

Permissions

A story from the Zoo

By Austen Tucker



COLOPHON

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By Jumpin Jack Rabbit

Everybody wants an origin story until they get one.

That is one of the first lessons you learn when you build something people need. Not something people buy. Not something people like. Need. It stops being a story between friends and becomes a legend. That maybe, if one tries hard enough and gets some luck on their side, they could follow in my footsteps and find the same success.

They want the clean version.

There is no clean version.

What you're getting is a permissions ledger. Every door I opened and who I opened it for and what I told myself it meant. Better than the polished-up version they put into the news stories about me.

You see, The Zoo was always about permission.

Permission to be one's truest self. Permission to try, to change, to *grow*. Even if that growth made you stranger. Permission was sacrosanct.

The first permission I gave to the Zoo wasn't the code. It was Nate in my bed.

This was before the Zoo. Before Fulldive had a consumer name and before every mayor with a heat-death district wanted to stand in front of a camera and talk about digital resilience like the phrase had not been focus-grouped by a defense contractor with a hardon for human misery. This was when it was just me and Viv and Nate slogging it out in

the corpo trenches, three techies in one house with too much history, not enough money, and an arrangement nobody could explain cleanly to HR.

One night, I shot up like I sometimes do. I felt my body. Felt my breath catch. *Drones don't breathe.*

In the dream, I was over Hsinchu again.

Infrared city. Heat blooming off the roofs. Li-Hsin Road running like a bright wire through the park. Fab 12A quiet inside its perimeter. Fab 8 darker than it should have been because half the engineers had already done the smart thing and run. The wind came in off the strait and the software called it weather, which was cute. To me it was a correction factor.

Two kilometers.

Hold the line.

Intercept anything crossing it.

No exceptions.

Nobody says no exceptions because they believe there will be no exceptions. They say it because they know exactly what exceptions look like. Like, well, the nun bus that drove down Guangfu Road with a sound system strapped to the top. The loudspeaker kept cracking on the word children.

We surrender and are requesting asylum. There are children on board.

My vision narrowed. My body tilted forward into the charge. The drone frame did not have lungs, but my real

body did, and somewhere in a room far away it forgot how to use them.

The bus crossed the line.

I woke before the strike, which was rude. The dreams never let you keep the clean part. They only let you keep the choice.

Nate stirred beside me.

“Bad night?”

I sat on the edge of the bed. My hands were fists. My heart was a stupid animal throwing itself against the walls.

“The student journalist or—”

I gripped an imaginary steering wheel and honked once into my fist.

Nate did not laugh. That was one of the things I loved about him. He knew when a joke was a joke and when it was a bandage wrapped around a pressure mine.

“Bus,” he said.

“Bus.”

He slid over and put a hand on my arm. Not to hold me down. Not to keep me there. Just enough pressure to tell the nervous system one true fact: *we aren't there anymore.*

“Want me to get Viv?”

He was close enough to know I needed her. Trusted enough to offer. Loved enough that I did not hear the door open.

“She needs her rest. You know sleep is hard for her.”

“She'd find spoons for you.”

“Nate.”

He squeezed my bicep. Warm. Careful. Still there.

“Go to her.”

So I did.

Vivian and I shared the next room over. I was the floater in the throuple, partly because I was the hinge between them and partly because my own room was a mess of wire, wet-ware, failed prototypes, old military cases, and half-finished projects I kept calling temporary. I did not have room for a bed of my own. I had room for mistakes.

I turned on the light.

Viv winced before her eyes opened.

“You know the lights make me see kaleidoscopes in the blind spots, right?”

“Sorry.”

I killed the light and stood in the dark, waiting for my eyes to remember how to be eyes. For half a second I expected thermals to kick in.

I am not a drone.

I am a human being.

I am—

“Come here,” Viv said.

I found the edge of the bed by feel. She shifted to make room, exactly enough room, because she always knew where the bodies were even when the bodies did not know where they were. I got in beside her. The fan ran. Somewhere outside, the city did its three-AM version of itself.

“Bus again?”

“Bus.”

She found my hand under the blanket.

“I’m here.”

That is what I am trying to describe. Not the war. Not the tech. The way she always knew where the bodies were, even in the dark, even when the body was mine.

You already know what he was like in the mornings. I am writing it down anyway.

The next morning was eggs.

