



Friends of Paynesville Library Inc.

Winning Stories



SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2026

Friends of Paynesville Library Inc.



SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2026

Winners

FIRST PRIZE (\$400.00)

**"A Great Wall" written by Miriam Smith,
Sale, Victoria**

SECOND PRIZE (\$200)

**"Four Feet" written by Ian Harrison,
Malabar, New South Wales**

THIRD PRIZE (\$100)

**"Extinction" written by Alexander Aich,
Berwick. Victoria**

Congratulations to all winners and thank you to all entrants.

Friends of Paynesville Library Inc.



JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Judges Rosemary Douglas, Bill Cotter and Jill Ellis came to a unanimous decision on the three top stories for this year's contest.

Top of our list as number one was number 1 - A Great Wall.

Second and third were 50 Four Feet and 33 Extinction.

All three judges agreed that this year's winners were very difficult to choose as there were so many well written, interesting stories often using major events and times in human history in original ways.

The writers of the 2026 entries have given us great hope for the future of short story writing. Emotions, humanity, reflections on character and longside humour and well judged thought through plots. So much fresh imagination at work is more than encouraging.

Over the years we have judged this competition we have read lots of good writing and 2026 was full of insight and wonderful observation.

A Great Wall had each of us hooked from the first page with a modernist twist on the building of the Great Wall of China. Lots of chuckles and well directed pathways. Amusing and enjoyable to the end.

Four Feet and Extinction could both have been winners but we all agreed that A Great Wall shone.

Thanks to Fiona and all of those involved in continuing this very special annual contest continuing a grand tradition in acknowledging the importance of story writing.

Jill Ellis

Friends of Paynesville Library Inc.



PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS

"I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better knowledge, sent to where I met him down the Lachlan years ago; He was shearing when I knew him, so I sent the letter to him, just on spec, addressed as follows, "Clancy, of the Overflow".

And an answer came directed in a writing unexpected (and I think the same was written with a thumb-nail dipped in tar). A.B. Patterson

Of all the more than fifty entries in this year's Paynesville Friends of the Library Short Story Competition, we did not receive one entry written with a thumbnail dipped in tar. However, we received stories from people who wanted to share their love, compassion and feelings of being Australian, alongside some ripping yarns and exceedingly challenging "who-dun-its". The standard and quality of the stories this year have been unprecedented and to the Judges; Jill Ellis, Rosemary Douglas and Bill Cotter, I say "Thank you, thank you". It is an extremely difficult task to pick the best from among the finest. Thank you for all those who entered, we wish you success in the future, keep writing.

John Mooney

A Great Wall

Miriam Smith

A Great Wall

It was early afternoon in the Chinese Emperor's palace. The Ming emperor stretched slowly.

'I am so bored!' he said, 'Can we attack the Wokou pirates again?'

'No,' said an adviser, 'it'd be political suicide.'

The adviser paused to consult a clipboard, '...and you can't do any more interior decorating yet because Huang said the living room curtains won't be ready for another 2 weeks.'

'Why don't we build something outside, then? That's always politically popular.' said the Emperor.

Another adviser spoke up,

'How about a water feature, maybe with a little bridge and some willow trees? We can get some nice ladies with fans to stand on it.'

'No, not that again,' sighed the Emperor, then perked up as he had a thought, 'but how about something avant garde, edgy, and original... like a giant wooden duck?'

'We can't do that. The Greeks already built a giant wooden horse,' said the first adviser.

(It is a little-known fact that the Greeks did NOT besiege and destroy Troy. They DID sneak in by using a wooden horse ruse, but when they crept out they looked around and thought: well, this is a bit rubbish. There's no decent place to get a coffee, the local mall doesn't even have an electronic goods outlet, and only entertainment venue is a museum on tree ferns. So, they crept back out of Troy and sailed away. We're not sure what really destroyed Troy but current research points to either the Lizard People, the Tories, or that it was the inevitable result of untrammelled Popery).

'Well, we can't be seen to be copying the Greeks, I s'pose.' said the Emperor reluctantly.

General Qi had been standing silently and gazing ahead into the middle distance but spoke now, still apparently staring off at some vision only he could see.

'What about a wall, right, but a really big wall,' he said slowly.

'What, like, head high?' said an adviser.

'No, *really* big.'

‘3 meters?’

‘No! REALLY big.’

They all thought about this for a minute.

‘Ooooh...’ said the Emperor.

The Emperor, assisted by his advisers and General Qi, reached out to a contractor to project manage the construction of the wall, who promptly came to the palace for a consult. The Emperor and all assisting explained what they wanted and the contractor nodded wisely then looked out the window, spat, and scratched his behind.

