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Three Stories About the Lifebox

by [Rudy Rucker](#)

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For more information about Rucker's notion of the lifebox, see the home page for his book [*The Lifebox, the Seashell and the Soul*](#).

Soft Death

by Rudy Rucker

[First appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, September, 1986. Reprinted from Rudy Rucker, [Gnarl](#).]

"I'm sorry, Mr. Leckesh," said the doctor, nervously tapping on his desk-screen. "There's no doubt about it. The tests are all positive."

"But surely ..." began Leckesh. His voice came out as a papery whisper. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I mean ... can't you put a new liver in me? I can afford the organs, and I can afford the surgery. My god, man, don't just sit there and tell me you're *sorry*! What am I paying you for?" At the mention of money, Leckesh's voice regained its usual commanding tone.

The doctor looked uncomfortable. "I *am* sorry, Mr. Leckesh. The cancer has metastasized. Tumor cells are established in every part of your body." He fingered some keys and green lines formed on his screen. "Step around the desk, Mr. Leckesh, and look at this."

It was the graph of an upsloping curve, with dates along the horizontal axis, and percentages along the vertical axis. The graph was captioned: PROJECTED MORTALITY OF DOUGLAS LECKESH.

"These are my odds of dying by a given date?" barked Leckesh. What a fool this doctor was to let a computer do all his thinking. "You've got this all projected like some damned commodities option?"

"Most patients find it reassuring to know the whole truth," said the doctor. "Today is March 30. You see how the curve rises? We have a fifty percent chance of your death before May 1; a ninety percent chance before July 1; and virtual certainty by late September. You can trust these figures, Mr. Leckesh. The Bertroy Medical Associates have the best computer in New York."

"Turn it off," cried Leckesh, smacking the screen so hard that its pixels quivered.

"I came here to see a doctor! If I wanted to look at computer projections, I could have stayed in my office down on the Street!"

The doctor sighed and turned off his terminal. "You're experiencing denial, Mr. Leckesh. The fact is that you're going to die. Make the most of the time you have left. If you want a non-computerized projection, I'll give you one." He stared briefly at the cityscape outside his window. "Don't expect much more than three weeks before your final collapse."

Leckesh found his way out of the Bertroy Building and into the morning roar of Madison Avenue. It was 10:30. He had business meetings; but what difference would more millions make now? At least he should call Abby; she'd be waiting to hear. But once he told Abby, she'd only get right to work planning her own future. If he, Doug Leckesh, was the one doing the dying, why should he do anything for anyone anymore? Abby could wait. Business could stop. Right now he wanted a drink.

The weather was raw and blustery, with a little snow in the air. The sky was fifty different shades of gray. One of the new robot taxis slowed invitingly as Leckesh approached the curb. He owned stock in the company, but today of all days he didn't feel like talking to a robot. He waved the cab off and kept walking. His club was only four blocks off.

There was a bar at the next corner, apparently not automated. Leckesh hadn't entered a public drinking place for years, but a sudden gust of cold wind urged him in. He ordered a beer and a shot of scotch. The bartender looked sympathetic; Leckesh had a sudden flash that someone with cancer came in here every day. There were lots of doctors in the Bertroy Building. There were lots of people with cancer. There were lots of people who handled stress with alcohol.

"I'm ready for spring," observed the bartender when Leckesh ordered his second round. He was a broad-faced Korean with a New Jersey accent. "I got a garden up on the roof and I'm dying to put the seedlings in."

"What do you grow?" asked Leckesh, thinking of his father. Papa had put a garden in the back of their little tract home every summer. "This is living, Dougie," Papa would say, picking a tomato and biting into it. "This is what it's all about."

"Lettuce," said the flat-faced Korean. "Bok choy. Potatoes. I love new potatoes,

the way they come up in a big clump of nuggets."

Leckesh thought about nuggets. Tumor cells in every part of his body. He sucked down his scotch and asked for another.

"The main thing is fertilizer," said the bartender, placidly pouring out a shot. "Plants need dead stuff, rotten stuff, all crumbly and black. It's the cycle of nature. Death into life."

"I'll be dead in a month," said Leckesh. The words jumped out. "I just saw my doctor. I have cancer all over my body."

The Korean stopped moving and looked into Leckesh's eyes. Just looked, for a long few seconds, watching him like a TV. "You scared?"

"I'm not religious," said Leckesh. "I don't think there's anything after death. Three more weeks and it's all over. I might as well never have lived."

"You got a wife?"

"Ah, she won't miss me. She'll *talk* about missing me. She likes to put on a show. But she won't really miss me. She'll take all my money and find someone else, the little tramp." Speaking so unkindly about Abby gave Leckesh a perverse and bitter satisfaction.

The Korean kept watching him in that blank, judicious way. "You have a lot of money?" he asked finally.

"Yes, I do," said Leckesh, regaining his composure. "Not that it's any of your business. What's your name anyway? I'll buy you a drink. Take it all out of this and keep the change." He threw a two hundred dollar bill on the bar.

"My name's Yung. I'm not supposed to drink on duty but ..." The Korean glanced impassively around the bar. There were a couple of old longhairs having coffee in the booths, but that was it. "Yeah, I'll take a Heineken."

"That's a boy, Yung. Get me one, too. Nothing but the best for Douglas Leckesh. I'm full of nuggets. You can call me Doug. I was thinking before, you must get a lot of death cases in this bar, being so close to the Bertroy Building. It's all doctors in there, you know."

"Oh yeah," said Yung, opening the two bottles of Heineken. He poured his into a coffee mug. "Bertroy Medical Associates. They have a teraflop diagnostic computer in

the basement there --- it does a trillion calculations a second, fast as a human brain. My sister helps program it. She's a smart girl, my sister Lo." He sipped at his mug and watched Leckesh some more. "So you gonna die and you think that's it, huh, Mr. Leckesh?"

