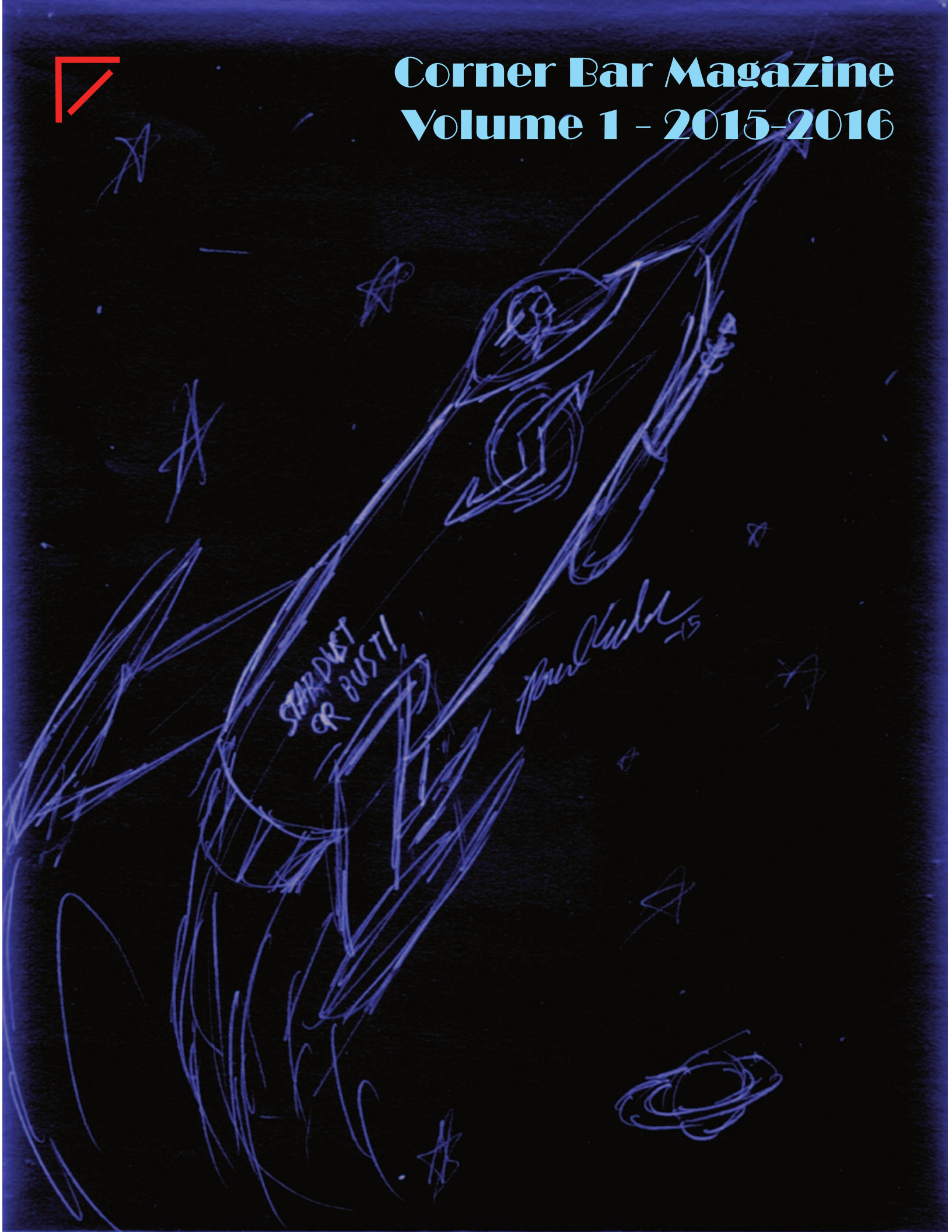




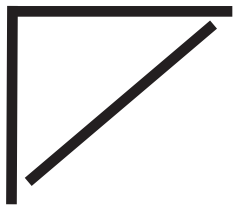
Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 - 2015-2016



STARDUST
OR BUST!

John Decker 15



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 1

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TRINKETS

by RUSS BICKERSTAFF

I was trying to keep the trinkets quiet. I kept wanting to yell at them and ask them if they wanted to negotiate, but I felt crazy enough as it was. I looked up to address the woman across the table from me and took a deep breath. The shouting of the trinkets was something that was very, very difficult to channel out under normal circumstances. Doing so under the tremendous stress of the present moment was that much more difficult. She was about to ask me something when I finally cleared my throat to speak. It silenced her long enough for me to find some words to speak to her.

“I need them to help me out,” I said, “but in order for them to help me, I have to help them first.” There was silence as my words drifted in her general direction. She seemed to be reluctantly considering them the way anyone would be moved to consider something that wasn’t terribly intelligible. I felt the need to explain what I had just said, but I figured the most polite thing to do under the circumstances was let her decide how it was that she wanted me to explain what I had just said.

“What,” she asked carefully considering her words, “do you mean?” Ah. Well. This question didn’t really give me any idea what she needed to know, but I knew that it was my move, so I had to say something. I knew that I had to decide how I was going to try to sell these things from the ground up,

which I suspected may have been why it had been so difficult to sell them for the many years that led into that meeting. There was always the need to explain why it was I was selling them and that was always something that I had such tremendous difficulty with.

“I mean that they want me to sell them,” I said. “And I want to sell them because if I don’t they won’t help me.” It was a pretty straightforward way to answer her question without getting too far into things that were going to make me seem crazy. I tried to be as nice about not really answering her question as possible. I even attempted to manage a sheepish, little smile as I softly spoke the words which actually mean so little to her question. I so wanted to be helpful to her, but I wanted to sell the trinkets even more.

“Okay,” she said without breaking eye contact or batting an eye. “What are the trinkets going to help you with if you sell them to me?” Again, it was a straightforward question that required a straightforward answer that I was in no position to be able to answer in a straightforward manner. I considered the best way to answer this without having her throw me out of her shop and onto the ritzy, designer sidewalk of the high-end shopping district in which her expensive, little artisanal boutique lounged.

“The trinkets are going to help me with a very debilitating issue which is far too

tedious to get into detail at this time,” I said carefully. I was, after all, bound to honesty by the trinkets. “Suffice it to say, it would not inconvenience the trinkets in any way for me to sell them to you. You would be doing no harm to any other person by purchasing them from me.” And again, what I was speaking was completely true. I was speaking it in a tone that implied no menace at all.

“I see,” she said inspecting the trinkets quite closely. They beamed with pride the way some trinkets do under the gaze of a seasoned salesperson like myself or the lady across the counter from me. “While your personal issues are of no concern to me, I can understand needing to unload a parcel of goods in a hurry. The workmanship and detailing on these... things is substantial. I assure you I would have no trouble finding homes for these things. I would, however, ask a bit more about their concern in the transaction.”

“Ah,” I said perking up a bit. Usually this was where things were in a much worse situation. Usually this was where I would be cast out. “As I say, they have a will of their own and they wish me to sell them. They are very eager to be sold.” All of which was completely true.

“But when you say they have a will,” she said cautiously, “I mean...do you really

feel that they’re...sentient?”

“Well, what’s sentience, really? I may perhaps be personifying them in some way in order to advance my own personal interests as a dealer in fine things, but I assure you that you need not worry for my sake.” It was a simple matter of distraction. Always bring the conversation back around to me.

There was a concern about the whole thing, but she turned out to be the buyer. I took a meager sum for the trinkets. I

had no doubt in my mind that she would be able to get rid of the items in question. The items were very persistent. Once sold, they were quite persistent in crawling their way into the

heads of their owners and letting them know that it was

very important that they get sold

again. They were addicted to selling themselves. They existed only to be sold. It had grown to become a problem for me...a problem that would only be able to be solved by my selling them. The other problem was, of course, the honesty they instilled in the owner. No one who owned those things was ever allowed to lie. They were quite insistent upon that much. It was the most difficult thing to manage about the whole deal, I mean really: how does any dealer of *anything* become successful if one must be truly, brutally honest about everything? ❖



THE SUNSET MAN

by TREVOR BOELTER

In Los Angeles, watching the setting sun is an activity all in itself. I blame the pollution – that although the smog is better than it was in the 80's and 90's – the congested LA air provides some of the most stellar sky gazing anyone could ask for in the western hemisphere.

In my neighborhood – it is no exception. We're luckier than most – because we have views that are unimpeded by the plethora of apartment buildings, that are torn down and resurrected for the continuing stream of dreamers to reside.

We have a view that most of the valley residents would kill for. You see, in our neighborhood, we border an empty city block that is reserved solely for Disney Radio.

Imagine, in one of the most populated cities in the world, an entire city block that is empty of homes, cars, skateboarding teenagers, Jewish families walking to temple, BBQ's, a kid practicing drums in their garage and any of the other multitude of activities that us Angelinos feel compelled to do before and after nightfall.

The empty expanse offers nothing but short brown grass and brambles, which is surrounded by a tall chain link fence topped with razor wire. The fence guards the three massive radio towers that sit in the middle of the reserve, standing as a marker for

incoming airplanes forever blinking red lights and a signal that propels 50,000 watts (times 3) throughout southern California.

It's not uncommon walk my dog on a hot summer night, and when passing certain spots of that empty city block, I will feel as if we walked into a freezer.

The temperature drops a significant number of degrees – and I know that if I were carrying a fluorescent light bulb – the energy emanating from each tower would power that fluorescence into a white phantom glow.

I don't like to linger along the fence – it feels unsafe – wondering what the wattage from each tower is doing to my bones, to my brain, to the cells that are living within an atoms reach.

The signs posted every hundred yards along the fence seem to parrot this:

NO TRESPASSING -
UNSAFE CONDITIONS BEYOND
THIS BORDER.

As I'm sure the towers are thoughtful enough to only push their radioactivity up to the border of the fence – as if it were courteous of the neighbors across the street.

Still when viewing the towers from further down the road, where my house sits on our quiet street – with their silent blinking

red lights, the towers are a lovely sight to behold.

The empty lot tells us that there could be hundreds, if not thousands of souls that could live in that square – and without them, we feel we have been granted that most rare gift lacking in LA – open space.

It was on those walks with my dog, a good thirty minutes before sunset, as the sun still hung high enough in the sky to sting my eyes that I first caught glimpse of the Sunset Man.

In the following year that I saw him – I never got his name – but kept calling him the Sunset Man to my wife, and any friends who were lucky enough to see him at his post.

Because if no one had seen him except for me – I’m sure I would believe I was going mad.

But now that he is gone – I wonder if my sanity is all that it’s cracked up to be?

And I think now – did he have the answers all along? Or was it that the answer he finally received was enough to make him disappear for good?

When I first saw the Sunset Man, my dog Deuce was still alive. I had two dogs; Fox and Deuce. Fox was a four-year-old American Eskimo who was obsessed with playing ball. Deuce, on the other hand, was a thirteen-year-old cocker/lab mix whose only yearning was to sleep.

They were the oddest pair – and though they hated each other when they were off-leash – they could at least find

peace when I walked them at the beginning of each evening.

During the summer – sunlight stays open till 8 – but after the Summer Solstice, the closing time grows earlier and earlier.

It was late in July of last year when I first saw him – his hands locked behind his back, head cocked high, as he stared – without sunglasses – at the sinking sun in sky.

The Sunset Man seemed to be relatively young – in his early twenties, with short hair and vanilla plain features. He wore shorts and a t-shirt, and although the shirt often changed, the shorts did not.

He didn’t look to be a member of the majority tribe that made up the community of my neighborhood – as we are “within shul” or a short walk to Temple – as the Jewish families in the area would be considered somewhere between Ortho and Ultra-dox.

The Sunset Man never wore a yarmulke, nor did he ever acknowledge the many families that walked past him, as they wore their Shabbat best – the men walking first with the women a few steps behind.

The Sunset Man acknowledged no one.

He just was – standing as still as the radio towers before him – as if those long steel cables that held each tower firmly to the ground were also holding him upright.

When I first walked past him, my dog Deuce sniffed his leg. I knew Deuce was getting older and feared that he might raise a leg on him, thinking the man wasn’t human, but as he stood so still, some new type of fire hydrant.

Pulling Deuce away, I said my first words to the Sunset Man: "Sorry."

But the Sunset Man took no notice. He never moved an inch.

I had a chance to look at him in that moment. His hazel eyes squinted, unblinking and open as he stared at the sun. The look on his face was serious determination with his jaw clenched, while the rest of him stood at a parade rest.

I didn't say anything further than 'sorry,' and walked the dogs down another street.

I thought nothing of it, really.

Everyone likes to watch the sunset – and though it seemed a little bit early to catch the show, who was I to consider anything out of the ordinary?

It wasn't until I kept seeing him, day after day, that I mentioned it to my wife.

"There's a guy always standing by the radio towers – he just stands there and stares at the sun."

"Every day?" She asked.

"As far as I can tell," I said. "Always around the same time, just before sunset..."

