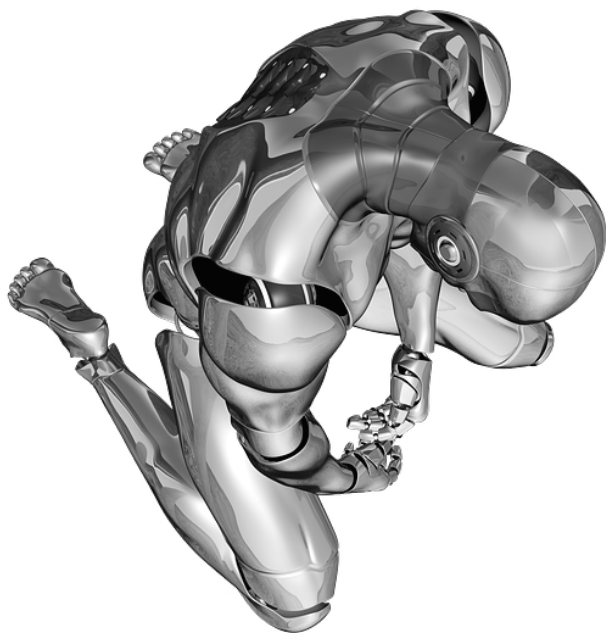


A Tick Tock Heart



Other titles by David Vernon:

- Skeptical* — a handbook of pseudoscience and the paranormal, (ed, with Laycock, Brown and Groves), 1989
- Having a Great Birth in Australia*, (ed) 2005
- Men at Birth*, (ed) 2006
- With Women: midwives' experiences — from shiftwork to caseload* (ed), 2007
- The Umbrella's Shade and other award-winning stories from the Stringybark Short Story Awards*, (ed), 2011
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A Tick Tock Heart

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stories
from the
Stringybark Future Times Short
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Edited
by
David Vernon

Selected by
Colin Campbell, Ruth Ellison, Fleur Joyce and
David Vernon

*A Tick Tock Heart — twenty-two award-winning stories from the Stringybark
Future Times Short Story Awards*

Published by
Stringybark Publishing,
PO Box 851, Jamison Centre, ACT 2614, Australia

www.stringybarkstories.net

First published: July 2014

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NATIONAL LIBRARY CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA ENTRY

A Tick Tock Heart: twenty-two award-winning stories from the Stringybark Future Times Short Story Awards / edited by David Vernon

Edition: 1st

ISBN 978-0-987523-976 (pbk).

Subjects: Short stories, Australian — 21st Century
Science Fiction, Australian — 21st Century
Stringybark Short Story Awards
Literary prizes — Australia

Other Authors/Contributors:

Vernon, David Michael John 1965- editor

Dewey Number: A823.0108

Cover photo: Pixabay

Cover design: David Vernon, www.davidvernon.net

Printed in Australia on Sustainable Forest FSC Paper

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Introduction

– David Vernon

In 2010 when I established *Stringybark Stories* I could not imagine that in four years we would be publishing our twentieth anthology of short stories. And yet, here we are. It seems somewhat fitting that our twentieth anthology is one that looks to the future.

For this competition, writers from around the world were asked to imagine some period after 2020 and craft a tale around that time. Some authors chose the far distant future, while others were perhaps a little bit braver and chose the near future to set their story.

Two broad themes emerged from the writers. Firstly, robots/ androids/your-plastic-pal who's-fun-to-be-with will soon be populating not only car assembly lines but also our houses. This will cause no shortage of dilemmas. The second theme was more grim — climate change; human made climate change, is going to have massive impacts upon everything on this precious earth of ours. There are no climate sceptics among our authors.

Despite the pessimism of many of our authors, this anthology does try to find gold, and not just lead, in our shared future.

This is an imaginative, clever and fascinating anthology of stories that take us into an entirely new world.

I hope you enjoy these stories as much as the judges, Colin Campbell, Ruth Ellison, Fleur Joyce and David Vernon did, in selecting them.

David Vernon
Judge and Editor
“Stringybark Stories”
July 2014



Second Code on the Post-It Note

– J.C. Howard

The box had been sitting in her kitchen, unopened, for over a week now. It was still exactly where the delivery guy had left it: in the gap between the dishwasher and the end of the bench top, where the tiles turned into carpet. Jean had looked at it every day, so she knew every detail on its surface by heart.

It was plastered with customs approvals, freight dockets and not one, but two invoice sleeves. There were also the government seals and warranty details, housed in a separate set of sleeves, and the full set of tracking pins which covered each side of the box in tiny tack-like disks. The large Japanese symbols flowing down each side of the box also added to the chaos of its surface. But, as ugly as it was, she was starting to get used to it being there; like it was a part of the apartment's décor or something. She had even rested a pot plant on top of it, to accentuate the 'Zen' feel.

Jean heard the ping of an email sound across her apartment's speakers. No doubt it was the company again. They sent one every day around this time, reminding her everything was ready. At midnight tonight, the code would expire, and she would lose him forever. Well, she already had, but still.

Today was the day.

She drank her morning coffee and stared at the box, trying to figure out a way in. It took her several minutes to get through the outer shipping box, fighting through large amounts of sticky tape and shrink-wrapping with a pair of ancient plastic scissors she had found in the bottom of the kitchen junk drawer. Once the outer cardboard and wrapping from the shipping was off, she fumbled all of the bulky refuse into one corner of the apartment, and beheld a beautiful glowing cube.

