**Zero**

**by Kevin Tumlnison**

"Hummingbird cake," he said.

I shook my head. "'I've never heard of it, Matthew. What is it?"

"It's a banana-pineapple cake. It's like banana bread but with frosting. And pineapple."

"Sounds tasty," I said.

"Have you ever tried it?" Matthew asked.

I shook my head again. "No, I haven't heard of it, remember? I've never tried it."

"But you might have tried it," Matthew said. "You might have tried it but just don't remember. Or you just don't *know*. You might have tried it."

"I might have," I nodded, trying to be nice.

"Did you like it?"

I fought the urge to sigh. "If I tried it, I'm sure I liked it."

This conversation had gone on a lot longer than I had anticipated. When I had walked in, Matthew was the first person I saw. He was a heavyset man in his thirties, sitting at one of the largest tables in the place. He had a cup of coffee and a newspaper—an actual, honest-to-God newspaper—and his expression was a little sour looking. I pre-judged him, I'll admit. I thought he was some angry local with small-town shackles. I thought he was the kind of guy who had wanted to leave here years ago, but found himself sitting at this table with a newspaper instead of ... well, it was hard to say *what* Matthew would be doing, if he weren't here.

I learned Matthew's name when another patron—another local—had come in for his coffee. "Heya Matthew, whatcha know?"

"Jesus is Lord," Matthew had said. And the other man had said "amen" before grabbing his to-go cup and moving away quickly.

I'm not an overly religious man. I believe in God, but I don't spend much time talking about him with strangers. Mostly I don't think about him much. So hearing him come up in casual conversation felt a little uncomfortable to me. And it was the first hint I had that Matthew wasn't feeling small-town-shackled after all. Matthew was what my grandpa would have called "simple," back in a less PC time, before we lost the ability to describe anyone with any word or phrase without offending everyone else around us. Me, I liked "simple." It said more about Matthew's life than it did about his mental illness, in my mind.

"Hummingbird bread is hard to make," Matthew said, and I nodded. He started describing the entire process to me, from ingredients to station prep to baking.

I listened. I nodded. I sipped my Americano, which was growing colder. I'd need a refill soon.

I had come in this coffee shop because it was exactly the kind of place I always look for on these trips. It faced Main Street, and it had big windows that could slide open and let in the fresh air from outside. You could sit and stare at the life passing by, going in and out of that large, square frame, like watching the world's biggest television.

I had work to do—a report to write that would set all the gears to moving. This place would be perfect. It had everything my employers needed, all within a few miles of the prospect site. The whole operation could be set up over the course of maybe six months. Within the year, this little dot of a town could be home base for the biggest battery maker in North America. And with everyone "going green," the battery business was about to boom. This town was going to see a lot of money soon.

If I could ever get around to writing the report.

Matthew had moved on from hummingbird cake to cars. "That's a 1974 International Harvester Scout II XLC," he said, rattling off the make and model with such proficiency I did a double take. "It's a rear wheel drive with a manual 3-speed gearbox."

"You're into cars?" I asked.

He nodded but without pausing he said, "It has a top speed of 84 mies per hour."

"Not that fast then," I said, smiling.

"The highest speed limit in the county is 70 miles per hour, so it's plenty fast," Matthew said.

I nodded, unable to fault that logic. "You know, my company is about to build something that will change everything about cars, houses, businesses—have you ever seen an electric car?"

"Tesla Roadster," Matthew said. "I saw one at the car show back in June. It was red. It has a top speed of 125 miles per hour."

I smiled. "Tesla started it all," I agreed. "And now other manufacturers are starting to get on board. And they need batteries for all those electric motors. My company makes a battery that charges in just a few minutes and can run for hours. We're planning to build a factory here."

Matthew sipped his coffee and suddenly picked up his newspaper and started reading as if I wasn't there.

I blinked.

"Is that boring?"

"It's almost 9:30. I have to finish reading and meet my parents at the donation center at 10 o'clock. I have to get my last coffee of the morning."

He got up and went to the counter to ask for a fresh cup, and I finally found myself sitting in a quiet space, without interruption. This was what I had hoped for over the past hour—a bit of peace so I could finish my work. Matthew had struck up a conversation with me out of the blue, and I'd felt it would be too rude to ignore him. And now, once the conversation had come around a topic I could warm to, he suddenly needed his last cup of coffee before hitting the road?