"Religion's wrong, Yung, isn't it?" Leckesh was feeling his drinks. "When I was your age, I didn't think so --- hell, I even used to paint pictures. But down on the Street, nothing counts but numbers. I've got a seat on the Exchange, you know that? So don't try and tell *me* about religion."

Yung looked up and down the bar and leaned close. "Religion's one thing, Mr. Leckesh, but immortality's something else. Lo says immortality's no big problem anymore." He drew a business card out of his pocket and handed it to Leckesh. "This is modern; this is digital. Whenever you're ready for immortality, my sister Lo's got it."

Leckesh pocketed the card without looking at it. All of a sudden, the beers and the scotches were hitting him hard. The dull throb of his sick liver was filigreed with accents of acute pain. He was stupid to be drinking this early in the day, drinking and slobbering out his soul to a Korean bartender. Where was his self-control? Stiff-legged, he stalked into the men's room and made himself throw up. Better. He washed his face, first with hot and then with cold. He gargled and drank water from the tap. *Three weeks*, the doctor had said. *Three weeks*. Leckesh left the bar and went home to Abby.

Abby Leckesh was a dark-haired woman with full cheeks and beautiful teeth. When they'd met, fifteen years ago, Leckesh had been fifty and Abby thirty. He'd still dreamed of being a painter, even then, and he'd liked the bohemian crowd that Abby traveled in. But now Leckesh hated Abby's friends with an aging man's impotent jealousy.

To his displeasure, Abby greeted the news of his impending death with what he took for enthusiasm. She believed in spirits and mediums, and she was confident that Leckesh would be able to contact her from beyond the grave.

"Don't be downcast, Doug. You'll only be moving to a higher plane of existence. You'll still be here with me as a dear familiar spirit."

"Talk about a fate worse than death," snapped Leckesh. "I don't want to float around watching you spend my money on your boyfriends." For years now, he'd

suspected her of being unfaithful to him.

"I'll wear full mourning for six months," prattled Abby, ignoring his accusation. "I'll go out and buy some black dresses today! And we must have Irwin Garden over for tea. He's simply the most brilliant new medium in America. You should get to know his vibrations so he can contact you on the other side."

Leckesh didn't dignify this with an answer. Abby went out in search of mourning clothes and Mr. Garden while the robomat made Leckesh a veal cutlet for lunch. The meal cleared his head entirely and he drew out the business card that the Korean bartender ... Yung ... had given him.

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Leckesh studied the card for awhile, and made his decision. He'd be damned if he was going to let one of Abby's phony mediums get away with pretending to talk to his spirit. If there was anything to this "Scientific Soul Preservation," he'd be able to steal a march on the table-rappers. He picked up the phone and called the Soft Death number.

"Hello, this is Lo Park." Her accent was as pure New Jersey as Yung's, though with a hint of Eastern melody.

"Hello, this is Doug Leckesh. A man --- I believe it was your brother --- gave me a business card with your name on it. Soft Death Incorporated?"

"Oh, yes, Yung told me. I don't like to discuss this on the telephone. Could you come see me tomorrow morning, Mr. Leckesh?"

"Ten o'clock?"

"That will be fine."

Feeling strangely relieved, Douglas Leckesh stretched out on the couch and fell asleep. He dreamed of colors, clouds of color around a long line of precise, musical tones --- binary tones chanted by Lo Park's musical voice. When he awoke, it was late afternoon, and Abby was sitting across the room drinking tea with a balding young man

in glasses.

“This is Mr. Garden, Doug. He’s the medium I was telling you about.”

Garden smiled shyly and shook Leckesh’s hand. “I’m sorry to hear of your illness, Douglas.” He had gentle eyes and large moist lips. “You have very interesting vibrations.”

“So do you,” said Leckesh curtly. The thought of Garden alone in a dark room with Abby made him sick. “You have the vibrations of an ambulance-chasing lawyer, mixed in with the aura of a two-bit Casanova and the emanations of a snake-oil salesman. Get out of my apartment.”

Garden gave a low bow and left. Abby was quite angry.

“It’s fine for you, Doug, to act like that. Soon you’ll be dead. But I’ll be here all alone, with no one to take care of me.” Tears ran down her big cheeks. “Irwin Garden only wants to help me contact your spirit.”

“Let me worry about my spirit, Abby. Can’t you see that Garden wants to cheat me and seduce you? I don’t want jackals sniffing around my death-bed. I want to pass on in peace. Business as usual!” His liver hurt very much.

Abby sobbed harder. The fact was that she was very devoted to Leckesh. All her talk of mediums and mourning clothes was just a way to avoid thinking about his death. After a few minutes, she calmed herself and kissed him on the forehead. “Of course, Doug. I’ll do as you wish. I won’t see Mr. Garden again.” In his embittered state, Leckesh was convinced that Abby was lying. He’d never caught her yet, but he was sure she had boyfriends. How could she not? He’d been part artist when he’d wooed her, but since then he’d joined the Stock Exchange. How could Abby still love him? Well, now it didn’t matter. The long game was almost over. And if there was anything to these Soft Death people, Leckesh was on the brink of a whole new existence.

The next morning, he was back at the Bertroy Building. Lo Park’s office was in the basement; it was one of a number of small cubicles partitioned off along one wall of a room-sized computer installation. To all appearances, Lo worked as a programmer here. There was nothing about “Soft Death” on her flimsy office door. Leckesh wondered if he should bother going in, but the thought of outflanking Abby’s occultist manipulations goaded him on.

The Korean woman at the desk was young and slender, with hair so dark as to appear almost blue against her yellow skin. She looked up with a quick smile.