‘So, this wall, do you want it Hellenic style? That’s all the rage out west these days.’

The Emperor turned to his advisers.

‘Do we?’ he asked.

‘No,’ they answered, ‘remember that bloody wooden horse. Make it all pointy like usual.’

‘Usual...pointy...design’ grunted the contractor, carefully writing it down. ‘And are there any public amenities near the site? Shops, schools, bus stops, that sort of thing?’

‘No, it’s kind of in the middle of nowhere,’ admitted the Emperor.

The contractor sucked in a breath through his teeth.

‘Yeah... that could be a problem,’ he said, ‘the land value will never go up. You’re potentially making a bad investment there. Are there any regular local activities or festivals at least?’

‘The Huns will probably attack on a semi-regular basis,’ offered General Qi.

‘Ah, a tourist attraction. Well, that’s something. You’d better advertise that as well when you release the conceptual drawings.’

‘Can you give us a quote?’

‘What do you want it made of?’

‘Stone, I guess,’ said the Emperor.

‘Stone, yep. Popular choice in walls,’ said the contractor, ‘I have some samples you can look at right here.’

The men studied the stone samples.

‘I like this blue one and this green one,’ said the Emperor, and as it was his wall the others simply nodded.

‘Well? Which do you want? The blue or the green?’ asked the contractor.

‘Blue, I think. And we’ll need at least several hundred kilometres. How much will that cost?’

The contractor named a price. The Emperor with his advisers and General Qi all bent their heads together in a huddle.

‘Can we afford that?’ asked an adviser quietly.

‘Are you mad?’ whispered the Emperor, ‘It was Seniors Bridge Night on Saturday! Once again, those scheming pensioners walk away with the divided wealth of the Empire. I really have to stop putting money on that game.’

General Qi looked at the contractor to ask,

‘Do you take credit? Or can we do a 20% deposit with full payment upon completion or something?’

‘No! All payment upfront for government jobs.’

The Emperor poked his tongue out at the contractor’s back.

Well, thought Qi, I’d better have a good hard think about this.

Qi went home for dinner. His wife was a highly respected cloth-maker and she was just finishing off a fine bolt with its decorative pattern when he walked in the door. Qi watched her as she pressed a woodcut of swallows to the fabric, leaving a nicely defined print.

He thought: maybe that’s something we could do to raise a bit of quick money. If we carved the instructions for applying for welfare onto a large piece of wood, we could... print... a lot of copies

onto paper very quickly and sell them at an exorbitant price. Hmm. Better make the instructions completely incomprehensible though or we'll lose all the money again in subsequent welfare payments.

Qi wandered back to the palace to share his plan with the Emperor. It was enacted and proved a huge success, so wall construction plans could be finalised and the groundwork would start within the month.

The day before building started was General Qi's birthday. He invited everyone he could find for a huge party on the site where they would be building the wall as a joint birthday-and-starting-construction celebration.

The party started well so what a pity that Qi had skimped on catering costs. 20 of the guests were served under-cooked chicken and hundreds of years before the word 'salmonella' was first coined, all 20 got violently ill and in a matter hours were dead.

'Well,' said the Emperor, who had also been invited, 'this is embarrassing.'

'What should we do?' asked Qi. 'This is awful publicity! They must be buried with the greatest honour to mitigate the situation.'

The Emperor thought about this for a minute, then snapped his fingers.

'I know! We'll bury them in the wall. In fact, send out a proclamation across the whole empire: all citizens with particularly honourable dead can bury them in the wall. That way, forevermore people will recognise what great honour they were buried with.'

And now construction of the Wall began, overseen by General Qi. Just after the foundations for the first half kilometre had been completed a school excursion came by: Teacher followed by 15 small children.

‘Children, this is Mr Qi,’ said Teacher.

‘Good morning Mr Qi,’ the children chanted.

‘What can you tell us about this project, General?’ asked Teacher.

‘Well, we’re building a wall,’ said Qi, then paused for questions or some appropriate admiration.

None came.

‘It is a very big wall,’ he continued hopefully. The children still just stared at him. They didn’t seem terribly impressed. Qi felt himself begin to sweat. What could he say next? He tried out,

‘And when it’s finished, you can all come and see the barbarian Huns.’

‘Will they fire arrows at us?’ asked a small girl.

‘Um... I suppose they could?’ ventured Qi.

‘*Cooooool.*’ said the children.

The building work kept on. General Qi was pleased with how happy his workers were and, just as the Emperor had promised, people continued to bury their most cherished loved ones with much honour in the wall. Even the political cartoonists showed favour for the build. Yes, everything was going well.

