New Fiction by Cory Massaro: “Gran Flower”

I fill the big bucket with soap and water and start heading across the field. It’s early on a Sunday and Gran Flower will want his solar cells cleaned, which they say isn’t really necessary, but Gran insists it helps. So I have woken up early and am hoping to reach Gran before he starts screeching and

riling up the crows.

I pass through our low, flat garden plot. It used to be a marsh, and the rain still feels free to run downhill and stay awhile. From there, I head up the dusty northern hill, under the checkerboard shade of its acre-wide awning, half solar panels to farm the sun, half glass to keep the dust dry so we can farm that too. Then, descending the hill, I reach the desiccated riverbed fringed with crusty little succulents, which is where our property ends and the Gibsons' begins. Gran wanted to be set up there last Sunday so he could spend the week swearing about them, the Gibsons, his synthetic voice cracking and popping at max volume, then—I imagine—going silent with awe the moment he saw a quail. The Gibsons don't even live there anymore; the Government removed them decades ago. Gran knows that, but I think he just likes the solitude and the quail and a place to say "motherfucker" where the Holy Father can really hear him.

I get to the property line, and there's Gran just where I left him.

From behind, Gran Flower looks like an aluminum sculpture of a sunflower. He has a long metal stem which sticks into the ground, and about five feet up, big metal leaves curl outward and upward. Hexagonal solar cells tessellate on the leaves' upper surface; it is these I'll need to clean.

As I walk around to face Gran, his head comes into view. It's his own human face from before he was a Gran, cast (I assume faithfully) in metal like Agamemnon's death mask. His head emerges from among the petals, as though they were a high starched collar and he a count.

"Hi, Gran," I say.

WHO ARE YOU? comes the scratchy monotone of his synthesized voice. He's probably filled up the tiny thumb drive stuck behind his head. Swearing at the Gibsons and God and country

occupies a surprising amount of writable memory. He’s probably dumped unimportant stuff like who I am, who anybody is now.

I take a solid state drive from my pocket. This one’s much more capacious but nearly full just the same: eighty of a hundred petabytes. “Just a second, Gran. Don’t be scared.” I remove the small drive he’s currently using and swap it out for the other. Eighty petabytes of Gran Flower, the Gran that tells me stories, the Gran I went to the city and the museum with. My Gran.

GUHGUHGUHGUH SSSHIIIIT SHIT SSSSSSHHHHHIVER MY STAMEN, goes Gran. He gets glitchy when I swap drives since I am effectively replacing a bit of his brain.

“I’m here to clean your solar cells,” I say.

OH BEES OH BEES OH NO OH OH OH NO OH JONAS, he says, WEREN’T YOU HERE JUST AN HOUR AGO?

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Gran Flower would be my sextuple-great-grandfather. He was among the first wave of Grans, or at least the first after the program became public.

A group of scientists had found some birds living in the most uninhabitably toxic places on earth, these big landfills full of old phones and computers and batteries. Places where the temperature reached 45, 50 Celsius all year round, and the ground was so acidic you could never go barefoot. The people had to wear masks and hazard suits and take pills, and their hair still fell out when they hit thirty.

But somehow the birds were doing fine—thriving, even. The way pigeons and rats live off human cities’ heaps of garbage, and not just live but live large, this one species of crow had found a way to turn people’s insistent fuck-ups into vitality and food.

So the scientists did the logical thing and caught a bunch of the crows and cut them open. The birds' brains were all in various stages of conversion to metal. So they cut the brains open too and discovered that the metal was forming these perfect replicas of the nervous structure, down to little conductive nanotubes where there had been axons and dendrites.

Then they started experimenting on people. It was about two hundred and fifty years back, Gran Flower says. Nobody knew why all of a sudden there were so few homeless people. The poor and desperate just started disappearing off the streets, out of the campers they lived in, out of the factories and warehouses they worked in. People thought the president must be doing a great job, the economy improving, all that. But really some corporation was just plucking people up and taking them to labs to feed them bits of old laptops and see what would happen. And eventually that same president, who was president for life and had already had all his organs replaced three times, disappeared also.

