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Arete

by Ryan Light

I was there when Buck Holley beat the Mechanical Man. Back in '77. *Heh*, good ole Buckey Holley. Never seen a man so lean, so mean; so full of *creative*. Oh boy, I tell ya they pumped 'em back then. They sure did. And Buck had the system of a bull. They shot him up with uppers, downers, swishers and swashers. The whole gamut. Most men couldn't even take a swisher without seizing up like some epileptic. Not Buck though, no. Man was a bull.

And the Mechanical Man. *Whew*, you should've seen him. Just *bits* and pieces – you get it? They say before he was the Mechanical Man he was just another Mickey Davey from the south part of Boston. But you know how it goes. You ship 'em off to war, and when they don't come back men, you build 'em into something *better*. And that's when it started, you know? When we really started building better men. Mickey wasn't no different, not really. Just had that *poor, dumb*, Irish luck is all.

Most men, you send 'em off, and the unlucky ones get *a* prosthetic. But Mickey? Man had a new limb for every tour. Funny thing, though. Mickey got the *better* end of all that switching and swapping. Run faster, jump higher; wicked precise movements. Never complained of fatigue. Oh, the army *loved* him. They built a Mechanical Man, and he won them the war. All his poor, dumb, Irish luck turned him into a hero. That's why it was such a shame to see Buck turn him into scrap metal. What's a soul to do, though? We just keep building better men.

After the war, Mickey was something of a celebrity. The emblem of a new age. I was in San Francisco at the time, a few years before the Great Exodus. We'd just won the war, the United Nations was in our back pocket, and America was poised to be the presiding nation of our interplanetary enterprise. And so that summer was *hot*.

To be young and walk the promenade. To be American and walk the promenade. To be a *man* and walk the promenade. That sweet summer heat licked that sweet summer *sweat* right outta *everyone*. The air was muggy and the evaporation, palpable. And if you stopped to smell its sweet scent, you'd well acquaint yourself with the invocation of the human spirit. We had shuffled off our mortal coils; we had achieved transcendant animalism. There was light and warmth and love and *moments sans reflection*. We were so damned thoughtlessly happy.

And I remember the streets were shrieking so – with light and laughter and *music*. It was the first time I had seen *the brass*. They were a trio for the modern age – the short black with a missing finger, the tall white with the fake eyes, and the shiny Mexican-Jew tranny with a voice like broken soap. And with them a french horn, flugelhorn, and trombone. Couldn't tell you about the white or the black, but boy could that tranny play the trombone. She was slick-fingered and wild-eyed. When she closed her eyes and pressed her lips on the brass, that brow, strong, dark, and

unapologetic, furrowed and writhed like a cobra. (Not that I ever seen a cobra.) I'd never seen such passion, and it was mesmerizing.

She caught my ear, first. That trombone would trill and sing. I swear, it was the first time that I had ever heard *triumph*. But then she caught my eye, and I watched her play for a long time. Never saw a queen pull off that red, white, and blue drag – not 'til her. Now I wasn't any hawk, but after that third, fourth, and then fifth bar, she had me soaring like the rest of them. And for once, I didn't feel like just a cheerleader for Uncle Sam and the Mechanical Man. It was my day, too.

And what a day it was. As long as you didn't look too closely at the ground. Beer-soaked hamburgers and hot dogs. And after enough feet had tramped over them, they damn near pasted the rents in the walkway (ain't no need for pavers). And the drains smelled sickly clean. Gutter shots; what a way to drink in the new year.

And that sweet summer heat – sticky and insidious – *it gets under your skin*. A pigeon pecked at a balled up shimmer-slick tee, hunting for scraps. And that wasn't the only tee. By midday, I swear, the promenade was like one of those old flea-markets. *Clothes everywhere*. Mine, too. But what did I care? I was a fecund youth. And I admired the women, topless and all. Enjoying their freedom, their *American* freedom, bought and delivered by the Mechanical Man.

Like I said, the Mechanical Man was a celebrity. But more than that, he'd become an American hero. Out on the pier, they built him an effigy. Whatever scrap they could steal. See that Herculean figure – made of stop signs and yield signs and *do not pass* signs, the straps and grits and filings of the iron of the old, rotting promenade. I passed by the gift shop and saw a mother and son. The boy was clutching an action figure. Had all sorts of buttons and settings – maybe even program it to fight the Reds or the Muslims or whoever's keeping us from building better men. And see that

kid's face light up with the voice-activation, *I am the Mechanical Man, better built from scraps and man's handicaps!*

We were just so thoughtlessly happy. So how could I blame him? What with the fervor and the star-studded posters. *The Mechanical Man*, you'd read, *And to think America ever needed Clark Kent*. Who were we kidding?