Then suddenly: trouble! Someone tried to sabotage the tiling of one of the guard towers. The saboteur was arrested and dragged before the Emperor and his entourage. His advisers demanded the death penalty.

‘I don’t approve of the death penalty,’ said the Emperor, ‘it’s so *distasteful*. Why don’t we just sentence him to life as a Manchu-Han banquet chef instead? Specialising in cheese’. The prisoner screamed and begged for mercy, but to no avail. Manchu-Han chef it was.

But in the background something curious was happening. Carefully incoherent welfare pamphlets weren’t the only things being printed. A local poet carved out several of his poems and printed

them, selling them for a small contribution. A lady who was sick of having to constantly repeat her recipe for crispy duck carved that out and sold prints for a significantly larger contribution. A man with a spacious barn offered to print both their contributions on a single sheet as long as he could put a name of his choosing at the top of the paper as his identifying mark.

He didn't want to use his own name for tax reasons but since he knew his was the fourth farm built in the area, he showed a complete lack of imagination and named himself The Fourth Estate. The man who had the fifth farm built in the area also had a large barn and tried to do the same thing, calling himself The Fifth Estate. But he was clearly a pretentious weirdo and his printing house didn't take off.

Some of the newly rich Bridge-playing pensioners approached yet another man with a farm and said they'd give him one chicken per week if he'd regularly print the local bingo results along with some small pieces of fiction they'd written. The hapless man had no idea when his farm had been built so simply named himself Random House.

The Fourth Estate then tried to burn down Random House's barn to gain a commercial advantage and The Fifth Estate achieved a surge in readership by printing his opinion on the social and economic factors that led to this attempted arson.

The Emperor and General Qi watched all these goings-on with fascination.

'Do you think they'll end up completely destroying the fabric of society?' asked the Emperor

'No,' mused General Qi, 'but I think we'll end up with a whole new group of wealthy, entitled people nursing grievances against each other.'

The Emperor, who dealt with politicians on a daily basis, nodded happily.

'Good,' he said, 'I was getting worried about our current bunch.'

The Emperor looked thoughtfully at Qi.

'You know,' said the Emperor, 'I was thinking we should have some kind of big do when the wall is finished. I can cut a ribbon and talk about how I am clearly putting all that confiscated treasure to

good use, then people can hang around afterwards to forget I said that. We'll need entertainment for the masses while they hang around, of course. What about that man who makes funny barnyard noises? He's always popular. And the Elite Warriors can chop melons and handkerchiefs in half with their swords, they'll enjoy that. And food stalls. Er – no chicken though, just lots of pork or something. People can't get sick from that, right?'

Finally, the day came when the wall was completed. The Fourth Estate printed when the opening ceremony was, The Fifth Estate printed a piece strongly asserting that the wall wasn't nearly big enough for our liking, and Random House printed a heart-wrenching story about a lost penguin. At the opening ceremony a good percentage of the empire came to gape at the wall for a while and eat crispy duck, the barnyard impressionist was a huge success, and the prisoner who had become a Manchu-Han chef carefully cut up some salmon for an awed crowd.

What is more, the Emperor regained favour that he had lost after the whole embarrassing Jisi incident. And as a final bonus, no one got food poisoning or sustained any serious injury (the chef did accidentally nick his own finger at some point but the knife was very sharp and his audience didn't notice. After all, salmon is reddish looking anyway).

As twilight fell after the opening ceremony, all had left except the Emperor and General Qi. They stood side-by-side, contented, looking at the finished wall in the fading light.

Then Qi spoke up,

'It's very impressive and all, but the contractor seems to have used the wrong colour stone. If anyone notices we'll look a bit silly.'

'Don't worry,' said the Emperor, 'I doubt it will remain standing long enough for anyone to notice.'

Four Feet

Ian Harrison

Four Feet

'My mates call me Smitty.' He pressed his calloused right palm flat on his own chest, over his heart.

'Oh, Smitty. Pleased,' the diminutive Chinese man likewise abbreviated his pleasantries, bowing slightly. 'Me Ping.'

They shook hands.

'Welcome to Victoria,' smiled Smitty, three missing teeth showing through – or, rather, *not* showing through, his dirty grey-flecked, bushy grin. 'We'll strike it rich here, Ping. Just you wait and see.'

He caught the barmaid's attention.

'Beer for my new neighbour, please – he's working the next claim over from mine.'

Peg rolled her eyes – another fanatic, struck ineffectual with the malaise commonly known around here as *gold fever*. She made a pretty penny in the pub – not as much as some of the other girls in town (like pretty Penny) – but at least she kept her clothes on and dignity intact.