The government held a candle for him and somehow installed an interim president. Then, five or six years on, the executive office called a press conference. Gran says everybody watched on the Internet as three secret servicemen wheeled something out on a hand cart under a giant purple mantle. They brought it out and stood it up and whipped off the mantle and revealed the likeness of the president, standing nine feet tall and made of titanium. A big POTUS golem affixed eternally to a podium.

When the golem started to speak they realized it was really him, it was President Gran as he came to be called, and not a sculpture or robot or art stunt. He explained the Gran technology and said we had finally achieved immortality, "we" being wealthy and powerful people (but he made it sound like the United States of America), and "immortality" being innately desirable. Then a bunch more Grans came out on stage under an aurora of flags as coronets blared. Some were carried

or pushed, and some walked under their own power on weirdly-jointed metal centaur limbs. They were all these old rich guys, CEOs and the like, whose disappearances over the years had garnered various degrees of conspiracy-theoretic attention.

President Gran served as head of state for thirty more years that way. My Gran says he went crazy after that—REAL CALIGULA STUFF. When President Gran declared himself a pacifist and a socialist and an environmentalist, the Senate realized he was too far gone and voted to impeach, then melt him down. They then released a series of commemorative dollar coins, made of titanium and bearing his image.

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I'm cleaning Gran's solar panels and explaining to him that it's been a year since we last loaded this version of his memory, not an hour. He says it's disorienting when somebody swaps out his writable memory, like waking up from one dream into another. But he understands why I did it. The last time I left him with a full memory like that, he raved for a week straight and could barely string together a sentence by the end of it.

I'M GLAD YOU LEFT ME ON THIS SPOT, Gran says. THIS USED TO BE A RIVER, AND THE GODDAMN GIBSONS LIVED ON THE OTHER SIDE BUT THEY KEPT TO THEIR OWN, AND IT WAS PEACEFUL DOWN HERE BY THE WATER. THE DUCKS USED TO SPEND SUMMERS HERE, DUNKING THEIR BILLS UPSTREAM TO CATCH GUPPIES UNDER THE SHADE OF THE OAKS.

There's not a tree for kilometers in either direction now, but I believe him.

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Grans choose how their bodies look. Or, more often, their families or caretakers or lack of money choose for them. In Gran Flower's time, they couldn't efficiently compress neural

structures to digital memory, so a Gran would only be able to remember new things for a few hours or so. This meant their minds were basically static: they could hold a conversation, but eventually they'd start to forget how the conversation had begun, and who you were, and hey why were you talking to them anyway?

Gran Flower hadn't been able to afford the procedure; it was a benefit for military service. He'd been in The War for a long time: central Asia, then eastern Asia; then all over Europe; then putting down dissidents in unquiet cities throughout the U.S. But it was all The War. He got a leg and an arm blown off, so while he was becoming a Gran—doing the breathing exercises, reading the books, feeling his body and brain ossify—he designed his floral body plan. And once he was metal and his internal organs were useless, the family took him to a metalworker who forged his torso and remaining limbs down into a stem and welded the leaves on.

We went to Chicago once, Gran and I, to visit my mom's side of the family. They had owned a few properties there in the city, and had been pretty well-off from landlording, enough that my great-great-great grandmother had been able to become a Gran. Gran Sticks, they called her. She had been really into video games. Of course now we don't have "games" as such, just massive virtual worlds that you have to remind yourself every few minutes aren't real. But in her time, you sat in front of the computer with a controller or a brain shunt. So that's what Gran Sticks does. She plays games on a computer so antiquated the family can barely find parts for it.

That side of the family's down to just one house now. They rent half of it to make a little cash and live huddled in a few rooms downstairs. You can hear Gran Sticks cackling at all hours in the singsong tones of her cutting-edge voice synthesizer as she blasts away virtual Communists, Fascists, extraterrestrials, insects, or disgruntled workers. The family wipe her memory once a week and delete her games' saves, too,

so they don’t have to buy her new ones.

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WHAT ARE WE PLANTING THIS YEAR? Gran asks.

I’ve explained to my version of Gran the dust bowl, that we can’t plant much anymore, how it’s mostly a solar and sand farm. “We’ll have okra, and some wild cherries, black-eyed peas, nopales.”

