

Paul Flamburis

*The Glass over the Strange People*

One of them, the one whose name tag read Hello My Name is Linda, pushed her morning coffee into a hot slice of the sunrise so it would cool more slowly.

The other one, whose name tag read Hello My Name Is Anthony, said, "It's still going to get cold."

Linda said, "Not before yours. And, don't."

Anthony said, "Don't what" and thought, *You know what*, which was also what Linda said next.

I was inside the building while this was going on, I was sitting in an empty chair. I was a little early so I passed the time listening to these two do their scene. Through the glass I saw someone parking and wondered if it was my friend, but was disappointed to see a blonde normal-looking head emerge.

Linda pulled a wad of cash out of her back pocket and deposited it on the counter, a five to one ratio of ones to fives. "Ten on CBR flatbread," she said.

Anthony asked, "What do you get out of losing money?"

"One of these days you're gonna fuck it up, and then I'm gonna make you sign the dollar, and then I'm gonna hang it on my wall. That's what I'll get out of it."

"Well it *is* gonna be a CBR flatbread, so no bet. Excellent guess, though."

"No fun," Linda said, pocketing the bills.

The blonde guy walked up to the counter and Anthony disappeared into the back. He looked at Linda and said, “Chic’bac’n ranch flatbread, please.”

Linda said, “Three ninety-five” and turned around to give Anthony the order, but he was already back at the counter, holding a hot paper bag spotted with bacon sweat. Anthony gave the bag to the blonde man, the blonde man gave a crisp five to Linda, Linda gave Anthony an annoyed look. The man left without collecting his change.

Anthony said, “See.”

“Wow. Good job, Anthony. Who knew the secret to filling the tip jar was making your customers wig the fuck out. Have you ever read a mind that didn’t think you were an enormous dweeb?”

“Oh my god, fuck *off*.”

“That was a serious question. No, right? You never have.”

I liked Anthony. He was the kind of guy you would want to have a long dinner with at a restaurant where the entrees always arrived late. I could imagine us sitting together and waiting for our steaks. Anthony saying *Nice to meet you, I’m Anthony* to an empty chair. Me saying, *So, Anthony, tell me everything you hate about the things you love*. Anthony having a lot to say.

Linda suddenly put the crumpled cash back on the counter and said, “Yeah alright, this guy definitely wants a turkey bacon avocado.”

When Anthony didn’t say anything, I looked outside and saw that my friend was carrying his big strange-looking head through the threshold. The same head I slept in at night. I liked it there, it was roomy. I was thinking of installing a new window, but only because I was bored.

The brow jutted way out, making for a nice open balcony. Sometimes it was a good idea for us to be in two places at once, which got me out of the house. Now and then.

Linda gave Anthony an anxious look and a light punch in the arm. “Hey.”

Anthony shook the fog out of his head. “Yeah. Ham, cheese.”

The strange headed man scratched an itch on a patch of bare head. He looked at each person behind the counter, up at the menu, back down to the people, squinted with half of one eye. He cleared a phlegmatic buildup from his throat and rasped, “So, which one of you is Professor X?”

Anthony looked surprised, but he shouldn’t have been. He had to know something like this was coming. Maybe I could kind of understand, though. Hearing truths out loud is not the same as knowing them.

Linda said, “Who are you supposed to be, Magneto? How do you fit into your helmet?”

The strange-headed man half-squinted at Anthony and asked, “So you’re the one I heard about. How do you do it?”

Anthony muttered, “I pour my mind into that of the human superorganism. Just like anybody else.”

Linda said, “Yesterday it was ‘I merge myself with the cosmic egg.’”

“Suck a cosmic egg Linda.”

The strange-headed man bent forward to read the nametag. “So your name’s Anthony.”

“Apparently.”

“You would do well to pull your head out of your ass, Anthony.”

“Sorry, guy. It’s way stuck in there.”

“Pull hard.”

Anthony didn’t say anything. He looked like he was initiating a staring contest with the strange-headed man. He focused his vision on what appeared to be the weaker of the man’s eyes.

The man let him win as quickly as possible and said, “I’ve got a very long drive ahead and I won’t be stopping again anytime soon. I’d like to eat some breakfast first, but I’ve got no more money. I was wondering if you’d take a riddle as currency.”

“Why do you think I would do that,” Anthony said, without having blinked yet.

Linda’s hand briefly hovered over the phone, but she thought better of it. She walked over to the glass-encased emergency axe instead and stood there with her arms crossed.

“Because you’ve never seen one before. Not the way the rest of us have. The answers are usually right in front of you. This time you’ll have to think for yourself, yeah?”

Anthony won the staring contest again, the same contest. He still didn’t blink.

The strange-headed man reached across the counter to take Anthony’s used napkin. Then he reached his hand inside his big coat, prompting Linda to tap audibly on the axe glass. The man slowly pulled a pen out from inside his big coat and scribbled on the napkin. Anthony took the napkin back. The man had drawn an egg shape around a coffee stain, which looked like a broken yolk or some kind of fucked-up embryo. Outside the shell he had drawn a cartoonish serpent, a scaly banner that read: Which came first?

Anthony said, “The evolution of the amniotic egg predates legless squamates. So what. Is this a joke?”

The strange-headed man said, “Smart kid. How old are you, Anthony?”

Anthony said, “A hundred and seven.”

The strange-headed man said, “You’re twenty-six. I’m older than twenty-six. Which makes me the egg. If we were an Orphic egg, you and I. Which we are. Which makes you?”

Anthony’s face flushed. The man was a steel egg. Anthony looked like he wanted to crack him on skillet and see what came out to fry.

“So I’m a fuckin’ snake? Is that what you came here to tell me, guy? So what?” I happened to know that Anthony had always been fond of snakes.

The strange-headed man looked at Anthony with hatred and admiration, uneasy roommates in one pair of eyes. “Just thought you should know. The way things are.”

“Are you gonna order something, man?” asked Linda, with the implication that a *no* might summon the axe.

The hatred disappeared, most of the admiration disappeared with it. “Come to think of it, eggs sound good to me. I’ll have an egg and cheese on an English muffin.”

Anthony made the sandwich in front of him, the first time he had ever done so, dropping it in the bag like it was a dead frog from a toxic waste dump. He paid for it himself with the cash he would have owed Linda if the man had ordered a turkey bacon avocado.

The man pulled out a black leather wallet, which was very fat. “Here’s my card,” he said, sliding a blank eggshell rectangle across the table. Anthony flipped it over as soon as the man turned around. In barely-legible yellow letters there was an address that was not close.

Linda walked back to the counter and took one of the dollars back out of the register and I heard her whisper, “Anthony, will you sign this?”

The strange-headed man ate his sandwich on the way out and I followed him. He was my ride. I snuggled deep into the strange head and the strange head got in the car. We looked back and saw Anthony watching us through the glass while he sipped his coffee. Must’ve been cold-cold, couldn’t get any colder now. Must’ve felt like snakes going down.