

# Futures

## The quantum chocolatier

A taste of freedom. By Sarah Totton

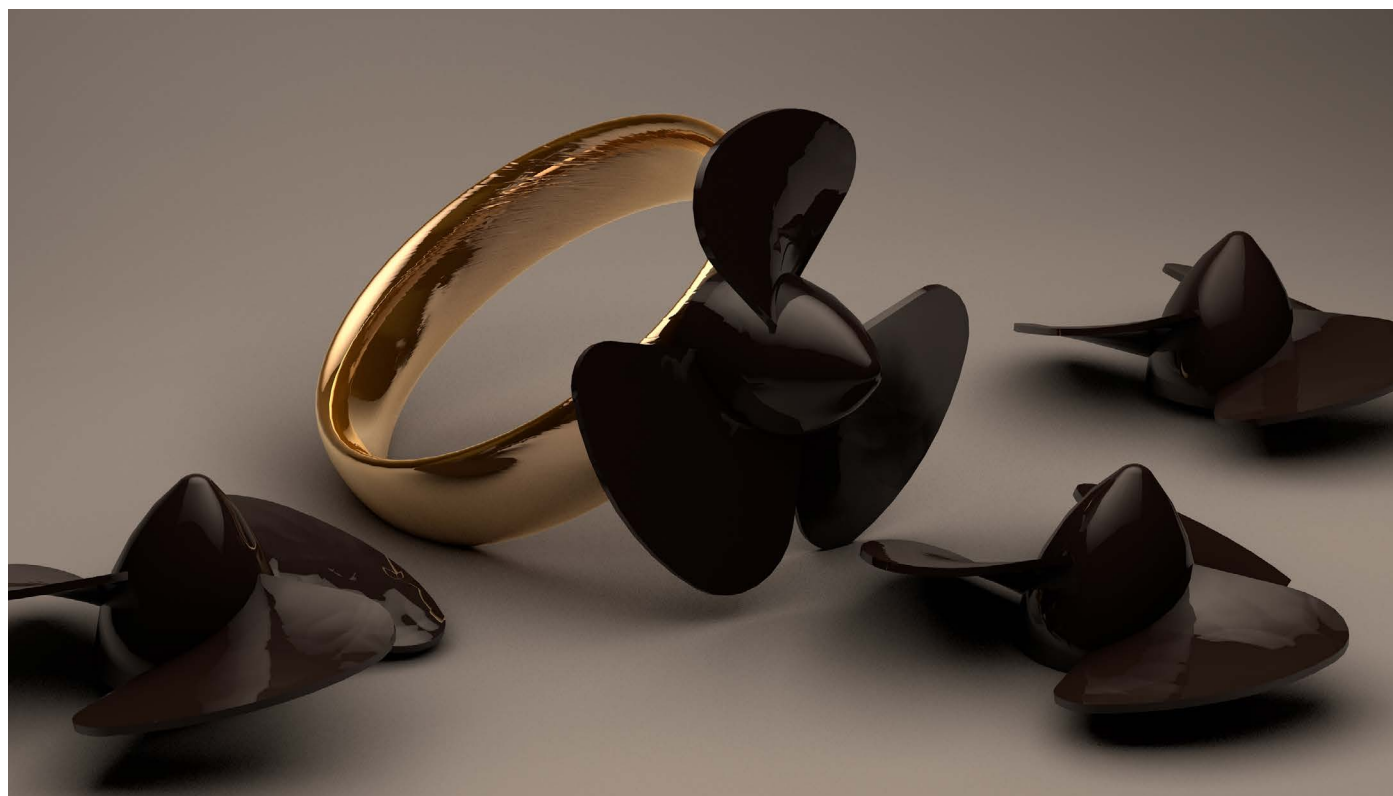


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**“T**hat’s it?” said Hedge. “We asked for something special.”

The object under scrutiny was a metal box with a slot in the top and a mouth-like opening at the front. It sat on a mahogany table in the heart of Ballantine’s Gifts.

The proprietor, Mr Ballantine, of the simian hands and genotype of unknown provenance, said: “This is Tarrington’s Chocolatier.”

“What does it *do*?” asked Hedge, clasping the hand of his fiancée, O’Mara.

Hedge was a rabby young man. O’Mara’s friends called him a diamond in the rough, though ‘pyrite with pretensions’ was more accurate. O’Mara, by contrast, was so plain that a curious observer might wonder what the attraction was. She wore a knitted dress in burgundy with a row of brass buttons up the back. It was clear that she had done them up herself, as she had missed fastening one between her shoulder blades.

“Tarrington’s Chocolatier can make you any

confection you like,” said Ballantine.

“So, it’s a vending machine.” Hedge glanced under the table. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“Try it,” said Ballantine. “Put a coin in the slot and see what comes out.”

