear with Franklin's dad Amos and older brother Ray. They came running around the corner to confront the stranger, an unknown happening, and although they didn't brandish them, they did carry their hunting bows.

"What's this!" demanded Amos and Rusty explained himself in a highfalutin manner. Rusty told Amos that he lived in a group of 743 men, women and children with the next closest group of people more than 200 miles distant. The surrounding groups were near the same size and too far away to come across or see signs of. They were located outside of Terra Haute Indiana.

The homes they occupied were well built and weathered the ages of at least a few centuries. Rusty told them the first miracle he would perform for them would be to get them some electricity of which they were wholly dumbfounded at the concept and weren't too excited. They got the idea that Rusty came from the magic artifact and they would never be able to beat him so they may as well just go along and hope it would work out.

While he was talking Rusty communicated with the connected bots in the relic where he had stayed and had a small nuclear furnace moved out of storage. Soon much of the village had gathered to hear his stories. He got permission to bury the generator in the middle of the town and began the grid. The existing network was degraded, and the copper had corroded, and all of the wiring up to the homes and more substantial buildings had to be trundled from storage in the relic. There wasn't enough but more was easily manufactured from raw material within a week. Rusty sent bots to collect corroded wire from anywhere it could be found. After they ran out they

would need to reactivate a mine wherever the ore was most abundant. The reanimation of Franklin's group was the rebuilding of the world.

Meanwhile, most of the village was assembling in the backyard along with a host of following chickens and dogs and smaller pigs. Rusty decided to do some electrical demonstrations and cobbled together a small generator and a Van de Graaff machine along with a motorized model car that he used to amuse and prepare the crowd for their own contact with electricity. He distributed small flashlights with yearly charges. Meanwhile, he ordered a group of bots, of which the crowd was still suspicious, to fetch and set up a cafeteria of the mobile type. The smell of baked bread quiets anyone. It took most of the afternoon to train the people how to make the simple cooking choices and how to feed the input bin. How the natives were to deal with the composted waste could wait; the pats meanwhile just plopped out and piled at the back of the machine.

Sasha showed up in her best homespun. She hadn't really noticed Franklin before but now that he was the center of all this attention she thought she might hook onto a rising star. Franklin saw her, and that was all it took for her to approach ignoring his shyness. She pressed in close as Rusty fired up the Van de Graaff and pretended to be a bit alarmed allowing her an excuse to rub against him. Franklin certainly intended to communicate his appreciation but fumbled his deliveries.

Toward evening Sasha was rounded up by her parents leaving Frank with a set of memories that would last until Sasha got a chance to upgrade them.

Getting his attention back after the Sasha onslaught Amos asked Rusty what was for dinner. He was not really expecting an answer.

"Bacon, lettuce, and tomato aka BLT with mayo and wheat bread," Rusty said and went to manipulate the grill. By now there had been plenty of waste input, and the machine chugged out an even 100 of the sandwiches in short order. They were eaten with glee especially by the women and girls who didn't have to prepare them.

The fire pit in the backyard was stoked, and many people were pulling their bedding into the yard as the sun went down. It was springtime and the nights were still cool. Frank asked Rusty what he was going to do about sleep and whether he might want the company of the romantic kind during the night. Rusty refused any personal attention and declined in a good mood saying he had plenty to do and that he didn't sleep. Many of the men died before their brides, late thirties, and it was considered a polite thing to do to give one of the widows a good night of attention.

Rusty noticed that Amos had a moderate case of bowed legs brought on from rickets. Rusty knew he could help the weakened condition using stem cells and leg braces but getting the man to consent to a month of downtime while the legs healed was something to puzzle in the future. Many of the people died from an infection. Franklin's other older brother had died when a broken leg got infected – it was a horrible memory of the lingering painful death.

Already people were looking for medical help. A nearby family had brought a member with an infected toe that had already gone gangrene. In a moment Rusty had snipped off the toe with a laser, searing it at the source and gave the boy a bottle full of pills. He told him to take one every four hours. The family was amazed expecting they would need to bury him in the next few days. The boy struggled with swallowing a pill but soon achieved it. There were murmurs of worried approval heard throughout the crowd. Life-saving steps were a more massive miracle than a stove.

