

EXCERPT FROM **SOMEONE COMES TO TOWN, SOMEONE  
LEAVES TOWN**

Cory Doctorow

Once upon a time, Alan's mother gave birth to three sons in three months. Birthing sons was hardly extraordinary—before these three came along, she'd already had four others. But the interval, well, that was unusual.

As the eldest, Alan was the first to recognize the early signs of her pregnancy. The laundry loads of diapers and play clothes he fed into her belly unbalanced more often, and her spin cycle became almost lackadaisical, so the garments had to hang on the line for days before they stiffened and dried completely. Alan liked to sit with his back against his mother's hard enamel side while she rocked and gurgled and churned. It comforted him.

The details of her conception were always mysterious to Alan. He'd been walking down into town to attend day school for five years, and he'd learned all about the birds and the bees, and he thought that maybe his father—the mountain—impregnated his mother by means of some strange pollen carried on the gusts of winds from his deep and gloomy caves. There was a gnome, too, who made sure that the long hose that led from Alan's mother's back to the spring-pool in his father's belly remained clear and unfouled, and sometimes Alan wondered if the gnome dove for his father's seed and fed it up his mother's intake. Alan's life was full of mysteries, and he'd long since learned to keep his mouth shut about his home life when he was at school.

He attended all three births, along with the smaller kids—Bill and Donald (Charlie, the island, was still small enough to float in the middle of their father's heart-pool)—waiting on tenterhooks for his mother's painful off-balance spin cycle to spend itself before reverently opening the round glass door and removing the infant within.

Edward was fat, even for a baby. He looked like an elongated soccer ball with a smaller ball on top. He cried healthily, though, and gave hearty suck to their mother's exhaust valve once Alan had cleaned the soap suds and fabric softener residue from his little body. His father gusted proud, warm, blustery winds over them and their little domestic scene.

Alan noticed that little Edward, for all his girth, was very light, and

wondered if the baby was full of helium or some other airy substance. Certainly, he hardly appeared to be full of *baby*, since everything he ate and drank passed through him in a matter of seconds, hardly digested at all. Alan had to go into town twice to buy new twelve-pound boxes of clean white shop rags to clean up the slime trail the baby left before him. Drew, at three, seemed to take a perverse delight in the scummy water, spreading it around the cave as much as possible. The grove in front of the cave mouth was booby-trapped with clothesline upon clothesline, all hung with diapers and rags drying out in the early spring sunlight.

Thirty days later, Alan came home from school to find the younger kids surrounding his mother as she rocked from side to side, actually popping free of the grooves her small metal feet had worn in the cave floor over the years.

Two babies in thirty days! Such a thing was unheard of in their father's cave. Edward, normally a sweet-tempered baby, howled long screams that resonated through Alan's milk-teeth and made his testicles shrivel up into hard stones. Alan knew his mother liked to be left alone when she was in labor, but he couldn't just stand there and watch her shake and shiver.

He went to her and pressed his palms to her top, tried to soothe and restrain her. Bill, the second eldest and still only four years old, followed suit. Edward's screams grew even louder, loud and hoarse and utterly terrified, echoing off their father's walls and back to them. Soon, Alan was sobbing, too, biting his lip to keep the sounds inside, and so were the other children. Dillon wrinkled his brow and screamed a high-pitched wail that could have cut glass.

Alan's mother rocked harder, and her exhaust hose dislodged itself. A high-pressure jet of cold, soapy water spurted from her back parts, painting the cave wall with suds. Edward crawled into the puddle it formed and scooped small handfuls of the liquid into his mouth between howls.

And then, it stopped. His mother stopped rocking, stopped shaking. The stream trailed off into a trickle. Alan stopped crying, and soon the smaller kids followed suit, even Edward. The echoes continued for a moment, and then, they, too, stopped. The silence was as startling—and nearly as unbearable—as the cacophony had been.

With a trembling hand, Alan opened his mother's door, and extracted little Frederick. The baby was small and cyanotic blue. Alan tipped the baby

over and shook him gently, and the baby vomited up a fantastic quantity of wash water, a prodigious stream that soaked the front of Alan's school trousers and his worn brown loafers. Finally, it ended, and the baby let out a healthy yowl. Alan shifted the infant to one arm and gingerly reconnected the exhaust hose and set the baby down alongside of its end. The baby wouldn't suck, though.

Across the cave, from his soggy seat in the puddle of waste water, Edward watched the new baby with curious eyes. He crawled across the floor and nuzzled his brother with his high forehead. Frederick squirmed and fussed, and Edward shoved him to one side and sucked. His little diaper dripped as the liquid passed directly through him.