"Maybe he just likes to watch the sunset." She said.

"Without sunglasses?" I asked.

Being born with blue eyes – I can't be outside without sunglasses – my eyes burn even on days where it's cloudy.

"Huh," she said, obviously not that interested.

And truth being told – neither was I.

It wasn't until I spoke with the Sunset Man a year later that I started to second-

guess everything I thought about him.

That summer turned to fall, and moved quickly into winter – and still, whenever I walked the dogs, I would see the Sunset Man at the same place near the chain-link fence, watching with the sunset with those squinting, unblinking eyes.

It became a joke for us – after driving home from a day out with our one-year-old daughter my wife finally saw him.

"Oh my god, you weren't joking around."

"Nope."

"He does this every day?"

"As far as I know."

"That's so creepy!"

"What did I tell you?"

"Why do you think he does that?"

"Maybe he's some kind of reverse vampire."

The Sunset Man soon became part of repertoire of stories with friends and family who came to visit:

"Did you see him?"

"Who do you mean?" they would ask.

"The Sunset Man?"

"Hey, wait...we saw a guy standing near that big open lot..."

And we'd smile and nod, and say, "That's the one."

The stories we came up with about why he would stare at the sun each and every day varied:

He was trying to send messages to his home planet. He was really the first person powered by solar energy. He saw something terrible when he was a child and forever

tried to burn the image out of his mind...

It was fun for a time – but something in the pit of my stomach told me to lay off – that although the jokes were harmless – his pain, his torment, or whatever it was, could be in fact very real.

Eventually, I asked my wife if we could stop speculating about the poor guy and soon, we never spoke of him again.

Except of course, when we passed him on the road.

“There he is again,” we’d say – and we’d move on.

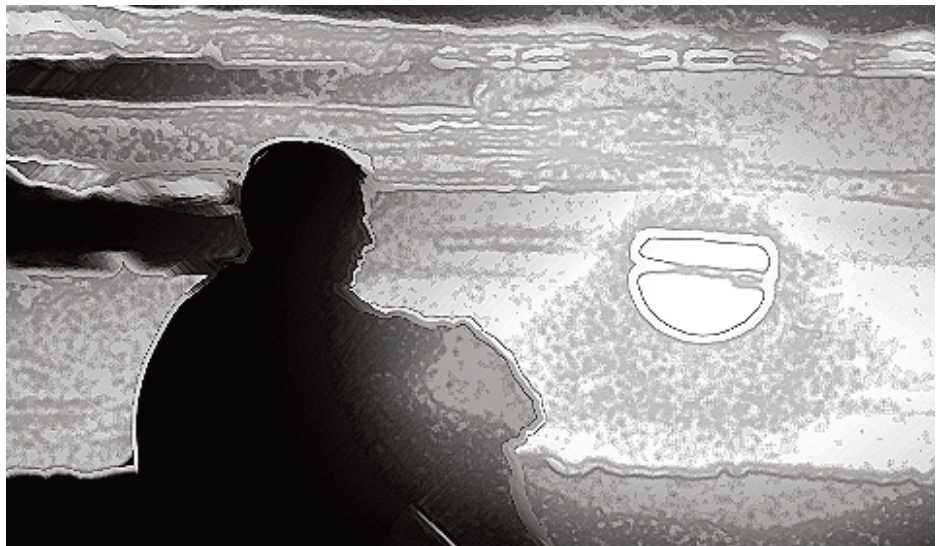
What were going to make for dinner? Plans to binge on Homeland that night? What about getting a sitter and seeing a movie?

Life – it moves – and soon winter fell away to the spring, and we were back again to summer.

Our Sunset Man remained – and as far as we could tell, he remained resolute to stay at his post and see the sky turn the many different colors that it does depending on the smog levels of the day.

The fact that we were and are in a drought hasn’t helped California. But it greatly enhanced those sunsets – into the fiery pinks and deep oranges, along with the hues of deep blue and purple.

Who wouldn’t swoon over our sunsets?



But the Sunset Man was never swooning – never blinking, never even seeming to breathe. He just was – as we are – as anything that is subject to the laws of nature.

We started to see him more and more when our daughter was old enough to be in the bicycle seat we purchased and began taking family rides around the neighborhood.

Every time we passed him, I felt compelled to say hi.

I felt it was rude not to acknowledge our neighbor.

But like always – there was no movement, no acknowledgement, nothing from the Sunset Man.

“Hi,” I said again, and this time, my daughter joined in: “Hello” she said in her best attempt to get past the baby babble.

And he turned around – as if his feet were connected to a Lazy Susan – he swiveled without effort, and without shifting his shoulders or arms.

The Sunset Man looked at my daughter with his signature squint.

“Hello, yourself,” he said.

And I nearly ran our bike into a parked car and sent my daughter and I to sprawling to the ground.

The look of shock on my face must have been noticeable – I’ll admit, I have big eyes that grow to half the size of my face when I am caught off guard.

They must have exploded behind my sunglasses.

“He spoke,” I whispered to my daughter.

“He thpoke,” my daughter mimicked.

“It’s a lovely night,” I heard my wife say to him from a few yards behind – as she caught up with us on her bike.

But the Sunset Man said nothing further and turned back to his position – hands behind his back, chin held high as he stared at the sun dropping in the sky.

“Do you think the key to get him talking is her?” I asked my wife later, as I dumped the boiled spaghetti into a strainer.

“You’re not using our daughter to pry into that strange guy’s life.” She said.

“But it makes perfect sense – you see, the Sunset Man is an angel, and he only notices the innocent ones. We’re too used up in this world, but she is brand new, untouched...”

I pointed to our daughter whose face was a mess of spaghetti sauce and mashed up garlic bread.

“She is the one who can learn the mystery.”

“No way, just talk to him – but keep our child out of it.”

“You can’t be serious? I’m joking...” I said...

But was I?

Part of me wanted to know what it was that the Sunset Man was waiting for – what he was seeing in the sky, day after day.

Where did he live? Did he work? Did he have dreams or goals? Why was he staring at that goddamn sun?

Goddamnit, I thought – this guy is taking up far too much time in my mind.

It had been almost a year since I first saw him – and I had passed him too many times on my bike, or with the dogs that I felt compelled to speak to him.

I knew that he wouldn’t talk to me – but if I pushed him just enough – he may break his silence.

My heart was beating out of my chest when I approached him that day, with my dogs in tow, sniffing and peeing wherever they wished to leave their scent.

The familiar hum of the radio towers drifted in and out of my ears as I walked along the sidewalk border – as I walked directly toward him, as he stood at his parade rest.

I could see his features – he must have been in his early twenties, with short brown hair to match his squinted hazel eyes – as he clenched his jaw – grinding his teeth.

“Hello,” I said.

The Sunset Man didn’t respond.

“Hello,” I said again with a bit more force.

“Hello,” he mumbled in return.

“I see you here all the time.”

He didn't respond, but shot his chin up a little bit higher, as if I had shaken the concentration out of him.

Maybe he was autistic, I thought? If I continued, I was just being mean. The man deserved his privacy.

"What do you see?"

I couldn't stop myself - I had to know. I just had to figure out what the Sunset Man was looking for.

Movement again, his eyes flickered as they caught a quick sideways glimpse of me.

"I've seen you here for almost a year now, you're here day in and day out. What is it you see?"

"Sunset," he mumbled...his voice was low, with that southern California drawl that most people in our state swear they don't have.

"I know...but what is it?"

The Sunset Man turned toward me - his face was now a mask of anger.

"I just like the sunset," he said, louder this time, annoyed.

"But you're here way before the sun sets..."

My heart was skipping beats now, and I was surprised to feel my own anger surging underneath my quickened breaths.

"Doesn't it kill your eyes?" I asked.

My dogs pulled at me, they wanted to head down the familiar street - to check on the mailboxes and tree stumps for the other neighborhood dogs "pee-mail."

"What does?" The Sunset Man asked.

"The sun, how you stare at it without sunglasses..."

The Sunset Man shook his head, "No."

"Look, I'm sorry to be pushy. But I see you here all the time, always in the same place, always staring at the sun before it drops...what do you see?"

The Sunset Man looked back at the sky as the colors grew in the atmosphere.

"You don't want to know..." He said.

"But I do."

"No, you don't."

The Sunset Man sighed and turned away from me. He walked with a brisk pace down the street to the intersection of Burbank and Bellaire.

Hitting the crosswalk button, he crossed the street and disappeared into the adjacent neighborhood.

I looked at the sun - there was nothing out of the ordinary. It was bright, my head hurt, and I felt like I blew it.

"I spoke to him," I said to my wife later that night.

"You didn't."

"He was very pleasant."

"Really?"

"No, that was sarcasm. He didn't like all of my questions."

"Well, of course he didn't. You probably came off as one of those Neighborhood Watch creeps. Good going!"

Shortly before falling asleep that night, I knew that what she said was right - I *had* come across as a pushy jerk. I had invaded the man's privacy - I had asked him to share his deepest thoughts, and I didn't even ask him his name.

I didn't even introduce myself...

I knew that if I did speak with him again, I would have to do my best to remain friendly, but curious. Could I do that?

It wasn't until late August when I found out – and finally had my conversation with the Sunset Man.

If I could take it back – I would, because after that initial conversation, I never saw the Sunset Man again.

That Friday, I hopped on my bike, while my wife and daughter scampered in the backyard with the new play-house we had gotten her a couple of days before.

I didn't take the dogs – I knew that if I were to truly speak to the Sunset Man, I would have to do it alone.

And just as I knew he would be – he was standing at a parade rest while the sun inched closer to the horizon.

I pedaled up to him and slowed to a stop.

“Hi,” I said. “It's me again...”

The Sunset Man didn't turn – but I knew that he had heard me, as his back straightened to make himself taller.

“I'm sorry if I got off on the wrong foot with you some time back. I just find you to be so compelling...that you come here day after day...”

I was rambling now – and yet, I was not being neighborly.

“I'm sorry, I should introduce myself...”

“Save it,” he said – his voice was firm and direct.

“Okay.” I responded.

“Do you really want to see what I'm looking for? Do you really want to know?”

“Yes,” I said – and it was true, I had never wanted to know more about anything than any other time in my life.

“What I am looking for is not in the sun...”

I stood next to him, and faced the western field at a parade rest. Hands behind my back, my chin held high.

“I am looking beyond the sun,” he said.

I looked up at the sun, and through my sunglasses I felt a terrible pain...it was so bright...

“Take off your sunglasses,” he said.

“No, that's crazy.”

“It isn't. It only works without sunglasses. Take them off.”

The Sunset Man was looking at me now, and his face, which had seemed so young in all the times I had walked or ridden past, in those brief moments where I had seen him speak to me or my daughter – all of the youth in his face and body disappeared in an instant.

His face was haggard, weathered, gray – with crow's feet that stretched out of his eyes and laid siege upon his skin.

But it was too late to turn back – I took the sunglasses off my face and stared directly at the sun.

“Now look beyond, look...”

And squinting my eyes as far as I could without voiding my vision – I saw what he was looking for – I saw what brought him here day after day.

A planet – bigger than our moon at its nearest perigee, bigger than any celestial

body I have ever seen with my naked eye came through behind the sun.

There was no need for a telescopic lens, or binoculars, or anything to enhance the vision, as my sight seemed to break through that shining barrier as the circular divide revealed itself in our atmosphere.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s the Dark Star,” he said. “And any day now it is going to open and swallow us whole.”

The Dark Star had a purple outline, but I could see that more color was growing along the border of its body.

“It’s an eye that is currently closed, but soon it will be opening upon this world, and as soon as it catches wind of us, we will be gone within its blink. My job is to call to it as soon as I see that it opens – before it sees us, I must acknowledge the presence, and prove our worth through a form of worship.”

The Sunset Man took a deep breath.

“But I don’t have to look for it anymore...there is someone new who can see it as well.”

The Sunset Man gripped my shoulder – it was gentle – as if he were thanking me for my persistence.

As I looked to him – his age had progressed – the skin of his face was cracking off in chunks and spreading dust into the wind. I could see the blood vessels in his arms and his throat – I could see the beating heart in his translucent chest.

As he was fading in front of me, he motioned my eyes back to the west.

“You must not let it out of your sight, you must be ready for it when the sun begins to hang low in the sky, you must catch the Dark Star as it opens. You must call to it with these three words...”

And he said no more – as his loving grip popped out of existence as the sun sank beneath the horizon and for a flash – just a moment, the Dark Star remained in all its glory – a giant circle in the sky – before it had faded as well.

Three words came to my mind – as if I heard them on the wind, as if they had burrowed into the grey matter and would not let go.

I know I cannot utter these words out loud – nor can I write them or share them with any other being.

If the Dark Star perceives a fraud, or false worship, then we are all doomed.

But I know that we are not – I know that I have such an important task – a task that will be mine until I can worship the Dark Star for all of humanity.

My wife has grown worried – she doesn’t know why I have to leave work early – why I prefer to stand alone, facing west – why I refuse to move away from the radio towers.