Matthew came back to the table, which was just to my left. I had turned to face him as it had become obvious that he was going to keep talking to me. I had leaned back against the wall with the large, open window to my right, and I had listened to Matthew prattle on about hummingbird cake and the weather and whatever else was on his mind. Now, as he pulled on his coat and wool cap—both of which seemed unnecessary on this spring-like day—he didn't so much as say goodbye as he walked out of the coffee shop, crossed Main Street, and disappeared around the corner of the building across the way.

He left his newspaper sitting in a disheveled pile, spread across the large table.

I shook my head, laughed a little, and turned back to write my report.

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It was nearly noon when I decided I'd done enough, and I needed a break. I stood and stretched, feeling my knotted muscles protest and my joints crackle. I was starting to notice that sort of thing. My body was starting to send me signals that I wasn't made for sitting for long stretches, despite years of practice.

I closed my laptop and slid it into my messenger bag, and then flung that over my shoulder. I had gotten my coffee in a to go cup, so there was nothing to bus. I finished the final sips of the cold Americano, and dropped the cup in the trash on the way out. I had seen a burger joint not far from here, and that seemed as good a place as any to grab some lunch before hitting the road. I had one more night here, sleeping in the dinky motel just off the highway, and tomorrow morning I'd board a plane and fly home. This trip had been a success, in my book. This place was perfect for what we needed.

I ordered my burger to go, and I was walking and eating as I made my way back to my car. I stopped in mid-bite and mid-step as I noticed someone sitting on my hood.

Matthew.

He had his rump on the hood of the rental car and his feet resting on the front bumper. Propped on his knees was a wooden box that looked like it might be a hundred years old. It had an oil logo on it, and was probably a shipping crate for a few cans of motor oil. It was the kind of thing my grandfather had kept around—too handy to throw out, as he'd say.

"Matthew," I said cautiously. "Whatcha go there?"

"You said you were a battery guy," Matthew said. He slid off of the hood of the rental car and I winced to think there might be scratches or dents. Matthew was oblivious. He stood and held the box in front of him, and moved a bit closer to me.

I peered inside the wooden crate.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's a motor," Matthew said. "I built it. And I built the battery that runs it. My pop taught me about motors and batteries. He was an electrical engineer."

"It's nice," I said, nodding. I had a burger in my hand and an overwhelming desire to get back to the hotel and watch TV until bed time. It had been a long trip—fruitful but a little exhausting. I just wanted to unwind.

"It doesn't stop," Matthew said.

I didn't quite get his meaning. "What doesn't stop?"

"The motor," Matthew said. "I put the battery on it and it's been running ever since."

"Must have a good charge," I said.

Matthew nodded. "1987."

I shook my head. "Sorry, Matthew, I don't know what you mean."

"1987," he said again. "That's when I built the battery. It's been running since then."

I laughed. "Well, that's pretty impressive," I said. "Most batteries don't handle recharges for that kind of time. Good work."

"I've never recharged it," Matthew said.

I blinked and shook my head a little. "Sorry, I don't know what you mean then."

"I built this in 1987, for school. For the science fair. And I charged it up back then. And it's been running ever since."

I started to chuckle then, as if I got the joke. And then I just ... didn't. Instead I looked into the wooden crate and saw the little motor whirring endlessly. It was connected to a set of gears that kept spinning, moving larger and smaller gears. There didn't seem to be any point to it.

"I took off the skaters," Matthew said. "I took that panel off, so I could show you the battery."

He turned then, and I noticed for the first time that there was a large backpack beside him. He placed the wooden crate on the hood of the rental car, riffled through the bag, and brought out a rectangular panel that he placed perfectly on top of the crate.

The panel was painted to look like a frozen pond on a winter day. It was a little childish looking, as paintings go. The banks of the pond were dotted with two-dimensional evergreens, decorated with splotches of multi-colored paint that represented Christmas ornaments. And the ice of the pond was baby blue, interrupted by thin, irregular cracks that were the tracks of several tiny skating figures. I watched as the figures came to live, moving around in their tracks in the ice, doing small turns before repeating the entire course.

It was crude. But it was in motion. And it was *fascinating*.

And then the full weight of what Matthew had told me sunk in.

"You built this in 1987? It's been ... this has been running *continuously* since 1987? On one battery?"

"I built it for the science fair," Matthew said. "It never stops moving."

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We were in a shed outside of Matthew's house. It smelled like a mix of motor oil and potting soil, and every available surface was covered with bits and pieces, tools and small parts. There were motors and wires strewn all over. One tangle of multi-colored wires formed a knotwork pattern that dangled from a nail on the back wall, and I was fascinated by it for a moment, as if it contained all the mysteries of the universe.

