

# cory doctorow

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**KIM STANLEY ROBINSON**



# radicalized

**four novellas**

refugees. The politicians who raged about the scourge of terrorists hidden among refugees, and the ones who talked in code about “assimilation” and “too much, too fast.” The soldiers and cops and guards who pointed guns at her, barked orders at her. The bureaucrats she never saw who rejected her paperwork for cryptic reasons she could only guess at, and the bureaucrats who looked her in the eye and rejected her paperwork and refused to explain themselves.

Now there was a new group in that latter class, distant as the causes of the weather: the building management company and its laser printer, blasting out eviction threats to people whose names they didn’t know and whose faces they’d never seen over transgressions so petty and rules so demeaning.

The elevator captains had been a good chuckle, a way for everyone from the poor-doors and the poor-floors to feel like they were mice outsmarting the cats. The letters put them in their place: roaches, facing exterminators.

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The elevators weren’t any better programmed than the Disher or the Boulangism or the thermostat or anything else, really. The big difference was access. She could take her Disher to pieces in her kitchen without having to explain herself to anyone, but let her try that in the hallway, in sight of the cameras and her neighbors, and the situation would be very different.

To take out the elevators, she’d need to take out the cameras, and then work in the very small hours, and still she would risk discovery, so she’d need a disguise, a maintenance outfit, and maybe she could also take out the lights and replace them with working lights—she began to visualize the tableau: her down on one knee in shapeless coveralls with a hard hat pulled way down, the lights out and illumination from floodlights that would shine right into the eyes of anyone who tried to snoop. It was a fun daydream, and she enjoyed the game of thinking of how someone might catch her and how she might avoid being caught. It was an especially good way to recover from the exhaustion of trudging thirty-five flights up, or the frustration of waiting for forty-five minutes with a cooling pot of tagine from the corner deli in her hand, the smell driving her crazy.

She pushed around the wreckage of her tagine with a glass of cheap and delicious retsina—a favorite among so many refugees who’d made the passage through Greece, and now a staple of refugees who hadn’t, thanks to its popularity in the camps—and looked out her tiny window at Boston far below her, the Charles swollen to its levees, the ant-like people swarming home under the streetlights as autumn’s early night fell swiftly upon them. She daydreamed about hi-viz and work lights, about the tools she’d use to remove the firefighter’s override panel to reveal the USB port beneath, the subtle ways in which she would alter the building’s algorithms so that the faceless people would never discover her intrusion.

There was a ding at the door and the screen showed her Abdirahim, weirdly distorted by the camera’s autofocus on his face, which was a good foot below the adult-height camera

mounting. She waved the door unlocked and he let himself in, looking from her to the tagine to the wine and then back to her.

“Have you eaten?” It was a phrase she remembered her mother saying to everyone who came through their door, even when there was no food to share. It had irritated her once, and now she said it automatically on those rare occasions when someone came through *her* door.

“Yes.” Abdirahim said it too quickly.

“But you’re still hungry.” It wasn’t a question. She remembered being a thirteen-year-old: hungry all the time. She got him a plate and spooned some tagine onto it and then found a pita and popped it in her toaster to warm it. When it was done, he looked at her with wide eyes.

“Yours works?”

It took a moment for her to figure out what he meant. The toaster. “It works,” she said. “I fixed it.” Then, with a little pride: “The dishwasher, too. And the thermostat. And the fridge.”

“Show me.”

“Eat first.”

The food barely touched his throat on the way down. She felt like she should probably make him eat slowly in her capacity in loco parentis, but she was as eager to show him as he was to be shown. When he said *show me* it made her realize that she’d been bursting with secret knowledge that she’d wanted more than anything to share.

When he was done, she put his dishes in the dishwasher and gestured him over to her so that she could show him the boot screen as she put the Disher through its paces, with the fanciful graphics she’d installed, of anthropomorphic dishes with bad attitudes showering angrily in the trademark Disher spray. He clapped and laughed and demanded to see the rest, and then to be shown how to do it.