Why I have grown so distant, why I refuse to wear sunglasses, why my face is growing wrinkled – but am told how young I look though I continue to grow old.

All that I know is that I must remain resolute – I must stand at that parade rest.

I must – for the Dark Star will open any day now. ❖

THE STUDY

by SONNY RAG

Ricky glanced across the room at the chimpanzee lounging on the couch. He could smell her breath from here, a stomach tweaking combination of apple and cigar smoke. The chimp caught him looking, rolled her lip and sucked air threateningly through her teeth. Ricky quickly looked back at his book, which he wasn't reading, but was using as a prop to get her to ignore him.

"They're ten times stronger than humans," Post-Grad. Assan had said. "So you shouldn't provoke her."

"Provoke her how?" Ricky asked. "What provokes a monkey?" Big frown at monkey.

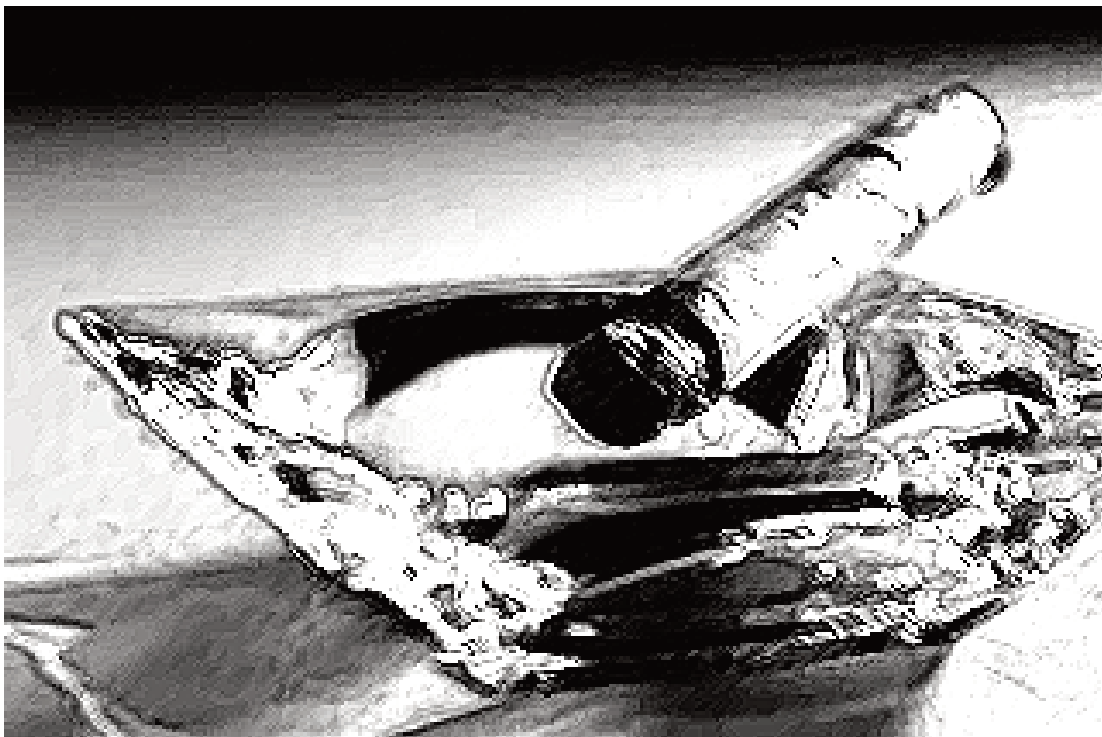
"That depends. She's the equivalent of a teen-ager by our standards. What provokes a teenaged human?"

Ricky frowned back. He couldn't imagine there was anything that *didn't* provoke a teenaged girl, but what he was really thinking was how Assan had asked the question with curiosity, as if he had no idea about girls, teenaged or otherwise.

"Forget it. Just remember that they're terrifically strong," the scientist-to-be said.

"Yeah, ten times." Ricky was looking at the bars of the cage containing the chimpanzee. They didn't seem strong enough.

"Well, maybe not this particular specimen," Assan said conversationally. "Like I



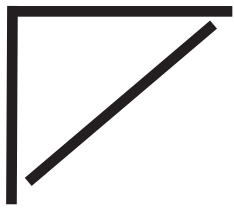
said, she's young. But, you're pretty flabby, so ten X probably still applies." Ricky looked up at the insult, but Assan apparently didn't mean anything by it. He was from Pakistan and though he had the American-idiom thing down pat, he didn't always grasp what was and wasn't the right thing to say.

So, she'd arrived at his apartment, brought by two other Pakistani doctoral candidates in primatology, and she wasn't happy. He'd tried to assuage her discomfort with fresh fruit and by paging up and down the satellite TV music channels, hoping to find something that kept her from screeching. Thank God she didn't like Classic C&W or Tejano, both of which were nails on a blackboard. What Ricky didn't know (but didn't want to A: search for Assan's business card and B: call and ask) was, "are the screeches approval or annoyance?" Ricky had booted his computer to Google

Chimpanzee comma Behavior, but the Windows log-on-theme caught her fancy, scooting over and shoving Ricky out of the way. The laptop was interesting until she had launched so many apps that it locked up. Pulling the top apart from the bottom killed the Dell and she was bored again.

The cigar was his fault. In the living room was an ashtray with half a *Romeo Y Julieta* in it, and she had sniffed at it, howling. Oh, well, it wasn't on the no-no list Assan had provided. Ricky lit it up with an Ohio Blue-tip and she snatched it from his hand. It was obviously not her first. Now there was a pall of smoke above her head, and he hoped that she didn't decide to open the refrigerator, from which she had seen him extract the apples, but which contained beer, mostly. He was pretty thirsty, but he'd been on dates with drunk chicks before and, well, *damn*. ❖

END TRANSMISSION



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 2

Page 1 – AN EXCERPT FROM ASTRAL TRAVELERS by Michael Roche
Mr. Roche is a writer, illustrator, bass player, and astral traveler from Raleigh, NC. He enjoys spoiling his darling wife and their two beautiful children. He adores art, dogs, *The Who*, bourbon, *Rush*, and Mark Twain. He can be found most weekdays inside classroom 2113, teaching English to delightful students from many different galaxies.

Page 10 – OUR QUESTIONS FOR THE EDITOR OF
THE ANNOTATED ALICE ON THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
PUBLICATION OF *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*



AN EXCERPT FROM **ASTRAL TRAVELERS**

by **MICHAEL ROCHE**

Episode One: **Icy Peril on the Planet Tun-Drá**

In the far reaches of space, on the icy southern pole of the remote planet Tun-Drá, our hero, Gabriel, fast approaches his doom. His ship, The Rocinante, prowls in orbit over a desolate world.

"Did you pick anything up on the scanners, Lee?" The voice of Gabriel fills the earphones of the pilot, his friend Cygnus Lee.

"There's naught on the onboard scanners. I don't see any cave down here large enough for yer beastie, Gabriel."

"Agreed. Keep me posted."

"Aye. Now, you'll wish to be wary of the Aranette, Gabriel! It hunts with the instincts of a wolf and kills with the precision of a machine!"

Gabriel shudders with dread at the

thought. The prey he seeks today, the Aranette, is a formidable opponent. It was nothing less than a biomechanical nightmare of servo-motors, steel, flesh, muscle, and weaponry.

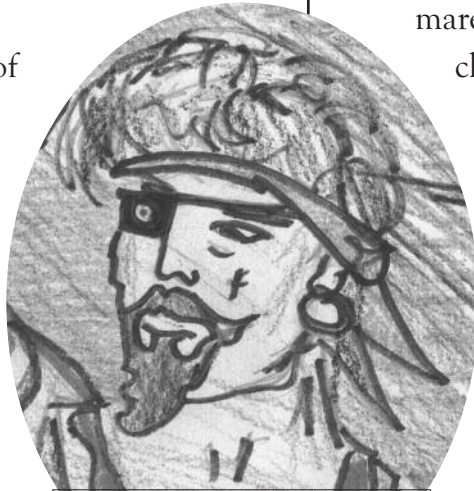
Gabriel barks, "No need to remind me, Lee!"

"I wish you didn't have to parachute down... Isn't there a way I can skim the surface and drop you off properly?"

"No, Lee. The icy winds on the

southern poles of Tun-Drá would buffet this ship terribly, I'm afraid. Try that and we'd be nothing but space kindling! The chute's not fancy but it's the only way, I'm afraid." Gabriel straps into his parachute and adjusts his mask and goggles.

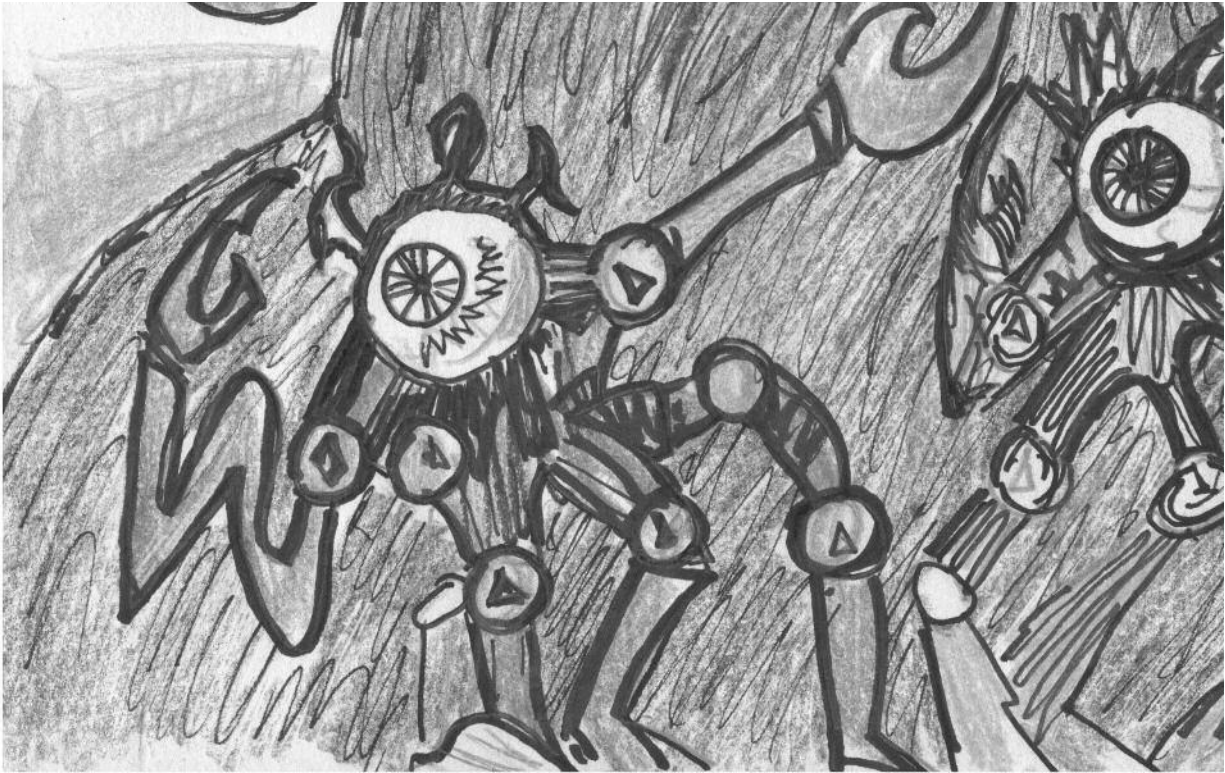
"Ye must be wary o' that Aranette!



Our Hero,
Gabriel the Adventurer



His trusted friend,
flying ace Cygnus Lee



Marry, 'tis feared by the sons and daughters of a dozen worlds."

Gabriel checks his breathing tubes and tries to ignore Lee. But he cannot ignore the video monitor! "Lee, look, star-board side!"

"The scanner confirms it, that cave is plenty big for your beastie! Aye, but heed my warning, Gabriel. The cave is covered by what appears to be a dome of solid ice. There's no telling how thick it'll be. Aye, whatever you do, try to steer clear of landing on it."

Lee banks the ship and races the engines. "Aye, there 'tis! Brace yourself, my Gabriel, for I'm executing Reversal

Maneuver YYZ."

"Roger, Cygnus!" Gabriel adjusts the straps on his chute and peers toward the escape hatch door. The ship banks and swings around closer to the desolate caves of the Aranette.

The intercom crackles: "Have you checked your parachute, sir?"

"Roger, Cygnus."

"So remind me again of why you're risking your life, and mine, to capture this bee's stinger?"

"Lee, as you well know, my treasure today will be none other than the Aranette's

stinger! As you know, when the Aranette stings, a deadly toxin passes through the stinger. The broken-off stingers solidify, and that poison transforms the stinger into a rare and wondrous jewel. A jewel for my love, the princess. To get this treasure, of course, you just have to be brave enough to face the Aranette."