Matthew's workbench was buried in this mess, but none of the disorganization seemed to bother him in the least.

I've seen this before. A lot of the engineers I talk to are meticulous in their work, but sloppy in their environment. It's like there's a balance to be struck—as if being well organized in one area meant you had to be a slop in another.

Matthew had put his wooden crate down on top of a pile of other objects, and it just continued to move.

And it wasn't the only thing.

All around us were blinking lights and whirring motors and moving gadgets with no obvious purpose. And as I looked closely at all of them, I saw the same makeshift little battery attached to each. It might be different sizes, but it always had some shared characteristics.

"All of these things run off of your battery?" I asked.

"I build them and then I build the battery and they just keep working."

"And what do your parents say about this?" I asked.

"Pop says it's a nice hobby. Momma says it's ok as long as I don't forget that Jesus is Lord."

I did not have a response for that, other than a mumbled "Amen."

"Matthew, if what you're telling me is true, you've done something ... I mean, I don't even have a word for it. You've done something *amazing*."

"Pop says that most batteries run out after a few months or maybe a year or so, which makes these good ones."

"Good ones," I repeated. "Matthew, there *are* no batteries like these! Even the best batteries have to recharge every now and then! You're telling me that this one," and I nodded to the ice skating model, "has been running for 29 *years* without a charge! It's ... it's *impossible!*"

"Momma says nothing is impossible when you have Jesus in your heart."

"You must have him then, Matthew, because this is just unbelievable."

I asked him to show me more, and he obliged. We went through his entire collection of tiny motors and toys and gizmos. Everything ran from his little batteries, and all of it certainly *looked* as if it had been around for years. At the very least, over the course of the next few hours I never once noticed anything run to a stop, and Matthew never put anything on charge.

"Can you show me how you make the battery?" I asked.

Without hesitating Matthew turned and cleared a small space on the table. And then he ...

Well, it's actually very difficult to explain. Mostly, he *blurred*.

His hands started moving all over the place, grabbing bits of wire, snips, a soldering iron, tiny fragments of metal. I looked to see what he would pick up to use for the battery's source of energy, but there were no liquids or crystals or anything that I could see. I took out my phone and recorded everything, dictating any observations I could as he went.

I'm not an engineer. And I'm definitely not a physicist. I'm just the guy my company sends out to check out prospects, to find materials, and to organize a system for getting the work done. I'm kind of like a wedding planner for factories—I don't know all the specifics, but I know the people who do. And I know enough to recognize when something isn't quite right—when a contractor is scamming us or when parts aren't quite up to spec.

So I'd like to think that if Matthew was pulling one over on me, I'd know it. But with the speed he was working, and the flurry of random parts and materials he was using, I was pretty sure this wasn't a scam. If he really were trying to fool me, he would have had to set it all up well in advance. And frankly, there was just no way he could have known I'd be here. No one knew me in this county, and no one knew why I was here.

After a few minutes, Matthew sat back and I got a peek at his work in its final form.

It was a small, cylindrical object. A coil of copper was spun around its outside, and two leads came from one end. Tiny wires ran along its length, connecting seemingly random points all along its exterior. I knew from having watched him build it that there were more points like this inside—an array of them that represented a variety of small electronic components.

"Can I pick it up?" I asked.

"Yes," Matthew said.

I reached out my right hand, slowly, and pinched the battery between by thumb and forefinger. I lifted it gingerly, feeling its very slight weight, and raised it so that I could look at it closer.

In doing this, the two leads coming out of the top jostled, and a huge spark erupted as they made contact.

I dropped the battery and it landed with a thud on the workbench.

Matthew laughed as if he'd just seen the funniest thing on Earth, and I smiled and laughed a little with him.

"I wasn't expecting that," I huffed. "I never saw you charge it!"

"I didn't," Matthew said. "I don't have to charge them anymore. They pick up a charge from the air."

"They ..." I started, but couldn't even finish. "How?"

"Momma says the power of Jesus is all around us."

I thought about this. "You're saying these batteries are powered by ... God?"

"I dunno," Matthew said. "He never told me."

I shook my head. I was breathing heavy. Like I said, I'm no engineer. And I'm not physicist. But I do hang around with a lot of those guys, and I read a lot of technical journals and articles. I know the rudiments of science. I have to. And I knew exactly what this was, now.

Zero point energy.

I can't really explain all of this very well, but I can say that it's all tied up in quantum physics and energy in a vacuum. It's the energy that's left over when you take everything else away. And, according to some folks, it's infinite. If you could tap into zero point energy, or ZPE, you could power the entire world forever.