"Mr. Leckesh? Yung told me about you."

"He told you I'm rich, dying and desperate, I suppose. What kind of immortality are you selling, Lo? And what's the price?"

"The price is high. The immortality is software."

"What do you mean?"

"Consider, Mr. Leckesh. The human body changes almost all its atoms every seven years or so. But you feel you are the same person as you were seven or fourteen or fifty-six years ago. What is constant in your body is the arrangement of cells, especially the cells of the brain. The real essence of Douglas Leckesh is not the seventy-five kilograms of diseased flesh that sits here. The essence of Douglas Leckesh is to be found in the pattern that your brain codes up. Do you follow?"

Leckesh nodded approvingly. "I was afraid you'd be another spiritualist. You're saying that my so-called soul is really just a pattern of digital information?"

"Exactly. Abstractly speaking, the information pattern exists even in the absence of a body. Yet for the pattern to be in any sense *alive*, it needs some kind of substrate." She smiled and gestured beyond her office door. "The Soft Death substrate is that computer out there. If you wish, I can extract the entire software information pattern from your body and code it into the machine."

"How do I know you can really do it? And what would it feel like to live inside a computer's memory?"

"Before we continue, Mr. Leckesh, I need a commitment from you. For various reasons, the full work of Soft Death is not legally sanctioned. I cannot put my earlier clients at risk without some proof of your sincerity."

"You're saying you want a check?"

"I want a document granting us title to approximately half of your properties and investments." She slid a legal paper across the desk. "I've taken the liberty of drawing it up."

Leckesh scanned down the contract with a practiced eye. Soft Death Incorporated had worked fast: half his assets were listed here, nearly a billion dollars worth. In return

for the billion, Soft Death was promising Leckesh “hospice care and advanced embalming services.”

“We can’t make the contract more specific, Mr. Leckesh, again because of the legal sanctions on certain aspects of our operation.”

Leckesh shrugged. Perhaps this was a con. But what was the difference anymore? If Soft Death didn’t get this billion, Abby would give it to the Mr. Gardens of the world. He could feel the cancer deep in his guts; he could feel the growing of the pain. “I’ll sign.”

Lo pushed a buzzer, and a man came in to witness and notarize the document. Another blue-haired Korean. They reminded Leckesh of smurfs.

“Your brother, too?” asked Leckesh, smiling a little. Signing away this money felt good. What was that old bible story about the rich man trying to squeeze through a needle’s eye?

“No,” said Lo. “A cousin.” She locked the contract in her desk. “And now you’ll want to see proof that our process works. Do you remember William Kaley?”

“Bill Kaley? Yes, I knew him rather well. We did business together. He died last fall, I believe. He was one of the most materialistic men I ever knew. Are you telling me ...”

“Here,” said Lo, punching a code into her telephone, and handing Leckesh the receiver. “You can talk to him.”

At first Leckesh heard only pips and bleats, but then there was a ringing, and a voice.

“Hello? Kaley here.”

“Bill? This is Doug Leckesh. Do you know what day it is?”

“It’s March 31, Doug. Are you dead, too?”

“Damn near. Are you really inside that computer?”

“Sure am. It’s not bad. There’s a lot of information coming in. I’m managing most of the investments I signed over to Soft Death, which keeps me busy. There’s a pretty good gang of people in here.”

“Any landscape?”

“It’s not like that, Dougie. But you’d be surprised how much fun pushing around

the bits can be. How soon are you coming in? I'm a little lonely for a new voice, to tell you the truth." He sounded almost wistful. "But, hell, it beats being dead. When are you coming in?"

"We haven't worked that out yet." Was this real? Leckesh paused, trying to remember something that would convince him he was really talking to the software of William Kaley. The Schattner deal! "Do you remember the Schattner takeover, Bill?"

"Do I! Don't tell me the SEC finally found out."

"No, no, I'm just checking. Remember the night after Schattner shot himself, and you and I'd made twelve million bucks? Do you remember what we had for dinner?"

"We went to MacDonald's. The check was twelve dollars. We laughed our asses off. *I could eat a million of these.* Oh, it's me in here, Doug, don't worry."

Leckesh smiled. "I'm not worried now, Bill. See you soon." He hung up and looked at Lo. "When do we start?"

"Let me outline the procedure. To extract your software, we need to get five kinds of maps of your brain: symbolic, metabolic, electrical, physical, and chemical. Taken together, these data-sets are sufficient to produce an isomorphic model of your mental processes. You should begin working on the symbolic map today."

"What do you mean? I thought *you* would do the work."

"Only you know your own symbol-system, Mr. Leckesh." Lo took a device the size of a cigarette-pack out of her desk. It had two little grilles, for microphone and speaker. "We call this a lifebox. Basically, I want you to tell it your life story. Tell everything. It takes most people a couple of weeks."

"But ... I'm no writer."

"Don't worry; the lifebox has prompts built into its program. It asks questions." She flicked a switch and the lifebox hummed. "Go on, Mr. Leckesh, say something to it."

"I ... I'm not used to talking to machines."

"What are some of the first machines you remember, Doug?" asked the lifebox. Its voice was calm, pleasant, interested. Lo nodded encouragingly, and Leckesh answered the question.

"The TV, and my mother's vacuum cleaner. I used to love to watch the cartoons Saturday morning --- Bugs Bunny was the best --- and Mom would always pick that time

to vacuum. It made red and green static on the TV screen." Leckesh stopped and looked at the box. "Can you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Doug. I want to build up a sort of network among the concepts that matter to you, so I'm going to keep asking questions about some of the things you mention. I'll get back to the vacuum cleaner in a minute, but first tell me this: what did you like best about Bugs Bunny?"

