Dr. Sam Toohey kicked his desk drawer shut and leaned back in his chair. Science, who needed it?

Dr. Cool

by DANIEL ROBIN BOOTH

A pile of half-read, skimmed, or just plain unread papers lay on his desk. They could wait. Most of them were the usual directives: Do this, go there, find this, prove that, translate it into plain Global Communication System Two (Western dialect). They would have to wait. It wasn't even as if GCS2 was his native tongue. He'd grown up speaking a minor dialect derived from Global Communication System Seven. He laughed. Seven! No one used seven any more. In fact, everything from four upward had died out over the past 10 years. Three was only used by the more pedantic type of older statesman. Two was given official sanction for purely political reasons. Global Communication System One was the only variant that actually meant anything these days. Anything else spoken by adults was looked upon as a little eccentric; teaching of any other system was strictly forbidden. And still he had to translate everything he did into GCS2. Simply making his work accessible to 98% of the population wasn't sufficient. "Science must be open to all," was the decree from on high. He was lucky he didn't have to do GCS3 as well, but they had specialists for that sort of thing.

This was a different office. Cleaner than Sam's; fewer empty bottles lying on the floor, less of that peculiar smell associated with ... what was it called now? "Cigarette smoke." Yes, that was it: cigarette smoke. Well, whatever it was, there was none of it here. Just the gentle whirr of the environmental conditioning and the occasional hum as a vehicle zipped past the window. Two men stood and stared out of the window in question.

"Do you have to work on the 48th floor?" said one.

"Yes," said the other, "I think I do. I like the view."

"I don't."

"You should try looking out instead of down."

"But there's such a lot of 'down' to look at. I..." he was interrupted by the sound of the room entry-shield disengaging briefly to let their boss enter.

"Men," she said, "we have a problem."

Back in his less-than-sterile office, Sam sat with a small paper tube in his hand. He turned it over and over, as if trying to find the motivation to do what came next. Eventually he put it into his mouth and picked up the silver metallic object lying underneath a pile of *Series Three Cycle—Technical Specifications* documents. He flicked at it until a yellow flame was produced. Slowly, very slowly, he applied the flame to the tube in his mouth. Thick, toxic smoke appeared, which Sam tried unsuccessfully to avoid inhaling. He placed the silver object back on the desk, coughed a little, and wiped his slightly watering eyes.

This couldn't possibly be "cool." No way on Earth, or what was left of it, was this activity cool in the slightest. This worried him. Beneath all the mission directives and GCS wrangling, "cool" was Sam Toohey's job. His training had been somewhat hit and miss. The science part, that was the hit. He was a genius ... OK, he was a decent scientist; he'd done his time in the lab, gained his Global Qualification Level Eight (Science) permit. He could have been a brilliant ... reasonably good ... researcher. So what was he doing here with this tube full of vegetation gently smoldering in his mouth? Being cool, that's what. Government Agent 225476, Doctor Sam Toohey. Responsible for public understanding of science and, more importantly, making science fashionable again. Which meant being cool. Or, at least, behaving in a manner that some government history researcher had decided represented a lost era of "coolness." This represented the "miss" part of his training.

A sharp pain from his left leg made him change his position slightly in the chair. He opened the drawer of the desk and pulled out a bottle of amber-colored liquid. He was about to remove the top when a thought struck him. He removed the paper tube and placed it carefully in the glass dish on his desk. He then put the top of the bottle in his mouth, levered it open with his teeth and spat the top across the room. He gulped some of the liquid down. It tasted filthy but it was officially cool and, remarkably, it did seem to ease the pain in his leg.

The pain in question stemmed from the various test programs for the Series Three Cycle, not to mention the Series One and Two Cycles. Your average car was deemed unsuitable for him; it just wouldn't be cool enough. Sam would have been quite happy with an average car, or even a slightly under-average one if he was being completely honest, but the department wouldn't have it. So they cooked up the Series One Cycle, which damn nearly cooked Sam.

The Series Two had performed quite well, at first. Unfortunately, no one had told Sam that the two–thrust nozzle configuration made it distinctly more unstable than the standard four-nozzle car. Sam discovered this for himself ... at 100 meters up, hence the pains in his leg. The Series Three seemed to have all these little problems ironed out. At least, it hadn't killed him yet ....

"Gentlemen, this is a job for Sam Toohey."

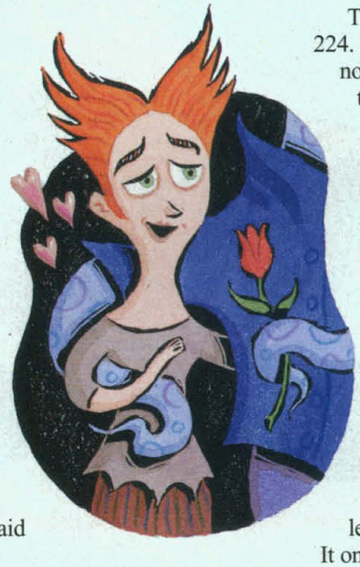
There was a muffled ringing noise from somewhere on his desk.