Wasn't too long after that, you'd see Mickey Davey on all those talk shows. Asking him all those *American* questions. *How many men were there? What were the odds? Was it your strength or your cunning?* And Mickey'd just smile and nod and soak it all up; never eager, never broke a sweat. *There were a lot of men. The odds were terrible, just like buying a ticket. And, John, don't you know? Strength is cunning.*

Then John gets to the *real* question, right? *Ever get scared?* I only ever saw him on the TV screen. So in that half-breath before Mickey answered, I never could tell what he was thinking. He had funny eyes, you know? And in the half-breath, in just that moment, they kinda glazed. I don't know what they saw, right then, but for a moment there, he almost looked like a prophet. And then it'd pass, almost as quick as it'd started. And then he'd crack that wicked, cocksure smile, *When you're built to be better, you just don't think of that kinda thing. Ain't no thing to be afraid of.* And the audience would roar.

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After enough talk shows with the *John Doe-littles*, though, Mickey'd only play with the right company. The producers were happy enough to accomodate. Swapped his chair for a loveseat and everything. When Mickey came on stage, he always brought One-Eyed Loretta.

Loretta was a queen. Not a queen like *lady triumph*, no. She was Cleopatra embodied. Hair black as pitch, raven. Skin *just* dark enough so you knew she wasn't one of us. That she was different—without meaning to cause offense. And when she stood still, you'd mistake her for one of Michelangelo's. Never saw such *unnatural* beauty. Her face was carved out of soft, smooth sandstone; her body, *designed*. The bold eyeshadow, the bold wingtip eyeliner – and only one eye. (The *right* one, of course.) It was grey as steel, and just as hard. And pelagic.

Looked to me like she'd seen *the world* with that eye. So wide, so...*aware*. It was constantly flicking, twitching, seizing from one corner to another. Like a sentinel. And, like I said, I only ever seen the two on the TV screen, but I remember once her eye twitched – must've been to the camera – and I swear she was looking right at me. Or was it *through* me? I felt naked. She disrobed me with a glance.

One-Eyed Loretta never talked much, 'cept to introduce and shuffle Mickey off to and from the *Johns*. And she had a low, smokey voice, like burning sandpaper. But there was this one time, after enough of the shows and the excitement and the fervor had died down, that John – snake had to keep it interesting – he asked, “We've seen the reels from the war, and we're mesmerized, but – now I gotta ask, since people want to know – how *much man* are you really?” Mickey took it sorta funny, y'know? His eyes twisted up, like they weren't sure how to make sense of it. Mickey's lips twitched for a breath like they wanted say something. But Loretta? I don't think that girl ever missed a beat.

Right on cue, she said, “I'll allow you he's mechanical, but I assure you that don't make him any less of a *man*.” And with that voice – never seen someone speak so soft and deliver so hard. It was with a practiced calm – majestic and ethereal and terrifying and steady, like those destriers you'd see in all the old Lawrence-type movies.

If you weren't paying attention you'd almost have missed it. No more'n a flash. But I think John lost his cool there. Or if not his cool, at least he broke character. You know how these hosts are, right? All smiles and daisies and *positivity*. 'Til you make them look silly, or say something off-script. For just that moment, John's eyes were *hot*.

And then he blushed and smiled like someone had just told him he'd had a sprig in his tooth. He replied, "Well there you have it folks – a man is a man is a man is a man," smile never breaking (like it'd been *carved*.) And you'd have thought that was that.

But it wasn't. There's a funny thing that happens, when you leave your front door. You put one foot in front of another, a little faster, a littler sharper – and you're off to the races. But watch your step; you catch toe, you lose your balance *for an instant*, slip up and there ain't no coming back – you break the spell. And there's no telling when. For Mickey? I still think it was just his poor, dumb, Irish luck. The Mechanical Man had been our venerated American hero. So naturally, after that, we swatted him back to Earth. The secret, sick pleasure of all those *John Doe-littles*.

Used to hear we'd built better men. You'd hear that cybernetics had broken man's glass ceiling. But there was a new refrain, *Better men*; not *machines*. And the Mechanical Man?—if he's anything more than just a man, then he must be a machine. (No more a man than *lady triumph*.) And no artifice can be a hero. It's the *flesh* that makes the hero.