"Nay, there's not too many souls brave enough to face that evil beastie out yonder. Ah, Gabriel, we're entering Red

Sector A. Prepare for ejection door opening."

"Confirm opening. Ready for launch."

" May the Son of Life protect yer hide, Gabriel, and your soul!"

"The Son of Life may or may not help me. " Gabriel replies, "I'm going to rely on physics - not faith - to guide me safely."



The metal door groans open. Gabriel braces himself against the frozen winds. Suddenly, he leaps! The air is bracingly cold against his skin. Freefall!

Gabriel is a bird in reverse; rather than rising on thermals, he sinks in freefall toward the perilous unknown!

Episode 2: A Captain Dies!

In the far reaches of space, The Corvine, a small and elegant passenger ship, roars out of Kham-Sharri station. At the helm, Captain Rickenbacker addresses the passengers over the intercom: "Welcome aboard The Corvine. Now you can relax and let your cares slip away. By nightfall we'll be arriving at Silver World Casinos. Sit back and dream about how you'll spend all that money you're fixin' to win! Captain out."

The Corvine, a sleek and tidy ship, carries two comely passengers, the famed Princess Mona Loa, and a young lady named Tessa who is seeking work on Silver World. The remainder of the vessel has been reserved for the princess's enormous assortment of luggage. The princess travels with no retinue today, however; that is to

say her servants are purely mechanical, unless of course they're your standard holographic type.

On the other side of the princess's changing screens sits Tessa, a petite and pretty brunette. With a wistful look in her deep brown eyes, Tessa follows the captain's advice. She relaxes, tunes in a mellow guitar station on her listening device, and returns to composing a letter to her dear friend Pammi back home on Barchetta Rouge: "Oh, Patti, such a lucky day for me! I'm off to Silver World to seek my fortunes in the

casinos. I figure I'll start off serving cocktails and maybe work some of the tables for this year, and then start moving up, up, up! And would you believe my brush with fame? I told you there was only one other passenger with me on the voyage. What I didn't know until just now is that the other passenger is the Astral Princess herself, Mona Loa. How gorgeous she is, with her silky dresses and perfectly teased hair. You've heard

the stories about how her tresses look like spun gold and how her eyes are the color of the morning sky and I want to tell you that everything you've heard about her is true. She seems to float rather than walk. I read that even the shape of her mouth has sent men mad with desire. Not to mention the scores of space pirates out there risking their lives to capture her fabu-



lous treasures. Well, until today I wouldn't have believed any of that was real, but now I do. Why, just as we were ready to board the spacecraft a few loonies were tossing her homemade kron r'bars. Do you know what those are used for? (Blush) Ah well, maybe some of that pixie dust will rub off on me. I'm feeling a bit lonely lately and could use a few space pirates fighting and doting over me. Can you imagine what it would be like to have men fawning and pledging their fealty? I'm trying to drink some wine but the turbulence on this flight is horrible and I keep spilling on my data pad. Sorry. I hope to see you again soon, Pammi. Come visit me on Silver World! Love, Tessa"

Once again, The Corvine dips and spins in her course. Tessa pages the captain on the intercom: "Captain, is everything ok?" No answer follows. Tessa gets nervous. The Corvine suddenly banks hard and drops into a tailspin. The ladies don't realize that Captain Rickenbacker is dying at the helm. An aneurism overtakes him, the result of the powerful solar flares. His passengers are as yet unaware of his approaching demise and their own impending doom. The ship spirals out of control as the cap-



tain falls to a lonely slump at the helm. For Tessa, the spiraling becomes impossible to reconcile. She rushes to the edge of the princess's changing screen.

"Your majesty? Can you hear me? I fear there's a problem with the captain. Princess!" Tessa feels helpless and uncertain. Suddenly, the screens part and the drapes are pulled back. And there, before her at last, is the lovely princess, busily getting her heels buffed.

"I won't walk on these floors for at least an hour after I buff the royal tootsies. So you'll have to go and check on the captain yourself. There. I decree it." The princess made a dismissive hand gesture without actually looking at Tessa, who stood, humiliated and alone. Mona Loa returns to her catalog of Mixolidian velvet slippers. "You've probably got less than a minute before we crash."

Tessa's first reaction is to freeze, but she forces herself move. She dashes toward the helm, but her way is made ever-more perilous by the swaying ship. She gets

stopped abruptly by a wild maintenance cart, which slams into her. But a scraped knee and a barked shin are the least of her concerns now. She stumbles to the helm at last and calls, "Captain Rickenbacker, are you ok? Captain!"

A low voice croaks a response. Tessa rushes to the captain's side to aide him, but she soon realizes the low voice isn't coming from the captain; it's coming from his radio. Tessa reaches over and cranks up the volume knob. The captain's pink tentacles spill out across Tessa's lap. She reaches behind his knee to check for a pulse but finds nothing there but the typical scaly tops of the captain's tarsal fins. Meanwhile, Admiral Steinberger's voice crackles over the speakers on the silvery console: "Captain Rickenbacker, this is base, do you copy?"

Tessa, fumbling wildly with the radio controls, cries out, "Admiral, can you hear me? The captain is dying! I can't save him."

"Captain? Are you there?"

"Why can't you hear me? Where's the control for voice activation?" Tessa feels panic

rising in her stomach.

The voice of the admiral booms over the static: "Captain, we're losing signal. You're veering into hostile skies, turn back! Your course is very erratic! Do you wish us to switch over to automatic controls?" The admiral's voice gradually dies out in a wash of static.

"Yes! Automatic controls! Yes!" Tessa cries.



"Captain? Do you copy? I fear we've lost him. Admiral Steinberger signing off."

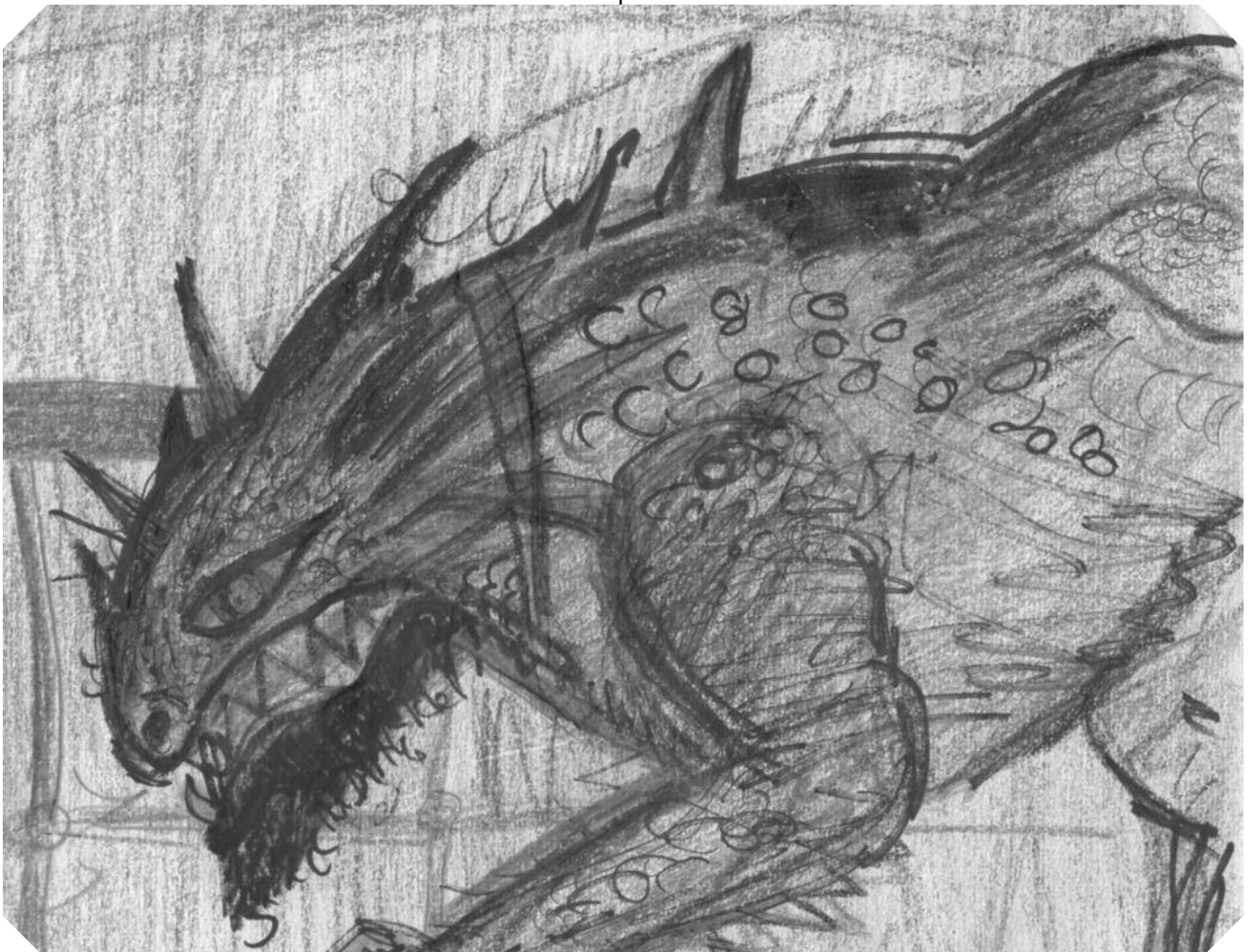
Tears streaming down her cheeks, Tessa tenderly lifts the body of the captain into a seated position, whereupon she slides him over into the empty co-pilot's chair.

"How hard can it be to fly a starship? Not too different from cruising around in my Jett-Skoot, right?" Tessa clutches the controllers and boots up the navigation computers. "Ha!" Tessa starts cracking herself up, talking to the captain's corpse, "It's not the flying I'm worried about, kiddo, it's the

landing! Oh well, I might be going crazy, but at least I'm going down swinging! Oh Pammi if you could only see me now. What a day, I meet a princess, a captain, and an admiral. And I get to crash land a spaceship." As the ship rocks and bucks beneath her, Tessa takes the helm bravely, and braces herself for certain death!

Episode 3: Peril on the Peaks of Mount Nkpg-nthom

In the far reaches of space, on the icy southern pole of the remote planet Tun-Drá, frost clings to our hero Gabriel's beard as he plummets downward, ever downward!



The howling winds are whipping him far off his course. With growing horror, he draws nearer to the craggy peaks of Mount Nkpg-nth?m! The peaks will surely tear his flesh from his bones if he should crash into them. Thoughts of death will do him absolutely no good now! So Gabriel shakes his head, blowing out great gusts of breath in order to clear his mind. Next, our hero curls into a ball, bracing for an impact that is sure to tear him asunder. He knows that deploying his parachute would be foolish given his present altitude and the nearness to the mountains. So, with his right hand he readies his grappling hook instead. Then he shoots out a line of hope into the rocks. He watches in horror as it fails to hit the target! Shot after shot he fires with the hook, and each time he misses. And each time he reels his hook in, he feels his chances of survival diminishing. Another part of his mind calculates his possible aerodynamic drag force, and its effect on preventing potential weightlessness. His mind races for new plans as he falls ever downward to certain doom. His bones ache and the cold is tearing at his exposed skin.

With what seems the last of his strength, he hurls the grappling hook out once more. Relying more on chance than on physics, if truth be told, he comes up lucky this time; his hook sinks into a stony peak. His grappling hook pops open, revealing a shock absorbing spring-system that begins coiling outward, helping him to control the speed of his fall. Within moments he comes to a full stop. Although he's

ceased falling, he isn't yet out of danger. The howling winds buffet his body and the bloodcurdling howls of the bearded g'narth lizards of Mount Nkpg-nth?m fill his skull.

With every muscle straining, Gabriel clings to that rope for dear life, and rappels downward towards the snowy plains of Nkpg-nth?m. He spots a small outcropping where he can rest a moment and call back to the ship. "Lee, can you hear me?"

"Aye! By the very Tobes of Hades! You survived the fall! You son of a sea-cook! 'Tis nothing short of incredible!"

"Let's just say my landing wasn't ideal. The winds blew me off course. They blew me right into the peaks of the mountains. I'm hanging by a thread to a peak of Mount Nkpg-nth?m."

"I'll bank around and try to pick you up."

"No, no, stop, man! The winds will smash your ship to bits. There's a gas in the exosphere, similar to formaldehyde, that is corrosive to the metals on the hull of the ship.

"Aye, all those molecules giving up electrons and positively charging their ions, it's enough to chill yer blood and tear yer ship to pieces! Don't worry, man, I'll not stray from this orbit. Try to stay alive. Aye, there's something strange on the scanner. I think I've drawn some unwanted attention. Two Confederate ships on my tail! They're hailing me now. They look hot and ready to open fire on me, Gabriel! I'll circle back to get you when I can."