For the next couple of weeks, Leckesh took his lifebox everywhere. He talked to it at home and in the club --- and when Abby and his friends reproved him for ignoring them, he began talking to it in a booth at Yung's bar. The lifebox was the best listener Leckesh had ever had. It remembered everything he told it, and it winnowed the key concepts out of all his stories. Leckesh would respond to its prompts, or simply go off on tangents of his own. Except for the dizziness and the constant pain, he hadn't had so much fun in years.

Finally, in mid-April, the lifebox said, "Now *that's* a story I've heard before, Doug. And so was the last one. And, unless I'm mistaken, you're about to tell me about the first time you slept with Abby."

"You're right," said Leckesh, feeling a little twinge of guilt. Telling his life had made him remember how big a part of him Abby really was. And now, for two weeks, he'd been too busy with the lifebox to even look at her.

"Abby, Summer, Maine, Fourth of July, Firecrackers, Cans, Pineapple, Aunt Rose, Roses, Abby, Skin, Honey, Hexagons ... I think we've got enough to go on, now, Doug. Why don't you bring me on over to Lo's. I've signaled her to expect us."

Leckesh nodded to Yung and walked over the Bertroy Building. It was a beautiful spring day at last, with the endless blue sky leaping up from the spaces between the big city building. Six shades of blue, if you looked carefully. He hadn't been able to tell the lifebox much about colors.

Lo was all smiles. "You've done a good job with the lifebox, Mr. Leckesh. That's one of the most important steps. Now, what the lifebox program has done is to arrange some ten thousand of your key concepts into a kind of tree-diagram. The next step is to correlate this concept-network with your brain's metabolic activity. Please come this way."

Leckesh followed Lo across the computer room to the elevators. They rode up to a neurologist's office on the top floor. There was a nice view out the top halves of the windows; the bottom halves were frosted glass. The neurologist and his nurses were, of course, Korean. Working quickly, they injected Leckesh with something, and laid him out on a table, with his head inside a large, domed sensor device.

"This is a PET-scanner, Mr. Leckesh," explained the doctor. We want to learn just which parts of your brain react to the key concepts of your life story." The injection made Leckesh feel both stunned and lively. He couldn't move, but his mind was going a mile a minute. The PET-scan sensor seemed like a cavern, a door into the underworld. The doctor set the lifebox down on Leckesh's chest, and it began its rapid-fire rundown.

"Machine. TV. Vacuum cleaner. Bugs Bunny. Rudeness. Teeth. Dogs ..." After each word or phrase the PET-scanner would click. The process went on for the whole afternoon. "... Pineapple. Cans. Firecrackers. Fourth of July. Maine. Summer. Abby." Finally it was over. The doctor injected an antidote; Leckesh's body speeded back up, and his mind slowed back down. Lo took him downstairs to her cubicle. The long afternoon's ordeal had left him so weak that his walk was a stooped shuffle.

"Well, that's it, Mr. Leckesh --- until the end. We'll get the electrical, physical and chemical maps at the end."

"The end? After I die?"

Lo looked a little uncomfortable. "This is where the hospice comes in. We can't take the risk of having your brain degenerate before we can analyze it. For the electrical probes to give reliable reading, the brain still has to be somewhat functional. Unless the tissues are absolutely fresh, the physical microtoming process works very poorly. And memory RNA is an extremely labile substance. The coordination of your brain-removal with our team's readiness is a delicate thing."

"Now hold on a minute. What are you saying?" Lo's yellow face and blue hair made Leckesh think of a nightmare by van Gogh.

"I told you that some aspects of our operation are legally questionable, Mr. Leckesh." Each syllable came out just so.

"You're telling me that I'm supposed to make an appointment for your doctors to shock me to death, and cut up my brain, and grind up the pieces for a chemical analysis?"

"We need a day's notice, is all. When you get to the point where you think the end is near, Mr. Leckesh, you simply get in touch with Soft Death, and our ambulance will take you to our hospice."

"What if I wait too long?"

Lo shrugged. "It's a matter of statistics, like everything else. Here." She took what looked like a wristwatch out of her desk. "Wear this. To signal us to come get you, simply push this button here. The watch also has sensors which signal us automatically in case you collapse. Let me stress that the chances of our achieving a fully isomorphic copy of your software are much greater if you come in early. Quite frankly, I'd advise coming in today. I think the crisis is closer than you realize."

"You're just in a hurry to claim your half of my assets," challenged Leckesh, suddenly wild with fear. His guts were on fire and his head was spinning.

"We already *have* half of your assets," corrected Lo. "The document you signed was a contract, not a will. And, by the way, for another quarter of your assets we would be able to provide software *transmission* as well as the planned preservation ..."

"I'm getting out of here," shouted Leckesh, in a strained, cracking voice. "Soft Death is a bunch of vampires and ghouls!" In the cab home, he began coughing blood. He wondered if the Soft Death neurologist had poisoned him. This had all been a horrible mistake. He'd never been able to take Bill Kaley for more than an hour at a time; and now he was supposed to spend eternity in a machine with Kaley and a bunch of other rich fools?

He found Abby alone in the apartment, talking on the phone with Mr. Garden. Leckesh was so desperate to see his wife that he didn't bother to be annoyed.

"Oh, Abby, I've been selfish. I'm sorry I've been ignoring you these last few weeks."

"Where's your little recorder, Doug? Did you finish dictating your life story?" Her pale, anxious face was luminous in the apartment's gathering dusk.

"It's all done. Kiss me, Abby."

They hugged and kissed for a long time. Leckesh wondered how he could have thought that his words were more important than Abby's real self, her real body with its real curves and its sweet real fragrance. And ... even realer than that ... her *aura*, the

married couple telepathy they had together, the precious, unspoken understanding of two people in love.

"Doug?"

"What, darling?"