'Seriously, Peg. I dug *this* up today.'

These were magic words in the Ballarat Arms, packed shoulder-to-shoulder with ripe, grimy prospectors who'd toiled tirelessly beneath a relentless sun, trading ever-more outlandish tales. It was almost inevitable that one of the millions of identical-looking pebbles they'd all sluiced, panned, and shovelled that day contained the precious material. Conversations stopped and curious heads on craning necks swivelled.

Liquid gold sloshed.

The thumbnail-sized glittering nugget that Smitty displayed suggested the life-changing motherlode lay tantalisingly close, albeit nestled beneath the surface. They all dreamed of abandoning heat-stroke and the tent city, ever-watchful for officials and thieves.

Oftentimes, they were one and the same.

‘Gold.’ Agreed Ping.

‘What could you do with that?’

‘Pay debts. Then family, bring here.’ A wistful tone; his words appeared to strike a chord with Peg, who’d often been pulled up by management after complaining to drinkers of her desperate homesickness.

‘That, my friend, sounds wonderful,’ mused Smitty, stubbing his hand-rolled smoke and draining beer dregs. ‘Right-o, I’m off for some shut-eye. ’night love, ’night digger.’

He mimed digging and sleeping, and was rewarded with an enthusiastic grin and thumbs-up from Ping. Peg winked. Both knew Smitty would slumber fitfully, keeping one eye open, lest someone try ransacking his tent before he’d had a chance to exchange the nugget and bank the proceeds.

To the unscrupulous, prospecting often proved simpler *above-ground*.

~

Days passed; each, much the same as the one prior. Thousands of men digging, sluicing, scrabbling at the Earth on hands and knees. Sweating beneath the scorching summer’s sun.

Gold above; gold below.

With night falling, Smitty introduced the newcomer Ping to his usual group of mates in the rowdy pub. Most were like Smitty: single, enjoying their new-found wealth, but for others like Ping, who mimed four little heads back in Shanghai whenever he talked family, it was an endurance race to riches to reunite everyone in Victoria. It explained why Ping was so diligent: first out of the swag in the morning and working until too dark to see. These blazing summer days would stretch ever-longer until Christmas, but the heat would endure until March.

~

Ping carefully washed buckets of water through his hand-crafted wooden rocker-box, separating the heavier gold flecks from the clay and iron-rich earth he shovelled. It was muddy and onerous work – most prospectors who sluiced had a second pair of hands helping to agitate the cradle.

From afar, an enterprising Smitty watched his friend frantically rinsing something in his bucket. He laid his wheelbarrow down and approached, hands in pockets, as two uniformed men on horseback rode up.

‘Smitty, look!’

Smitty nodded, smiling. ‘Yep. That’s what we’re after.’

One of the mounted men spoke. ‘Let’s have your licences, gentlemen? We can’t have you lot just taking Victoria’s wealth without paying your fair share.’

‘Pack it in, will ya, Digsby? Haven’t you got another tune? Here y’are.’ Smitty handed his over and after a brief glance, Digbsy returned it.

‘You, Chinaman. Licence. Papers.’ Tighes snapped his fingers. ‘Chop, chop.’

Panicked, Ping slapped pockets before finding what he was after, tucked inside the steep rise of his wide conical wicker hat. The second horseman examined the document, tutting with disapproval.

‘This licence has expired.’

‘Bullshit, Tighes. Ping ‘n’ me renewed together.’

‘Not what it says here.’ Tighes’ beady eyes flashed beneath his hat. ‘Expiry, January 1852.’

‘Truly? Mine’s January 1853,’ read Smitty.

‘See for y’self,’ sneered Tighes, flapping the page.

It was December, 1852.

‘So what’s a *clerical error* mean for Ping?’

The licencing office had ‘accidentally’ short-changed the migrant on his documentation.

They were only issued month-by-month.

‘It means forfeit,’ said officer Digsby, aggressive.

‘Excuse. What is *four foot*?’

‘You, Chinaman.’

Ping looked to see if his bare, muddy legs had sprouted another pair of boots.

‘What?’ his brow was furrowed, and the horsemen had deliberately positioned themselves so Ping had to shield his eyes to address them.

‘A shade over five foot, *I’d* say.’ Smitty tried breaking the tension, but even his gap-toothed jocularity failed to move the officials.

‘Stay out of it, Smith. Put simply: you, Chinaman, are in forfeit, Chinaman. We’re seizing your claim because you are working it illegally. A fine will also be levied, of course. And since you’ve broken the law, Chinaman, we’re having this, too.’ Digsby hefted to one side of his saddle, reaching down to snatch the glistening pebble from Ping, having pointed rudely with each slur of his people.

