

# Futures

## Dogman relates the parable of context

There's always a before. By Peter S. Drang



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**P**unky swipes his credcube over the food cart's paystalk then gestures for a footlong hotdog.

Dogman sees Punky through dreamy mists. The credcube registers and unlocks his crankshaft. Dogman's titanium elbows squeak to life. The dream lifts – he recognizes the boy, smiles. The cart clock resets to two minutes; an aperture spirals open over the hotdog tank. Dogman fishes a foot-long from steamy water using copper-tone tongs.

Punky shifts from foot to foot – the asphalt sunblazed soft. The Collective's community air units gust an urban canyon coolness for merciful contrast. That artificial wind splays into invisible chaotic eddies around Dogman's food cart and animates the manbun roosting on Punky's green-streaked moptop.

"He's banishing me!" Punky says.

Dogman tests his matte metal jaw before speaking. "Slow down, boy. Who's banishing you?"

"My Pop – shooting me off to a Moonside trade school, rinky-dinky, unaligned, sittin' there on that dead rock. Meanwhile, my buddies get to head out to the new Collective Institute right here on Earth."

"Context, Punky, context." Dogman wrist-flicks the footlong dry and nestles it into the mock-seed bun with a servo-fluid motion, then tool-changes the tongs for a yellow squirt bottle.

"He's sending me away, Dogman!"

Dogman shakes the mustard bottle once, twice, then tops off the dog with seaweed relish. He presents the masterpiece. "Eat, Punky boy, and listen about context." He wipes his non-slip fingers on a red chequered towel. "Listen good now."

The boy keeps shifting as he takes a bite. Yellow and green streamers of condiment dapple a patchwork mosaic along the bun.

Dogman leans in close to Punky's ear. "Long ago, when the Collective was just startin' up, a man and his grewed-up son was celebrating

by eatin' swanky at a cloth-napkin joint. They order and – lickety lickety – a white-glove waiter plops down two fine porterhouse cuts sauced up ritzy. Son looks at dad and says, 'This steak needs more salt.'"

Punky stands mid-chew, transfixed.

"Dad's face twists horrific for a blink, then he squares up. Bounds over the table, sending plate 'n' platter ascatter, lands with his boy in a full Nelson." Dogman folds up his arms around an invisible opponent to demonstrate the unbreakable wrestling hold.

Punky's eyes go double wide. "The hell? Just 'cause of salt?"

Dogman holds off the question with one outstretched manipulator, as only one minute remains on the cart clock. "Everyone in the joint is shouting at the dad's violence, cursing him, but they're afraid he'll snap the boy's neck, so stand back. Cops arrive forthwith and tear the man off his son. Boss cop takes one look at the man's face and orders the son to be toted off in cuffs to Thought Remodelling.

## Futures

And the dad? Released, weeping. The crowd rails against the injustice.

“What you think about that, Punky?”

Punky’s face is all scrunched up machinating. “Crooked cops. They were all crooked back then, Collective says. Tight with the dad, took down that poor, innocent son —”

“Context! Yeah, cop knew the dad, but weren’t no cahoots involved. Just this: cop knew the family, knew the history. The context.”

Punky takes another bite, shakes his head while chewing. “I dunno, Dogman.”

“Damn right you don’t! No situation on this planet nor any other is ever the true start. There’s always a before. And the story don’t make no sense without knowing that particular before. Or worse, what sense you try to make without knowing that before ain’t no sense — just nonsense.”

“You makin’ my head spin, Dogman, you are!” Punky laughs.

“Well, then,” Dogman says, laughing with him, “spin the other way to straighten on out!”

Punky tries it, spins on one foot, thereby to counter-rotate his confusions. Globbs of mustard and seaweed relish fly out from the footlong. Punky slows to a wobbling stop.

“Did it work?” Dogman says, laughing so hard his speakers crackle.

“Naw, just dizzy.” Punky’s eyes dart back

and forth following a gyrating world Dogman wishes he could also see.

“And what should you be a-searching for to understand, Punky?”

Punky’s eyes settle, and he’s back to feet-shifting on the sweltering ground. “Maybe ... context?”

Dogman raises his manipulators in the air as if praising the Almighty. “You got it, Punky. See, what the cop knew, and you didn’t, is this: that son got released from a Collective Thought Remodelling Centre that very day. Why’d he been there? Years earlier his mind got scrambled by a glitchy mindforge at his Collective school. That night he stabbed a waiter with a steak knife. And before he killed that first waiter, you know what that boy’d said?”

Punky has both finished eating the footlong and finished reckoning the answer. “Not enough salt?”

“Yessir, Punky. Yessir.”

“Dad was justified, then. That boy needed another round of remodelling. First round didn’t take!”

Dogman nods. “Truly. Everybody there thought otherwise, you thought otherwise. Because you all had no context. So, what should you be doing, Punky?”

Punky stands there for a moment like his brain is a vulture circling overhead, looking

for a carcass of meaning to pick through. “I should ... ask my Pop why he wants me to go to that unaligned Moonside tradeschool instead of the Collective school. Ask if there’s some sorta ... context.”

Dogman nods.

A tone sounds from the cart clock, calling for more credits.

“I’m short today, Dogman, sorry. Can’t keep ya awake.”

“It’s OK, Punky, let me dream. Go talk with your Pop.”

Three more tones: sharp, insistent. Dogman freezes up. The vat’s aperture twists closed, encasing the steaming water.

As his brain mists over, Dogman watches Punky walk away — seeking context. Dogman will dream of distant times, before the Collective decanted his mind. He’ll dream of his long-ago life, of his hard-won wisdom, of his many struggles. But Dogman fears that he’ll also dream those painful memories of his addled, murderous son.

**Peter S. Drang** is a high-tech entrepreneur and SF writer. His work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flame Tree Press*, *The Arcanist*, *Nature* and elsewhere.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Peter S. Drang** reveals the inspiration behind *Dogman* relates the parable of context.

Decades ago, I wrote a story called *In parables spake the Dogman* about a hotdog vending robot that would give wise advice to people from all walks of life. That was one of my earliest novice stories and was quite dreadful. Recently, I decided to take another stab at *Dogman*. This time I placed him in a dystopian future where the world is largely controlled by the nefarious ‘Collective’. He can only give advice to Punky in the form of parables, presumably because he’s being monitored. Dogman wants Punky to look beyond the surface level of events in his life, because things may not be as they seem. To echo this theme, the final sentence adds a bit of context that recasts the reader’s understanding of Dogman himself. I hope this story inspires people to search for the ever-elusive context required to make better sense of the world.