Franklin finally tired soon after dark and retired to his room. There was no need for him to sleep under the stars this evening. When he looked out the window at the people in his yard, he wasn't particularly surprised to see that Sasha had maneuvered her family to group their bedding outside of his window where he could see where she was. It was tempting, but if her parents let him through their barrier, it might be considered an engagement of marriage other than a meeting of pleasure.

In the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep other than a nodding guard, Rusty appeared at the foot of his bedding.

"Franklin," it said loud enough to rouse him.

"What is it?"

"The auto-response buried egg-shaped guns on the edge of Siberia have downed an incoming Reptoid ship," Rusty said as if it was important. Apparently, it was, thought Franklin.

"What's a gun, was anybody hurt and is it coming here?" Franklin asked.

"No, but I thought you should know. If Reptilians get involved here in North America, we are in for a fight".

"What would they want from us?" Franklin asked.

"Dinner" Rusty answered without a smile.

"OK, let me know if there is something I can do and thank you for your concern"

Franklin said returning to snuggle into his bedding. He didn't see Rusty go and all that he knew is that he had seen and heard enough for one day.

Franklin rose to a changed yard. He stumbled around looking for a spot to urinate and found a new station that worked quite well. Next, Franklin looked for food and found a delicious egg foo young at the new kitchen. The silverware and plate were new innovations, and he had to

watch the others struggle with the utensils before he managed to push the food into his own mouth.

Asking about, he found that Rusty was working in the center of town, so he headed off in that direction. On the way, he chanced upon a newly cleared roadway that was overrun with bots of all shapes and sizes carting items to and from what he assumed would be the citadel. The machinery was careful to steer around pedestrians, and he had no trouble walking the mile or so to find Rusty.

The head machine was located amid a bustle of hustling bots, and Franklin assumed Rusty was communicating with some unseen presence because he wasn't seeing anyone barking commands although the construction was naturally organized.

The atomic battery was already buried, and wires were being extended to a new substation that would distribute among the grid already being constructed. One thing that would be lit quickly, within the week, would be the school. The school was critical to Rusty as that is where it would be convenient to meet to get the re-education going. If the Reptoid ship meant anything, they would need to meet the threat quickly.

"Hi Rusty," Franklin said when he got near to his friend.

"Hello Franklin, how was your rest period?"

"I slept fine, is there anything I can do"?

"You can go into the school and arrange the furniture. We should be starting classes within the week" Rusty said. It produced a couple of papers that detailed seating arrangements and gave them to the boy. Even writing was new to Franklin. Franklin did the best he could not knowing what school was for. At lunchtime, he went to follow the road back to his house for something to eat when he found a section of the school where he could eat. The bots had already

renovated a small working food exchange. He spent the afternoon feeding weeds to the machine to be converted into food and he ate dinner there too.

He was joined by Sasha for dinner who had spent the day looking for him. She was congenial, and Frank was glad to have her company. Ray followed Sasha having an interest in the girl but wouldn't intrude too far on his brother. That evening Rusty provided a new machine that he said made clothing, but first, they needed to load it with raw material which was wood and foliage. It was exhausting work, and Rusty didn't assign bots to the simple task because, as he put it when asked, "I'm not making that mistake again!"

The next week went pretty quickly. Amos, the titular head of the community was compliant and soothed the rest of the tribe or city. The houses were lit by the dozens a day, and the people were soon enthused with lights. Food was a community affair, and it was fun to watch your neighbor adjust the utensils and plates. There was no dishwasher, and once the plates were provided by Rusty, they were to be cleaned and stored. Furniture was supplied as well as bedding from the warehouse portion of the citadel and everyone was pleased and kept busy.

The school began on a rainy day, a Monday as the new calendar specified, and the entire village turned out to be instructed in an elementary way from the re-purposed bots. Everyone wore their new clothing – they especially liked the shoes which resembled army boots although they had no familiarity with what army boots were supposed to look like. Somehow Sasha made her polo shirts look especially fetching. Daisy Dukes weren't invented yet, but Rusty could have run odds, if a robot was to be so inclined, that she would be the first to design such an innovation.

Most found the inclusion of new facts and ways to be exciting and stayed in school the entire day. Some left and they were assigned providing raw materials for the machines which, if

they stay away from school, is all they will ever do. History class was the most volatile and unusual from the very first day.

