

Swiping “The Floor” of Melissa Fall

Here is a short story that was submitted as part of a contest for short stories about Basic Income. I did not enter this contest because I thought they would not want to read anything critical of their hobby horse. So I was surprised to find something like this had shared first place.

I have a habit of swiping relevant writings about Basic Income and putting them on my own web site. What I really want is to make sure they do not disappear. If somebody complains I discuss it with them, take it down if they insist. I cannot determine any copyright to this piece. The author, Melissa Fall, has not responded to me.

The url at which I found this is <https://io9.gizmodo.com/read-the-into-the-black-contests-winning-story-set-in-1822338909>

Melissa understands so perfectly what is wrong with Basic Income the way it is now proposed, that even if she does not permit me to swipe her story, I am going to take ownership of her two best tropes in it. One is that building a floor under people’s feet does no good if you haven’t build a foundation first. The other is that most of the UBI schemes now being proposed are designed to solve their problems, not ours. You don’t have to ask who “they” are.

The upshot is that UBI does not work with capitalism. It is something you do once you have authentic socialism in place. It must stay on the shelf until then.

“The Floor” by Melissa Fall

They said it would solve all our problems.

That’s what everybody comes back to now when something goes wrong, when their plans aren’t working out. That sentence is a mantra, whispered at the bus stop and on the corner and in darkened bedrooms around the country. I don’t know how many times I’ve been sitting in my office, across the desk from some poor slob, when that line gets snorted out through the tears: they said it would solve all our problems.

My response is always the same: “Listen, they said a lot of things.”

Before they put down the Floor, they told us to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, to wait for the

cash to trickle down. Before they gave us the Allowance, they sold us on two ideas: that the self-made man was real and that money couldn’t buy happiness.

Obviously, they lied.

But they always lie, don’t they?

“The lying never stops,” Colleen said, pushing open my office door like it was an artificial barrier that existed only in the mind.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

I was still half-asleep.

“Human beings seem pathologically unable to tell the truth,” she said. “Do you know how many

unfaithful spouses I've had to track this week?"

"Don't tell me," I said. "I don't want to know."

She looked terrible, probably almost as bad as I did. She dropped into the chair on the other side of my desk, closed her eyes, and pressed against their lids with her fingertips. She'd painted her nails, I noticed. They were black. They'd been a maroon color last week. I wasn't sure when she'd made the switch.

"I don't even understand how people cheat anymore," she said. "And I don't mean from an ethical standpoint. I mean literally. Just, like: how?"

We both knew that our jobs had gotten harder because of the late-tech wave. In the good old days, the days of my fathers and forefathers, you could do what you had to do as an investigator. You could leave a microphone in someone's purse or put a tracker on the bumper of someone's car. If you hired one of those burned-out hacker types, you could access someone's credit card records, maybe even their hospital files. It was easy to see who was calling which lover, and how much the two of them were paying to book a hotel room in Reno, and whether or not someone had needed to get an STD test after the whole thing was done.

None of that was possible anymore. The Corps had bought the hospitals, and they'd been able to pay the burned-out hackers to lock down their databases from the inside, so only Corps-affiliated insurance companies could look at them and decide who deserved to die and why. One of my aunts, who'd worked for the Corps for a couple years before having a nervous breakdown, told me that you should never let yourself get put in a spreadsheet, because, as she put it in a rare moment of lucidity, "it's too easy to sort by column."

After I told Colleen that one, she jokingly called them "the Corpse" for a while, but I told her to stop; you never knew who was listening in.

And that was our problem. People had known for a while that the Corps was eavesdropping on cell phone conversations, supposedly because they wanted to improve the accuracy of their virtual assistants, but really because they wanted to

gather more data and do a better job of targeting their ads. But when the Government started using the audio files from those stupid virtual assistants to get people convicted in a court of law, everyone finally shut up.