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM MCCAULEY

He ferreted through the various piles of paper until he found the large, black communication device that they had installed for him. He lifted the handset. "Sam Toohey," he said.

"Ah, Sam, good morning," said a voice. "We need you to …" The voice broke off. Sam could hear it continue indistinctly in the background. "Why can't we see him?" "He doesn't have holocommunicative imaging facilities," mumbled a second voice. "Why not?" "It's not cool." "Ah, yes, I see." The voice returned to the foreground again. "Dr. Toohey, are you still there?" Sam picked up the still-burning paper tube and inhaled deeply from it.

"Ain't goin' nowhere," he drawled as the smoke seeped from the side of his mouth. Sometimes, it just worked …



"What did he say?"

"I think," put in a third voice, "he implied that he has no travel plans for the immediate future."

"Did he say that?"

"I think so."

"Was that GCS2?"

"I think it may have been supplied to him by the archive department. They've been working on something that they've provisionally called CCS1."

"CCS?"

"Cool Communication System."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Dr. Toohey?"

"Yeah?" Sam took another swig from his bottle.

"Could you use GCS1 please? I'm afraid I don't speak 'cool'."

"Sure thing, ma'am." Sam collected his thoughts. "I mean, yes, of course." He maneuvered himself around the desk, still clutching the archaic communication device to his ear. "What can I do for you?" He stretched out his arm, trying to retrieve the bottle stopper from where he had spat it.

"Dr. Toohey, report to Media Station 224. They've been broadcasting scientifically inaccurate material. A warrant and broadcast license have been drawn up for you. We'd like you to correct them."

Sam picked up the stopper, blew the dust from it, and inserted it back into the bottle. "I'm on my way."

"Excuse me," said a small voice.

"What is it now?" bellowed the manager of Media Station 224.

"I think…"

"What? What do you think? Do I pay you to think?"

"Er, yes, you do."

"Good. So, what do you think?"

"I think that some of the material we just broadcast might have been inaccurate." The manager went pale.

"Inaccurate?"

"Yes."

"Badly inaccurate?"

"I'm afraid so. It may even have been misleading."

"Damn!"

Sam stepped out of the door and approached the Series Three. It sat and glinted in the strong sunlight. That reminded Sam. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of dark pieces of glass, held together by a metal frame. More coolness, although these might have come in useful if he hadn't been issued with standard UV contact lenses as soon as he was old enough to go outdoors. He positioned the glass pieces over his eyes and hooked the frame around his ears. Now he was ready to go. He mounted the Series Three and kicked it into life. He liked that bit. It certainly beat the slight tingling sensation of the retinal scan in a standard car. The noise of the engine got louder. It was, he had to admit, a good noise. So good, in fact, that he had to have a permit explaining exactly why it violated 14 separate noise-pollution edicts. Sam took one last drag from his cool-tube, flicked the vertical nozzle control to positive and allowed the Series Three to rise slowly into the air. Maybe cool did have its advantages after all.

"Review those transmissions. I need to know how misleading."

The Series Three slowly drifted down toward Media Station 224. Sam twisted the throttle, producing an extra burst of engine noise, just in case they didn't know he'd arrived. Just in case they didn't know how cool he was. The cycle came to a halt, and Sam leapt to the ground. The door to the station was closed. He reached for the handle and then paused, a slight grin appearing on his face. He took a step back, pulled out his Target Immobilization Device and kicked the door open. "Freeze!" he shouted, before everything went black ...

In a standard television studio set, a well-brushed presenter stood and addressed the camera.

"It looks farfetched, doesn't it? But this is what scientists are predicting the world could be like by the end of the 21st century. Just 50 years from now, we could all..."

Professor Charlotte Hamilton switched off the television and placed the remote control on the arm of her chair, amazed at what passed for science programming nowadays. Predicting the future ... When would scientists learn that trying to predict the future was generally a bad idea? It only made them look rather foolish when their claims were dug out of some archive to embarrass them many years later. The future was a perverse and bloody-minded entity that didn't care in the slightest for the opinions of "experts" who told it what it should do and how it should behave. As if it were trying deliberately to annoy them, it would often go along with the outlandish claims of science fiction writers far more readily than it listened to the sensible and eminently "reasonable" predictions of the professionals.

Take the flying car, for example. Over 100 years ago, they had predicted that flying cars would soon be the only mode of transport worth using (and probably powered by nuclear fusion reactors as well). By the end of the last century, there were those who claimed to have got them working. Here, 50 years later, they were still a dream, and scientists were still blithely predicting that we'd all be whizzing through the air in them as soon as one or two teething problems were sorted out ... the prototype was nearly ready ... the accident was unfortunate, but a better model was already in production .... The excuses went on and on, unlike the flying cars themselves. Charlotte stood up and left the room. The future, she had no doubt, would take care of itself. Before she reached the door, a long green tentacle reached out and seized her round the waist. She smiled and kissed her husband on what she had always assumed was his cheek.

"See you later," she said and set off to catch the Mars shuttle, shaking her head. Flying cars, indeed.

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