

Alex Wilson suffered a head injury in an auto accident a few years ago, and I have to wonder if that experience helped him to get into character while writing this story. It's a gripping tale, and one that resonated deeply with me. The story grabbed me by the collar and pulled me through to the end.

In this story, a man's brain loses communication with his nervous system through misuse of technology. That has the effect of leaving him numb and insensitive to pain and other sensation. While he uses the condition to his financial advantage, the more human aspects of being isolated from his environment while standing in the middle of it takes a huge toll.

Alex's work has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction and Chiaroscuro. He has a forthcoming appearance in Weird Tales. He is a member of the Clarion class of 2006. Locus Magazine called him a "promising new writer."

"Nervewrecking" delivers that promise.—RN

Nerve Wrecking

by Alex Wilson

Used to be a faux detective, but now I'm in a faux prison jumpsuit on a faux cobblestone roof, staring down a sixty-foot drop. Hate the word "faux," so it doesn't all suck that the drop's the first real thing I've seen in Los Angeles. But yeah. Leave it to my luck to manage a turn without actually being helpful.

I'm probably not suicidal, but it doesn't exactly bug me how that big, blue air bubble below looks inadequate as a person-catching device. I'm also convinced they gave me the cheap kneepads because they know I can't tell any difference. I hate this place. The people. The penny pinching. Mostly the place. At least the people are pretty. Hell, even *I'm* pretty today. I look just like Whatshisname. Kevin something. TV actor from that stupid medical thing.

Have to squint at the angle of the sun. Glare's making me think of the heat, making me wonder how quickly a facial graft sunburns. I'm used to wearing them at night.

And where was the sun yesterday off the Santa Monica pier?

Was hoping to catch my first sunset, first time on the West Coast. With the sky so gray, all I got was this unremarkable blotch. No interesting colors or ripples in the sky; just a dollop of yellow behind a grainy mask, which might just be as good as it gets for me. Sally tells me the smog comes and goes in Los Angeles, so it was just my bad luck last night (and today so far). This I can believe.

Sunburn or no, there's just gotta be something on my face besides the graft. I touch an empty pocket, then remember that insurance asshole took away my handmirror.

I turn to Sally. She's harnessed by her torso a few feet back from the ledge. Wind scatters blonde-like bangs across her face. On the ground, her hair's too thick to move, but up here it's alive. Almost looks real. Can't tell whether she's meeting my eyes, but the sight of such active wind reminds me to blink.

"Is there something on my chin?!" I yell.

The wind parts Sally's hair like she's poking her face through a shower curtain to hear me better. She gives me that teeth-apart smile of hers and throws a big thumbs-up, which is her other job besides smiling. Think she said she wants to be an actress, just like everybody else in Los Angeles does. I hope she's listed both smiles and thumbs on her resume. I hope she's demonstrating both in her headshot.

Sally's other hand grasps her harness and I catch the fault line in her smile. I check the groin of my jumpsuit to make sure I haven't pissed myself. Looks dry enough. Sally's probably just getting bored.

I smile back at her, more to be a jerk than out of politeness. My smile's still more of a snarl these days. Can't correct it without a mirror to guide me. Sorry, Sally. I'm sure Kevin Something could've given her something she could work with.

Hear the word "action" in my earpiece. No "quiet on the set." No "rolling." Those words would be wasted on this sideshow.

I turn back to the ledge. Hold my breath. Jump.

Supposed to flail my arms and arch my back, as much for the three camera setups as for safety. I forget all that, thinking instead of what Sally's smile could feel like if I moved my fingers along the cusp of her teeth, if I dared her to bite down. Her teeth could be dry. Inside of her lips, moist.

Then I think that maybe if I hit wrong, the shock to my system'll wake it up and I'd actually be able to feel someone's mouth against my skin again. That was one theory the EnDearTech

guys had about how to repair me: bang on this old television long enough and you'll fix the reception. Wish I was watching TV right now. Or a sun setting over the ocean. Is that so much to ask, L.A.? Is it? I'll call Alan when I land and tell him this is all a mistake. If my luck's actually turning, maybe he'll actually answer his cell.

So eventually I guess I bounce off the air bubble, hit the pavement belly-up. My arm bends behind me when I settle, which might mean something for my wrist. Should have stung something awful, but I could impale myself on a boom mike and I'd still have to be told it's time to die.

Three production assistants are at my side as I dust myself off. Must have blacked out momentarily because Sally's there, too, and it should've taken her a bit to unfasten and climb down. See her hand on my shoulder and it smarts worse than the fall. She gives me nothing but fake smiles and thumbs to gawk at visually, but sure. She'll tease me with a hand on my shoulder.

"You okay?"

Stupid question, but I don't say that. "They get the shot?"

"Yeah. Said it looked amazing."

"Wonderful." Perfection. One Take Michael, that's what they'll call me. I can build a reputation as the stuntman who never complains and never screws up. Found my place among the unfeeling, in the city of ripoff sunsets and faux everything-under-them.

"You want a break?"

I shake my head. "I'm only in the one shot."

"Right. And they've already moved the cameras for the next take. You ready to go again?"

"Oh." So sometimes I forget I'm not the only perfectionist in the world.

"You all right?"

I nod. But how the hell should I know?

Another insurance asshole returns my handmirror, and schedules me for an X-ray at the end of the day. Wears a green turtleneck under a cream-colored sportsjacket. Five years of pretending to be a detective, and the most useful thing I've learned is not to trust people who can't dress themselves.

So yeah. Turns out I've busted some ribs. Probably on take three, although the P.A. I hit on the second bounce took the worst of it. But Asshole here's suddenly claiming I'm a liability because I

wouldn't know to ask for a doctor if I *did* get hurt.

See, my nerves are fine. Brain's fairly unremarkable, too, thanks for being too polite to ask. But there's this disconnect. They don't talk to each other. Some undiscovered island of chronic peripheral polyneuropathy-land, which means about as much to me as it does to anyone. All I know is you can burn me, punch me, stab me, fuck me. I might fall unconscious and I might die. But I'm not going to feel a thing. Might not even notice it, if I'm looking the other way and not listening real close. Never said I was a great detective.

Thought my condition would be an advantage here, that they'd love a stuntman who never complains. Hell, Alan said I'm the only man alive who doesn't mind these expensive—apparently painful—facial grafts. Figured this'd be as useful in Hollywood as it was in detective work. But Asshole here suddenly says I can sue for everything the studio's worth.

I say: "Really?"

Asshole glances at an assistant. "No," he says finally. The word lasts forever, like he's reluctant to take his finger off a chess piece before he's sniffed out all my angles. "And we're going to need you to sign some more stuff."

Offer to sign anything and everything, but they say there are ways around any contract; they need even more protection. Comforting to work in a business where contracts are so flimsy, but I guess that's not my problem anymore.

So Hollywood spits me out in two days. Has to be some kind of record, especially for a guy who had a job before he arrived. One Take Michael.

After Asshole leaves, I perk up at every set of footsteps in the hospital hallway, I don't know, thinking I'll see Sally come by with a tearful goodbye just so I can wonder why she isn't quite as brunette or puffy-cheeked as she should be. And why would I expect that sort of rejection piled upon rejection? What makes me think I must have killed Lady Luck's parents in another life or three? Experience.

Okay. Yeah. The explanation thing. So six years ago, I stuck a modded EnDearTech EnShare on the back of my neck and became the poster boy for a national recall. Now this was the original EnShare, not one of those "family friendly" pieces of crap endcapping every other WalMart aisle nowadays, but same purpose: attach it to the back of your neck and trade nerve sensations with a partner. What I touch, you feel. What you touch,