I'd thought that maybe everyone would unplug those goddamned things instead, but obviously, I'd been wrong. People got used to asking a machine to tell them the time, because they didn't have the energy to raise their head a few inches and look up at the clock.

So, now Colleen and I and the rest of our profession didn't have anything to go on. No one called a boyfriend from their hands-free device in the car, and even if they did, it would have been impossible for anyone outside the Corps to access the information. Most people were so paranoid that they didn't use credit cards anymore, and the girl in the apartment next to mine told me that she periodically swept both her home and her car for trackers and bugs.

"Well," I said, "it doesn't matter if you've got nothing to hide."

"Don't give me that BS," she said. "That's what everyone said a hundred years ago, and look where it got us."

The question wasn't where; the question was what. We were in the same place we'd always been. The only difference was that now we had a Floor.

Colleen went out around noon, because she had a lead on a Company Man who seemed to be going around with the sales associate at a makeup counter. I thought about eating out but decided not to. It was only the second day of the month, which meant all of the people on the Floor had Allowance to burn, and I didn't have the patience to wait in line. Time is money, et cetera, so I went to our office fridge and pulled out an open jar of peanut butter. I found a clean spoon in one of the drawers then went back to my desk. I was about to dip the spoon in when someone pushed open my office door without knocking. I assumed it would be Colleen standing in my doorway, but I saw a girl instead.

The girl was a girl, and she didn't look especially

healthy or happy. Let me just say it now: I'm not made of stone. The argument has been raised, once or twice, that I'm made of wires and circuits and a few expertly crafted humanoid apparatuses, but I'm flesh and blood just like everyone else.

Anyway, the girl came in. She asked if I was Mister Heurebleue, and I said I was.

"You look a little too young to be a part of my typical client base," I told her.

"I'm emancipated," she said. "So I can use my Allowance to retain your services."

I nodded. A lot of kids were getting emancipated these days. The skeptics, or, at least, the ones the Corps paid to act like skeptics on the news streams, said they were just doing it because they wanted the money and they wanted to be free. And while I certainly didn't think that was the case, even if it had been, it didn't seem like such a terrible phenomenon to me. I had been under the impression that, for America as a country and a construct, freedom was the entire point.

"Which services are you looking for?" I said.

"I've heard you find people," she said.

"Sometimes," I said. "And sometimes I charge people an hourly rate for a couple of weeks and come up empty. Just so you know."

She nodded. She had a very serious expression on her face, and her hair hung straight on either side of it, casting a shadow below her cheekbones. I couldn't tell if she were malnourished or simply fashionably thin; now that everyone had enough money to eat, I guess you were supposed to look like you were spending your Allowance on one of those Illicit Substances that kept you spider-limbed.

"What's your failure rate?" she asked me. "An approximate estimate is fine."

She stared at me in a way that made me feel very uncomfortable. It was a cold and calculating stare, and I couldn't tell if it was innate or borne of necessity. Given my initial impression of her, I'd have said necessity, but I'd been wrong

before.

"Well, it used to be a lot lower," I said. "But in the past five years, I'd say my failure rate has gone up to about fifty percent."

In truth, I didn't think it was that bad, but I also got the sense that I wouldn't want to take her case. She was a skinny kid who'd hit the Floor but still knew expressions like "failure rate" and "approximate estimate." Facile use of those expressions was never a good sign. I didn't feel too bad about lying, either. After all, Colleen had just said that human beings were almost incapable of doing anything else.

The girl was still staring at me, rolling her eyes over my face like she was reading a book. After a few seconds, she stopped, raised her eyebrows, and smiled at me.

"Good," she said. "Then I'll take my chances. My name is Solarflare, by the way."

"That's a pretty New Age name you've got there, Solarflare."

"Is the New Age still new if it happened 150 years ago?" she said.

"Unfortunately," I admitted, "that is an excellent point."

Solarflare and I left my office building together, and I told her that I needed to know the name of the person I was supposed to find.

"Lunarphase," she said. "She's my sister. We live together in a Planned Community for teenagers."

