Takeaway
A word to the wise.

**Tony Ballantyne**

Stephanie stretched the phone cord to its full extent and leaned into the doorway, gazing into the tiny kitchen beyond.

"There's a customer on the phone wanting two sweet-and-sour porks delivered." Mr Ho shook fried rice from his wok, expertly filling a silver container.

"Why you telling me that, Stephanie? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I know, Mr Ho, but the customer wants the order delivered to the anthill on Stonebreak Lane."

Mr Ho frowned. "Ah, that is unusual. Ants usually prefer lemon chicken. Tell them ten minutes."

Stephanie looked at Mr Ho. It wasn't like him to make jokes. It wasn't like him to do anything except to cook and to chastise her for not working hard enough.

"Are you winding me up, Mr Ho?"

"No, Stephanie."

Stephanie held his gaze for a moment, then she shrugged.

"Ten minutes," she said into the phone, and put it down. Mr Ho began to lecture her.

"Your trouble, Stephanie, is you lazy. Think too much about boys and not enough about work. Tell me, you learn speak French at school?"

Stephanie came into the kitchen and leant on the counter as Mr Ho rinsed the black wok under the tap. Steam hissed up.

"Learn French?" said Stephanie. "Why should I when I can run Transl-8 or Lebab for myself?"

"No! But…. where do they get the money from?"

"Ant nest is near computer assembly factory. Ants ideal for manipulating small parts. Cheaper than machinery too. Ants don't ask much money. Only get enough to buy tasty Chinese food."

"So why are ants ordering Chinese food?"

"Because my food very tasty. I good cook. Very popular takeaway. You think they want to eat Mr Mahmood's horrible curry? Rancid ghee and chilli powder."

"No! You know that's not what I mean! Why aren't they out hunting for leaves or whatever it is ants eat?"

"Why don't you go out and hunt or farm for food? Takeaway is easier. And tastier. And more efficient for ants. Nest is thriving. Is now 100 yards across!"

"What? How come I didn't know about that?"

"You lazy girl. Only think about boys. Ants nest on television, you not see?"

"No! But…. where do they get the money from?"

"Ant nest is near computer assembly factory. Ants ideal for manipulating small parts. Cheaper than machinery too. Ants don't ask much money. Only get enough to buy tasty Chinese food."

"Elegantly put. See? You clever girl when you want to be."

"So why does that mean I should learn French?"

"Ants not know language properly, not know wider context, so just respond to need. Get exploited. All that work in computer plant, and only get paid enough to buy takeaway."

The sweet and sour pork was ready. Mr Ho expertly divided the contents of the wok between two silver trays.

"All done," he said. "Feed hungry ants. Very good customers. Ah! Here come delivery girl!"

"Delivery girl?" said Stephanie. "What happened to Adam?"

"Too expensive. And lazy. Prefer spend time chatting to you than delivering tasty food. Delilah more reliable."

Stephanie looked down at Delilah as she trotted into the little kitchen, tail wagging. She was very good, eyes to the front, not stopping to sniff anything. Mr Ho bagged the order, putting the handle into her mouth.

"Good girl," he said as the dog trotted out of the shop. "Work very hard."

Stephanie watched her go.

The next day, she signed up for French lessons.

Two of Tony Ballantyne’s most recent stories appear in The Year’s Best SF 13, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer. His next novel, Twisted Metal, is published in May by Macmillan.