

Printcrime

Forematter:

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In the words of Woody Guthrie:

"This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright #154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we don't give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that's all we wanted to do."

Overclocked is dedicated to Pat York, who made my stories better.

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Introduction to Printcrime:

Printcrime came out of a discussion I had with a friend who'd been to hear a spokesman for the British recording industry talk about the future of "intellectual property." The record exec opined the recording industry's great and hysterical spasm would form the template for a never-ending series of spasms as 3D printers, fabricators and rapid prototypers laid waste to every industry that relied on trademarks or patents.

My friend thought that, as kinky as this was, it did show a fair amount of foresight, coming as it did from the notoriously technosqueamish record industry.

I was less impressed.

It's almost certainly true that control over the production of trademarked and patented objects will diminish over the coming years of object-on-demand printing, but to focus on 3D printers' impact on *trademarks* is a stupendously weird idea.

It's as if the railroad were looming on the horizon, and the most visionary thing the futurists of the day can think of to say about it is that these iron horses will have a disastrous effect on the hardworking manufacturers of oat-bags for horses. It's true, as far as it goes, but it's so tunnel-visioned as to be practically blind.

When Nature magazine asked me if I'd write a short-short story for their back-page, I told them I'd do it, then went home, sat down on the bed and banged this one out. They bought it the next morning, and we were in business.

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Printcrime

(Originally published in Nature Magazine, January 2006)

The coppers smashed my father's printer when I was eight. I remember the hot, cling-film-in-a-microwave smell of it, and Da's look of ferocious concentration as he filled it with fresh goop, and the warm, fresh-baked feel of the objects that came out of it.

The coppers came through the door with truncheons swinging, one of them reciting the terms of the warrant through a bullhorn. One of Da's customers had shopped him. The ipolice paid in high-grade pharmaceuticals—performance enhancers, memory supplements, metabolic boosters. The kind of thing that cost a fortune over the counter; the kind of thing you could print at home, if you didn't mind the risk of having your kitchen filled with a sudden crush of big, beefy bodies, hard truncheons whistling through the air, smashing anyone and anything that got in the way.

They destroyed grandma's trunk, the one she'd brought from the old country. They smashed our little refrigerator and the purifier unit over the window. My tweetybird escaped death by hiding in a corner of his cage as a big, booted foot crushed most of it into a sad tangle of printer-wire.

Da. What they did to him. When he was done, he looked like he'd been brawling with an entire rugby side. They brought him out the door and let the newsies get a good look at him as they tossed him in the car, while a spokesman told the world that my Da's organized-crime bootlegging operation had been responsible for at least twenty million in contraband, and that my Da, the desperate villain, had resisted arrest.

I saw it all from my phone, in the remains of the sitting room, watching it on the screen and wondering how, just *how* anyone could look at our little flat and our

terrible, manky estate and mistake it for the home of an organized crime kingpin. They took the printer away, of course, and displayed it like a trophy for the newsies. Its little shrine in the kitchenette seemed horribly empty. When I roused myself and picked up the flat and rescued my peeping poor tweetybird, I put a blender there. It was made out of printed parts, so it would only last a month before I'd need to print new bearings and other moving parts. Back then, I could take apart and reassemble anything that could be printed.

By the time I turned eighteen, they were ready to let Da out of prison. I'd visited him three times—on my tenth birthday, on his fiftieth, and when Ma died. It had been two years since I'd last seen him and he was in bad shape. A prison fight had left him with a limp, and he looked over his shoulder so often it was like he had a tic. I was embarrassed when the minicab dropped us off in front of the estate, and tried to keep my distance from this ruined, limping skeleton as we went inside and up the stairs.

“Lanie,” he said, as he sat me down. “You’re a smart girl, I know that. Trig. You wouldn’t know where your old Da could get a printer and some goop?”

I squeezed my hands into fists so tight my fingernails cut into my palms. I closed my eyes. “You’ve been in prison for ten years, Da. Ten. Years. You’re going to risk another ten years to print out more blenders and pharma, more laptops and designer hats?”

He grinned. “I’m not stupid, Lanie. I’ve learned my lesson. There’s no hat or laptop that’s worth going to jail for. I’m not going to print none of that rubbish, never again.” He had a cup of tea, and he drank it now like it was whisky, a sip and then a long, satisfied exhalation. He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

“Come here, Lanie, let me whisper in your ear. Let me tell you the thing that I decided while I spent ten years in lockup. Come here and listen to your stupid Da.”

I felt a guilty pang about ticking him off. He was off his rocker, that much was clear. God knew what he went through in prison. “What, Da?” I said, leaning in close.

“Lanie, I’m going to print more printers. Lots more printers. One for everyone. That’s worth going to jail for. That’s worth anything.”

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