"Your parents must have been a couple of crackpots," I said, as we pushed our way through the heaving crowds on the sidewalk to get to the bus stop. "No offense."

"They didn't pick our names," she said. Her voice was low. "We did. After we got emancipated."

There was a line of about a dozen people to get on the bus, and it seemed like we probably wouldn't fit. I stuffed my hands into my coat pockets and looked over at Solarflare.

"And why did the two of you decide to do that?"

“Mostly so we could hit the Floor,” she said. “They said it would solve all our problems.”

There was that sentence again.

“Who’s ‘they?’”

“The Government,” she said. “We were trying to get moved to a group home for girls, but they said it would be easier if they just started giving us an Allowance.”

“And you can’t get an Allowance at you’re age,” I said, “unless you’re emancipated.”

Her voice was very quiet, so quiet that I almost couldn’t hear her over the wheezing noise of the bus pulling up to the curb.

“My parents weren’t nice people,” she said.

The doors opened. Nobody was on the bus, probably because everyone else on the route had already forced themselves onto the previous vehicle, so I was pretty sure we were going to be able to make it.

“I don’t think I could have survived emancipation at your age,” I said, as we stepped through doors and waited for the pay kiosk.

Everyone was trying to hurry, because we all knew the bus wouldn’t start moving again until we’d paid our fares.

“I’m not sure I’m surviving it now,” she said.

She touched her card to the surface of the machine. It beeped at her and flashed its standard message: SUFFICIENT FUNDS.

I threw a few coins into the hole at the machine’s top, and I thought I caught her looking at me enviously.

You couldn’t use cash if you were getting an Allowance. You had to use your card. Your card was loaded up on the first of every month, and you could spend your Allowance however you wanted, but the Corps had to know everything. They had to know where you went, how much you spent, and what you bought. You got your money, and they got your data. That was it. That was the deal. There was no other option.

If you had an extended period of inactivity on your card, then a Company Man showed up at your door to check on you, and if you were sick, he took you to the hospital, which was owned by the Corps, in his Company Car, which was also owned by the Corps, and he waited for you while they fixed you up on the Corps’ dime. Then he checked your medical record to make sure there wasn’t anything mental going on, and as long as you weren’t about to kill yourself, he’d put you back in his Company Car and drive you home. This might have been apocryphal, but I’d heard that, sometimes, if you asked him very nicely, he’d even kiss you goodbye. A Company Man never cared about catching your cold. But then you wouldn’t ever see the same Company Man again, so there wasn’t any point to falling in love.

Of course, it probably goes without saying that the Company Men were all young and handsome and under the age of thirty-five.

If you weren’t sick, though, the Company Man asked you a few difficult questions about why you hadn’t been buying anything, and then he went through your house or apartment, just to make sure you weren’t illegally stockpiling gold bars or cash or any other form of currency. Then he took you to the hospital in his Company Car and forced you to submit to a mental evaluation. If you failed, you disappeared from public view for a period of one to ten years. If you passed, the Company Man drove you home. This might also have been apocryphal, but if he happened to be wrong, and you just hadn’t bought anything for “legitimate personal reasons,” then supposedly he made love to you on the floor of your living room.

I don’t know; I thought all of it was urban legend, to be honest. I once asked my aunt why there weren’t any Company Women.

“The Company Men are so suave that even Kinsey-Zero guys are attracted to them,” she said.

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“Well, honey, you don’t have to,” she said. “You’re not taking an Allowance.”

Solarflare and I got off the bus in a place where

there'd once been a ballpark. They'd bulldozed the ballpark and put up condos. Then they'd bulldozed the condos and put up a Planned Community. That particular Planned Community was, apparently, where she lived.

The "Planned Community" was a euphemism, and the chaos of the housing development spilled out on to the street. There were teenagers everywhere, bicycling away from the gate or yelling at each other about one thing or another. One of them, a tall young woman who couldn't have been more than fourteen, came up to me and asked if I had any change.