Somehow, through a bunch of cobbling and tinkering, Matthew had found a way to create unlimited energy. And he was using it to power a 29-year-old science fair project.

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Matthew's parents saw across the table from me, and his fathered eyed me like I had just showed up to date his daughter wearing a heavy metal shirt and sporting a nose ring. Matthew had wandered into the other room, and I could hear a video game playing.

"He's a special boy," his mother said. "He always has been."

"Not a boy," his father said. "He's a man now, Judith. Has been for years."

"He'll always be my boy," Judith said.

I could see the tension between them. I could almost see the whole thing play out—the mentally disabled son who had special needs that only his parents could meet. Matthew was 38 years old, which meant that for almost forty years he'd been a child, in his mother's eyes. His father had expectations of him, clearly. But was he was stuck. He couldn't turn him out, could he? His wife—clearly a religious woman—would never hear of it. And besides, it was plain that the man loved his son, too. But I could see the pain in his eyes. And the fear.

"I'm not here to cause any problems, but I think Matthew has stumbled onto something that could change your lives forever. It could change the lives of *everyone*, actually. I work for a company that builds very high-performance batteries. We supply companies that are working hard to end our dependence on oil and natural gas, and bring make sustainable technology more prevalent. We make some of the highest-performing batteries on *Earth*—and *nothing* we make compares to what Matthew has built!"

"He's always been a special boy," Judith said, smiling sublimely and nodding.

"I think he's more special than you even realize," I said. "I'd like to introduce him to some people I work with. I'd like for him to show them his batteries, and maybe work with them to patent them."

"Patents?" his father, Earl, asked. "That sounds expensive."

"My company would pay for them, for the exclusive right to produce Matthew's battery in our factories," I said. "In fact, Matthew stands to make a *lot* of money from this. He'll never have to worry about money again. His needs will be taken care of for ever."

I looked squarely into Earl's eyes when I said this last part. I knew the burden of caring for Matthew had to be tremendous. It was clear that Earl worked hard, and that Judith wasn't really contributing to the family's income. She cared fro Matthew, and Earl cared for the family. But it wasn't enough. I could see that just by looking around.

"And what do you get out of it?" Earl asked.

"My company gets control of a patent that they can use to change the world," I said. "Personally. I'll probably get a promotion. And an electric car, finally."

I laughed a little, but Earl didn't reciprocate. His attitude toward me had been fairly guarded, and maybe even a little angry, ever since he came home and found me hanging out with his son in the shed. I had explained why I was there, and had managed to get this table-top conversation going. But I still hadn't convinced Earl that I wasn't there to cause trouble.

"Would you like some more coffee?" Judith asked.

"Sure," I smiled. Say yes a lot. That's what they teach you, when you're learning how to negotiate deals. Say yes, be amicable, and when it's time for you to make *your* big ask, they'll feel like they should reciprocate. It was a bit of psychological manipulation, but I was ok with it. This was a big deal, after all. This was bigger than Matthew's special needs. This was the Earth. This was the future of *humanity*.

Judith got up and went to the coffee maker, and Earl called after her. "Put it in one of the paper cups," he said. "I need to show our guest something."

Judith said nothing, didn't even look back, but Earl stood, sliding his chair across the linoleum and gesturing for me to follow him as he walked out of the kitchen door.

I followed.

We walked past the shed where Matthew had his little workshop set up, and into a larger barn. Earl pushed a large sliding door to the side and stepped into the maw of darkness. I hesitated on the outside, wondering what fresh hell awaited in the dark ahead. And then, with the sound of a large breaker switch being flipped, the barn lit up like noon.

I stepped inside.

Where I had expected bails of hay and racks of pitchforks and maybe a cow or two, instead I found rows of workbenches, large machines of every description, and a large circular arch that dominated the far end of the barn.

I took everything in as best I could, looking from table to table and object to object. I moved about touching things here and there, checking with Earl to make sure it was ok first. He nodded each time. His expression had changed. He no longer seemed gruff or cautious. Instead, there was a note of sadness in his features. He watched me as I moved around the room, and it was almost as if he felt regret.

"I'm going to miss this one," he said.

I turned to him, "What do you mean?"

"It was a quiet place. Has been for years. Decades. When I first got here, I was pretty sure it was on the path, but it was so ... *quaint*. The technology was a throwback, for sure. But I knew it would catch up. Seems like it's moved a lot faster than I expected." He sighed. "Everything is moving so much faster now. The closer I get to the center, the faster time moves." He chuckled "Or maybe I'm just getting old."