The construction bots taught the classes. They had reformed with faces and ears and mouths – they talked through their mouths. They dressed in the usual polo shirts and jeans or slacks and were easily mistaken for human beings if not for their silvery metal heads. When school was over, they reformatted or transformed to tote vehicles with a trip to the citadel to install some tires and a truck frame. By the end of the month, everything had changed permanently without a hitch in Rusty's plan.

Amos was getting fidgety as one time he had been the unelected king of the group, and it hadn't meant much to anyone. Now that the group had purpose and possessions he was beginning to notice that Rusty allocated all the critical jobs to Franklin. He didn't realize that Rusty was parceling the crummy jobs and schooling to maintain the mental and physical strength of everyone in the group. Franklin was young with lots of energy and didn't mind doing some of the grunt work.

Rusty was putting extra training in particular people all through the group. Amos and Ray and Lydia and Franklin's mother were selected to be doctors and nurses and were already operating a clinic. They provided sage advice and tender loving care. With the actual treatment and diagnosis being done by a robot they could see and diagnose and treat all of the patients in a short time. Eventually, people would be more effective than robots.

Time had passed, and Rusty was soon to marry Sasha while Rusty had them training as diplomats although they didn't know it and didn't know what the job entailed. Rusty knew that

they would have to send emissaries out before too long especially if the Reptoids made their appearance on this part of the planet. Peace was not to be as the detector armament reported another ship in low orbit but it hadn't landed not knowing how much of the land was protected. The lizards would be determining how poorly protected it actually was. Rusty's citadel would not go undetected.

"Don't be coy, how do you like school?" Rusty asked Franklin and Sasha on this next Monday morning. The calendar was another new innovation that the tribe organized itself around.

"School is exciting. I had no idea there was so much stuff to know" Frank said.

"I especially like reading and writing," Sasha said squeezing Franklin's arm into her bosom. Franklin's reddening face caused Rusty to smile through his personality module.

"Good, am glad to hear it, and I have an assignment for you. I want you to go to the next village and make contact with the people who live there".

"Both of us?" Franklin asked, and Sasha smiled.

"Also, your family is doing good with the clinic. You've both taken the monthly birth control pill so I see no reason why you can't travel together".

Franklin thought that this was one of those times that Rusty was just too mechanical. Sometimes he didn't take feelings into account. Franklin hadn't made love with Sasha yet, and he didn't think an arduous trip of 200 miles in the ruff would be very romantic. He assumed correctly that his girl would prefer to be comfortable.

"I have something new for you," Rusty said and walked them outside of the classroom that they occupied. There sat two ATVs the likes that Franklin or Sasha had never seen. Rusty showed them how to use the simple machines. They had a thousand mile range between charges

and were keyed to the pair in case anyone decided to take their stuff in the strange encampment. There was also a phone attached to the machines, and they were to check in with Rusty often. There was also a weapon compartment, but Rusty preferred to mount a rescue if action was needed and wouldn't activate the lasers and bazooka unless it was necessary for an emergency.

Sasha and Franklin had already selected an empty home shell on the edge of the community and had spent some time there cleaning it out. The electricity was proposed to be connected within a week, and they would move in with a short wedding ceremony – he was to carry her over the threshold.

Duty bound, the two loaded some food and were off that same morning. They camped the first night without incident but before the second night the terrain got rocky, and they had to avoid snakes. Skirting a small lake a few cottonmouths charged them, but they made it past before the snakes made landfall. They were following a highway, but at places, it had become too covered with thicket to follow, and they had to detour. They used the phone which also had a locator device to maintain their coordinates. They traveled through the second night. The third day they skirted a heavily racked snorting deer and ran across their first hunting party.

They were plowing through the woods when someone called out to them. They dismounted and waited. Soon a hunting party of three young men approached them with their bows at the ready. They looked a bit different from the home team – they were already wearing clothing that wasn't homespun, and their bows were what Franklin now realized were manufactured. They didn't seem impressed by his transport.

"Where did you get the working carriage," asked Ron the leader of the hunting party. He had a heavy accent but was easily understandable.

"It was given to me by a friend," said Franklin. He introduced himself and his fiancé to the three young men as they seemed more interested in the pretty girl than in anything else.

"Let's get you back to the village and meet the chief," said Ron nonchalantly.

"But you'll be going home empty handed" Sasha added. "Maybe we should help them with their hunt and return with some deer."

"It's all right we have plenty of fresh meat," Ron said. The road was easy from this point into the encampment which was only 4 or 5 miles distant. Ron stayed with his new guests while the other two ran ahead and when they arrived in the outskirts they were met by dozens of people all polite and nicely dressed.