"Don't you have an Allowance?" I said.

"Sure," she said. "But it's not enough. They auto-deduct the hospital fees and the transportation fees and the grocery delivery fees and the rental fees and the school fees, and you got nothing left at the end of the month."

"I can't give you change," I said. "We'd both get arrested."

"You're a stiff," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "You're probably right."

I looked over at Solarflare and saw that she was looking at the other girl and rolling her eyes at me, as if to say: this old fogey. Then she rummaged around in one of her pockets for her key card, pressed it up against the gate pad, and let me in.

I recognized the development as soon as I saw it; this was one of the first Planned Communities, a historic structure that had been designed and built before the Corps took over, back when at least a few people in the Government had been serious about giving everyone an equal opportunity. There were about five four-story buildings, all of them surrounded by gardens and done up in an old-fashioned Arts and Crafts style, hearkening back to the 1930s, a time in American history when everyone had seemed to care about each other and the environment, when the Government had given the people legitimate support: investment in infrastructure, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the WPA. It had been the height of the Great Depression, but people my age now thought of it as kind of a

golden age.

I wondered if whoever named the Corps had been inspired by the CCC, if they'd done some kind of focus group and were playing on positive word associations.

I sighed, gazing at the once-great Planned Community that Solarflare lived in. The place was falling apart. The paths were uneven, split apart by seismic activity, and Solarflare had to press her keycard to the door panel a few times before the door popped open.

"Doesn't even work half the time," she said as we started going up the stairs. "I used to have to call Lunarphase to get her to come down and let me in."

We got to the landing of her hallway, and we walked through the fire doors. I saw that, despite its degradation, the space was still impressive. The carpets may have been moldering, and the wallpaper may have been peeling, but that only added to the character of the building. Solarflare put her keycard in the reader affixed to her door lock and waited a few seconds for a double beep. Then she pulled the door open.

I walked into the room and felt like I was in another era. There were crown moldings and built-in cabinets and thick, wooden frames on the double-pane windows. I noticed someone had collected shells and put them on the fireplace mantle; I was almost certain, though, that the fireplace was not operational.

"You have a lovely home," I said.

Solarflare smiled at me sheepishly.

"We got lucky, I guess," she said. "Let me show you Lunarphase's room."

She led me down a narrow hallway and pushed open a heavy door. The room was amazing. Someone had painted over the pale-green wallpaper so that it looked like the bed and desk and desk chair were at the center of a redwood grove, complete with ferns at the bases of the trees. The trees looked so real that I reached out to touch one, just to be sure.

“This is beautiful,” I said.

“She did that,” Solarflare said. “She always wanted to see the redwoods.”

But of course she never would, because they were long extinct.

I went over to the desk and opened the drawers. Solarflare didn’t try to stop me. I saw some papers, but when I skimmed them, I realized that all of them were homework assignments. It looked like Lunarphase had been in a community college class, learning something about compound interest rates.

“Well,” I said, “where do you think she went?”

Solarflare shrugged. “I don’t know. I think they took her.”

“Who took her?”

“The Corps,” she said.

“Why would they do that?”

“Who knows?” she said. “Maybe they thought she wasn’t using her card.”

“What about your parents? Couldn’t they have gotten angry or worried or something and taken her back?”

Solarflare shook her head. “Never. They were happy when we left.” She chuckled, then, and her laughter was edged with bitterness. “If they won’t pay for your birth control, you’d think they’d at least add some more to your Allowance when you have a kid.”

“I thought they did.”

“Yeah, but it’s not enough,” she said. “It’s never enough.”

I told Solarflare that she didn’t have to walk me out, especially given the fact that the door to her building wasn’t opening consistently. I went down the uneven paths until I got to the gate, then I turned around once, just to see the whole thing again. I felt a dark, sinking sensation in my abdomen when I saw the contrast, in my mind, between what this development was and what it

was supposed to have been.