The *Hito House Robot* packaging was playing images of the famous black and white machine across its surface, performing all of its amazing functions in silent precision. Jean watched the moving images on the digi-board packaging for several minutes. Eventually, the *Hito* began to repeat its actions; stuck in an infinite show-reel of cleaning,

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lifting and preparing meals. When Jean got bored, she tore off the set of fastening tabs that kept the base attached, and lifted the box up.

It was sitting foetus-like, hunched in a ball, its smooth head tucked between its knees. All across its sleek, carbon surface were thin sheets of clear plastic film, perfectly cut to the shape of its every surface to protect it from scrapes and scratches in transit. She peeled a piece from its shoulder, revealing a perfect, glossy skin underneath. A dull, fish-eyed reflection of her face looked back across the curve of the matte carbon material. It was an oddly satisfying feeling, removing that plastic — almost cathartic. Before she knew it, she was peeling it all off, revealing first the sleek back and shoulders, then the thin, pipe-like arms, and finally the robot's shiny, black and white head. She spotted a large 'O' button on the base of its skull, and pushed it in. Instantly the rubber circle lit up white underneath her finger, and the *Hito* twitched.

And stood. It eased to its feet, unfolding its limbs and rising up with the sound of sliding plastic. When it reached its full height of around five feet, it lifted its head and everything seemed to lock into place. For a moment everything was very still and silent, then a pleasant, synthetic voice sounded from somewhere.

“Hello,” it said politely. “I am Hito.”

The voice was soft and rolling — like dragging something hard across corrugated rubber.

Jean blinked. She saw some of the protective wrapping, still stuck to its legs. She stooped down quickly and peeled it off. The *Hito* swayed slightly for a moment, as Jean brushed off the last little bits of sticky with the wrist of her cardigan.

“Thank you,” it said automatically, its head still bowed.

Jean stood up quickly; surprised with its awareness. It knew this, and yet she had still not even activated it yet. Almost as though it read her mind, the voice came again.

“If you have a code, you might like to speak it.”

She looked over at the *Post-It* note on the wall and bit her lip.

Her daughter, Amelia, had written both the codes onto the one note and stuck it up there, right next to his picture. Jean knew it was to introduce her to the idea of the two of them being one and the same. Funny thing was, it had started to work. In the last few weeks she had

detached herself from that old picture of him. It was as though he was the code on that *Post-It* note now, and the image in the picture was of some other man she thought she knew.

But the sound of him still lingered. Sounds were easier to remember.

Occasionally she thought she had heard him calling out to her, and she often heard him in the bedroom, or pottering around the apartment. She could still recall the way he pronounced certain words; like when he said *heer-ya*, instead of *here*. And when he laughed, it was never loud, yet it always sounded big — as though it came from a larger person. Jean remembered a lot of things about him: their first kiss, the birth of their daughter; hard times; good times; the three of them around the breakfast table. It was hard to link that face to those memories. But she remembered the laughter. There was always laughter; it seemed to come so easily.

Jean's fingers tapped against the cup in her hands. Maybe she should make another coffee before she did this. Amelia would be livid that she was drinking this much caffeine.

"Hello," said the robot again. "I am Hito."

He had told her he wanted her at least to try this for a while. Before he died, the company had captured it all. They had a way to extract everything — any little piece of memory or quirk of character that made him who he was. It was all there, in the *Next-Life* database, waiting to be downloaded. It wouldn't really be him — she knew that. But it would be close.

Jean made another coffee and roamed around her kitchen, lost in a memory of their wedding day. When she stopped, she found herself standing in front of the *Post-It*. She took a deep breath and plucked the yellow slip from the wall.

"Hello. I am H—"

She spoke the first code. The Hito listened.

"Thank you," it said. "Hito activated."

It lifted its head, its eyes blazing to life. There was a moment, just the briefest flicker of processing, as the robot took in its surroundings. It panned its head around the apartment and found Jean, locking on to her face with its crystalline eyes. It lifted a hand to her.

But before it could offer up anything else; before it could tell her all

of its amazing house functions; before it could even say one more word, she spoke the second code on the *Post-It* note. Once again, the Hito listened. Then it straightened and nodded its head respectfully.

“*Next-Life* function activated,” it told her. “Accessing database. This may take a while.”

Jean left the robot in the kitchen and took a shower. She washed her hair, gave it a blow dry, put on some eyeliner and just the smallest touch of lippy. Then she slipped on a bright blue dress — his favourite — and waited.

She spent the next few minutes, staring into the mirror, wondering if it could be him and deciding that it wouldn't be, and that the whole idea was stupid, and she was making a monumental mistake. Then a noise came from the kitchen. It was the clack of hardened feet across her kitchen's tiled floor. Jean listened as the footsteps travelled across the carpet of the lounge room and down the hallway. She opened the bathroom door and leant out. From here she could see straight into the kitchen. The *Hito* was gone.

“Hullo?” she called out.

A human voice came from the bedroom. It was a deep, masculine laugh, peculiar in timbre — almost like it belonged to someone abnormally large. Frightened, she called out again, walking weakly through the doorway and stopping dead when she reached the hall.

The *Hito* stood motionless in front of the bedroom mirror leaning in towards its own reflection, a shiny hand raised to its face. It looked at her through the mirror.

“Hello, love,” the *Hito* said in his voice. “It's me.”

They broke down together. And when he comforted her, telling her he was here, that he was actually really here, she noticed the word tweak up the end so that it sounded more like *hee-ya*, than anything else.



J.C. Howard loves everything science-fiction and fantasy and is (slowly) working on his first novella, which combines the two. He is studying fiction-writing and journalism at Griffith University, and is based in the north of Sydney. He has previously been published in the *Stringybark* anthologies *The Umbrella's Shade* and *Marngrook*.