THE CROWS WILL BE WANTING TO GET AT THE CHERRIES, I EXPECT, says Gran. SET ME UP THERE FOR THE WEEK; I’LL SEE IF I CAN’T SCARE ‘EM OFF.

Even after two hundred years of dust bowling, and climate change, and droughts, Gran still knows how to work the land. And I think he enjoys playing scarecrow.

I pull his stem up out of the ground and strap him across my back, into a kind of bandolier I’ve made for this purpose, and start walking.

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That’s how I got Gran to Chicago on our trip—I carried his long, light body. I hitched a ride in the bed of a pickup truck from the farm to the train station with Gran balanced on my crossed legs. On the train, I leaned him against the window, and his metal nose tapped the glass as we bumped over rail ties.

Walking the streets after our visit with Gran Sticks, I kept Gran Flower in the bandolier, slung diagonally across my back. The sidewalks were full of people and Grans of all shapes. Somebody had placed their Gran in a baby stroller, a smooth little eggplant of a Gran with an artfully etched face. A pair of Grans across the street terrorized the sidewalk in wheeled go-cart bodies, their heads mounted like hood ornaments. An old man held hands with a humanoid Gran and rested his head on

the round chrome shoulder. The pair trundled along aristocratically, careless of the impatient crowds.

We didn't head back to the train station immediately but checked out the natural history museum, where they had an exhibit about human evolution. I walked Gran down the line of taxidermy and animatronics, from rhesuses to orangutans to gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees, Neanderthals and Denisovans. Finally us, "us" being humans who haven't become Grans.

At the end was an art piece consisting of two busts: a furious-looking chimpanzee and a surprised, wilted-looking old lady. The chimpanzee wore glasses with an archaic, silver chain around the frames, and he stared the old lady down. The old lady wore a plastic tiara.

In front of the art stood a placard outlining an evolutionary theory. It talked about how, sometimes, evolution works by lopping segments off an organism's life span or adding new ones. How maybe humans were just chimps that never grew up all the way. "Neotenous apes," the theory was called. It noted that most other mammals stop being so plastic and tolerant and apt to learn after a certain age. They get set in their ways, like an old dog you can't teach new tricks to.

I peeked over my shoulder at Gran, his stem crossing my back like a greatsword, his petals nearly poking me in the eye. Sweat soaked my still-flesh ape back where the stem pressed into my skin. Gran was a bit languid in Chicago, the weather being so cloudy and he being so solar-powered. But I thought maybe this metamorphosis into a sleepy, near-deathless Gran was like humans' next stage of life, the one we neotenous apes were missing. Like old dogs who can't learn new tricks but somehow know when their human has a seizure, or that an earthquake's coming, or not to trust the guest you've invited home. We won't all reach that stage. Unless I get rich like Gran Sticks, or go to The War and manage not to die like Gran

Flower, I'll live a few short decades as an unfinished mammal, sweating and stinking and never setting in my ways.

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I arrange Gran in the bandolier and take him to the cherry orchard. He's facing backward and telling me bits of family history as we pass.

THAT'S WHERE WE SET UP THE STILL; OH, THE PARTIES WE'D HAVE AND THE MOONSHINE FLOWING TILL SUNUP, Gran says, AND AUNTIE STERN'S FIDDLE COMMANDED OUR FEET TILL THE DEVIL BANGED A BROOM ON HELL'S CEILING.

I am trying not to think about average memory formation rates. How many megabytes per minute are filling that drive, the one that holds my Gran. How many more times I'll be able to talk to him like this. When the drive fills, that's it, and I don't have anywhere to back him up to. He'll start babbling and swearing as virtual neurons half-overwrite each other. And I guess I'll have to delete this bit of him, the memory of Chicago and the museum, and introduce myself again: "Hi Gran. You don't know me; I'm your great-great-great- …"

We reach the orchard and I plant him. I wipe away a tear. SWEATING SO MUCH? DON'T TELL ME THAT LITTLE WALK WORE YOU OUT, BOY. HA. HA. HA. WHEN WILL I SEE YOU NEXT?

"Soon, Gran," I say, as I remove the solid state drive.

OH NO OH OH OH NO, he says.