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And if you're looking for *flesh*, then you're looking for good ole Buckey Holley. He was a meathouse, a mountain – if you're gonna flip the lid off his head, you're gonna have

to climb him. Sometimes he'd affect this dumb, lazy (albeit, charming) countenance, like some sun-struck wheat-buckin' boy. But don't be fooled—man had a sharp tongue and a sharp wit – he'd sting you then cream you. And a real bastard at *bridge*.

Buck'd come out of Boise, where he'd been some kinda *ranger*. State militia, rove from town to town – keep the peace, I suppose.

I remember, way back, used to go to Idaho. Ain't much to see there, but there's family and a friend or two, you know? I'd visit a small, no-name town out on a river. One of those *simpler* places, just an inn, a general store, and one (*just one*) bar. I guess it was one of those places that Buck used to “check up” on. I only ever met Buck once, but it was at the well – don't really remember what it was called, something like, “Gabriel's Gutter.”

I'd gone to Gabriel's Gutter to drink off the day. Cool off. Same as most people in no-name, so I wasn't alone, but that didn't mean the place was crowded – not by any means. The Gutter was dark and smoky, the floorboards squeaked and the bar was slick-wet. Over the low murmur of pleasantness and conversation you could hear Jagger on the 20-Cent station. My sleeve was wet from the bar but it was warm enough that I didn't care. I'd almost finished my can of *Bud-might*, and went to crush and toss it. Crushing cans was an old habit, so when my *Bud-might* didn't collapse, I felt a flash of shame and weakness—but then I remembered that the war had taken a lot of resources, set the can down, and sighed. Used to make cans out of aluminum, but after the war, they went back to steel. *Cut costs*, they said, *desperate times*, and maybe that was true, but man I think I'd give anything to crush a can again. Makes you feel strong, you know?

Buck swung the door and entered with a big iron on his hip. Don't think he meant to cause a stir, but a man meated up like that, proud like that, ain't never going to be subtle. Sharp-eyed bastard, too. Must've seen me fiddlin' with my *Bud-might*,

'cause he walked right on up to me, didn't even mosey. And from across the room, too, subtly lit and smokey as it was. Like I said, *keen eyes*. "Name's Buck," he said, slapping me on the shoulder and extending a hand. "Pleasure to meet," and his voice trailed off suggestively.

"Nelson," I replied (giving him the first name that I could think of), taking his hand in mine, "pleasure." He'd caught me off-guard, and I didn't know what to say to a man like that, with those dense, calloused hands which dwarfed my own.

"Mind?" he drawled, and indicated toward the *Bud-might*.

"Go ahead," I said.

Buck lifted the can and noticed a swish. His eyebrow quirked and he finished it. Then left palm on the bottom and right on top, he crushed the *Bud-might* easy as an accordion. He took a seat on the beaten-up stool next to me and lay his broadbrim on the counter. "You from out of town?" he asked me. He grabbed a blue pack of *American Spirits* from his back pocket, lit up, and took a long drag. Damn near evaporated the first centi.

I nodded. "Does it show?"

His eyes lit, "You look too damn *clean*, boy," and he chuckled as smoke melted from his teeth. "What brings you?"

I sighed. "You know. Just makin' the rounds – keep my soul clean."

"You godly-type?"

I waved a hand, "Just figurin' speech."

Oh, his eyes narrowed, "Type are you then?"

I was growing a little impatient (maybe, back then, I was a little quicker to irritate), "Shit, I don't know." Sighing, "Call me a *humanitarian*."

He lifted his hands all innocent, revealing deep lines. "All right, then. If he ain't a talker, then he ain't a talker. Not like I mean offense." He took a long drag on his

cigarette, and damn if he didn't flick a full inch into the tray. He waved the tender for a pitcher, adding *and café!*, then asked, "Don't you want to know why I'm here?" A pitcher slid down the counter and Buck caught it perfect by the handle. He filled one glass to the brim, and then another 'til it started frothing all over. "Quick!" he urged, "I bought, don't waste it."

I tried to drink it down, but the glass was wet and slippery when I tried to grasp it and I teetered it a little. I gave a leap, fumbled a bit, but steadied it. Buck didn't whisper a thing, I swear, but when I caught his eye his pupils were laughing. He was amused; I was not. "All right, if you insist. What brings you here?" With a sigh.

"This town used to be one of my stops. I was a ranger for the state. Not anymore, though. Not now, I guess." He twiddled a crusty badge in his front shirt pocket. The tender placed a steaming french press and a cup in front of Buck. Buck ashed out his *Spirit* and then pulled out another.

"You guess?"