It was always eggs on the bad nights. Nate’s protocol, not mine. Adopted without discussion sometime in the first year he started staying over and then staying and then being part of the house in a way nobody had to vote on because the vote had already happened in groceries, laundry, bad movies, prescriptions, and who knew how everyone took coffee.

There had been a casserole before there was a key.

That is how Nate entered most rooms. Food first. Smile second. Useful hands third. He showed up one winter with a casserole dish wrapped in a towel and a joke about Midwestern courtship rituals, and Viv let him in because Viv collected strays with better judgment than I did. By the time I noticed he had a drawer, the drawer had socks in it.

The morning after the bus dream, I came downstairs and there was a plate waiting.

Vivian was already at the table. Cane leaned against the empty chair beside her, laptop open, screen reader running too fast for human souls. She ate without looking at her plate. Nate stood at the stove in boxers and a shirt from a conference neither of us had attended. He looked ordinary.

I needed him to look ordinary.

“Did you see the new viewports from BoxCo?” he asked.

I sat down with military precision and ate too fast.

“Saw the headline.”

“Galvanic sensors. LLMs generating the sim from neural patterns. It builds itself around you. Thoughts, associations, memory fragments. That whole haunted-house-for-your-data thing, but expensive.”

I thought about the full-body gravity beds. The way the world dropped out when the eggheads threw the switch. The feeling of air under rotors as I rose over the Science Park. The sky enormous and still. The only moving thing in it was me.

“Generating isn’t the important part,” I said.

Viv’s fork stopped.

Nate looked over his shoulder.

“Explain,” Viv said.

“They’re missing the dive. Infinite content means nothing if the world doesn’t feel real around you. If the embodiment doesn’t hold, you die.”

The room went quiet in a way I did not understand yet.

Viv had gone still.

It was the same stillness she had across the bar the first time we met, the first time she listened to me talk for five minutes and decided she could do something with all that damage. Like a targeting system, but kinder. Like she'd found the hinge.

"We could build it ourselves," she said.

Nate laughed once.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was insane, and we all knew sane had not gotten us very far.

"Not *it*," Viv said. "Something contained."

"The tech is classified," I said.

"The implementation is classified," Nate said, because he was already opening his laptop. "The idea isn't. The idea is on every feed in the country with a BoxCo logo under it."

"The eggheads never let me see the backend."

"Then tell us what it felt like," Viv said. "All of it. The movement. The nausea. The parts where you knew it was real before your brain caught up. We do not need their machine. We need your memory of being inside one."

Memory.

That was always the first theft.

I looked at the eggs. Nate refilled my coffee without asking.

"Consumer Fulldive?" he said. "Everyone would use it."

Viv put one earbud in. Her screen reader went silent.

"For what it's worth," she said, "I'd use it."

And so we built. For months and months, we built. Not because we wanted a million dollars. Because I wanted my wife to see again.

And I gave Nate permission to help.

I want you to understand that I knew what I was doing. I was not fooled. I was not naive. I chose him, and it was good, and it was right, and it was ours.

This is the part the lawyers care about. The paper trail. The expenditure record. Three of us with a HELOC and a Caymans LLC who thought we were just building something useful.

I want to get through it fast enough to say the part that matters.

We ordered a BoxCo viewport that afternoon.

Not to use.

To open.

It ran an open-source OS. Gods, remember open source? It meant I could start working on the interface before the delivery drone had cleared the driveway. Version one was a skullcap. I shaved my head because I could not pull enough galvanic readings through my hair and because every major life decision deserves at least one bad aesthetic choice.

It took months and thousands of dollars of busted prototypes. We paid the cost happily.

We put a HELOC on the house and lied about what the money was for. Viv used her harness to register an LLC in the Caymans. Nate drove two hours to buy a second viewport from a dead-eyed teenager in a mall kiosk because the first one came apart in his hands like a pile of oysters for a Bostonian and he wanted a control specimen.

The kitchen table became an autopsy slab.

Sensor arrays. Optical leads. The galvanic cluster. Heat sinks. Adhesive pads. Cheap plastic molded around a miracle.

“Bad design,” Nate said, rotating the cluster under the lamp.

“It works,” I said.

“So does duct tape, until you put it in the ocean.”

Viv sat at the table with a braille making labels she could read, because she loved me enough to know my labels were useless.

“Walk me through it,” Nate said.

So I did.