Gabriel cuts off his com-link and thinks of ways to avoid shredding himself to bits on the ragged cliffs and peaks of Mount Nkpg-nth?m. He hopes Lee can stay alive long enough to figure out how to save him. Bracing himself against the winds, he continues rappelling downward until that dreaded moment when he runs out of rope. Trying desperately to avoid impaling himself on the craggy rocks, he leaps away into the unknown. The winds favor him and blow him away from the jagged peaks of rock. Freefall! Frost glazes across his goggles, blurring what little sight he has.

Below him, he sees his target, the dome of ice. He wonders if his luck will hold out. He's already avoided death once. But now he had to avoid being smashed to pieces when he collided with the dome of ice. Just how thick did he think it was, after all? Suddenly, moving on a combination of calculation and instinct, he reaches to the D-ring on his pack. The ebony chute chuffs and huffs open as it deploys. The hemp chute flutters out around him like a billowing cloud. The winds are much less intense at this altitude and he falls blissfully downward. If he can ease his fall enough, maybe instead of crashing through the icy dome, he could land on top of it. Then he could cut his way into the ice and enter a bit less hastily. Crashing through a wall of ice just isn't an option as far as he is concerned. Suddenly his left side jerks up abruptly. His eyes peer around, searching for the problem. Then he sees that the straps that connect his harness to the parachute have been

severed! His right arm whips loose of the harness altogether. He watches, helplessly, as the harness and the parachute fly away from him!

His lifeline now severed, he plummets toward a dome of solid ice! Every muscle braces for impact. His hands flounder blindly before him as the dome gets ever closer and closer. At last, with a shattering explosion of sound, he smashes into the mysterious dome! Shards of ice blind him as our hero plummets to his icy death. ❖

OUR QUESTIONS FOR THE EDITOR OF *THE ANNOTATED ALICE* ON THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PUBLICATION OF *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

All hail the scholar who takes ownership of annotating a classic. Why? Because what they do is hard work. It's not thankless, but we often lack the skill to know what a task they've given themselves. Is it everything ever known about the subject? No, that's a "Compleat...". Is it everything we need to know? Yep, or at least, we hope so. We'll never know unless we dive in, and it has to be an attractive volume (it is!) and we need time and patience and good coffee and sandwiches from *Dean and DeLuca* and the kids have to go outside to play until, say, February.

And then we do dive in. Why? Because if we can't be scholars, we can be fans. We peruse, one of those absurd words in English that means what it does and exactly the opposite of what it does (how that must have pleased Lewis Carroll) and we talk about it with our friends and promise to lend the book to them when we are done, but we are never done. They'll have to get their own copy, or wait for an important birthday, like their own or Carroll's or

maybe the Queen's.

Mark Burstein is the president emeritus of the Lewis Carroll Society of North America and was gracious enough to answer some questions for us, which demonstrated rather succinctly that we are not serious reviewers but still like good things when we see them, especially in print, and we also like big roundish numbers like 150. Mr. Burstein was fun to type to, and to receive typing from.

Note: I am nowhere near clever enough to have put these questions together on my own. My younger sister, who has loved *Alice* since she was little (probably around the age of the young Miss Liddell) posed some of them for me, and I bounced a couple of ideas off my good friend, aka *Sir John In Florida*.

Editor: We'd like to pick your brain - as the "SME" (subject matter expert) of all things *Alice*. We have a perception - it seems a modern one - that there are "levels" of reading intended for us as we grow from young-

sters to teens to adults. *Alice* is (or is it not?) a child's fairy tale, but also arguably fantasy/science fiction, intended for older readers. How do you characterize it and why?

Mark Burstein: I like to point out that the average age of the people in the boat that famous day the tale was first told was close to eighteen, all of whom needed to be amused. Alice herself was ten at that time, but Carroll set her avatar in the book as exactly seven (her birthday, in fact). It was never intended for young children; Carroll wrote an abridged version called *The Nursery Alice* in 1890 for them.

I would avoid the term "science fiction," but "fantasy" is fine. The books and their author were ghettoized for a century as belonging exclusively to children, and it was Martin Gardner's *Annotated Alice* that turned the tide in 1960. From not even being listed in the first two editions of *Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research*, it has become an academic industry, eclipsing many of the most revered Victorian authors, and constantly generating a cornucopia of interpretations, elucidations, and theories.

Yes, it can be read (and reread) on so many levels. It's the most quoted novel in existence, on a par with only Shakespeare and the Bible. Philosophers, political commentators, students, professors, and just about anyone can find something profoundly true (and often simultaneously very funny) in its pages.

Ed: What was it about the *Alice* stories that first grabbed your attention? How old were you? Which of the Carroll characters is your favorite and why?

M.B.: Their depth, humor, and how fine of a description of the actual world we live in they are. We're taught in school that if you are intelligent, work hard, are dedicated to selfless public service, you might grow up to be president. Take a good look at the present crop of candidates; I ask you: does this conform to what we were told in school, or have we fallen down a rabbit-hole?

I probably got my first "hit" of what they mean when *The Annotated* came out in 1960. I was ten, and my father, an Alice fanatic as well, brought home one of the first copies. It's always been a bit of a bible to Carrollians. Another huge influence was the Cyril Ritchard complete recordings. It's wonderful to have them read aloud, and when I was at U. C. Santa Cruz in the late Sixties studying, shall we say, amateur psychopharmacology, they made perfect companions on one's travels. 'Nuf said? From there I wrote several papers on it (particularly in relation to Zen Buddhism), and integrated it into my senior thesis. Collecting came just a bit later.

I have always identified with the White Rabbit. He's the Hermes figure, the one who initiates her and introduces her to Wonderland. He also serves as the "Herald" at the Trial. He gets a bit of a bad rap; everyone thinks he's late, but in fact he was just *worried* about being on time, and the

only character we know was late was the Duchess.

Ed.: We also think - we hope we are not alone in this - that certain iconic literature must be introduced to readers of a particular age (ahem.. the age of the reader, not the age the reader dwells within, as in *Bronze or Space*) and in a particular order, and that one should - must - read the book before seeing any of the films/cartoons made from that work. Our feeling is that if one waits too long to read *Moby Dick*, or *The Catcher in the Rye*, one loses the directed point of the author and the story's effect is spoiled somewhat. Certainly one must read *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* before high school (and certainly before seeing the movies!) What thinkest thou? Agree? Disagree? And what about attending to classics before modern pieces? For example, shouldn't young people know about *Alice* and *Gulliver's Travels* before Harry Potter and (Neil) Gaiman's *Coraline*? Or is this just wishful thinking on the part of an old editor?

M.B.: I just went through this with deciding when to read *Wonderland* to my daughter, Sonja. It's certainly ideal to have it read to you around eight or nine, but on the other hand, my friend Adriana Peliano, who founded the Lewis Carroll Society of Brazil and has done several books about Alice, first found her through that Hanna-Barbera abomination made in 1966.

I wouldn't say one needs to read the canon in chronological order. Master Potter does

just fine with *Pooh* or *The Hitchhiker's Guide* in whatever order they happen to be read (mostly to do with the age of the reader or read-to-ee). And we have a rule in our family: the book must be read before the movie is seen. Where possible.

Ed.: What is your opinion about the *Alice* movies which have been produced over the years? Which is your favorite/least favorite and why? How about one sentence on your thoughts on Johnny Depp's "Mad Hatter?"

M.B.: *The Annotated* lists 14 feature films beginning in 1903 and 42 other adaptations (animations, made for TV movies, mini-series, direct to DVD, etc.). Many have a redeeming quality or two, but the only ones I find watchable are Jonathan Miller's 1966 BBC teleplay with Sir John Gielgud, Peter Sellers, Peter Cook, etc., and Dennis Potter's *Dreamchild*, which is not actually an adaptation. I could give you some choice words for that godawful hairball coughed up by Tim Burton, with its execrable screenplay and scenery-chewing performances. And the chutzpah of calling it *Alice in Wonderland* rather than *Alice Returns to Underland* baffles me.

Ed.: Illustrations: Your thoughts on the Disney-izing of the characters in our cultural mind's eye. Do you prefer the Tenniel or Rackham illustrations, or a different artist altogether? How about Walt Kelly's Pogo "satire" of the *Alice* story in "Who Stole The Tarts" from Stepmother Goose?

M. B.: "Tenniel or Rackham?" We know of

over a thousand book illustrators, from Ralph Steadman (a favorite) to Salvador Dali (the first trade edition of which I produced). Others high on my list would be Barry Moser, Anne Bachelier, Oleg Lipchenko, Harry Furniss, Pat Andrea, Willy Pogany, and Harry Rountree. It is one of literature's most delicious ironies that a book whose original illustrations are among the most iconic in Western Civilization has gone on to be the most widely illustrated novel in existence.

Pogo is another favorite of mine, but I'd call "Who Stole the Tarts" an illustrated sequence, not really a satire, even though he used comic-strip characters. Would that Kelly had undertaken to do the whole of *Alice*! There are many other examples of Kelly's Carrollian work, including renditions of "Jabberwocky" and Humpty Dumpty's poem that serve as teases for what could have been.

Ed.: Is *Alice* more than an absurd look at Dodgson's historical period? Is it the *Saturday Night Live* of Victoriana? Is such stuff inevitable in the life of a culture - we develop to the point of having a leisure class, then look inward for answers, then almost immediately dismiss those answers as silly/madness?

M. B.: I don't believe that the *Alice* books would have survived through time, been translated into more than 170 languages, and be adopted by people of all ages all over the globe, if it were solely a study of Victorian England. The books that have

come along in the after-time attempting to prove that all of the characters were Oxford personalities or it was a gloss on some of the academic or religious controversies of the time have been utter failures. Face it, she's universal.

Ed.: Carroll's poetry was probably his first "skill" - something he began to hone early and often as a young man. Which of Carroll's poems is your favorite and why? What do you think about the potential for Carroll (and "substance abuse"?) to achieve the heady level of absurdity, or is his brilliant doggerel a standardly clever product of witty times?

M. B.: Nothing comes near "The Hunting of the Snark" (counting "Jabberwocky" as part of *Looking-glass* and therefore ineligible). It shows all of Carroll's sublime wit. Most of his juvenilia is just that, his serious poems are way too maudlin, and a few others just have bits and pieces of brilliance. "Hiawatha's Photographing" and "The Three Voices" should also be mentioned as laugh-out-loud funny.

Carroll got a bad rap in the Sixties; he never touched anything stronger than sherry. I don't see Victorian times as distinctively witty; there are always great nonsense verse writers - Edward Lear, Ogden Nash, Dr. Seuss, John Lennon, and one of my favorites, the aforementioned Walt Kelly....

Ed.: *Alice*, Dickens, Gilbert and Sullivan: which is the more scathing indictment of the British culture? Just kidding - how does

Alice fit in with the other classics of 19th Century English art? Does Carroll owe anyone props? Byron? Mary Shelley?

M. B.: “You might just as well try to influence a Bandersnatch.” Carroll was a game-changer, genre-definer, tipping point, whatever you want to call it. Closest we’d come is George MacDonald, whose *Phantastes* and “The Light Princess” were around and who was the very man, in fact, who encouraged Carroll to expand his manuscript, get a better illustrator, and publish it. But no, he was *sui generis*.

Ed.: Finally - in your opinion, if one does not play chess does that fact diminish the appreciation of *Through the Looking-glass*?

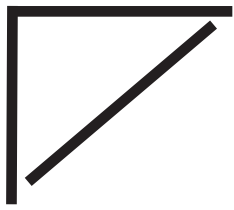
M. B.: I don’t think so. It might even be better, as a chess-player would notice things like the moves being out of order and that when the White and Red Knights were

fighting over her, neither was actually in a position to do anything about it such as capture or defend her. I suppose a basic knowledge would be good, that pawns can advance to being a Queen and the like.

Final note - we had fun with this. We hope we didn’t break any HIPAA rules finding out about Mr. Burstein’s connection to Grace Slick’s writing of “White Rabbit” with Jefferson Airplane, and how cool is it that he has a piece of (ahem, unprepped) sixties blotter acid paper with the *Alice* art?

Mark Burstein is the editor of W.W. Norton and Company’s volume *The Annotated Alice, the Deluxe 150th Anniversary Edition*. This article was published simultaneously in the February 2016 issue of *The Blotter Magazine* (www.blotterrag.com). ❖

END TRANSMISSION



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 3

Page 1 – ARABESQUE by Edward Ahern. He writes, “Born 1942 in Chicago. Graduated from the University of Illinois in 1965 with a degree in journalism. Went through Naval officer candidate, scuba diving and bomb disarming schools and served as officer of the deck, diving and EOD officer aboard the aircraft carrier Essex. Married Elizabeth in November of 1967, and went to work as a reporter for the Providence Journal. After a year on the Journal went through a year of intelligence trade craft and language training and spent four years in Germany and three in Japan. Speak decent German and French and bad Japanese. With the demise of that organization went to work in international sales for Abitibi, a Canadian-American paper producer. Picked up an MBA from NYU (honors), and stayed twenty three years with Abitibi, serving as product development, international sales, and marketing director. Visited 72 countries for Abitibi over the years. Retired from Abitibi at fifty eight and went to work for International Forest Products, a subsidiary of the Kraft family group of companies that includes the New England Patriots. Really retired in 2010 and started writing fiction and poetry. Over a hundred twenty stories, poems and articles published so far, and two books.