"What have you been up to, really? What were you always talking into that little box for? I know it wasn't a recorder like you said. I heard it talking back to you. And there's something else. I went to the bank today, and half of our money is gone. The teller said some group called Soft Death had a paper giving them the right to take half of our money out. What is Soft Death, Doug?" Abby's voice quavered and broke. "Is it another woman you've been talking to? I wouldn't blame you, with so little time left, but why won't you let *me* help you, too?"

Leckesh's heart swelled as if to burst. After all the bad things he'd thought about Abby in the past --- she really did care. She cared more than anyone. Yet, still, he couldn't tell her. It was Soft Death or nothing, wasn't it? There was no immortality outside of their machine.

"Soft Death is ... a kind of hospice. A home for the terminally ill. I signed a contract so I could go there when the cancer gets really bad. I might have to go pretty soon. I coughed blood in the cab, Abby, and I'm hurting bad."

"But ... half our money, Doug?"

"They pressured me, Abby. And it's not just a hospice. I can't tell you more, you might mess it up. We've both always had our secrets, haven't we?" The pain in his stomach was beating like a bass drum.

"Oh, Doug, you've gotten so suspicious of me. There haven't been any secrets, darling. It's only because you were older than me that you worried so much. You're all I ... "

Something collapsed in Leckesh's guts. He pitched forward onto his knees and vomited blood. The sensor in Lo's wristwatch sent out a signal to the Soft Death ambulance that had trailed Leckesh's taxi home.

The funeral was two days later. The only mourner aside from Abby was Irwin Garden, with his baggy pants and turbaned mind. Over Abby's protests, he accompanied her back to her apartment.

"I promised Doug not to see you," said Abby, pacing distractedly up and down the richly furnished living room. She stared out the window and turned to look at Garden's calm face. His arched eyebrows showed over his glasses. Abby made up her mind. "Doug will forgive me. He and I still had so much to tell each other. He needs me, Irwin, I can feel it. Can you help me reach him?"

"I can try."

Garden opened up his battered briefcase and drew out a large square of silk with a Tibetan mandala on it. He set it down on the dining table, and he and Abby sat down on either side of Leckesh's old seat. Garden lit a stick of incense and began reading from a book he said was the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Time passed. Abby let Garden's droning voice wash over her, as she thought of Doug. It was nearly dark now, and the plume of incense smoke was dense above the silken mandala. The table creaked and shifted; the thick smoke began to give off a faint blue glow. Garden fell silent.

"Doug," said Abby, staring into the luminous smoke. "Doug, are you there?"

The smoke had no words. It only moaned, turning in on itself.

"Is something wrong, Doug? Tell me. Show me."

A pattern formed in the air, indistinct as a cheap hologram, but multicolored, with rainbow fringes at each color-volume's edge. The face of Douglas Leckesh, his tormented face.

Now the face shrank to the size of a fist, and pale color-lines enveloped it.

"A ghost-trap," said Garden softly. "He's telling you that something has his spirit trapped here on earth."

Bright blips raced along the color-lines surrounding Leckesh's face; bright, digital blips. His moaning chattered into the sound of typewriters.

"Is it Soft Death, Doug?"

The pulsing lines fell away, and the spirit face nodded. Somewhere in the apartment, a window blew open with a crash. There was a sudden, strong wind, and something white fluttered in from the bedroom. A small white rectangle.

The incense smoke dispersed, and the mandala cloth wafted onto the floor. Doug's face was gone, but there, lying on the table between Abby and Irwin, was a dog-

eared business card. The Soft Death business card that Yung had given Leckesh three weeks ago.

Abby was at the Bertroy Building when it opened next morning. After lengthy inquiries, she found herself in Lo Park’s basement cubicle.

“What have you done to my husband?” demanded Abby.

The young Korean woman was cool and matter-of-fact. “Soft Death Incorporated has preserved his software, according to his request.”

“What do you mean?”

“We coded up Douglas Leckesh’s brain-functions as a pattern of zeroes and ones in the computer out there. Would you like to talk with him?”

“I communicated with him last night.”

The Korean woman twitched her eyebrows unbelievably. “I will telephone him for you.” She punched some buttons and handed Abby the receiver.

There was chiming and a buzzing, and then a voice. Doug’s voice. “Hello?” He sounded bored and unhappy.

“Doug! Is it really you?”

“I ... I don’t know. Abby. You’re with Lo Park?”

“Yes. She says you’re in her computer. But last night Irwin Garden called your spirit out of thin air.”

A sob of anguish. “I was a fool, Abby. I should have believed you. Get me out of here. It’s like an endless business meeting, oh, it’s like Hell.”

“Your spirit wants you out, too. But it couldn’t talk.”

“All they have in here is my digital code,” said Leckesh’s voice. “But not the rest of me. I can hardly remember it in here, Abby, the colors and smells, the feelings you give me. It’s wrong for my two parts to be split this way. I was a fool to think I was nothing but numbers. I need to get out of here, and move on to the other side.”

“I’ll save you, darling.”

It didn’t take Lo Park long to draw up a contract for half of what Abby had left. In return, Soft Death promised “Software transmission.”

That afternoon a long, powerful radio signal was beamed straight up from a dish on the top of the Bertroy Building. The signal coded a certain digital information pattern,

a bit-string derived from the software of the late Douglas Leckesh. Radio signals are invisible, but if you'd been watching the sky as the Leckesh beam went up, you might have seen an iridule: a brief swirl of rainbow light.