When I got back to the office, Colleen was there, lying down on the couch in the waiting room that we were supposed to reserve for paying customers. I thought maybe she was sleeping, but she sat up as soon as I walked in.

“Where have you been?” she said.

“It’s a long story,” I said. “How was your stakeout?”

Colleen gave me a long, slow smile and told me. She knew where the sales associate lived, so she’d camped out on the fire escape, which gave her a clear view of the living room. The woman only lived a few minutes away from the department store, so apparently she came back home for lunch every day. And on this particular day, just as Colleen had suspected, the woman brought her Company Man.

“I took four Polaroids of them,” she said. “They were just rolling around on the carpet.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Don’t you think he’s worried about his wife finding out?”

“She probably believes the same stupid rumor everyone else does,” she said. “You know, if he screws up and guesses wrong, he has to bone the person on his or her living room floor.”

I sat on the other side of the sofa. I felt tired just thinking about it.

“But you have to admit,” I said, “it’s a great cover story for philanderers.”

She laughed and tried to hand me the Polaroids. I told her I didn’t want to see them, and I explained that she only needed to take one or two of photos from now on, because Polaroid film cost hundreds of dollars a cartridge. We couldn’t afford to go digital, not with the Corps’ all-encompassing access to the cloud and powers of deletion, but we also couldn’t afford to spend \$5,000 a month on instant film.

She said fine, and we put the Polaroids and all of our other sensitive materials in the safe. I was about to turn off the lights and lock up when something occurred to me.

“Can I ask him something?” I said.

“Who?”

“The Company Man,” I said. “It’s about my case.”

“What are you going to say?” she said. “If he answers your questions, then the Polaroids go away?”

I frowned. “I don’t know.”

“We’ll be losing a commission if you do that.”

“Some things are more important than a commission, Colleen,” I said.

And in this particular situation, I definitely meant it.

The Company Man’s house was huge, in one of those suburbs where no one was on the Floor or had been on the Floor in decades. It was called the Floor, after all, because it was the economic floor through which a person no longer had to fall through in the United States. If you were unemployed or making less than a certain amount of money, you got your Allowance, no questions asked.

But as soon as they put down the Floor, they moved the goal posts. They privatized everything. They got rid of Social Security and Medicare and the other programs, because, according to the Government, there wasn’t any other way to fund the Floor. Consumer goods and groceries got more expensive. Middle class families pulled their kids out of public high schools, and tuition shot up at public four-year universities. And you could forget about financial aid if you were a college student; the Government didn’t have to give you anything if they were already giving you an Allowance. The point was that they’d done the right thing for the wrong reasons to help the wrong people, which meant that the right thing wasn’t really the right thing at all.

Then again, the Government had always been an illusion, every member of Congress bought and paid for by the Corps. People had gotten sick of it, so they’d elected a third-party candidate who’d campaigned solely on the promise of the basic income. Little did we know that he was

financed by the Corps like everybody else.

Little did we know that the veneer of a people’s revolution was covering up a hostile takeover.

Little did we know that the Allowance was just another way for the Corps to monitor the neediest among us.

Little did we know that true luxury wasn’t having enough money, but having total privacy.

Little did we know that you had to build the foundation before you could put down a Floor.

As I knocked on the Company Man’s door, I relished the thought that I would soon tell him his private life was about to be private no more.

“Are you Damon?” I said. “Damon Beauregard?”

He glanced back over his shoulder and then at me again. He had a magnificent shoulder and an equally magnificent face. I was beginning to think that perhaps my aunt had been right about the Company Men after all.

“Why? Who are you?”

“Giorgio Heurebleue,” I said, holding out my business card. “It sounds like, somewhere along the line, both of us were French.”

He took the card reluctantly, read it over, and looked up at me again.

“Yeah, okay,” he said. He sounded irritated. “What’s this about?”