Hedge looked at O’Mara, and she searched her handbag. “I don’t have any coins, but I have this.” O’Mara took a silver arcade token out of her bag.

“That will do,” said Ballantine. “Put it in.”

The token clunked as it dropped into the slot. The Chocolatier vibrated briefly, then a chocolate truffle on a square of purple foil slid from the opening.

The chocolate shone red under the display lights.

“Is that ...?” said O’Mara, picking it up.

“Ruby chocolate,” said Ballantine.

O’Mara took a tentative bite. Sweet cream oozed out. The scent of it filled her mouth. Suddenly she was five years old, in India with her grandfather in the market, eating a sweet he had bought her, spongy and soaked in syrup

with the stray cows, and dogs and bright blue- and purple-painted sandstone buildings all around her.

“Rosewater!” She popped the rest of the chocolate into her mouth for another taste of that yearned-for time, before money and Hedge’s gambling debts came to trouble her.

“Let me try,” said Hedge. He rummaged in his pockets and came up with a casino chip, which he slipped into the machine.

“You promised you weren’t going to gamble anymore,” said O’Mara.

“It’s an old chip, silly goose,” said Hedge.

A thump came from the Chocolatier. Something dropped into view through the opening.

Hedge plucked it out. “Cracker Jack!” He ripped the box open and shook it into his open mouth. As he chewed, he tipped the box over his open hand. Caramel popcorn tumbled out alongside a brightly coloured plastic toy.

“A propeller ring!” he said, putting it on his

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finger. He blew on it, and it made a whirring noise. “I haven’t had one of these since I was a kid.”

“It seems to know what we want,” said O’Mara.

“The Chocolatier uses quantum technology to predict what would most please you,” said Ballantine.

“Can it pick a winning horse?” said Hedge.

“It produces confectionery only,” said Ballantine.

“Still,” said Hedge. “Anyone who stole it could make a pile.”

“The Chocolatier does only what its lawful owner desires,” said Ballantine. “For this demonstration I have asked it to give you what you would most like. It would be useless to a thief. Perhaps worse than useless, if you apprehend me.” He looked at O’Mara.

Hedge grasped the undone brass button on O’Mara’s dress, and twitched it off with enough force to make her cry out. He slipped the button into the Chocolatier. A moment later, a golden egg rolled out.

Hedge snatched it up eagerly. His expression turned to disappointment. “It’s not solid gold.” He scraped the surface with his thumbnail,

revealing gold leaf coating the milk chocolate underneath.

“Confectionery only,” said Ballantine. “Not material goods.”

“Still ...” said Hedge. “We could make a killing selling candy out of this.”

“It would be possible to make a killing, yes,” said Ballantine. “Contingent on your desires.”

“Let’s buy it,” said Hedge. “How much?”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” said Ballantine.

O’Mara paled. “We can’t afford that.”

“Use the money your grandfather left you,” said Hedge.

“That’s for our wedding and a down-payment on a house.”

“When are you getting married?” asked Ballantine.

“In three months,” said O’Mara.

“If you’re in the market for a trip, I can offer you something truly special – imagine being decoupled from the grid. Complete freedom from all your troubles.”

“Forget that,” said Hedge. “Come on, O’Mara. This Chocolatier will pay for itself in a week, if I market it to the right people. It’ll pay for the wedding and a house and a hundred honeymoons. It’ll clear all my debts, too.”

Mr Ballantine regarded Hedge soberly. “I can see that you are the sort of person who would never walk away from Omelas.”

“O’Mara, you mean,” said Hedge, patting her knee. “Of course not. I’d never leave her. She tried to leave me once, but I kept at her till she took me back.”

“I ... suppose we could afford it,” said O’Mara. “All right. We’ll take it.”

Hedge hustled O’Mara out of the shop and off to the bank. They were back in a matter of 30 minutes.

Ballantine had the paperwork ready. “This transfers the ownership to you,” he said to O’Mara. “Keep in mind that trip I told you about. It’s on special – just for the next three months. I’ll buy the Chocolatier back from you for the same price.”

“Don’t think about pulling any fast ones,” said Hedge. “Come on, O’Mara.”

“Au revoir,” said Mr Ballantine.

**Sarah Totton**’s work has appeared at *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and *Infinite Lives: Short Tales of Longevity*.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Sarah Totton reveals the inspiration behind *The quantum chocolatier*

Some of my favourite stories are about wish fulfilment and revenge. John Collier’s *The Chaser* is a good example. When I was writing this story, I asked myself what exactly would I wish for if I had a machine that could give me whatever I wanted. Chocolate, of course. (Ice cream is a close second.) The moral of Collier’s story is ‘be careful what you wish for’, but I didn’t want to write a cautionary tale. I figured the Quantum Chocolatier would be far more useful and interesting if it could predict, not what you want, but what you need (whether you know it yet or not).