They say you don’t really know how to do something until you can teach it to someone else. As Salima looked up the instructions again, she realized how much of it had just been recipe-following the first time around and how much she’d come to understand since, so that the steps made *sense*. She was able to explain to Abdirahim the *why* of each step, nearly as much as the *what* and *how*, and her heart beat and her blood sang with the experience of mastery.

This was the antidote, she realized, to the feeling of distant people whom she’d never meet who held the power of everything over her. To be able to control the computers around her, rather than being controlled by them.

“You see,” she said at last, as a realization came out of the blue to her and left her wonderstruck and thunderstruck, feeling like a reveling prophet. “You see, if someone wants to control you with a computer, they have to put the computer where *you* are, and *they* are not, and so you can access that computer without supervision. A computer you can access without supervision is a computer you can change, because all these computers are the same, deep down. When you get down to the programs underneath the skin, a toaster and a dishwasher and a thermostat, they’re all the same computer in different cases. Once you can seize control over that computer, all of them are yours.”

As the words left her mouth, her messianic fervor was replaced by nagging self doubt, the knowledge that she was shouting triumphantly at a small boy who had only gotten out of temporary refugee housing a few months before, and she felt foolish and small. But then she saw the gleam in Abdirahim's eyes, and it was the same as the gleam in *her* eyes, and she knew that the two of them were sharing the vision.

"Our dishwasher and toaster haven't worked in weeks," he said.

"Oh, dear." She hadn't even thought of that. She had reflexively kept her work a secret from Nadifa, because she was doing something potentially dangerous and she didn't want Nadifa to point this out. But that was before her vision. "We should do something about that." She held out her hand. "Let's go see your mother." She remembered to take the retsina with her on her way out the door.

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Perhaps Nadifa would have been upset at the idea of hacking the family's appliances, but that was before she had spent two weeks parenting without a toaster or dishwasher. The hardship of eating everything cold or shelling out money she didn't have for takeaways had softened any concerns she might have had, and as she watched Abdirahim show his sisters how to jailbreak all the apartment's major appliances, she radiated motherly pride.

"He's good at it," Salima said. "I only showed him once and now—" She gestured.

"Do you think we'll get in trouble? With the building, I mean? They own the appliances."

Salima shrugged. "They were getting a share of the money we spent before, for the special bread and soap and so on. But with both companies bankrupt, they won't be expecting any new money. Now, if the companies do ever come back from bankruptcy and still no one here is using their products..."

Nadifa nodded. "That would definitely be trouble." She watched her kids, who had the cover off the thermostat and were avidly watching a video on the big screen next to it, where a person whose body had been mapped to a giant animated rabbit was explaining how to get it to fall back into a debug mode from which it would accept commands that let you override central commands to it. "But if it's just the two of us, will they even find out?"

Salima shrugged again. "If the system is designed well, then yes. It would be very weird for our apartments to generate much lower revenues than any of the others. I once did a job where I saw that two of the self-checkouts at a pharmacy were generating twenty percent less money than the rest. At first I thought it was that they were broken, but even when they were serviced and even moved, they were always twenty percent down from the average. They got sent away for analysis and they'd been hacked and were being skimmed."

"But you are good at your job, and you care about that sort of thing." Unspoken: no one good at their job, who cared about anything, was involved in the poor-floors of Dorchester Towers.

“I’m sure they care about money. But perhaps they’re not so well designed.” She pondered it. “I don’t know. They certainly care a lot about making money, so the parts that help them make as much money would probably have the most attention. I’ll search for it. There must be other people in this situation.”

The kids successfully tested their modifications to the thermostat and closed it up, looking this way and that for something else to attack.

“Don’t forget the refrigerator,” Nadifa said. “That’s a fun one. Very tricky.”

They raced to the screen and started typing, sending Idil, the eldest girl, to read the model number off the label on the inside of the fridge door.