"I guess. Got a notice couple weeks back. Said I'd been discharged, that my services will no longer be required. Not sure I buy that, that my services aren't required, I mean. Who else gonna watch the countryside, keep it safe? So I *guess*, but it's not like I take nothing too serious." Buck poured himself another glass. (Must've *inhaled* the other.)

"So what, you just drift between all your old "stops," keep doing the same thing?"

He laughed, lighting another *Spirit*. Man just didn't stop. "I would and that's what I been doing. But after a week or two had passed, I didn't get no paycheck, and it just didn't feel the same." The pitcher was empty. Buck waved for another.

"That's a shame. What are you going to do now?"

"Ain't like anybody paying for protection any more. At least not on Earth really." Buck shrugged and sighed. The pitcher arrived, and he didn't even wait to pour. I'd

lost count, but I ain't never seen anyone drink that much coffee, smoke that many *Spirits*, and drink that much *Bud-might* that quick – let alone all together.

“Man of your constitution? Could always be a guinea. In the in-betweens, at least.”

“A guinea?”

“You know. Work those *clinical trials*. Good money, low-risk—at least for you, it seems. *Advance the scientific enterprise*, you know?”

By this time, Buck's french press was just grounds. He gave it a minute's thought. “Easy money, you say?” Buck chuckled. “Maybe. But ain't no money come easy.”

Like I said, that was the only time I ever met Buck. But that's how I know the man was a bull. We talked until the Gutter closed. And never once that night, though my memory's a little fuzzy, did he stumble, slur, cough, or even use the head. Some constitution. At the time, he was a real charmer, I didn't know how far you could push man like him. If I had, I'd like to think that things maybe would've been different, you know?

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Buck made his way to Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the time, that's where they did all the clinical trials – the important ones, at least. MIT, Harvard, and Tufts Medical Center were pooling their resources to make better pharmaceuticals. Ones that'd really work, you know? More precise targeting, fewer side effects. A pseudobiological program to remedy all society's ills, fatigue, dystrophy, frailty, depression, anxiety, *nerve*, and even stupidity – all without making you queasy. Mickey'd won the war, freed up enough dollars to make it seem viable.

The Unis paid good money for guineas. Most of them got sick. That was the whole point, after all. Find the mechanism for the side effects and neutralize it. Only way to find the side-effects is to make 'em rear their heads. They knew it, too. That's why they'd part a pretty penny.

Buck, though. Now he was different. He spent a few years doing the trials, and never once got sick. But he did get *better*. In the first trial, the drug just worked on him, no queasies or nothing. They gave him a sledgehammer and a boat of rocks. From sun up to sun down, he crushed those rocks into tiny little pellets – like those old chain gangs – and never broke a sweat. Had him out there for weeks, dawn 'til dusk, see when he'd quit, get tired. After the second week, Buck wasn't breaking *as many* rocks, but at the end of each day, he still pounded out a mineral wasteland. In the second trial, he flipped a pickup end over end. In the third, I swear they must have shot him up with *lightning*. Never seen a man *simply be* so fast, no matter fleetfooted or motormouthed.

Man, Buck had some crazy ideas back then, I'll tell you. Spoke hard and fast, often in impish poems or riddles. Buck took less'n a day to alphabetize, categorize, and organize that chemical labyrinth Tufts called a pharmaceutical lab – and in the next he tackled the mailroom. And this doe-eyed, fat-faced reporter tried to ask him about it, y'know, “Buck, how do you do it? What's it like?” And Buck'd just light up and smile, “Ain't no thing, really. You just gotta learn to take your Bs with your As, and your Xs with your Ys and Zs – keep your braxels with your axels and your xenoquils with your zilophils – and let the rest just fall into place.” And the doe-eyed fat-faces just never knew how to take it (which can be embarrassing, on camera). Then he'd tell them a secret about the present king of France like he thought he was some kind of Bob Dylan – but I'll tell you a real secret, Buck ain't no prophet.

The fourth trial cleared Buck's head. World couldn't bother him after that. No

frustration, not even in traffic. For the researchers, these years were magnificent. Not because they had figured out how to cut the side effects from *everyone*, not yet. Rather, for the first time, they got to *really see* what it was they hoped to achieve. They got to really see man become *better*. They had transcended the hypothetical, made something *real*, and all-natural – *sans machination*. Their vision had preceded their work. (A cause for celebration, but in retrospect, I think that it was more a human pity.)

It was a while, but the government finally clued into Buck and the Cambridge research. Soon as they did, dispatched some sharp-looking suits and convinced four or five of the researchers to start working on Buck, just Buck. See, they recognized the importance of continuing the Cambridge research, for the good of *man* and all that. But Buck? Treat him right and he could be a great *asset*. Build more like him and we'll sweep the solar system, colonize the whole of it in less'n a century. That'd be the good of man too, they figured.