Some accents were harder to understand from some people, but Franklin did his best, and they were regaled at a dinner with plenty of the ceremonial herb and beer. Franklin not being used to the party life fell out early to the glee of all the rest of the revelers.

He arose in the morning from a mattress someone had helped him onto in the middle of the floor of a large building. His fiancé wasn't nearby, and he began to worry, despite his headache, that something had happened to her.

It was then that Sasha appeared around the corner obviously in good spirits with two pretty girls in tow. They crossed directly to Franklin and were all about his well being. Did he feel alright, could they get him anything, how about some breakfast or coffee?

"Coffee?" Franklin asked. They had none where he lived. One of the girls got him some coffee and a bagel and his hangover quickly abated. "This would be a good trade item" he added.

"It isn't exactly rare, but we only have a limited supply" the one that brought him coffee said. "I'm Sally."

"We have what was called a distribution center before the collapse, and a lot of the items are still good. There are canned foods and clothing and some tools like the bows. I don't know what we would want in exchange" the other girl said.

"Some live ATV batteries would be good," Sally said.

"I'm glad I came," he said, and Sasha smiled in agreement, but then a buzzer sounded. After a bit of a search, Frank found it was the phone and answered it for the first time.

Rusty wasted no time and spoke up immediately. "There is a Reptoid prowling the village you are visiting."

"So what am I supposed to do about it?" Franklin asked.

"You have to get some help and kill it. It's about as hard to kill as an alligator" Rusty said

"What's an alligator and what does it want here?" Franklin asked. Meanwhile his new friends Ron and the twins Mike and Albert had come in at the start of the conversation. Franklin didn't think it wise to put it on private.

"You can do it with a bow. Reptoids are humanoid lizards, and they eat raw meat. They prefer a fight, and they are only allowed to use weapons that match the humanoids they are hunting".

"Allowed by who?" Ron asked.

"I wouldn't call it law, but there are precedents," Rusty told them. "They must have spotted your ATV because they dropped in behind it right before you entered the village. They are loners but you need to clear the trail, or you will be ambushed on your return trip".

"What if we just hide?" asked Sasha reasonably.

"The reptoid will keep coming until it finds and takes someone from the village. Crowds don't scare it because they run. Reptilians are an ugly bunch," Rusty informed them. There didn't seem anything else to say, so they hung up.

"Let's go kill it," said Ron and his friends agreed, waving their bows.

"What about Sasha," Franklin asked in alarm.

"She has to come. We can't leave her here alone. We won't run since we know that is what it expects" Ron said and set off jogging down the trail with the rest following, the two ATVs at a crawl.

Not three hours into the journey Ron and his friends decided to take a break. Right then, from the side of the road, there were two pops, rather loud ones. Franklin and Sasha found themselves and their machines entangled in a net.

Ron and the two hunters set up a perimeter and waited for the alien. It didn't take long until the monster detached itself from the woods and strutted forward armed with a club and an expectation that everyone would run except its trapped meal.

Ron was good to his word, and Franklin didn't even see fear on his face as the young man stood his ground waiting until the ghoul got close enough to receive his strong thrust.

"Now!" Rod shouted, and three arrows were accurate to their marks followed by three more. The first three ricocheted off the hard carapace but the second set lodged one into the flesh under the knee. The creature roared in pain and fear and moved as quickly as it could back into the forest.

"I would say it's done with us" Ron bragged.

"But done with the village?" Sasha asked.

"I think so. Rusty says it hunts for fun; it doesn't really have a food problem. Therefore I think its misery will keep it busy. It may even leave the earth" Frank said as he struggled with the netting. Advance materials weren't allowed, and he found it easy enough to let his friends cut him free as he hadn't carried a knife.

"Well let's get moving a bit faster. I'm anxious to meet our new neighbors" Ron said.

"We've certainly have a tale to tell" Sasha added.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

After a career as a computer consultant and then some investigation into alien history of this solar system I became certain that someone with artificial intelligence may have been here and maybe as long as hundreds of millions of years ago.—but AI's might not die so wouldn't they still be here? It doesn't hurt to look for them in fiction.

BIO:

John David Hanna is a retired computer contractor with one story published. You can read his credits on his website www.JohnDavidHannaWriting.com