‘Smitty,’ pleaded Ping.

‘Nothing I can do, mate,’ said Smitty, sadly. ‘My hands are tied. Sorry I didn’t check your licence when we got ‘em. I just presumed Morgan wrote the right number down. He’ll be sorry, though. Last time I trust that bas...’

One of the horses whinnied.

‘Look, Ping, we’ll pack it in for the day and straighten everything out tomorrow. We’re on a short rope here. Just do what these blokes tell ya. I’ll help you shift your gear.’

‘*Our* gear,’ said Tighes, spitting.

‘Not his tent and personal effects. You’ll get your fine, but through the proper channels. Not today.’

‘Very well, then. We’ll watch him pack up.’ Digsby sat on his horse, implacable.

Ping dropped his tent, throwing guy-ropes around, refusing Smitty’s assistance, shoving him roughly and gesticulating, babbling long strings of *Chinaman* sounds none of them understood. The horsemen rolled their eyes. Shadows lengthened.

'Hurry yourself up, Chinaman. We don't have all night.'

Once Ping had bundled everything into a swag, he stormed off alone, still talking to himself. His rocker-box gouged twin trails in the earth, an evaporating line of water droplets between. The officers rode on, to check more licences.

After a while, Smitty returned to his barrow.

~

Another month passed and Smitty thought he'd seen the last of Ping. The new neighbour working Ping's former claim was a cranky old bugger. A distant relative of Digsby's grouchy missus, he'd gathered. Smitty was drowning his sorrows when a small, strong hand clapped his shoulder.

'Beer, Peg. I owe Smitty.' The deliberate syllables could mean only one man.

'Ping! Thought we'd seen the last of you. I had plans, y'know. You left before I could spell 'em out. Where've you been?'

'Finding gold, downriver,' his disappointment was audible.

'Panning dust by the river? Nah, that's a mug's game. Mob of bloody cut-throats, down there. They wait 'til it rains, then collect the washed-down scraps we miss – it's why they don't need licences,' scoffed Smitty. 'Listen, mate, I have it all figured out. Let's talk, somewhere quiet. Walls' got ears round here, if ya catch my drift.'

Ping didn't, but followed him away from the din.

~

The following morning, Smitty ventured into town. New buildings were being constructed to support Ballarat's growing community and there were more horses than he remembered. He queued to renew his prospecting licence, for two men working his claim. He checked the expiry date twice, relieved that Morgan had done the right thing. The price had increased again though. Bloody inflation. Equipment hire, hardware, beer, food, and women were all in short supply and high demand, with the gold price dropping weekly. He needed to strike it rich and get out.

Ping was at Smitty's site, rocker-box readied and buckets of water filled from the river. Not actually prospecting, should he be challenged again.

'You hide gold in my claim? Why?'

'Ah, your family needs it more, and I've never seen anyone work harder than you.' Smitty shrugged, dismissive. 'I couldn't do anything about them licencing troopers, though. That was a case of plain old rotten timing. They have a sixth sense for lucky prospectors stumbling across gold nuggets. Pack of Chinese-hating mongrels.'

'Why you not help when they take my claim?'

'To throw 'em off the scent, of course. Half the time I was excavating and the rest, hiding what I'd uncovered. Too big for me to handle alone.' Smitty grinned. 'I'd have explained if you'd have let me. Couldn't have them pinching *my* claim – well, *ours*, now. Seeing as it's the one with the four-foot long vein running through it.'

'Four foot? Again?' Ping was alarmed.

'No, Ping. Gold. It's full of gold. If you want to bring your family here, we've *really* got to improve your English.'

Extinction

Alexander Aich

EXTINCTION

2235 AD

Saul Lieberman won the lottery, along with 39 others, although in Saul's case it was rigged.

Saul was, after all, the astrophysicist who, in 2198, discovered the interstellar object hurtling into the solar system from somewhere beyond the Oort Cloud. The football-shaped object, subsequently designated 24-ISO Lieberman, was nearly as massive as the asteroid, Ceres. Spectral analysis of the object's composition was inconclusive due to its nearly non-reflective surface. But it was conjectured to comprise of silicate rocks and minerals, and an aggregation of various metals. When Saul first detected the object inside the orbit of Jupiter, it was travelling at the colossal speed of 600,000 kph, a velocity reserved for objects only when they sling-shotted around the sun.

Many telescopes and all manner of celestial devices were trained on that arc of the sky heralding the approaching interstellar visitor. The supercomputers made short work of the calculations predicting the object's path. It would bypass the sun by 25 million kilometers, a hair's breadth by astronomical standards. Its incredible speed, increasing as it neared the sun, would prevent it being caught by

the sun's gravity. Its destiny would not be a final fatal plunge into a nuclear furnace.