And that's when they started pumping him full of uppers, downers, swishers and swashers. I don't know what kinda shit they put in him – *creatine*, for sure, but more'n just that, had to have been. Buck, now, he was big before. But when I saw him on the TV screen, I could just as easily've been staring at Goliath. And they amped him up in the morning—I don't know how much. That's why his eyes were always so open. You'd think he'd get insomnia or go crazy after a couple a days, right? But no, they'd just slow him down, some downer or other – probably fentanyl – and he'd slowly pass out, smiling like a great, big Buddha. Never knew you could marionette a man like that. Control his mood and energy. Make him strong, make him fast. It was all so *scientific*. Ain't no need to get your limbs all messed and mangled, neither. No machine parts, no one can say you ain't *human—right?*

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It was a while after the war, but they still sold those Mechanical Man action figures everywhere. All the gift shops and toy stores. Posters of his celebrity were still seen from San Francisco to Cambridge. But they had faded with age, from the elements, from so many years out on the street. Don't know when they stopped printing, but most of the posters you'd see on the street were first edition anyway. *Those old glory days*. Dried out red, beaten blue, and yellowing white—a battlefield with a bomber, tank, and small army of Americans; above them, the Mechanical Man rising up from the field, metal arms outstretched, in holy rapture. The bottom read, *Uncle Sam and the Mechanical Man – Become Better*.

It was for the kids, really. Give them something to look up to, but something just alien and fantastical enough that they'll grow out of it. For the rest of us, Mickey's time had come and gone. The *John Doe-littles* could only build a man so high until, by popular demand, you gotta tear him down. It's a ratings thing, so I guess you can't really blame 'em. Mickey was getting older, anyway, done with the talk-shows. All his parts and pieces still worked fine, but in the right light you could see dark bags hang beneath his eyes.

There's a rumor that he'd hit the bottle. (That poor, dumb, Irish luck.) On that, Mickey never commented. And when the reporters went to ask Loretta, she'd just stare at them with her one eye and most of 'em would balk. And to the ones that didn't, she said, "What're you all gawking at? Don't you think he's earned it?" *now get!* And they *got*.

San Francisco'd come a long way since I heard the *brass*. But it was still dirty, still more salad bowl than melting pot. Mickey lived by the Mics. He spent his time at Rosie McCann's, drinking away his minor celebrity.

Rosie McCann's was quaint, quiet, unassuming, and unapologetic. Above the pool table was a great, big American flag, and beneath it the green, white, and orange of Ireland. Over the faint din of the room, you could hear the radio—*I'm an honest Irish labourer and I come from the County Clare; once I had a farm there with nothing much to spare*. There were four TVs in the bar, all tuned into the same fight between two heavyweights. There was a minute and a half left in the round. A hook landed and the static from the applause scraped the enamel off the bar. The tender slid Mickey a bottle. He popped off the cap with a flick of his mechanical fingers. It was, he felt, one of his more useful tricks. Some flies gave a cheer, then went back to their respective nothings. Around Mickey were five other bottles. Over static—*For I'm as strong as any lion; I was reared on eggs and ham; I'm a terror to all fighting men around the Mickey Dam*.

On the TVs, bells sounded, indicating the round had ended. Mickey looked up and saw one of the heavyweights, face sanguine. Commercial break. Mickey spent the next minute or two ignoring how delicious cigarettes and alcohol are and worries of what shampoo was best for his skin (however much he had).

But it was the last commercial that caught Mickey's attention. At first, he didn't pay it any mind because it looked like it was for just another MedTech company pushing the next generation of erectile dysfunction pills. *Feel weak? Worried she doesn't think you're a man?* A sharp transition. *Well now there's hope*.

Hope? Mickey thought, *haven't we already had enough of that?* The ad continued, *Buck Holley felt weak. Buck Holley was worried she didn't think him a man. But after Buck met with the most innovative minds in medicine, that's all changed. Look at him now*. It cued footage of Buck Holley's time at Tufts, then switched to something more contemporary. Buck Holley, broadbrim square upon his head, in a sharp, black suit, with a tiny, metal American flag pinned to his lapel. Beside him was a personal

plane, pilot already in the cockpit. Buck, beaming savagely, walked behind the plane and placed his hands on the tail. He sank into his thighs, and made an explosive movement forward. The plane budged, and Buck, like a motor, just kept pushing it faster and faster, until at the very last second, the pilot activated the ignition and soared into the sun. *Don't just achieve flight. Make it happen.* The fineprint informed Mickey that Buck's pharmaceutical program would seek to reach a general audience in less than five years.