"I'm sorry, Earl, I really just don't know what you're talking about."

He shook his head. "No. You wouldn't. It's pretty amazing, actually. Every time, you come along. Well, not *you*. Someone *like* you. The one who discovers my boy. The one who learns that the impossible is really possible after all. I've tried to move us to the most backwater places I could, but it always happens. I guess it's just the way the Omniverse works."

"I don't ..."

"No, you don't," Earl said. "Look, I don't want to scare you, but what you're after isn't quite as nice as you think it is. We found that out the hard way, back on my world. Oh, it's wonderful, when the whole world finally notices that everything is bigger and better than they expected. But as big as the universe is, there are a lot of really small minds in it. People discover this—they discover zero point energy—and they do alright with it, to start. But then ... it's over. They never seem to realize that having that kind of power comes with a responsibility. There's a balance, see? You can't have access to infinite power without also having infinite restraint. You can't have evil still roaming around in the world when God comes to call, as my wife might say."

"Earl, look, I didn't mean to come and disrupt anything here. Matthew found *me*. I was just here to build a battery factory, that's it. But I have to tell you, what he's done ... it changes *everything*."

"Yes it does," Earl said. "It always does. A billion different universes, and Matthew changes every one of them. I've brought him and Judith to a new start more times than I can count, and it always ends the same way. The boy just can't help himself. He *feels* it."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Earl laughed. "Gods and men, son. My wife ... she loves Jesus. She just *loves* him. She took to Jesus immediately. It's the story, you know? The son of a carpenter becomes a messiah. He starts with simple roots, and he changes the world forever. That's a story. That's a *legacy*. She likes that a lot. She's always chasing God, every time we start over. She wants to talk to him, I think. She wants to find out why."

"Why what?" I asked, cautious.

"Why Babel. Why Eden. Why we were cast out, told we couldn't have access to the power God has access to. She doesn't quite realize that right now. She started giving in to the persistent dream a long time ago. Too many universes ago. She just lets me take her and our boy across the threshold and into a new one. And the closer we get to zero, the more she just lets herself be taken by the persistent vision of each universe."

"Earl ... I have to tell you, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

Earl shook his head, then went to the wall beside the circular arch and pulled a large switch. There was a high-pitched sound, like water coming to a boil in a kettle, and when that faded a spiral of blue light swirled around in the center of the arch until it filled it from edge to edge.

I stumbled back from it. And for the first time I noticed that there was an array of Matthew's batteries all along the edge of the archway. Whatever this was, it was being run by zero point energy. And it was *massive*.

"You have what you need," Earl said. "You have my boy's battery. That will change everything. You'll have a few years, maybe even a few decades of prosperity here. I'm glad of that, at least. But tell them, boy. Tell them that this isn't the first time it's been tried. There have been *billions* of tries. And every one of them has eventually turned into a nightmare, because humans ... well, we don't respect the *balance*. Tell them, if they'll listen, that infinite power *must* come with infinite restraint. You have a whole universe to explore and expand into, but you need to stay right here until you're all of the same mind. Don't let the divisions stand, son. Don't let everyone decide they can be anything they want without considering anyone else. The persistent vision of this universe will fracture, and infinite power will tear you all apart."

I was about to say something, to ask more questions than I ever thought I could ask, but before I could say a word Judith nudged me with a paper cup full of coffee. She'd put a lid on it, and she was smiling at me. Matthew was standing beside her, wearing his coat and wool cap.

"I made it to go," she said. "I'm happy to have met you. I'm sorry for what's to come."

"They might make it," Matthew said. "They have hummingbird cake here."

"And Jesus," Judith nodded, smiling.

"There's hope all around then," Earl said. He looked at me as if to drill his dire warnings deeper. "Don't forget to tell them," he said.

I shook my head, dumbfounded. "No," I said. "I ... no I won't forget."

Earl nodded, then took Judith by the arm. She, in turn, took Matthew's hand. And they walked toward the archway.

As they stepped through, Matthew looked backed and waved and said, "Good luck with your factory."

And then they were gone.

The archway collapsed after they entered, falling into a pile of rubble and debris on the ground. I stared at it as it toppled, not even sure what I should do. It was just too disconnected. I was just too  unsure of what had happened, or what any of it meant

I walked out of the barn and went to the rental car, and started making calls. By morning I could have some people here. I could work out what to do next. I could take Matthew's batteries and anything else we found here, and I could help turn those into something that could change the world

And I'd remember to tell them, too. Respect the balance. Maybe this time we'd listen.