Then, to the world's collective astonishment, another interstellar object was detected less than a month later. And by some quirk of fate, which elevated him to super star status, it was Saul who detected it. Saul hated attention. He was always only interested in observing and unravelling the mysteries of the universe.

When the media hunted him, he locked himself inside the NASA Space Center in Houston. "Saul, just give them an interview," his Director implored. Saul eventually capitulated and agreed to several, but only by video conference. He tried his best to downplay his discoveries. "I happened to be scanning that part of the sky anyway. No big deal." But, as it transpired, it was a big deal indeed.

As the discoverer, Saul got naming rights. He couldn't use his own name again, so he decided to call it 25-ISO Fangio. The second object was bigger and faster. It was spherical and even more massive than Ceres. Fangio had the scientific world hyperventilating with excitement. Some speculated that it had a crust, mantle and metallic core. All were waiting for more data. The supercomputers predicted its path was similar to the first object. The bookies took bets on how long it would take Fangio to catch up to Lieberman.

About 4 months later 24-ISO Lieberman surprised the watchers. At a distance of 50 million kilometers from the sun, it began veering from its predicted course.

The supercomputers plotted a new trajectory – towards the sun. At this point Fangio had nearly caught up, now only 2 days behind. And soon, it too, began veering towards the sun. Some kind of magnetic attraction, the scientists speculated.

Two interstellar objects would plough into the sun, and earth had a ringside seat. Not since Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 nosedived into Jupiter in 1994 had there been such a sensation.

Six days later, the Parker Solar Probe III provided an eight-minute-delay live stream of the events. Virtually all of humanity watched 24-ISO Lieberman plummet into the sun. Every scientist, to a person, expected Lieberman to vaporize upon entering the corona. But it defied expectation. Its leading edge, flaring brilliantly like a heat shield, was slowly consumed as it streaked through the sun's outer layers. According to Parker's images, only Lieberman's outer layer had been vaporized when it disappeared from view. Shortly thereafter, the plume of a coronal mass ejection emerged, like a burp, from the point of entry.

The world was stunned. Even a lay person knew that what they had seen shouldn't have happened. The expert commentators and analysts were simply repeating words like 'unbelievable' and 'impossible.'

Nine hours later, Fangio plunged into the sun in a similar fashion a mere 50,000 kilometers away. Given the sun's diameter of 1.4 million kilometers, a difference of 50,000 kilometers was like both objects hitting dead center of a bullseye.

In the next decade, all kinds of theories emerged – magnetic force fields, anti-matter fields, dark energy fields, alien objects and more.

Saul and the 39 other winners had six months to complete their training. Saul didn't understand why the arduous training was really necessary. After all, it was essentially a one-way mission. And everything was automated anyway.

Saul still vividly remembered that day in 2208 when his Wrist-Comm started vibrating and buzzing. Petabytes of data constantly flowed into the Space Center's computers and he had programmed them to trigger a notification upon receipt of certain indicators. The notifications were then replaced by the urgent ringtone of his associate. Saul raised his Wrist-Comm up to his left ear. "What's up, Larry?"

"Saul, uh ... you better get down here."

"What is it?"

“It’s ... uh, the diameter of the sun.”

Larry was not normally emotional, but he sounded like he would rather be tortured than give up what he knew.

“What about it?”

“It’s ... uh, increased ... by, uh”

“By what, Larry?” Saul was starting to get a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Uh, ... by 0.02 per cent, and ... uh”

Being also an adept mathematician, Saul knew that margin was staggering.

“And what, Larry?”

“Uh, ... and it’s still expanding.”

The sinking feeling momentarily phased into a paralysis. “Shit,” Saul muttered under his breath. The sun wasn’t supposed to expand for another few billion years when it entered its red giant phase. “I’ll be right there, Larry.”

According to the current model, the sun was in a state of very stable equilibrium between gravity pulling in and nuclear-fusion energy pushing out. What had gone wrong? The energy pushing out was getting the upper hand. Had to have been the interstellar interlopers, thought Saul. His thoughts and concerns were entirely focused on the sun. Not for a moment did he think about the earth. That was about to change.

The supercomputers were set to work. The initial rate of expansion cut the sun's life cycle by 2 billion years. But the rate of expansion wasn't uniform. It went up and down like a heart monitor. In the end, the rate of expansion went up, and stubbornly remained there. The supercomputers' final verdict was that a runaway thermonuclear chain reaction would occur in 2235.

The world was shocked. Life on earth would cease in 27 years. Extinction.