Alan patiently picked dripping Edward up and put him over one shoulder, and gave Frederick the tube to suck. Frederick gummed at the hose's end, then fussed some more, whimpering. Edward squirmed in his arms, nearly plummeting to the hard stone floor.

"Billy," Alan said to the solemn little boy, who nodded, "can you take care of Edward for a little while? I need to clean up." Billy nodded again and held out his pudgy arms. Alan grabbed some clean shop rags and briskly wiped Frederick down, then laid another across Billy's shoulder and set Edward down. The baby promptly set to snoring. Danny started screaming again, with no provocation, and Alan took two swift steps to bridge the distance between them and smacked the child hard enough to stun him silent.

Alan grabbed a mop and bucket and sloshed the puddles into the drainage groove where his mother's waste water usually ran, out the cave mouth and into a stand of choking mountain grass that fed greedily and thrived riotous in the phosphates from the detergent.

Frederick did not eat for thirty days, and during that time, he grew so thin that he appeared to shrivel, like a raisin, going hard and folded in upon himself. Alan spent hours patiently spooning sudsy water into his little pink mouth, but the baby wouldn't swallow, just spat it out and whimpered and fussed. Edward liked to twine around Alan's feet like a cat as he juggled and spooned and fretted over Frederick. It was all that Alan could do not to go completely mad, but he held it together, though his grades slipped.

His mother vibrated nervously, and his father's winds grew so unruly that two of the golems that made their home in Alan's father came around to the

cave to make their slow, peevish complaints. Alan shoved a baby into each of their arms and seriously lost his shit upon them, screaming himself hoarse at them while hanging more diapers, more rags, more clothes on the line, tossing his unfinished homework in their faces.

But on the thirtieth day, his mother went into labor again—a labor so frenzied that it dislodged a stalactite and sent it crashing and chundering to the cave floor in a fractous shivering of flinders. Alan took a chip in the neck and it opened up a small cut that nevertheless bled copiously and ruined, *ruined* his favorite T-shirt, with Snoopy sitting atop his doghouse in an aviator's helmet, firing an imaginary machine gun at the cursed Red Baron.

That was nearly the final straw for Alan, but he held fast and waited for the labor to pass and finally unlatched the door and extracted little George, a peanut of a child, a lima-bean infant, curled and fetal and eerily quiet. He set the little half-baby down by the exhaust hose, where he'd put shriveled Frederick in a hopeless hope that the baby would suck, would ingest, finally.

And ingest Frederick did. His dry and desiccated jaw swung open like a snake's, unhinged and spread wide and he *swallowed* little George, ate him up in three convulsive swallows, the new baby making Frederick's belly swell like a balloon. Alan swallowed panic, seized Frederick by the heels and shook him upside down. "Spit him out," Alan cried, "Spat him free!"

But Frederick kept his lips stubbornly together, and Alan tired of the terrible business and set the boy with the newest brother within down on a pile of hay he'd brought in to soak up some of Edward's continuous excretions. Alan put his hands over his face and sobbed, because he'd failed his responsibilities as eldest of their family and there was no one he could tell his woes to.

The sound of baby giggles stopped him crying. Edward had belly-crawled to Frederick's side and he was eating *him*, jaw unhinged and gorge working. He was up to Frederick's little bottom, dehydrated to a leathery baby-jerky, and then he was past, swallowing the arms and the chin and the *head*, the giggling, smiling head, the laughing head that had done nothing but whine and fuss since Alan had cleared it of its volume of detergent water, fresh from their mother's belly.

And then Frederick was gone. Horrified, Alan rushed over and picked up Edward—now as heavy as a cannonball—and pried his mouth open, staring down his gullet, staring down into *another mouth*, Frederick's mouth, which

gaped open, revealing a *third* mouth, George's. The smallest mouth twisted and opened, then shut. Edward squirmed furiously and Alan nearly fumbled him. He set the baby down in the straw and watched him crawl across to their mother, where he sucked hungrily. Automatically, Alan gathered up an armload of rags and made ready to wipe up the stream that Edward would soon be ejecting.

But no stream came. The baby fed and fed, and let out a deep burp in three-part harmony, spat up a little, and drank some more. Somehow, Frederick and George were in there, feeding too. Alan waited patiently for Edward to finish feeding, then put him over his shoulder and joggled him until he burped up, then bedded him down in his little, rough hewn crib—the crib that the golems had carved for Alan when he was born—cleaned the cave, and cried again, leaned up against their mother.

*Excerpt from Someone Leaves Town, Someone Comes to Town*  
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# BACKWARDS CITY REVIEW

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