The boxing match returned. Mickey noticed a peculiar tension all over his frame. He took a breath and tried to relax himself. That's when he heard something like grit and dust strike and grind his bar. He looked down and saw fine, brown glass shards. He examined his hand – not a scratch, which was unsurprising, all things considered. He apologized to the tender and swept the shards off the bar into the palm of his hand. Unsure what to do with them, he ground it all into a dust and stashed it in his pocket. And then left.

Mickey walked the streets of San Francisco for a long time. I don't think he knew where he was going. I like to imagine that he walked hands in pockets and head down – I know I would. I don't think that I could bear to keep my head up, if I were him. The Mechanical Man made these streets sing with triumph and love. Never knew what it sounded like 'til then. Never knew there were so many colors 'til then, neither. But so many years had passed, and now the twilight was casting long shadows over cracking roads. And what if Mickey had looked up, right at the wrong time, you know? What if he had looked up – just once – during that long walk, and seen the Mechanical Man. A faded, yellowing poster of *him*, the Mechanical Man that won the war. I wonder how long he'd look at it, how long he'd soak it in, if it would even ever sink in. I wonder who it was that he'd even see. And that's why I always liked to imagine him hands in his pockets, head down. I don't think I could

bear it.

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Don't just achieve flight. Make it happen. Back then, you'd see that ad everywhere. Liable to find it on any channel at any time of day. Boy, that was some promotional campaign. I don't blame the researchers, not really. They'd been sucked in by the government (the military); they didn't allocate the research dollars. Sure, it was their product, but I don't really think they were in it for the glam. But the military was—they were working on the next generation of fighting men, of *better men*.

And the ads were well-received. We had reclaimed our old-world optimism. Once again, we felt that we could conquer the solar system. That we could achieve greatness.

And people were happy again. 'Cept for Mickey. At the time, I didn't know why. Way I saw it, we could finally make heroes without having to rebuild them. I was enamored with the notion that all my idols, all my heroes, could (and someday would) be made of the same *flesh* as me. Those who transcended themselves might still remain human, retain their humanity. (I was still young.) So when I heard Mickey and Loretta on the TV, I didn't know what to think.

Mickey and Loretta were leaving Rosie McCann's, late in the evening. They were met by a small gaggle of fiendish reporters, one of whom had a live TV camera. They were tongue-lapping and ruffle-collared. Those hyenas caused such a din that you couldn't make out an intelligible question. But then, over the clamor, you could see Mickey distinctly hear, "Any comment on this changing of the guard?" Mickey glared at the reporter, his face slowly twisting into all manner of knots. Then he took a

deep breath (you could see his chest heave) and waved him away as he tried to find some clear, easy line through the reporters.

Loretta, though – I just don't think she was as *tired*, you know? She wasn't ready to just wave them away. She sidled up to that reporter with all that regal elegance and said, "Changing of the guard? You think Buck's some kind of *replacement* for Mickey? You think they keep the *same watch*? They ain't even the *same thing*. Mickey's the Mechanical *Man*. Buck's a beast, nothin' more. All you media-types, you make it seem like *we've* transcended. *We, we, we*. But *we* ain't *Buck*. Buck ain't no *man*. Don't know what he is, but I do know that."

Poor One-Eyed Loretta. Girl never did have the foresight. Like I said, funny things happen, when you leave your front door. Loretta was the only real verbal dissent to the research program. So you'd think it wouldn't be that big a deal, what with the rest of it going so well. But it was.

Buck? Now he took it real personal. Huffin' and puffin'. Man was making a fuss. Had the government set him up with a press conference and everything. Not sure if the government took it personal, too, but they were none too happy, neither. Not at first, at any rate. Then they smartened up.

See, at the time I thought Buck'd go into that press conference and blow the house down. (Amped like him, no way a man can be stable, I figured.) He spoke plainly, calmly, and deliberately – with a dash of that western charm. But never did his voice raise, or his speech hasten. "Men don't hide behind women. Words, neither. The Mechanical Man says he's a man? Then let me assure you, I'm the *better man*," he said, as he covered his heart with his broadbrim and gave a little lean forward. It almost looked earnest.

After that came the tabloids, nobly chronicling the hot, new, contentious feud between Buck Holley and the Mechanical Man. *A Mechanical Zinger!*, you'd read.

