

M*ss*g* *n * t*m* c*ps*I*

by Charles Stross

Story Copyright (C) 2006, Charles Stross.

Images Copyright (C) 2006, Rudy Rucker.

1,100 Words.

— Dash it! Is this gadget turned on, Miss Feng?

— No, I was not enquiring as to its state of sexual arousal, thank you.

— What, it is on, is it? Fascinating! Ahem. Look here, allow me to introduce myself. I've only got three hundred of your what-do-you-call-its ... seconds ... so I shall have to be jolly brisk, what?

— This is a time capsule. I am told it only holds eight megawotsits of data, enough for a brief natter and a G&T. I'm sure your clankie tech chappies can figure it all out: something to do with the chronic entropy barrier, I'm told, otherwise we'd be able to send you a couple of uploads and a God program to eat your brains instead of this deeply tedious message in a bottle.

— (Do I really sound like that? No, don't tell me, Miss Feng. Just pass the Port.)

— I am Sir Ralph Takahashi, the MacGregor of Clan MacGregor, hereditary patron of Gelnochy distillery, heir to the Takahashi trust in Yokohama, and governor-general of Batley. I come from a long line of upper-class twits; blue blood has flowed in the old family veins for almost four centuries, that being how long it's been since they bought their titles of nobility. That was back during the aftermath of the Martian Hyperscabies epidemic of 2256 — damned bad show that, but it did free up a lot of seats for the likes of my ancestors. (The blue-blooded cyanoglobin hack appears to have been dear old Uncle Tojo's idea — he thought it would help if we looked the part — but he unaccountably overlooked the small-print in the neurological warranty, for which may he jolly well itch in his coffin for ever.) But I'm rambling, aren't it? Forthwith, to the point! I'm here to sell the prospect of life in the exciting twenty-eighth century to you chappies, and I don't have much time left.

— The twenty-eighth century (since when? Something to do with a middle-eastern death cult, wasn't it? No, don't tell me ...) is a fine and exciting era and welcomes immigrants from all time zones. We're trying to develop the tech for a return temporal tourist trade as well, but I'm told we won't succeed for another seventy-six years. If you come from one of those centuries and cultures where English was spoken, you won't have much trouble communicating with classicists and over-educated upper-class drones like me, ha ha. And the Great Downsizing (I gather some of your more optimistic fellows used to look forward to this event, calling it a *Singularity*), in conjunction with the discovery of the Spacetime Squirrelizer (which allowed your less optimistic fellows to get away from the Great Downsizing — which is why *my* side of the family tree is descended exclusively from pessimists) has spread us pretty thin across the galaxy. This means that there are plenty of good employment opportunities for squishy flesh-and-blood types, but bear in mind that some occupations are now entirely traditional clankie preserves — forget trying to get a

job cleaning floors unless you're called Mrs Mopp and people keep asking you about nominative determinism whenever they first meet you. Oh, and forget qualifying as an auto mechanic, astronaut, or accountant. (In general, the A's are *right out* unless your circulatory system contains more oil than blood.)

— Alternatively, as long as you remember to take out catastrophic collapse-of-civilization insurance on your blind five hundred year hedge-fund, you should be sitting pretty when your investments mature and they thaw you out and grow you a new body. (Otherwise you might not have a leg to stand on.)

— Things you may be taken aback by in the twenty-eight century? (Yes, Miss Feng, I think I'll have another top-up ... ah, where was I?) Relations of an intimate nature are somewhat confusing to visitors at first, because polite society generally recognizes three gender axes, not the four you're used to. We have butch/femme, squishie/clankie, and U/non-U. I'm not sure quite why we dropped the old heterodox/orthodox gender split but I gather it had something to do with the craze for nasal penile enhancements a couple of centuries ago — or maybe it was to do with the common cold being reclassified as a sexually transmitted disease? I'm not sure; like matters to do with sex in all ages, it's deliberately kept unnecessarily confusing by the self-appointed arbiters of polite society. Anyway, moving swiftly onwards, as long as you remember that it is a mortal insult to sneeze in public in the presence of a butch clankie non-U, you'll be fine.

— Things you will find familiar: we speak English. In fact, our most U aristocracy aspires to the cultural heights achieved by the late pre-Downsizing anglosphere in its richest and most progressive centres of art and philosophy in the mid-twenty first century, Manitoba and Wagga-Wagga. The more U squishie aristocrats have, in fact, preserved the traditional Anglo-American upper crust mores in brine, although the clankie core are mostly descended from Eastern European black-hat hackers, so you'll find yourself perfectly at home here as long as you use P. G. Wodehouse and Stanislaw Lem as your guidebooks.

— As for why you might want to visit our charming century ...

— Dash it all, Miss Feng, what now?

— Oh, only thirty seconds left? They're not very long, are they?

— Oh, I don't know *why* I bother. If the Batley Tourist Board hadn't leaned on Aunt Agatha the Aggressive to threaten to box my ears if I didn't do something for the Drowned Yorkshire Reclamation Fund ...

— All right then! I will, I will!

— Come to live in the jolly sunny twenty-eighth century. We may be a bit over-insolated, and the Space Patrol may have a bit of a bloody nuisance on their hands with the alien space leeches from Arcturus, but at least we've *got* a Space Patrol, unlike some centuries I could mention, and the leeches don't invade *too* often. Immigration is easy — just shoot yourself in the old ticker while sitting on the edge of a bath full of liquid nitrogen, being sure to fall in carefully — and we natives are friendly, as long as you bring a bottle of Tawney Port and a cigar from drowned Havana. You can easily get a job below stairs if you want to rough it, but it's a great life if you're re-born rich, and between you and me all you need to do is remember your collapse-of-civilization insurance and invest ten dollars in

(END OF TRANSCRIPT — BUFFER OVERFLOW)

About the Author

Born in Leeds, England, [Charles Stross](#) knew he wanted to be a science fiction writer from the age of six, and astonishingly, nobody ever considered therapy until it was too late. He didn't *really* get started until his early teens (when his sister loaned him a manual typewriter around the time he was getting heavily into Dungeons and Dragons); the results were unexpected, and he's been trying to bury them ever since. He made his first commercial for-money sale to *Interzone* in 1986, and sold about a dozen stories elsewhere throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s before a dip in his writing career. He began writing fiction in earnest again in 1998.

Along the way to his current occupation, he went to university in London and qualified as a Pharmacist. He figured out it was a bad idea the second time the local police staked his shop out for an armed robbery -- he's a slow learner. Sick at heart from drugging people and dodging SWAT teams and gangsters, he went back to university in Bradford and did a postgraduate degree in computer science. After several tech sector jobs in the hinterlands around London, initially in graphics supercomputing and then in the UNIX industry, he emigrated to Edinburgh, Scotland, and switched track into web consultancy and a subsequent dot com death march.

All good things come to an end, and Stross made the critical career error of trying to change jobs early in 2000, just in time for the bottom to drop out of the first dot-com boom. However, he had a parachute: he was writing a monthly Linux column for *Computer Shopper*, and by a hop, a skip and a jump that would be denounced as implausible by any self-respecting editor, he managed to turn this unemployment into an exciting full time career opportunity as a freelance journalist specialising in Linux and free software. (The adjective "exciting" applies as much to the freelance journalist's relationship with their bank manager as to their career structure.) Even more implausibly, after fifteen years of abject obscurity, his fiction became an overnight success in the US, with five novel sales and several Hugo nominations in the space of two years.

He now lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, with his wife Feorag, a couple of cats, several thousand books, and an ever-changing herd of obsolescent computers.

This story originally appeared in the *Continuum 2006* program book in Australia.