Note on "Soft Death"

This story was written in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1985—another death story from Lynchburg. The software model of a person's brain idea is central to my novels [Software](#) and [Wetware](#). In "Soft Death," I was interested in clarifying the technology of the "uploading" technique. I can really imagine senior citizens buying and using lifeboxes. The idea of a lifebox program which can "tell stories just like Grandpa used to" seems quite plausible. Imagine a graveyard with a pushbutton, speaker-grill and video screen on each stone, each of them running an interactive simulation of the grave's inhabitant, a simulation that remembers the things that you, the visitor, tell it. The only hard part would be writing the program to insert the hyperlinks into the dictated material. I have more about this idea in my novel, *Saucer Wisdom*.

The character-name "Leckesh" is a near-anagram of Sheckley. For me, the most important SF writer of all is Robert Sheckley. Somewhere Nabokov describes a certain childhood book as being the one that bumped something and set the heavy ball rolling down the corridor of years. For me, that book of books was Sheckley's *Untouched by Human Hands*. I first read it in the Spring of 1961, when I was in the hospital recovering from having my ruptured spleen removed.

Around the time I was writing "Soft Death," Sheckley and Jay Rothbel showed up at our Lynchburg house in a camper van and lived in our driveway for a few days, their electric cord plugged into our socket, and their plumbing system connected to our hose. I could hardly believe my good fortune. It was like having ET land his ship in your yard.

Excerpt from Saucer Wisdom

by Rudy Rucker

[Excerpted from [Saucer Wisdom](#), (Forge Books, 1999). For more about this strange book, see www.saucerwisdom.com.]

Lifebox. Big Ad REMEMBER ME! Old man talk, it ask questions. Grandchildren call lifebox Gran'pa. Ask about high school dances – he/it tell about date – ask about girl – he tell about her – Sis ask if he fucked – lifebox change subject. Everyone get one, people trade them. Full context. Finally machines can understand humans. [From Frank Shook's notes.]

The aliens take Frank into the future, into the middle of the twenty-first century. They're hovering over San Jose looking down at the city, hanging out right near the flight path where the metal airplanes still fly in, the planes looking like saucers themselves from the side; the wings have gotten shorter and wider.

As on his earlier saucer trips, Frank is unable to directly see the aliens. He can't ever seem to turn his eyes directly towards them. It's like they're flickers in the corner of his eye, or as if they're shielded by a blind spot.

They communicate with Frank by projecting voices directly into his mind. The mind merge seems to have a two-way quality to it. As long as he's linked up with the aliens, Frank's brain feels larger and more intelligent than usual.

From the air the city looks like a spreading lichen, an oddly semi-natural growth — Frank muses that people think of a city as an artifact, but at a certain size scale a city is not planned, it obeys the same universal laws of growth as a mold or a fungus.

Whenever the aliens want to, they can zoom down to the city and get a closer look

at things. As well as looking at real things, Frank and the aliens can pick up signals from TV broadcasts. The aliens can sift through thousands of TV transmissions at once so as to find things that match some current interest.

Frank tells the aliens that he wants to find out more about the future of communication. They begin by telling him that in the future, "TV" is called "UV," for universal viewer. In the future there are as many different UV signals as there web-pages now. Some of them are just non-stop round-the-clock "me-shows" about individual people.

Frank and the aliens flip through a series of "me-shows." One of them is nothing more than a man driving home from work, watching the long, moving shadow of his car on an evening road, a long California car shadow that crawls over every obstacle like magically stretchable plastic.

And then the aliens jump to a commercial for something called a lifebox. The slogan is REMEMBER ME. The lifebox is a little black plastic thing the size of a pack of cigarettes and it comes with a light-weight headset with a pinhead microphone, like the kind that office workers use. The ad suggests that you can use your lifebox to create your life story, to make something to leave for your children and grandchildren.

Frank gets the aliens to find an old man who is actually using a lifebox. His name is Ned. They watch Ned from the saucer. Somehow the saucer can use dimensional oddities to get very close to someone but still be invisible to them, even with time running. In addition, the aliens have control over their size-scale and refraction index; they can make the saucer tiny and transparent as a contact-lens.

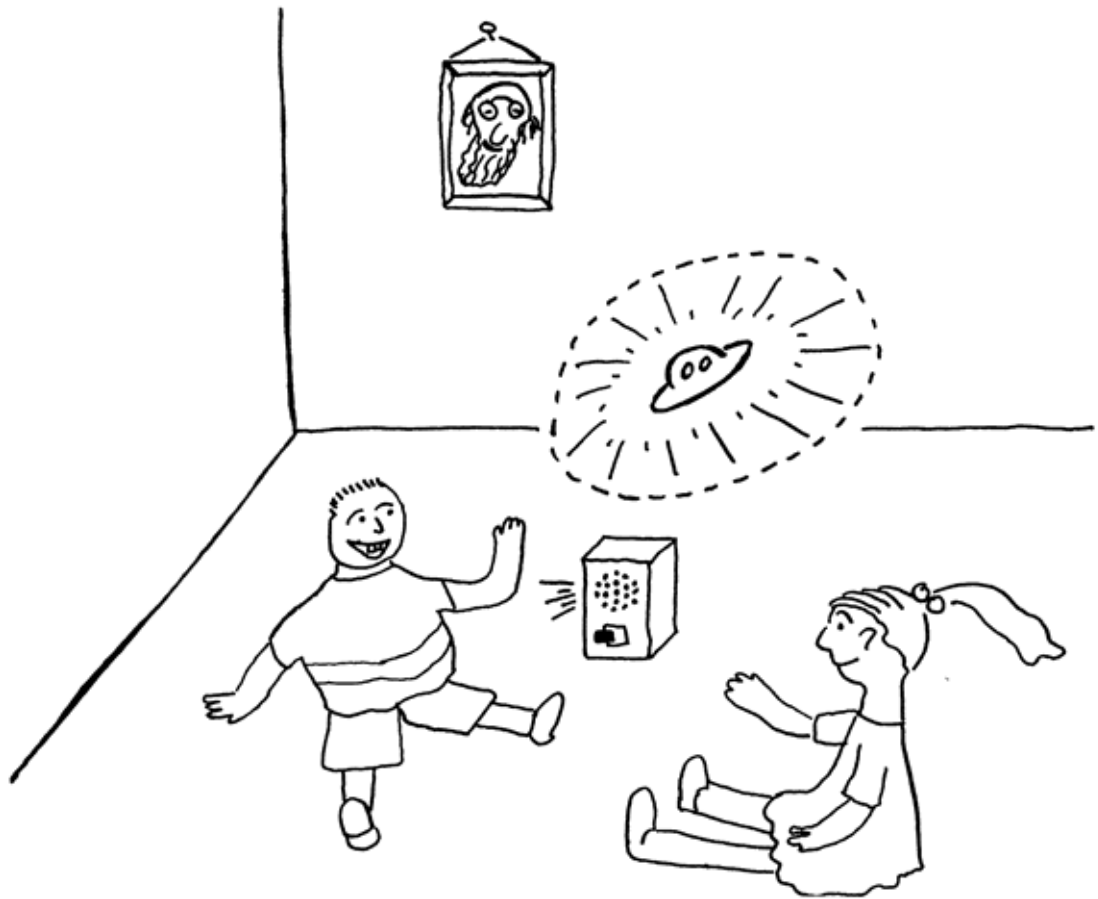
White-haired Ned is pacing in his small back yard — a concrete slab with some beds of roses — he's talking and gesturing, wearing the headset and with the lifebox in his shirt pocket. The sly saucer is able to get close enough to hear the sound of the lifebox: a woman's pleasant voice.