Page 7 – SONNY SAVES by David Caprita, who writes “I live in Los Angeles as a writer/actor/DJ. You can read more of that part of my life at davidcaprita.com, which attaches to my IMDB info. I'm originally from Pensacola, Florida, which is basically South Alabama, where my boyhood friends were either kids whose families' roots went back for centuries or Navy brats like me whose families had travelled the world and ended up in the backwoods of little towns like Bagdad, Chumuckla, Two Egg. So, growing up in the sixties in the Deep South surrounded by the civil rights struggles, the Vietnam War and the rock and soul music scene colored my view of the world.”

Page 11 – THE FORECAST FOR TONIGHT by David Caprita.



ARABESQUE

by EDWARD AHERN

Gus retreated into meditation after a bad day of work and another argument with Cynthia. He ignored the leg cramps his lotus position caused, and cleared his mind of everything except his focal point, a Philips head screw. He exterminated feeling and thought but couldn't reach a higher state. Frustration began to chew on his tranquility.

Maybe if I think myself forward in space or time? Or maybe if I visualize myself high above my body, looking down? But as soon as he tried for a spiritual destination his tranquility ruffled like windblown water.

I need a nonsense thought to restore my oblivion. And from nowhere came a memory of a dance step he'd always thought of as hinky - feet close together, then swing the toes forty five degrees to the side and bring the heels up behind them, while slightly wagging his backside.

Still kneeling in his lotus position, Gus visualized himself syncopating sideways. Toes and heels, toes and heels, nowhere to go but sideways. Toes and heels...

And slipped through a crease in the world. Gus snapped into full consciousness, but his body was nowhere to be seen. And that was weird, because he had no eyes. Literally senseless, he somehow knew that he now looked like a slivered sheet of mica. What the hell is going on? Where am I, no really, where's my body? As he peered

around colors blurred and reshaded in a quickly turning prism. Panic gurgled up in him like bad-food vomit.

Get a grip, chubby. What can I see? No, not see, sense? What am I aware of?

He was vertical in a horizontal sea flood of other mica sheets, blurred multi colors that poured past and over him. The sheets emanated annoyance at his obstruction.

"Hey, you!"

"You can talk!"

"Don't be an idiot. All you know is sound so that's what you think you're hearing. You're a pudgy little sucker. Turn sideways before you cause a serious inconvenience."

"I don't know how."

"Everybody does. It's like teat sucking, comes naturally. Wait - you're not dead!"

"Huh?"

"Dead, dummy. Your colors are camel dung drab. You're not supposed to be here."

The mica sheets flowed more densely and their push made Gus start to teeter.

"You've got to turn sideways and get up to group speed or you'll cause us to sprawl. You really don't want that to happen."

"Why does it matter? And I still don't know how."

"The group's corrective action would be to skewer you with what feels like thousands of acid tipped fish hooks. An obstinate dead person can tolerate it, barely. It would drive

you mad. You have to turn and swim. Remember being on a swing and swinging so high that you almost were able to circle the bar, but starting to dead drop? That's the feeling. Do it now!"

Gus remembered the sensation with vivid fear and snapped into horizontal. He began slowly gliding in the direction of the flow, feeling the almost bumps of the mica sheets as they overtook him.

"Kick it in the ass. Visualize yourself as sprinting."

Gus lurched, too fast, then too slow, but eventually matched the endless flow of sparkling mica.

"Are you still there?"

"For now. How did you manage to get here while alive?"

"Don't know, I was meditating and started sidling to the left when - pop- here I am." Gus paused. "Are all these sparkling sheets souls? Is this heaven?"

The other voice sighed. "Where to begin? It'd be so much easier if you'd died. Everybody comes here, good, bad and indif-

ferent."

"How do you know the good ones from the bad?"

The mica-like horde swerved in seamless joy, like a huge school of bait fish. Gus lurched and caused thousands of annoyances before getting back on pace.

"We're all amalgams of good and bad, but the bonding agent is the same. Once we're here we can look at one another and know what sort of blend we were."

"Do the bad stay bad?"

"No. Most quickly lose their pretenses. It's kind of like lying about your physique at a nudist colony, everybody here eventually buffs up. The pathologically bad are fish hooked until they follow acceptable behavior. But what the hell are we going to do with you? You're the unchangeable color of dirt. You can't survive here."

Gus had a thought that almost caused him to lose his cruising tempo. "Could I meet my parents?"

"I told you everybody comes here. Everybody. From the beginning of human



history to now. Trillions upon trillions, that's why we're crowded up in a space without perceived limits."

Gus became aware of his own hues. Sweet Jesus, all those moldy, blotchy bits. I need to cover myself with a huge fig leaf. "What about God, and Jesus, and the saints? And hell?"

"Dunno. We don't eat, drink or screw. No measured time. No clothes or possessions. No social status. All we have is membership. Once the other stuff dropped away we lost our need for a catechism. We're coming to a cascade. Touch the tip of your sheet to mine, I'll guide you through."

Oh my God, I'm undulating like a hula dancer. Free fall, vertigo, oh, the sinuous motions stroke my facets. I'm bursting with light.

"That was incredible! My mind feels like a honed knife."

"Pretty good. Being here is like riding a series of roller coasters without getting sick. Some are incredibly fast, some drop uncontrollably, some whip you in facet shaving turns. And after each cascade we're more sharply colored.

"All right, Gus, we've decided you have to go back."

"Wait! I just got here, how could you have decided that, or decided anything at all if you're just a swarm of souls or a school of holy fish?"

Gus sensed something sigh like, "Remember there's no measured time here. And we exist in consensus. Like the hymn says, 'We are all one spirit.' Or maybe 'We've got rhythm.' Anyway, no fault of yours, but

you're a fart in our perfume factory. We're going to be swirling left here."

Gus felt lost and supremely well guided at the same time. "Who are you that you're the one to help me? Why isn't it a committee?"

"Any one is many here. I'm your guide back to the physical. We have hopes that you'll do something for your brethren when you get back."

"Like what?"

"We have some suggestions that we'd like you to publicize."

"No one will believe me."

"We think we've worked that out. You've heard about secrets going to the grave? Guess what, they're all filed away here."

"Like how JFK was really assassinated?"

"Nah. We know, of course, but that's an unverifiable truth that would only cause more arguments. What we're going to tell you is mostly where things are hidden. Sunken ships, written confessions, lost cities, buried treasure. If you succumb to greed you'll become a very wealthy man. But then you'd look even more like crap when you get back here."

"So you want me to discover these things?"

"You need to be flushed through a few more cascades. No, dummy, you'll use these hidden items to establish your credibility about our suggestions. You'll dangle a goodie in front of thousands of people and make them listen to our hints before you give them the location."

"Why aren't they commandments, like Moses?"

"Yeah, that worked really well. Hang on;

this next one is going to knock off some of your moldy bits.”

The immense school glided into a raging froth of something. It’s like swimming through tonic water, no, like a scalding hot spring that stripping off my skin, no, swimming through aloe vera with bubbles of rose attar.

“I, I’ve never felt this clean!”

“Yeah, better maybe, but you still look pretty scummy. So here’s our list of suggestions:”

1. Get used to crowds, you’ll be a permanent member soon enough.
2. The dead already mourn the acts of the living, the living needn’t bother to mourn the dead.
3. Sex really is overrated.
4. Inflicting pain is self-cauterizing.
5. Eat and drink well, it’s your only chance, but...
6. ...anything done to excess is self-defeating.

“That’s it? What about messages from you all to your children and grandchildren, expressions of love, warnings....”

“We don’t interfere in your playground games, Gus. We’re going to give you a memory dump now. It’s going to feel like belly bloating.”

Gus’ dung-shaded but somewhat sparkly sheet suddenly felt like the mica flecks would pop off, like an overcharged bottle of pop.

“God, this is worse than my colonoscopy!”

“It’ll diffuse. We’ve also told you how you should return- basically just a reversal of the

arabesque, sidling to the right rather than the left. Think as if you had feet.”

“Wait, will I remember my experiences here?”

“Of course. They’re yours, we wouldn’t take them away.”

“And will I remember you. I don’t even know your name.”

Gus sensed a smile. “Think of me...think of me as your father, some part of me was. And know that as the living go, you’re a decent piece of work. Now get those missing feet shuffling.”

Gus syncopated to the right, still aligned with the school. Toes and heels, toes and heels, heels, toes, sideways...

And was back in his lotus position, visualizing his Phillips head screw. A raging memory torrent poured through his head, but after several minutes he was able to channel the flow within the limits of his understanding. He felt fresh-from-the-womb clean, immaculately reborn.

Once his legs quit tingling Gus checked his phone messages, tweets and e mails. He’d been out of action for two days and had been officially warned that his extended job absence was unacceptable and grounds for dismissal. Cynthia had left twenty seven messages, the last of which was that she needed space to rethink their relationship. I’ll miss Cynthia, but I don’t think I’m going to need that job. Guess I really should do what they asked. Got no money, have to start this small.

Gus drove his eight year old car to an abandoned apartment building. He pushed aside the corrugated sheeting that partly

blocked the doorway and entered, then walked carefully up to the fifth floor. The door to apartment 523 had been removed, probably for firewood. Two badly stained mattresses lay on the floor, and glassine packets were strewn everywhere. Used to be a shooting gallery I guess.

Gus pulled out the ball peen hammer he'd brought with him and began smashing through the plaster. On the floor behind the wall was a large, towel-wrapped bundle. He crouched down, grabbed the bundle, brushed off the rat droppings, and left without opening it.

Once back at his apartment he lay a plastic sheet on the bed, set the bundle on the sheet, and opened it. Holy hell. One, no two really long strands of pearls. The stones I think are what they call rose cut. Big, so big I'd choke if I tried to swallow them. Emeralds, I think, and rubies, and diamonds, must be hundreds of big diamonds. All set in heavy gold. Holy hell.

He arranged the jewelry on the sheet and took several pictures with his phone. Then he called the Providence Journal. "Editorial please"

"Copy desk, Harrington."

"Mr. Harrington I'd like to send you a picture of the Weatheral jewelry that was stolen in the 1920's from what was then the Biltmore hotel. Once you verify that the pieces are the same I'd like you to send over your TV station crew."

"Ah, and who are you?"

"Gus gave his name, address and phone number, and got the phone number of the reporter. The reporter had the pictures with-

in seconds and within fifteen minutes had called back.

"Mr. Gustausen, Jim Harrington. The pictures seem to jibe with the list of the stolen items. I repeat, stolen. Have you called the police?"

"As soon as you show up with the camera crew. I want a reliable witness to their recovery of the stones."

"Thirty minutes."

Gus called the cops as soon as he saw the TV truck pull up in front of the building. The two officers were on camera with Gus when he showed them the gems. Gus seemed to almost glow on the televised report, like a total body halo. People began to forward the news report just so friends could see Gus.. He didn't mention the suggestions, it wasn't time yet.

Gus was interrogated for a week on and off, but since he hadn't been born when the gems were stolen he was concluded to be the finder of the cache and not the perpetrating felon. The insurance company was expected to pay him ten percent, something just south of one million dollars.

A week after the Weatheral stones hit the news Gus went back to work. This time he called the FBI. "FBI? Agent Williams, this is Gus Gustausen. You may have read about my recovery of the Weatheral treasure? Good. And this is being recorded? Better. I believe I know the location of the financial records for the DeStefano crime family in Worcester. And this time I think I want moral and armed support when I go to the location. Call me back once you verify who I am."

The DeStefano ledgers didn't make the news, nor make any money for him, but Gus had established his bona fides. Two weeks after the ledgers were confiscated he called the FBI again.

"Agent Tom Williams, please. Agent Williams? May I call you Tom? Tom, I can help solve one of the agency's biggest failures. But you have to agree to do something for me.

"No, no, nothing like that. I just want you to help publicize six brief suggestions. You can say that they come from me, and that the FBI has nothing to do with them, but I want you to hand them out at every press briefing about the event and me.

"Oh I think you'll be willing to do so. You missed by just fifteen feet. Pity. But I'll give you what's left of Jimmy Hoffa."

Gus hung up and smiled to himself. Once the suggestions hit the news it's time to dig up some Aztec gold. I'll take some of the money and have the suggestions put up on the big sign in Times Square. Get somebody to create a web site and ghost write a book about them. Maybe go on the Tonight show. He smiled to himself again. I'm doing all this when I'm still dubious about the suggestions. After all, I'm about to violate number three and find a new girlfriend. ❖

SONNY SAVES

BY DAVID CAPRITA

Sonny stares.