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Salima knew that the kids wouldn’t stop at their own apartments, of course. She’d pass them in the hallways, sometimes, rushing from one apartment to the next. The feeling this gave her was hard to pin down: pride and excitement, but also trepidation and a sick, impotent sensation, the echo of the slow roll her stomach had done when she came home to find that laser-printed threat stuck to her door, to all their doors.

On the elevators, Salima heard whispers: *Have you done your place yet? It’s so easy. I’m baking bread again! We found some beautiful dishes at a thrift shop, such a treat to be able to wash them in the machine. My little boy did it so easy!*

Then one night, a knock at her door, urgent and low. She opened it and found Abdirahim, wide-eyed and stressed, and her pulse quickened, her armpits slickened and she thought, *Oh no, this is it.*

“Tell me,” she said, bringing him in.

“I did the same as always,” he said. “A toaster. I’ve done so many of them. But something went wrong and now it won’t even turn on.”

She whooshed out a sigh of relief. He’d bricked some poor person’s toaster, but he hadn’t gotten them all evicted. “Let’s go see.”

There were message boards for this eventuality, of course. Abdirahim wasn’t the first person to brick an appliance. There were tricks to get it to boot into an emergency shell from which the original factory operating system could be laboriously reinstalled, and then they could start over. She used Abdirahim as her helper, reading her instructions and searching for help when they got unexpected error messages.

The toaster’s owner was an old Serbian man, who’d never spoken a word to her, though they’d shared elevators and waited in the lobby together often enough. She had assumed that he was a racist, because that was usually the reason that white people didn’t speak to her. She didn’t take it personally. Some people were just ignorant.

But it seemed that he was painfully shy and awkward, and not (necessarily) racist. He offered them tea and served them biscuits he counted out carefully from a packet that he took from a nearly empty cupboard in which she spotted a huge jar of food-bank peanut butter and not much else. He excused himself to use the toilet four times while they

worked, and she heard the painful dribble of an old man struggling with an enlarged prostate.

At one point, she was ready to give up. The toaster wouldn't even show her a bootloader screen—it was in worse shape than when she'd started. But the old man looked so concerned, and she knew he wouldn't be able to afford a new toaster—she imagined the cold meals of biscuits and peanut butter he'd been surviving on since Boulangism had shut down.

So she and Abdirahim went back to step one, checking everything, *everything*, very methodically. Finally, they noticed that the toaster was actually an earlier model than the ones that everyone else had in the building—cosmetically identical, but with a model number that was a single letter off, and when she searched on that, she found a completely different set of instructions, and these worked. It was after 1:00 a.m. when they finished, but she still went down to her place and came back up with the makings of grilled cheese sandwiches on homemade bread, and they had a midnight feast that gave her heartburn, but it was worth it.

The next time, it was a kid she didn't even know, tapping at her door and asking for help with a bricked screen. Abdirahim had apparently told his army of Dorchester Towers Irregulars that she was a reliable source of level 2 emergency tech support.

The third time it happened, she realized she needed to get ahead of the phenomenon if she ever wanted to have another moment to herself.

“Abdirahim.” She stared intently at the kid until he met her eyes. Nadifa's presence helped.

“Yes, Auntie?” He only called her that when he was in trouble. The rest of the time it was “Salima,” or, with learned American familiarity, “Sally,” which was a new one on her that she wasn't entirely happy about.

“The way you are doing this, you and your friends, it's dangerous. You're going to get caught and you're going to get the people who live here caught, too. Do you remember the elevator captains, and what happened?”

“Yes, Auntie.”

“We don't want that again, do we?”

“No, Auntie.”

“We don't want to get everyone here thrown out onto the streets, either.”

“No, Auntie.”

“So I want you to get all your friends to come to my place, tomorrow, after school. Five p.m. Tell them, anyone who doesn't come is not allowed to jailbreak anything ever again.”

He registered surprise. “You mean that if we come, we can still jailbreak?”

She smiled and met Nadifa's eye. “Oh yes, my boy. We're not going to stop breaking the rules. We're just going to be *smart* about it.”