Man Rebuffs Machine! Larvel began publishing a new serial, “Buck Holley versus the Mechanical Man.” First issue sold out in less’n a week. And that’s when the government smartened up. The public wanted a contest, a veritable clash between Buck Holley and the Mechanical Man. And the government wanted the promotion (y’know, for the research program).

They encouraged the reporters to publish the most incendiary comments they could tease out of Loretta. *Buck’s an animal. Buck’s rabid. Tell you somethin’?* Meanwhile, they continued to hold press conferences for Buck Holley who’d always reply with a strange mix of condescension and western charm. *Take a look*, he’d challenge, *I’m just a bigger man.* After a while, though, Buck’s rhetoric became more inflammatory. Maybe the meds were getting to him, I don’t know. And then there was sweat and heat and sadistic tension in the air.

And just at its height, the military had *America, Tomorrow!* magazine publish the header, “The Mechanical Man has thrown down the gauntlet. Will Buck pick it up?” Now I never met Mick, but never seemed to me he had the energy for such a gesture. The story was cooked. But Mickey? He could hardly deny it, even though it weren’t true. You imagine what it’d look like, forced to withdraw a challenge. Someone of his stature? Even at his lowest he must have some pride. (More’n me, at any rate, man like that.) Couldn’t bear to let down all those kids who’d grown up with him, looked up to him. You could say they forced his hand. But to me he was never really in the game.

And man did that header whip all those *John Doe-littles* into action. All at once, they crawled out of their cracks and crevices, twitchy and beady-eyed. And all together they danced, on thin, spindly legs, and together weaved a resplendent tapestry. They brought together writers and producers and camera crew and *cash*. They built a set, a stage. A monument. They gave it a time slot. Late January, 2077.

They gave it a name. *Arete*.

I got my ticket as soon as they went on sale in the Summer of 2076. Got one of the last ones, too. Arete was more than a live production, it was a moment. And I knew it. That's why I had to get my ticket. See a contest? A veritable one-to-one clash? The two titans, mano-a-mano? You'd be blind to see it wasn't history.

It was *the* moment for the research program. Just think if Mickey won. Think if, for all their pharmaceutical concoctions, all their calculated balancing, they still couldn't produce nothing better than a, a jury-rigged war-cripple. And after all that advertising? Don't think anyone could eat that much crow. And of course it was a moment for Mickey—he was one of the leads after all. Give the press something other than his drinking to talk about. Feel young again, I imagine. And a moment for Buck, the other lead. After all his talk, man had to put on a show. But I mostly think it was Loretta's moment. Don't think I saw her eye ever blink.

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Arete was built from the ruins of one of the old America's great football stadiums. It'd been hollowed out during the war, and it wasn't 'til now that there was any profit motive in refurbishing it. And refurbish it they did. Claimed they could seat upwards of a hundred thousand. I believed it, too, after everything I'd heard about the great games of old America. The field was red clay and earth, the seats blue steel, and the columns and the rafters, twisting up to the sky, were white as doves. There came throngs of people, with concession stands to serve them. And the noise a veritable cacophony. Electricity was in the air. (I know it 'cause my hairs stood on end.) It smelled like milk and aftershave.

Even the sky was agitated. (It was cloudless, and the world was draped in blue.) Look up and see all these planes, dipping and diving, zooming and zopping. All kinds of tricks. A real spectacle. There was the distant, dull beat of some drum. Inconstant and ephemeral. The band was warming up for the big show, I suppose. I eventually settled into my seat.

It was high up, way up; even had to squint, see. On my left was plump brown man bedizened in a flamingo jacket (popped collar). Kept his sunglasses on, so I never did see his eyes. But his teeth were gummy and yellow, and I swear I smelled socks. To my right, a crusty old Korean who reminded me of dried out honeysuckle. He turned to me and said, "My money's on good ole Buck." I told him he had a gambling problem.

Just in time for the show. There was a mighty roar, so I couldn't hear the speakers too well. But I surmised that they were welcoming Buck Holley and the Mechanical Man into the stadium.

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The field was wide, huge even from the privileged view of the stands. Looking on the field, you'd see a shining ant and a plump'n. Buck Holley and the Mechanical Man stood at opposite ends of the field. Buck was twitchy, fidgeting with his dense hands. All just *open, close; open close*. And even from where I was sitting, you could see veins edging all over him. But Mickey? Stood there calm as a clam. 'Cept every one'n awhile he'd flick his metal forearm. Figure he was remindin' himself what he's made of. The field stretched before them, a sorta barren, dusty landscape devoid of any salient features, save for chalkmarking the length. (We knew where the action

was.) The wind was mellow but forceful. It rolled tumbleweed along the length of the 47-yard line. A magnum sounded. The game began.