Spatial orientation. Proprioception. Emotional state. Latency thresholds. Vestibular mismatch. The way the interface put its rules into you like loud emotions. Nate wrote everything down in a notebook he would keep for years. Later, people would call him a co-founder, which was technically correct and morally useless.

He was there.

He did the work.

I am not going to sand that down. That is how people get stupid about harm. They want the friend to have been wearing a villain hat the whole time, preferably with a little blinking light. They want love to have been a mistake you could have avoided with better pattern recognition.

Nate was funny. Nate was gentle. Nate learned my panic rhythms and Viv's medication schedule. Nate could take a piece of hardware apart without making it feel violated. Nate knew when to push and when to make eggs.

I loved him.

That is the problem.

One night, the skullcap synced.

I dropped into a black void.

No floor. No ceiling. No body.

My stomach turned over. My lungs locked. Panic hit so fast it felt old.

Dead again.

Just like the last time and the time before that.

"Breathe," Viv said.

Her voice was everywhere and nowhere.

"We're loading a test level now."

I forced air into myself. Remembered lungs. Remembered the program.

I am not dead. I am remembering, and this remembering will pass.

"Give me a body model," I said.

"Humanoid?"

I thought about the bus. I thought about rotors. I thought about the way a weapon platform makes violence feel like posture.

“Grab rabbit01.stl from my harness.”

Nate laughed so loud Viv’s mic clipped.

“A rabbit? What is this, Easter Sunday?”

“I had to be a monster out there,” I said. My tone did not change. “In the Dive and out. I want a fresh start. Something small. Kind. Something nobody would send over a battlefield.”

Viv did not say I was already those things.

She knew better.

Then she loaded the rabbit.

There is a moment in every successful interface where the body stops being a picture and becomes a fact.

Ears first.

Ridiculous, I know. The ears were the first thing that landed. Not visually. Positionally. A long, delicate awareness above me. Then weight in the hind legs. Center of gravity low and ready. Hands wrong, paws right, spine folded around a different idea of danger.

I moved.

Not piloted. Not controlled.

Moved.

The test level was a bar from an old JRPG Nate had grown up playing, a second-floor place in Japan with four repeating

textures, six stools, and a wall scroll rendered by someone who had never seen paper. It looked horrible.

It was ours.

“Jack?” Viv said.

I hopped onto the bar and cried so hard the headset lost cheek contact.

Nobody wrote that part in the launch history but I did. I cried and cried into my paws, because for once in my life I felt like something that could be loved. Not a weapon. Not a monster.

A fucking bunny rabbit in a third-rate simulation of a bar.

Nobody writes that part into the release notes.

Now you have it.

We spent the entire night building out two more sets. We tried sharing but the early models got really sweaty and honestly, it was time to build the beta models.

We had been working on avatar-swapping when I met Anabelle.

We obsessed with experimentation. Rabbit was easy. Rabbit was chosen. But then Nate wanted feedback on his flight sim, and that was too close to drone piloting.

I jacked out hard enough to knock a tray of leads off the workbench. The real room hit me all at once: heat, wires, old coffee, takeout containers, Viv’s meds, Nate’s socks under the table, the sour electric smell of hardware running hotter

than its warranty. Viv and Nate were still under, motionless in their chairs. For one stupid second they looked dead.

That did it.

I needed air.

I had not showered in two days. I had not been outside except to collect deliveries. The house had become a lab, and the lab had become a skull. I couldn't remember what was real and what lived inside the Zoo anymore.

I walked.

Anabelle was sitting on the low wall by the playground fence, kicking her heels against the brick like she was waiting for someone and had decided not to care whether they came. She was too casual about being unsupervised. Too good at reading whether an adult was safe. That landed in my body before my brain had a file for it.

"Hey kiddo." I waved. She looked at me like I was a crazy person - and true, I did spend most of my day as a bunny rabbit - but what came out wasn't disgust. It was curiosity.

"You busy playing with your Viewport?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

"My friend got one too. Says it's crazy addictive."

"What about you?"

"Dad doesn't like me playing videogames." She looked away. "But I make my own in my school harness. You have to do a lot of hacking to get it to cooperate."

I should have walked away.

That sentence contains most of the history of the world.

But I knew. I *knew*.

“We’re building a better one.” I said, and I laid a wink on her. “If you want to see the hardware, bring a parent so everybody knows I’m on the up and up.”