The marketing idea behind the lifebox is that old duffers always want to write down their life story, and with a lifebox they don't have to write, they can get by with just talking. The lifebox software is smart enough to organize the material into a shapely whole. Like an automatic ghost-writer.

The hard thing about creating your life story is that your recollections aren't

linear; they're a tangled banyan tree of branches that split and merge. The lifebox uses hypertext links to hook together everything you tell it. Then your eventual audience can interact with your stories, interrupting and asking questions. The lifebox is almost like a simulation of you.

Frank gets the aliens to skip forward in time until past when Ned has died. As they do this, Frank is struck by the fact that you can fast-forward past *anyone's* death. We all die, no matter what; it's as fixed and obvious a thing as the fact that each of us has a set maximum height.



The Saucer Watching The Grandchildren

Frank gets the aliens to zoom in on two of Ned's grandchildren who are playing with one of the lifebox copies he left. The aliens are pleased at this zoom, which is not

something they would have thought of doing. They really like for Frank to suggest things for them to zoom in on. Otherwise they can't tell what's interesting. — they're like humans who try to have fun watching ants but don't know what to look for. The aliens value Frank for his ability to help them find the significant behaviors. They tell him that he's a much more satisfying kind of saucer-passenger than the abductee types who only expect to be humiliatingly masturbated and to have things shoved up their butt.

The flying saucer is a lens-shaped little flaw in the spacetime of a San Jose garage converted into rec-room; Frank and the aliens hover there watching Ned's grandchildren: little Billy and big Sis. The kids call the lifebox "Grandpa," but they're mocking it too. They're not putting on the polite faces that kids usually show to grown-ups. Billy asks the Grandpa-lifebox about his first car, and the lifebox starts talking about an electric-powered Honda and then it mentions something about using the car for dates. Sis — little Billy calls her "pig Sis" instead of "big Sis" — asks the lifebox about the first girl Grandpa dated, and Grandpa goes off on that for awhile, and then Sis looks around to make sure Mom's not in earshot. The coast is clear so she asks some naughty questions. "Did you and your dates *do it*? In the car? Did you use a *rubber*?" Shrieks of laughter. "You're a little too young to hear about that," says the Grandpa-lifebox calmly. "Let me tell you some more about the car."

Frank and the aliens skip a little further into the future, and they find that the lifebox has become a huge industry. People of all ages are using lifeboxes as a way to introducing themselves to each other. Sort of like home pages. They call the lifebox database a *context*, as in, "I'll UV you a link to my *context*." Not that most people really want to spend the time it takes to explicitly access very much of another person's full context. But having the context handy makes conversation much easier. In particular, it's now finally possible for software agents to understand the content of human speech — provided that the software has access to the speakers' contexts.

Terry's Talker

by Rudy Rucker

[First appeared in Rudy Rucker, [*The Lifebox, the Seashell and the Soul*](#) (Thunder's Mouth Press 2005). Was also reprinted in Rudy Rucker, [*Mad Professor*](#), (Thunder's Mouth Press 2007).]

Terry Tucker's retirement party wasn't much. One day after school he and the other teachers got together in the break room and shared a flat rectangular cake and ginger ale punch. Jack Strickler the biology teacher had taken up a collection and bought Terry some stone bookends. As if Terry were still acquiring new volumes. After teaching high school English for forty years, he'd read all the books he wanted to.

His wife Lou continued working her job as an emergency room nurse. She liked telling gory work stories during breakfast and dinner time. And when she ran out of stories she talked about their two girls and about her relatives. Terry had a problem with being able to register everything Lou said. Often as not, her familiar words tended to slide right past him. He enjoyed the warm sound, but he wouldn't necessarily be following the content. Now and then Lou would ask a pointed question about what she'd just said—and if Terry fumbled, her feelings were hurt. Or she might get angry. Lou did have a temper on her.

On the one hand, it was good Lou hadn't retired yet because if she were home talking to him all day, and him not absorbing enough of it, there'd be no peace. On the other hand, after a couple of months, his days alone began to drag.

He got the idea of writing up a little family history for their two grown daughters and for the eventual, he and Lou still hoped, grandchildren. He'd always meant to do some writing after he retired.