It's always been a joke among the rest of the guys in the band that Sonny's always staring out the side window of the car, even when he's driving. Looking at all the billboards and road signs like a toddler. Or a happy dog.

"I swear", Jim the guitarist would say, "if it weren't so cold, Sonny'd have the damn window down with his head sticking out and ears flapping."

Sonny smiles.

Sonny always looks at the trees, staring at the cows slowly munching behind barbed wire at the edge of the road. Watching them whizz by like telephone poles always makes him laugh.

"Sonny!" Sonny comes back to earth and looks at Rick sitting in the front passenger seat while Duck, the band's drummer drives. It's Duck's shift at the wheel. They don't let Sonny drive anymore. Not after what happened last summer.

"Sonny!" Rick hollers again without turning his head. There's your sign, buddy." Sonny searches the side of the road. Standing alone in the middle of a freshly harvested cotton field is a small, wooden

church with a sadly tilted steeple on the roof. At the edge of the highway, where a red dirt road leads to the lonely building, a white-washed board with the words "Jesus Saves" scrawled in black paint stands sentinel like a scarecrow.

Jesus saves what, Sonny always asks the other guys when he sees those signs, as common as NeHi Soda billboards in this Deep South countryside. It was a running joke. Jesus saves people? Jesus saves the world? Jesus saves time? Why just "Jesus Saves?"

And they were always ready with the punchline:

"Jesus keeps his money in the Chase Manhattan bank! Jesus keeps his money in the Chase Manhattan bank!"

Rick belts out the words in his rough Greg Allman tenor, the cigarette-stained voice that melts the hearts of all those small town southern girls who swoon to see a long hair in their local bar, just like the ones they see on TV. The rest of the band joins in:

"Jesus keeps his money in the Chase Manhattan Bank. Jesus saves, Jesus saves, Jesus saaaaaves!"

Duck, Rick and Jim, who's as usual next to Sonny in the back of the station wagon all chuckle.

"There's your song, Sonny."

"Yeah, right. My song." Sonny sounds

annoyed but he isn't. He's used to all the teasing and picking. He never takes it personal. It's a compliment. Being the goofy Ringo, the Falstaff Monkee of the band is a hell of a lot better than not being in the band at all. Sonny loves the attention. The Kords are and will forever be his family since his real one disappeared long ago. Sometimes Sonny feels as if he disappeared with them. Until he jumps into the band's beat up Chevy. Then he's with family again. They may not be the Stones but they might as well be to these podunk back towns spread across Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. You'd think they were regulars on the Ed Sullivan show the way the kids react to them. The reaction from the crew-cut rednecks is something different but that doesn't bother Sonny.

It takes hours to get to a gig on the two lane Alabama roads but they finally make it to the club. The Stoned Toad. The club is

out of place in the middle of all the churches and Crimson Tide signs but it's a hit among the rural crowd who starve for something more than - well, going to church and Alabama games.

Sonny carefully unpacks his weapon of the night - the Squier Classic Jazz four string bass. Definitely. He loved his other Fender but this one was perfect for the small room they'd be playing in, plucky but soft tone, maroon-on-white with the long neck. Sonny's ready to kill with his weapon du nuit.

The band played well that night. The crowd went wild during "Crossroads", the Cream version of course. Sonny played his heart out on the bass solo, a performance even Jack Bruce would have appreciated. They packed up their equipment five hours later, everyone in the band except Rick who, as usual, flirts with the fawning southern girls while their redneck boyfriends stare in



envy and hatred at the strangers in the long hair and girl pants. Two of the scrawniest hicks walk up to Jim and Duck while Sonny stands behind the open U Haul, making sure all the equipment is loaded properly. He always wished they would just leave it to him. Sonny's bigger than the other three Kords put together. He's the heavy lifter. So he doesn't mind. But by the time he got out to the back lot, it was done.

"You boys some kind of rock stars? You think you're Elvis or somethin'?" Jim and Duck stand silently. The hicks approach closer.

"It's bad enough you come to our town to play that shit here. We don't like you messing with our women."

Sonny looms out from behind the U Haul and plants himself behind Jim and Duck. The rednecks freeze and slink back into the bar. Jim and Duck try to keep from laughing. It's always the same: The rednecks want trouble, Sonny shows up and it's over before it started.

"Thanks, Sonny, you fat ol' sonfabitch," Jim laughs.

Sonny grins. Duck hollers at Rick to get his ass in the car. And Sonny crawls into his space in the back without a word.

Sonny's eyes are closed in exhaustion while the rest of the band's voices drone through the night, ignoring Sonny while he dozes. Once in a while he wakes when he hears his name, but they're talking about him, not to him, cracking up at his hilariously loud snoring, his creepy way he talks in his sleep, thinking he's passed out.

Sonny smiles. Their soft conversation

about tonight's performance and their dreams for the future of the Kords lulls him back to sleep.

Sonny wakes up with the sound of the station wagon downshifting and slowing down. He looks out the side window and watches a whitewashed sign pass by at a crawl, the crunch of gravel under the tires, the ominous shake of the U Haul full of equipment groaning onto the shoulder. The makeshift train stops.

Someone cuts the engine. Silence.

In the darkness, across a shaved cotton field full of bare branches with tufts of left-over cotton fiber, stands the lonely church they passed earlier in the dawn, its crooked steeple silhouetted against an almost full Alabama moon. Jesus Saves.

The guys open their doors and get out to stretch their legs, not asking Sonny if he wants to join them. He's not offended. Sonny's eyes remain closed as he overhears their words, their laughter, an occasional hiss as someone inhales a toke of a fat joint.

"Sonny! Thank you, man!"

"God bless you, Sonny, you sonofabitch."

Sonny smiles.

"Yep!"

They do love him. Sonny can't resist. Giggling, he opens the door to join the guys in the cold autumn Alabama air.

Sonny stands next to the car in the pitch black night. The voices have stopped. It's totally, solemnly silent. Then miles and an eternity away, the distant bark of a dog.

The band members' backs are to him. They ignore him as they stare down at their

feet, as if they're gazing into an open grave. Sonny walks next to Rick and stands in the darkness. A soft sob, as soft as one of the tufts of cotton hanging on the barbed wire in the darkness caresses the silence.

A cross, the kind they've zipped past countless times on the shoulders of those nameless Alabama two lane highways stands crooked in the grass like a tomato stake.

Duck crouches down and gently lays the half-smoked joint in front of it, its thread of smoke lifting into the air like incense. The cross's arm is festooned with scribbled notes

and faded snapshots taped and nailed to it, its base surrounded by plastic flowers faded into a ghostly pastel. A teddy bear grasps a toy guitar. It's not a Squier Classic Jazz four string but the sentiment is still there.

Sonny weeps.

A trembling voice softly pierces the silence. Rick's, Duck's, Jim's? Sonny can't tell, but it doesn't matter.

“Sonny saves, Sonny saves, Sonny saves.”



THE FORECAST FOR TONIGHT

BY DAVID CAPRITA

*On the anniversary of the death of a brother
October 24, 2012*

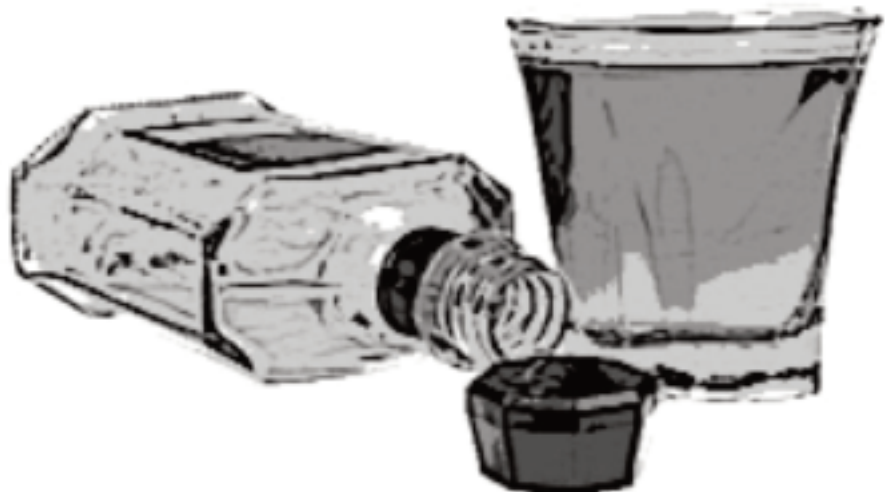
It was a dark and stormy night. Melvin stared out the bedroom window at the desperately waving trees, the sheets of rain driving diagonally down from the black, impenetrable ceiling of clouds hanging like ragged curtains.

To the rest of the world, it wasn't a dark and stormy night. It was anything but. It was a clear, crisp Florida autumn evening, one of those rare times of the year when the humidity was below twenty percent, allowing the air and the people in it to breathe in the brisk chill. Dew point was fifteen degrees below the air temperature. Which meant there wasn't enough moisture in the air to spit. All the stars were out, not just the bright Magnitude Ones and the planets that were always able to shine through the high altitude haze. Tonight the entire sky was a black blanket dusted with a talcum of stellar powder. Just the way the ceiling of the planetarium used to look when Daddy took them there.

To everyone else, including Chuck, Melvyn's

brother, it couldn't have been more pleasant. But through Melvyn's eyes it was the worst storms to hit the Florida panhandle since last fall. To Melvyn, as he stared wondrously through his bedroom window, it was as it was that October eve exactly a year ago. It was a very dark and stormy night all right. Daddy's instruments showed it. Barometric pressure falling, dewpoint a degree off the current temperature. The wet bulb said it was moist and humid. Daddy had shown Melvyn how to read all the instruments from the time he was three. And they all indicated the weather was going to get worse. Just like that night.

As Melvyn stared like a frightened child out his window through panes melted with streaming rivulets of water, the sky was an inverted ocean of low clouds and thunder.



The rain drops splattered against the glass as hard as against a speeding windshield. It was like that night daddy left him, and it was growing more intense even as his mind floated back to the horror.

“Are you gonna sit there all night?”

Chuck’s cigarette-scarred, slurred voice thundered from the hallway. It would have startled anyone else. But Melvyn was used to it. He sensed Chuck’s presence in his doorway even before he heard him. The distinctive odor emanating from the bottle of George Dickel Tennessee whiskey warned him Chuck was there before he heard him speak. Melvyn continued to watch the storm. He heard the whistle of the gale wind blowing through the branches of the pecan tree just outside his window. Occasionally, one of the branches would bend under the severe gusts and scratch against the glass inches from his eyes.

“Why don’t ya go outside and get some fresh air? Stop staring out that goddamn window and looking at those stupid broke dials. It’s a beautiful night, Moron. But not to you, ain’t that right?”

The sarcasm dripped from Chuck’s voice like the whiskey from the tilted bottle in his hand.

Melvyn replied, to himself mostly, “Daddy’s instruments say it’s getting worse.” Melvyn knew this was going to set Chuck off.

Maybe that’s why he said it.

“The hell with those instruments! They stopped working a year ago! Look outside, goddamn it! Look outside, Retard!”

Melvyn blinked at another flash of lightning. One thousand one, one thousand

two . . . BOOM. Less than a mile away.

“Just stormin’ away, right?” Chuck began to sway down the hallway toward the kitchen and his other bottle of Dickel. “You’re gonna have to get over Daddy sooner or later. He ain’t comin’ back. Can’t pretend to watch storms for the rest of yer life, ya know. Moron.” Chuck’s drunken voice was barely audible as he stumbled farther down the hall.

“He ain’t comin’ back, Moron!” Chuck screamed from the kitchen as he poured another tumbler of Dickel.

“It’s you and me.”

Melvyn silently watched the light show through the glass.

“Get in here and fix me somethin’ to eat!”

Another flash, followed immediately by the glass-rattling boom. Melvyn winced. Close! He didn’t even have a chance to say the first one thousand. He should be used to it by now. He’d heard the same crashing thunder every night since Daddy left. One of the first things Daddy had taught him about the weather was how to count one thousand one, one thousand two. It was science, his dad reminded. But to Melvyn it was magic.

He looked out at the phantom storm, eyes wide open like a frightened puppy’s, waiting for its dead master to come home.

Chuck appeared in Melvyn’s doorway, his silhouette like one of those black, faceless forms on the paper targets he and Daddy shot at Gabe’s Gun Range. They used to go every Saturday. And now there was Chuck. A burly oaf, hands down by his sides, head

bent, unkempt hair blocking the overhead light in the hallway. The silhouette made Melvyn smile.

“Go get me something to eat, Fartface or I’m gonna beat ya with this bottle.”

Melvyn knew Chuck wasn’t threatening him. It was a promise, as Chuck liked to remind him. Chuck had done it before. The worst time was that night. He beat Melvyn bad and then he went after Daddy. Daddy couldn’t call the cops. The lines were down because of the storm and Daddy ran out in the sheets of rain and thunder to get into the pickup and spin away before Chuck stumbled off the porch and fell face first into a blood-red puddle of rainwater and rust colored clay. That was the last time either of them saw Daddy.