She nodded like this was a reasonable adult sentence.

She did not bring a parent.

She came to the garage later that day, or maybe the next. Memory compresses around the parts you keep relitigating. The door was open because the diodes on my left hemisphere were on the fritz. I had gone inside for a soldering iron. She slipped in because she heard the test rig moving.

The perimeter alarm chirped.

Not a siren. A small ugly sound I had built myself.

My body reacted like it was Hsinchu.

K-bar in my hand before I knew I had picked it up. Body between the intruder and the room. Grip correct. Shoulders correct. Strong hands. Military.

Anabelle screamed.

The garage became a garage again.

I dropped the knife.

Not threw. Dropped. Like it had burned me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Old habits.”

She stared at the knife on the floor.

“That is a knife.”

“It is. I am putting both hands where you can see them.”

“You already put it down.”

“I’m doing both.”

I got lower. Not too close. Hands visible. There is a way to apologize to a scared kid that is really asking the kid to make you feel better. I tried not to do that. I had already done enough.

“Where are your parents?”

“They let me roam.”

“That is not what I asked.”

She kicked at the concrete. Watched my face. Watched the door. Watched the knife. Watched all three again. Like it was *normal*.

I knew her look like a gunny knows his rifle.

Nate was the one who said no when I brought her inside.

He was right.

“Jack, no,” he said. “We do not beta-test on the neighborhood children.”

“She’s not a beta tester.”

“She is a child in our garage with no parent and a prototype built from classified-adjacent inference.”

“Adjacent is doing a lot of work there.”

“So is ‘child,’” Anabelle said, protesting. “I’m sixteen.”

Vivian sat at the kitchen table with one hand wrapped around a mug she had forgotten to drink from. Her cane leaned against her chair. She listened to us the way she listened to systems: not for who won, but for where the load wanted to go.

“If she found the door,” Viv said, “the least we can do is make sure the room on the other side is safe.”

Nate looked at her.

Not a sitcom look. Not henpecked. Partnership language. He knew when Vivian had already decided something and was giving him a chance to arrive with dignity.

“Fine,” he said. Then, to Anabelle, “You touch nothing unless one of us says it is okay.”

“What if it’s on fire?”

“Then you may touch the door.”

She smiled. That was handshake enough between us.

I strapped her into my rig and showed her the test room.

No angels sang. No light poured down from the ceiling. It was a rigged-up bar with a terrible texture pack and collision bugs in the stools. But Anabelle stood there with the headset in her hands and asked the question again, quieter this time.

“Can I be taller?”

The first stranger I let into the Zoo was a kid who needed a door. And somehow, despite everything, I built just the right one.

You need to understand the bus.

Not forgive it. Not contextualize it into mush. Understand the shape of the math.

Hsinchu Science Park was the hinge of civilization. Everybody knew it. Politicians pretended not to. Generals found cleaner nouns. Commentators said supply chain because blood chain did not test well.

Whoever held the fabs held tomorrow by the throat.

In exponential times, six months is not six months. Six months is the difference between intercepting a missile after launch and intercepting the industrial process that would have built the missile in the first place. Six months is nanobot clouds thick enough to turn Tomahawk IIIs into bad weather. Six months is one side of the curve eating the other side's future.

So we held a two-kilometer perimeter around a building that was not actually the asset, because systems under stress love protecting symbols. The people were the asset. The engineers. The operators. The ones who knew the fabs like Stradivarius knew violins. Most of them walked out through every evacuation we failed to notice because we were busy watching the roads.

The bus was on Guangfu Road.

It had children on it.

It crossed the line.

I fired.

I laughed.

That is the part people want me to soften. I will not. I laughed because the rules had finally said the quiet part in a language even my nervous system could understand. I laughed because the monstrous trolley problem had arrived with a sound system zip-tied to the roof and a woman in a habit at the wheel. I laughed because the procedure worked.

The thing no human being should ever have been asked to do had been made clean, legible, authorized, and efficient.

The strike bought time.

Time bought output.

Output bought the curve.

The curve bought the war, or delayed losing it, which is what winning had become by then.

The math worked.

I came home from a war where crossing the line meant I killed you.

Then I built a place whose only promise was that crossing the line would not.

The math is not as different as I would like.

We did not hire a child.

That is the legal sentence.