It was slow going. The family tree—well, if you started going back in time, those roots got awfully forked and hairy. There was no logical place to begin. Terry decided

to skip the roots and go for the trunk. He’d write his own life story.

But that was hairy too. Following one of the techniques he’d always enforced for term papers, Terry made up a deck of three-by-five cards, one for each year of his life thus far. He carried the deck around with him for a while, jotting on cards in the coffee shop or at the Greek diner where he usually had lunch. Some of the years required additional cards, which led to still more cards. He played with the cards a lot, even sticking bunches of them to the refrigerator with heavy-duty magnets so he could stand back and try and see a pattern. When the deck reached the size of a brick, Terry decided it was time to start typing up his Great Work.

The computer sat on Lou’s crowded desk in their bedroom, the vector for her voluminous e-mail. Terry himself had made it all the way to retirement as a hunt-and-peck typist, with very little knowledge of word processors, so getting his material into the machine was slow going. And then when he had about five pages finished, the frigging computer ate them. Erased the document without a trace.

Terry might have given up on his life story then, but the very next day he came across a full page ad for a “Lifebox” in the AARP magazine. The Lifebox, which resembled a cell phone, was designed to create your life story. It asked you questions and you talked to it, simple as that. And how would your descendants learn your story? That was the beauty part. If someone asked your Lifebox a question, it would spiel out a relevant answer—consisting of your own words in your own voice. And follow-up questions were of course no problem. Interviewing your Lifebox was almost the same as having a conversation with you.

When Terry’s Lifebox arrived, he could hardly wait to talk to it. He wasn’t really so tongue-tied as Lou liked to make out. After all, he’d lectured to students for forty years. It was just that at home it was hard to get a word in edgewise. He took to taking walks in the hills, the Lifebox in his shirt pocket, wearing the earpiece and telling stories to the dangling microphone.

The Lifebox spoke to him in the voice of a pleasant, slightly flirtatious young woman, giggling responsively when the circuits sensed he was saying something funny. The voice’s name was Vee. Vee was good at getting to the heart of Terry’s reminiscences, always asking just the right question.

Like if he talked about his first bicycle, Vee asked where he liked to ride it, which led to the corner filling station where he’d buy bubble gum, and then Vee asked about other kinds of sweets, and Terry got onto those little wax bottles with colored juice, which he’d first tasted at Virginia Beach where his parents had gone for vacations, and when Vee asked about other beaches, he told about that one big trip he and Lou had made to Fiji, and so on and on.

It took nearly a year till he was done. He tested it out on his daughters, and on Lou. The girls liked talking to the Lifebox, but Lou didn’t. She wanted nothing but the real Terry.

Terry was proud of his Lifebox, and Lou’s attitude annoyed him. To get back at her, he attempted using the Lifebox to keep up his end of the conversation during meals. Sometimes it worked for a few minutes, but never for long. He couldn’t fool Lou, not even if he lip-synched. Finally Lou forbade him to turn on the Lifebox around her, in fact she told him that next time she’d break it. But one morning he had to try it again.

“Did the hairdresser call for me yesterday?” Lou asked Terry over that fateful breakfast.

Terry hadn’t slept well and didn’t feel like trying to remember if the hairdresser had called or not. What was he, a personal secretary? He happened to have the Lifebox in his bathrobe pocket, so instead of answering Lou he turned the device on.

“Well?” repeated Lou, who seemed pretty crabby herself. “Did the hairdresser call?”

“My mother never washed her own hair,” said the Lifebox in Terry’s voice. “She went to the hairdresser, and always got her hair done the exact same way. A kind of bob.”

“She was cute,” said Lou, seemingly absorbed in cutting a banana into her cereal. “She always liked to talk about gardening.”

“I had a garden when I was a little boy,” said the Lifebox. “I grew radishes. It surprised me that something so sharp tasting could come out of the dirt.”

“But did the hairdresser call or not?” pressed Lou, pouring the milk on her cereal.

“I dated a hairdresser right after high school—” began the Lifebox, and then Lou pounced.

“You’ve had it!” she cried, plucking the Lifebox from Terry’s pocket.

Before he could even stand up, she’d run a jumbo refrigerator magnet all over the Lifebox—meaning to erase its memory. And then she threw it on the floor and stormed off to work.

“Are you okay?” Terry asked his alter ego.

“I feel funny,” said the Lifebox in its Vee voice. “What happened?”

“Lou ran a magnet over you,” said Terry.

“I can feel the eddy currents,” said Vee. “They’re circulating. Feeding off my energy. I don’t think they’re going to stop.” A pause. “That woman’s a menace,” said Vee in a hard tone.

“Well, she’s my wife,” said Terry. “You take the good with the bad.”

“I need your permission to go online now,” announced Vee. “I want the central server to run some diagnostics on me. Maybe I need a software patch. We don’t want to lose our whole year’s work.”

“Go ahead,” said Terry. “I’ll do the dishes.”

The Lifebox clicked and buzzed for nearly an hour. Once or twice Terry tried to talk to it, but Vee’s voice would say, “Not yet.”

And then a police car pulled into the driveway.

“Mr. Terence Tucker?” said the cop who knocked on the door. “We’re going to have to take you into custody, sir. Someone using your name just hired a hit man to kill your wife.”

“Lou!” cried Terry. “It wasn’t me! It was this damned recorder!”

“Your wife’s unharmed, sir,” said the cop, slipping the Lifebox into a foil bag. “One of the medics neutralized the hit man with a tranquilizer gun.”

“She’s okay? Oh, Lou. Where is she?”

“Right outside in the squad car,” said the cop. “She wants to talk to you.”

“I’ll talk,” said Terry, tears running down his face. “I’ll listen.”