Later, Saul and Larry met up at Voyager, a bar near the Space Center.

"Do you think Ira could have gotten it wrong?" Larry asked. Ira, the name of the Space Center's AI program, was linked to NASA's supercomputer.

Saul couldn't even be bothered shaking his head. He felt numbed.

Both were silent, mindlessly staring at something on the table.

Saul was the first to stir, taking a deep breath. "What does it even matter, Larry. The only question remaining is whether the earth gets charred to a cinder or becomes an airless barren hellhole. Either way not even a cockroach will survive."

"Uh ... what about all the robots?" Larry raised.

Now that was a damn good question, Saul conceded. And it was a question that was particularly poignant to Larry, because Larry had an AI companion called Sonya. Although Larry didn't keep her a secret, he stopped short of taking her out in public. The few times that Saul had met Sonya, he was impressed how real and lifelike she was. And it was obvious Larry was quite fond of her.

"Uh, ... we humans are history. But uh ... some of the robots can surely get away."

They surely could, Saul thought. The world had 27 years to prepare. A space ship of robots, no, many space ships of robots could be sent out. But there was a big problem. Although they appeared to do so, robots couldn't really think for themselves. They were slaves to their programs. Could a space ship of robots function without humans? Not to mention the philosophical question, even if they

could function, *should* a space ship of robots be sent out without humans? Above his pay grade, Saul thought. At this point, he didn't even care if the robots evolved into something humans took exception to.

"Uh ... I'd need your help, Saul," Larry appealed.

The emotion on Larry's face revealed his thinking. He probably wanted to save Sonya, Saul thought. "You've got it, Larry."

The world mortgaged its entire future with unprecedented activity and construction over the next two and half decades. The United Nations built a subterranean mega city in the most tectonically stable location in the world – Western Australia. All the major powers built their own subterranean cities. The zillionaires built their own opulent underground palaces. They knew they were all doomed but all they wanted was to eke out a few more months, maybe a few more years.

Humanity's plan to survive had more than one prong. On the moon, the United Nations built a space port as well as a massive underground robotic factory to construct space ships.

In the year before D-Day, hundreds of space ships took off from the moon. The initial launches were manned by humans and funded by zillionaires and global corporations. They were timed to reach the orbit of Neptune before the sun exploded.

Although the sun wasn't going to literally explode, many people spoke about D-Day as if it would. And D-Day was not actually a day. It referred to a period of time, up to a month, during which the radiation, charged particles and gamma rays streaming out from the enlarged sun at the speed of light became so critically lethal that the earth's atmosphere could no longer protect it.

In the second phase, the space ships were crewed by a combination of humans and robots. The humans would be encased in shielded cryogenic capsules.

In the third phase, the space ships were fully crewed by robots. Their sensitive electronic components would be shielded and they only had to reach the orbit of Uranus. Sonya was in one of those space ships. Her AI programming had been massively expanded. No longer was she just a companion. And all the robots had been modified, allowing them to link to perform parallel processing, to match that of a supercomputer.

Larry had accompanied Sonya to the space port in Florida. He held both her hands in his and looked into her blue eyes. "I'll miss you," he said.

"I'll miss you too, Larry." Her face displayed the emotion of sadness. Her fingers increased their pressure.

In the back of his mind, Larry knew it was just learned behaviour. She wasn't capable of emotion, but Larry didn't really care. It was enough that she showed it.

"Uh ... you better go in now." Larry felt like crying.

Sonya nodded and gave Larry a gentle hug. Then she turned and walked lithely towards the *Authorized Entry Only* door.

Larry watched her, dressed in her blue flight suit, until she disappeared. She never looked back once.

Saul would have liked to see Sonya off, but he was in the middle of his 6-month training course. Had the lottery not been rigged, Saul would not have been amongst the chosen ones. Even his progress to the pool of eligible candidates must have been rigged. He was already 72 years old at that time. Somehow, he passed the rigorous medical assessment. Fortunately, his life expectancy,

according to the AI doctor, was 120 years, probably due to all his elective medical implants.

The hundred million applicants had been whittled down to one million eligible candidates. Then a lottery system was used to determine the 40 winners. The whole world had been watching the lottery draws, Saul amongst them. After the 39th draw, Saul recalculated the odds at 1 in 999,961. Then his name was drawn. Although no one took responsibility for rigging the lottery, Saul knew it must have been. No one begrudged his win, perhaps because a lot of people blamed him. The blame was irrational, of course, and so was the guilt that Saul took on. It was all Saul's fault for discovering the interstellar objects. It wasn't just fate that Saul was one of the winners. For Saul, winning was more about redemption.