The true sentence is worse and kinder: a child found the room where the adults were building a door, and she made herself useful before we could decide whether stopping her would be mercy or cruelty.

By that first winter the Zoo had a user who wasn't one of us, and she was good at QA because she did not trust the room.

Adults test the path they expect. Anabelle tested the path she would need if the room lied.

She checked exits first. She tried to sit where the sim said no one would sit. She noticed NPCs ignored small bodies unless the body made a noise first. She asked what happened if a user refused the assigned avatar. She broke onboarding because she would not click I agree until she understood who could see her.

“My sister would hate this menu,” she said once.

I was under a desk, elbows deep in a cable mess.

“Why?”

“Too many choices before it lets you leave.”

“That is terrifyingly good notes.”

“It’s annoying notes.”

“Most good notes are annoying,” I said, and she almost smiled before the sim pulled her back under.

The first time we met Anabelle’s parents was over a drawing of Fulldive’s older, more ancient cousin.

I insisted on permission. I had learned nothing and everything from the knife. Anabelle looked at me like I had asked her to fly with no wings, but she took us.

Viv did the talking because I looked like military-grade trouble and Nate was too smooth for that room. Their father recognized me as someone doing well in the new economy and hated me on sight. Their mother hovered behind him with a laundry basket against her hip and a face worn into permanent apology.

“Your Anabelle has been indispensable to our project,” Viv said.

“Our what?” he said.

“Project,” Viv said. “It means she is smarter than both of us in ways we keep finding expensive to replace.”

Nate smiled the smile that makes bank managers and nurses feel heard. “You will always know where she is,” he said.

That line comforted them.

It comforted us.

I hate that it comforted us.

We made it official-ish. A contract and a wage. A spare key. A standing invitation for all-night hackathons. A chair at the table. A user profile with restrictions nobody liked and everyone pretended were enough. Viv asked what avatar she wanted.

Anabelle crossed her arms. “Has to be cute.”

“Of course.”

“Something with armor.”

“What kind?” Viv asked.

“The kind people believe.”

Nate wrote that one on the whiteboard and circled it three times, pointing for emphasis. A cat; something soft and helpful, but all claws if pushed too far.

It stuck.

Ana — she went by Ana, once she opened up, and that mattered more than I told her at the time — caught me after a long session one Thursday. I was in the transition space between the Zoo and the real world, headset in hand, room still deciding which version of itself it wanted to be.

“I made you something,” she said.

She was trying to be casual about it. She wasn’t quite pulling it off.

She had started from the same sim Nate did — the flight test, the one I had jackknifed out of three months earlier, the one that put flight math in my hindbrain and a K-bar in my hand before my eyes were open. She had kept the physics. She had changed everything else.

“I just slapped a skin on it,” she said. Which was the modesty version of what she had actually done.

It was a porch. Somewhere rural and warm. Old wood, potted herbs, a couple of sorry-looking lawn chairs. Afternoon light. The feeder hung from a hook in the corner, bright red plastic, full.

She had built it for rabbit. The sight lines were low, the collision mesh was right, the feeder hook sat exactly at ear height if you sat up on your haunches.

“You have to just wait,” she said. She was in a small window at the edge of the sim, the way Viv sometimes appeared when she was monitoring without intruding. “It takes a minute.”

I waited.

The hummingbird came in from the left.

Fast. That's always the first thing — the speed of them, the mechanical efficiency, the way they fold and correct and hold position like they're solving a problem nobody else can see. My hind legs tensed. Some part of my nervous system started calculating intercept vectors.

Then the hummingbird was me, and I was looking down at a rabbit minding his own business on the ground.

I panicked at first, but the gentle country winds set wind chimes tingling.

I tilted, and my new body just moved. I leaned forward to the feeder and drank the sweet, sweet nectar. Beak in. Hovering. A small impossible thing doing the work of being alive.

"Whenever you're ready," Ana said. She stood inside a small home and watched through an open window. I flew over. She offered a finger and I obliged.

"It's gorgeous," I said. My wings were a blur I couldn't feel.

"You can fly here for as long as you want," she said. "I'll stay here and watch over you. Vivian said you needed an excuse to fly again, and — no. It's a thank-you. For giving me a chance."

"I know," I said. Then I flew free over the procedural prairie, the wind beneath my wings and the sun in my eyes.

We didn't mean to hire family, but Ana *became* it in that moment.



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