“And maybe you’re still French,” I said. “Going to your mistress’s apartment for lunch in the middle of your workday, then coming home like nothing’s happened.”

I produced one of Colleen’s four Polaroids and passed it to him, face-down. He flipped it over, then covered his perfect mouth with the hand that wasn’t holding the photo.

“Where did you get this?” he said.

I shrugged.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But if you look up a girl named Lunarphase in your system, I might be

able to make it go away.”

“If I’m illegally accessing our system, I need a guarantee.”

I cleared my throat and shrugged again.

“Frankly,” I said, “I don’t think you’re in a position to negotiate.”

He slammed the door in my face. I wasn’t sure whether or not he’d agreed.

The next morning, Colleen and I were eating bagels in the waiting room when the Company Man walked in. He wasn’t in his usual suit and tie, but he was striking anyway, wearing the kind of casual clothes that I would have worn if I’d been able to afford them. I glanced at Colleen and saw that her eyes had glazed over and her mouth was slightly, very slightly, open. It seemed like maybe she hadn’t seen his face from the fire escape the day before.

I felt a brief pang of jealousy but pushed myself past it.

“Yes?” I said.

“I looked up your weirdly named little friend,” he said. “She got a visitation from a Company Man called ‘X. Jones’ about a week ago, and there’s no record of them after that.”

He paused and looked over at Colleen. I thought maybe he smiled at her. I thought maybe she smiled back. I felt jealous again.

“As you can probably guess,” he said, “that’s highly irregular. Even if she’d been institutionalized, there would have been a record of it.” He looked back at me again. “Can I have those photos now?”

“What photos?” I said.

Colleen choked on her bagel, then coughed. The guy muttered something and walked out. I thought he’d slam the door, but he didn’t.

I went to the Planned Community to tell Solarflare what I’d learned. One of the kids hanging around outside the development opened the gate for me, and I phoned Solarflare as soon as I was downstairs. She came down

eagerly, and she looked years younger, like the kid she was.

“Did you find her?” she said.

“No,” I said. “But I know she left with a Company Man. Did she ever mention anybody named Mister Jones?”

She’d been smiling at me, but she stopped. Her entire face seemed to collapse and cloud over. She looked down at her feet, and I noticed that she hadn’t put on any shoes. She hadn’t painted her toenails, either. When she looked up at me again, her jaw was set.

“I know,” she said. “I know she left with Xavier. I want to know where they went.”

She took a deep, ragged breath. I could tell the tears were seconds away.

“She was a real adult, you know, and she was taking a class at the college when she met a bunch of political types. So she was starting to get weird about using her debit card, and Xavier just showed up, out of the blue. And he said he had to go through her stuff, and that meant she had to let him into her bedroom. And as soon as he saw her painting on the walls, he said he’d take her to see the redwoods.”

She let out a long, aching sob.

“But I knew he was lying to her because there are no more redwoods.”

I understood the problem. I reached out to give her a hug. She cried on to my shirt, my non-designer, button-down shirt, and I felt how thin she really was.

“Why didn’t you tell me all that before?” I said. “If I’d started with that, I’d have saved us both some time.”

“Because I wasn’t sure if they were monitoring me,” she said. “I tried to tell you what happened, but I couldn’t give you his name. They’re always listening, aren’t they? Aren’t they?”

I told her that, yes, they probably were.

“That’s just it,” she said. “Someone’s always

listening to you, but they're not, really. If they were listening, they'd change all of it. The Floor was supposed to lift us up and bring everyone together, but it didn't really help. I feel so alone. My sister is gone, and I've never felt so alone."

I let her cry on me for another quarter of an hour, at least. She was right. She was only about fifteen years old, but she already knew everything. You couldn't undo the predatory tendencies of capitalism and the patriarchy and

the exploitative human heart with something like the Floor. You needed to change everything else first. You needed to change the system.

But the Corps was the system, and the Corps did not want to be changed.

They said it would solve all our problems.

Instead, it had only solved theirs.