Buck exploded out of the endzone, b-lining for the Mechanical Man, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. Mickey just took a deep breath. Clam calm. And for a minute, it looked like we'd have a thrilling fight on our hands. Just like you'd see in Larvel.

The Mechanical Man? He saw Buck charging, and he calmly, slowly, deliberately walked toward him, with almost lazy strides. You'd see his lips twisting, others'll tell you they were quivering, but they weren't looking close. Don't blame 'em, it took me a while to see it too: he was prayin', whisperin', *for I'm as strong as any lion; I was reared on eggs and ham; I'm a terror to all fighting men around the Mickey Dam.* The distance between them closed, chalk reading 40, 30, 20. By the time the Mechanical Man had reached the 9-yard line, you couldn't fit one of those old pickups between 'em – but you could still hear the whisper, *now this rose the Mouse's temper and at me he made the jump, and he swore he'd paralyze me with the handle of a pump; but I quickly surprised him...* Buck was closing. And then the Mechanical Man did something strange. And I saw that familiar, prophetic glint in his eye. But I still ain't sure I ever sussed out his secret.

The Mechanical Man stretched out his metal arms, almost as though he were prepared to receive Buck in a great bear hug. Boy had some reach, like a great, metallic eagle. And then he gazed to the sky. And like I said, boy had some reach.

Then Buck closed and turned the Mechanical Man into *bits* and pieces. Someone got *animalized*, but I never really knew which. I just saw that glint, y'know, out there on the field, the red earth refusing that tired steel hand – with just three lead-limp fingers – upturned and grasping.

And the audience roared.

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A flash! One and done! Don't think even the producers expected that, and I smiled at their struggle to fill time before scheduled commercials. They improvised by playing footage of some interviews just before the Mechanical Man and Buck Holley stepped onto the field.

Up above the field was the Mechanical Man, emanating from a behemoth view screen. This one reporter, y'know, he looked like a chipmunk. All squeaky-eyed and plump-cheeked. He reached out his mic and asked, *So, are you scared?*

And Mickey's eyes went kinda funny again. And he smiled. But it wasn't wicked and cocksure, not this time. It was warm, and, more than that, it was *knowing*. *Ain't no thing to be afraid of*, is all he said. And then cut to commercial

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And after the commercial came the music. There were three gimpy looking guys on a pulpit. Trumpet, horn, and snare drum. And they played a march, imperious. It blared. And when it met with the cacophany of the roaring audience they formed a wicked harmony of sorts, the crowd a cruel counterpoint. Hard to know what to make of it. What it was supposed to achieve—what the intent was. It was the snare that got me. You'd hear it *rap-a-tap-tap* and then it'd start to blend all together and hiss (*hiss, hiss*). And I couldn't catch the rhythm. *Ain't no music there*. So I didn't understand why everyone was dancing.

So I soaked it in, and let it melt away.

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And after, the reporters crawled out of their cracks. A din. Pushing each other aside. *Fervor, excitement, news.* The questions *everyone* wants to know. “Loretta!” a reporter cried. “Mickey threw down the gauntlet, but now he sure as hell can’t put it up. Do you think we’ve found the better man?”

She stopped flat in her tracks for a second. Her lips quivered. And see her chest heave as she took a deep breath. For a flash, you’d have thought she was about to deliver some speech. Her stature was all right for it. Always so vertical, and poised. Like I told, she was every inch a queen. And I wanted to hear her speak, to let her voice sand away the rough, cut emptiness left by the festivities of Arete. We all did. But then her eye narrowed and her lips tightened. And whatever her secret, I guess it just wasn’t worth tellin’. Not to us, at any rate. Don’t blame the poor girl. “Yes,” was all she said. Loretta’s eye twitched. “Yes it has.”

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Arete. You know how they picked that name? Its an old word. Came from better men. You know, when words were, guileless and ingenuous and penetrating. But that winter? All just theatre. Bastardize and lionize. And I think that’s why it was such a shame to see Buck turn Mickey into scrap metal. Those *bits* and pieces. You know, you can only ride a horse so hard. And even the fastest gets thirsty eventually. Sooner or later they all give out, and don’t you forget it. Like on the TV, *a man is a man is a man is a man.*

Buck Holley beat the Mechanical Man. (And broke poor Loretta’s heart.) And that’s all there is to it. I like to think that the Mechanical Man won the war, but lost the future. Like a cherished, and somehow mishandled, antique. It eventually got broke.

But what's a soul to do? We just keep building better men—*right?*

End.