Ten weeks before D-Day, Saul and his 39 cohorts slowly filed through the *Authorized Entry Only* door, dressed in their blue flight suits. The ten-hour flight took them to the moon space port. There, they were transferred to a specially designed space ship, the *ECLIPSE*. Leading off the flight deck and mess room, the ship had twenty cabins, each with two multi-purpose bunks. They were assigned to their cabins in pairs.

Other than the 40 human passengers, there was one other passenger – an AI robot wearing a red flight suit. His designation was Flight Coordinator. His name was Flynn. Other than that, the space ship was fully automated.

Like the foreperson of a jury, Saul had been appointed the leader of the passengers. That gave him partial administrative access to the ship's systems and the right to confer with the Flight Coordinator.

Saul's cabin mate was Felipe. The computer had paired them. Saul had no say in the matter. Felipe was a creative influencer. People craved to be creative. Robots could only imitate creativity. Original human creativity was in high demand.

As prompted by repetitive announcements, Saul and Felipe stowed their equipment and belongings, fitted their special magnetic metal-sole shoes and strapped themselves into their bunk for take-off.

The flight to the leading edge of the sun's corona would take six weeks. On the first day everyone was getting used to their magnetic shoes. They had practised walking during their training course, and briefly on the moon, but zero gravity was an entirely new challenge. You lifted a heel and slid your foot forward. Then you lifted the other heel and slid that foot forward.

Saul had already acquainted himself with his fellow passengers during the training course. Other than Felipe, they were all religious. The Bible said the earth would be destroyed by fire. They were here for the rapture, the second coming, the appearance of angels, ascension, nirvana, enlightenment. None of them feared the end, or so they said. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, the love of God, or whatever else they believed in. Saul kept his opinions to himself. Religion had stopped in his family with his grandfather.

Being a celebrity scientist, Saul constantly fielded questions. Felipe had asked, "Do you have a theory about what happened?"

"About what?" Saul said.

"Well, about the sun exploding."

"The sun's not exploding. It's just expanding rapidly ... and then contracting rapidly."

"Well, do you have a theory about that?"

"Yes, I do." Silence.

Felipe looked at Saul expectantly. "What's your theory then?"

"The sun ingested something that didn't agree with it, like food poisoning."

Felipe blinked. "Ok, that's creative."

Saul had lots of down time to think. He thought about Sonya. She was in the third phase of two hundred space ships, each with 80 robots on board. The space ships were equipped with the latest fusion drives with enough fuel to last two thousand years. In interstellar space, the ships could accelerate to nearly 2% the speed of light, then coast to conserve power.

The supercomputers had given each ship a 0.5% chance of succeeding, so out of the two hundred ships launched, one might make it to a new planet. Although they weren't human, they were created by humans, they looked like humans, and they carried the legacy of humans. That would have to be enough.

Saul thought about how many of the earth's problems had been solved. The population had returned to a more sustainable level. Robots and genetic engineering were winning the war against waste. The United Nations Charter had been amended numerous times, giving it more control and power over global

issues. Saul shook his head resignedly. Just when things started to look promising.

The *ECLIPSE* reached the leading edge of the corona. The plan was to ride the wave, then plunge into the corona, gathering and transmitting data until the very end.

Saul linked his Wrist-Comm to the ship's systems. He marveled at the images of the corona appearing in his optical implant's head-up display.

As time for the plunge approached, many of the passengers started popping pills or praying. Some even started speaking in tongues. Suddenly Saul's attention was drawn to the appearance of a bulge on the sun's surface ... and it was growing. It was like the sun was giving birth to something. Watching the wall screens, the awestruck passengers began muttering in wonder.

Almost in real time, the spectacle unfolded in his head-up display. An egg-shaped vessel emerged, the coruscating inferno of the sun's corona reflected off its gleaming hull. His head-up display provided its dimensions, a hundred kilometers along its widest diameter. Massive.

Minutes later, a spherical vessel emerged. It was even more massive, two hundred kilometers in diameter. After emerging, the bulge closed.

The two vessels streaked away but were seen again three more times in the next 48-hour period. Must be orbiting to increase speed, Saul thought.

The data coming in also showed the sun's expansion had halted and in fact had commenced contraction. Saul overheard prayers of thanksgiving and adoration.

Felipe asked, "Do you have a theory about what just happened?"

As Saul furrowed his brow in thought, his attention was caught by the wall screen replaying a loop of the vessels emerging from the sun. Their shapes looked familiar. "Yes, I do," he said. "Aliens stopped over to refuel."

Felipe's eyes widened in admiration. "Good, very creative."

Saul turned to the Flight Coordinator. "Flynn, you can take us home now."