Melvyn looked at the silhouette and softly said, “It’s rainin’ too hard.”

Chuck reached Melvyn at his window perch in barely two strides. He grabbed him by the back of his hair and threw him down on the dirty bedroom carpet and pressed his work boot caked with dried red mud squarely on Melvyn’s chest.

“Cut this shit out about rain. You hear me? Daddy ain’t coming back. He’s dead. Get over it! Now, do what I say, get in that goddamn truck and go get my supper. Or there’s gonna be a second goddamn funeral I’ll have to go to, you little prick.”

Melvyn stared straight into Chuck’s clouded, drunken eyes.

“The road’s washed out.”

Chuck’s eyes darkened. Darker than the black clouds above the pecan tree outside the window. Like an explosion of lightning,

he swung his arm across Melvyn’s desk. The instruments flew across the room and crashed into the opposite wall. Dial faces shattered. Tubes snapped. Indicator needles froze where they were, stuck on signs of worsening weather.

“Storm’s here.” Melvyn smiled.

Chuck swung the half empty Dickel bottle across the side of Melvyn’s head. The fact it didn’t break infuriated him. He swung again. Melvyn saw a white flash and felt a boom of thunder. The world rumbled into darkness and silence.

The bottle still didn’t break. But the blank, unfocussed stare from Melvyn’s eyes stopped Chuck from swinging again.

“Fuck it. I’ll get my own supper. Little prick. Where’re the keys.”

Chuck wobbled out of the room and down the hallway to the front door. He stumbled out on the porch into the crisp night air.

Crickets chirped, the shaved fields around the house an indigo blue from the blaze of stars above him, like the ceiling of the College Planetarium. Where Daddy had taken Melvyn and Chuck ages before, when they were a family, when they were still real brothers.

Chuck jumped into the pickup, dropped the keys, cursed, snatched them off the littered floor and shoved them into the ignition. The engine roared, the dog growl of its rusted exhaust echoing across the fields, waking the woods. Before the truck had a chance to warm up in the dry chill air, Chuck spun the wheels in reverse and twisted onto the road toward town.

Melvyn stared at the ceiling of his bedroom. But his glazed eyes looked beyond it, into the wet branches of the pecan tree, weeping steady drops around him, on him, onto his face. As he stared at the shining, dripping leaves, one solitary drop fell and landed right between his eyes on the bridge of his nose. Melvyn laughed out loud. The sound of his laugh made him feel like he was eight years old again. The lightning flashed in a steady rhythmic pulse like a strobe light, freezing the drops in mid-air, just above Melvyn's face. He felt warm wetness beneath his head. The branches faded away but the rain continued. All over Melvyn, down the hallway, out the screen door Chuck had left open, across the porch and into the yard, streams slicing through the red North Florida mud. Melvyn saw it all; saw it washing out the one lane road from their house, swirling around the timber legs of the old bridge where daddy had died the October before.

Chuck sped toward the bridge, steering the truck's wheels through the powdery red dirt and onto the wooden planks. Something wasn't right. Maybe it was a pothole. Maybe a loose log. Or maybe it was the teasing laughter of an eight year old boy enjoying the rain, distracting a brother drunk on Dickel, staring uselessly through a

wiper-smearred windshield.

They found the truck the next day upside down in the dry arroyo that channeled nothing but tinder twigs and desiccated leaves this time of year. Chuck's neck was broken. He had obviously been drinking, the sheriff noted. The broken bottle of Dickel had flown like a missile out of the passenger window and shattered against a tree. There was nothing left but glass and label. The remaining dregs of whiskey had long evaporated in the dry morning air when they dragged him unceremoniously out.

Recognizing the truck and Chuck, the sheriff and emergency crew followed the road back up to the quiet, empty house. And that's where they found Melvyn. Soaked wet, his head resting in a pool of sticky blood. A smile on his face like he'd been enjoying the most beatific sight. They carefully covered his damp body with a sheet and carried him out to the waiting ambulance. A few neighbors and hands witnessed the quiet procession underneath an early morning sun.

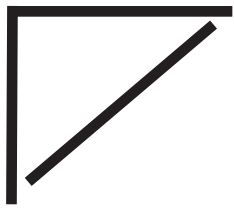
As the ambulance pulled away, the driver peered through the dust-powdered windshield up toward the cloudless blue sky.

"Beautiful day."

"Yep", his partner replied. "Shore is."



END TRANSMISSION



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 4

Page 1 – THE GIRL WHO LOVED BRUCE CAMPBELL by Christa Carmen. Christa Carmen lives in Westerly, Rhode Island with her fiancé and a beagle who rivals her in stubbornness. Her short stories have been accepted for publication by *Literally Stories*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Jitter Press*, and the *DreamFusion Press* anthology, *Infected World*. She has an undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania in English and psychology, and a master's degree in counseling psychology. Christa works for BioClinica in clinical trial support, and at a local hospital as a mental health clinician.

Page 13 – JUMP! by Janet Amalia Weinberg & Margaret Karmarzin Margaret Karmazin's credits include stories published in literary and national magazines, including *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Mobius*, *Confrontation*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *Another Realm* and *Hyperpulp* for a future publication. Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review* and *Words of Wisdom* were nominated for Pushcart awards. Her story, "The Manly Thing," was nominated for the 2010 Million Writers Award. She has stories included in *Still Going Strong*, *Ten Twisted Tales*, *Pieces Of Eight (Autism Acceptance)*, *Zero Gravity*, *Cover Of Darkness*, *Daughters Of Icarus*, *M-Brane Sci-Fi Quarterlies*, and a YA novel, **Replacing Fiona** and children's book, **Flick-Flick & Dreamer**, published by etreasurespublishing.com.

Janet Amalia Weinberg is a former psychologist and the editor of an anthology which was an Independent Publisher Award Finalist (**Still Going Strong; Memoirs, Stories, and Poems About Great Older Women**, *Routledge*). Her writing credits include essays in *Psychology Tomorrow*, *Long Island Woman* and *New Age Travel* and short stories in *Room*, *Wild Violet*, *Long Story Short*, *Weave Magazine*, *Moondance*, *West Wind Review*, *Ascent Aspirations* and other literary and sci-fi magazines.



THE GIRL WHO LOVED BRUCE CAMPBELL

by CHRISTA CARMEN

No Bottom Pond might have had a bottom, but as far as the three clammy and restless individuals that sat in the idling car by its banks knew, it very well might not. The cold sweats and body aches would not assail them for much longer; the lankier of the two males divvied up the wax baggies of brown powder, and each in turn began their own sacred ritual of preparation. It took only seconds for the first of the three to realize a key element was missing from their assorted paraphernalia.

“Dammit,” the stocky male said. “Does anyone have a water bottle?”

There was no reply as each of the three checked the space around their feet, and the nearest cup holder.

“Now what?” the lone female asked. “We can’t hit a gas station. We need to stay off the roads for a while, someone may have seen us leave that house.”

There was murmured agreement from the two men, followed by a morose silence. The lanky man broke the quiet with a snort of derision.

“This shit’s fried our brains,” he said. “We’re sitting next to a lake, complaining about not having any water to shoot up with.”

“It’s not a lake, it’s a pond,” the woman said.

“Technically, it’s not even a pond. It’s an estuary. And we can’t use that water because it’s brackish.” The stouter man sounded matter-of-fact.

“What’s brackish mean? That it’s dirty? Please, I’ve seen you use the water from the tank of a gas station toilet, dirty should be the least of your worries.” This, from the woman.

“No, not dirty, *brackish*. It means it’s half freshwater, half salt. We can’t shoot that, it might mess with our bodies’ electrolyte levels or something.” Now the stocky man sounded less sure of himself.

The lanky man opened the car door. He reached for an empty Dunkin Donuts cup discarded on the floor of the passenger seat, removed the lid, and looked suspiciously into its depths. Shrugging, he started for the pond’s weedy shore.

“I didn’t just get away with a B&E and buy dope from the shadiest dealer in town to let a little saltwater stop me. It’s only *half* salt anyways,” he called over his shoulder.

The woman and the stout man watched him creep toward the water’s edge. He folded his tall frame in half and scooped a cupful of water into the Styrofoam. He did this in the light of a moon so close it seemed to be perched atop the hill that loomed over No Bottom Pond, a luminous cherry on top

of a black forest cake.

The first full moon to rise on Christmas in forty years had occurred the night before. "A Christmas miracle," the woman had said sarcastically as they listened to a radio talk show host lament the previous night's fog cover on their way to Shore Road, and the house they'd been casing most of the past week. The upscale home had yielded extensive reserves of jewelry, cash, and three guns. There'd been a safe, but they had no use for a safe. They only took what they could trade quickly and easily to their dealer, and Pablo had no interest in safes.

The lunar display of December twenty-sixth happened to be free from a smothering blanket of fog. As the woman watched the tall man return, she noticed that in the bright moonlight, the water's surface had a strange sparkle to it, was almost phosphorescent in the gleam. Parts of the pond were the shiny, black, oil-slick of water-in-moonlight she'd expect. Having spent her whole life in the seaside town, she'd seen water undulating under the moon enough times for the sight to be commonplace, but No Bottom Pond seemed greenish in its radiance, and seemed not to steam as much as gurgle, like the stew in a witch's cauldron.

She forgot her inquisitiveness over the appearance of the water when the passenger door slammed shut. Three syringe tips plunged greedily into the captured pond water, transporting water from cup to three waiting spoons. Mysticism, Rhode Island was a small town (the population was reduced by half in the winter), and the heroin dealers had been tapped into the same pipelines in

and out of the closest major cities for decades; the three longtime users expected the same cut and purity of dope they'd had both the previous day, and on the occasion of their first use. Subsequently, no lighter flicked on to form dancing shadows on the car walls, no Butane-fueled flame burned prospective toxins out of the contents of their spoons, spoons that had shed the innocence of their kitchen days for something more sinister. They each shot up, one, two, three, and each fell into that first nod of euphoria, a scarecrow short of Dorothy and her friends in the poppy field.

At the same time that legions of fish were rising to the vaporous surface of No Bottom Pond, dead and already beginning to putrefy, small boils began to pop up under the skin of the three beings in the car. The tall man thought he'd injected a 'hot shot,' while the woman jerked out of her nod in wild agitation to inspect the tip of her needle, convinced she'd given herself 'cotton fever' by neglecting to free the point from Q-tip remnants. Both of them were wrong.

The mutations occurred quickly and the changes were profound. When the transformation was complete, the three beings were no longer satisfied with the heroin that flowed through their veins. They were hungry for more. Hungry in a way that made every torturous withdrawal symptom or harrowing mental craving of the past seem like a petty annoyance, a mere itch that could go without being scratched.

Two hours earlier, a local scientist named Craig Silas stood on a dip of Watch Hill

Road, a dark silhouette overlooking the river that rushed into No Bottom Pond. Craig worked at a nearby pharmaceutical company, and the previous year had snuck a project home to his basement laboratory to continue his work free from the oversight and ethical regulations of his employer.

In the wake of a country-wide opiate epidemic, Big Pharma had sufficient incentive to develop an opioid-free painkiller, eliminating the potential for abuse and addiction. Craig had stumbled on an unanticipated side-effect of the chemical compound he'd been studying, and upon bringing his research home, further unlocked the potential of the drug. Characteristics included superhuman strength, laser-point focus, and a complete inability to feel pain. Craig spent weeks hypothesizing on the drug's seemingly limitless prospects, until he'd descended the basement stairs one morning to find one of the pink-eyed lab rats feasting on his cage-mates' brains. It seemed that with every possibility of experiencing pain eliminated, the rats' behavior had morphed into something much more ominous...and much more deadly.

After driving up and down the streets of Mysticism with the concoction swishing around a large vat in his trunk, Craig noticed that the adjacent river ran under the road and into a wide inlet. Theorizing that the body of water before him was the equivalent of a dead end street, he pulled onto the narrow shoulder and muscled the vat onto the guardrail before another car could appear. Craig Silas had left No Bottom Pond ten miles behind him by the time his miracle

drug had seeped into the pond's ecosystem, and was home in his favorite armchair with his feet up by the time the first transformations began to occur.

Sophisticated cognition already reduced to animalistic compulsion, the three addicts, who had become fiends of a different nature, were barely able to recall the chain of events that had led them to their last high, brought to the utmost intensity by the unorthodox mixture of heroin and pond-dispersed, opiate-free analgesic. But they were able to recall enough to know what they needed to do to feed the hunger that gnawed at their insides like so many of Silas' lab rats. And so they began to move.

Kartya watched the spray of blood waterfall through the front door of the cabin, and grabbed Kit's arm.

"That ... was ... awesome!" she cheered, the arm-grabbing escalating to arm-slapping. She turned to face her boyfriend. "How much time is left?" she asked him.

"Kar, just watch it, I'm not messing with it again. It's thirty minutes long, like all the other episodes."

This appeased Kartya enough to watch the last ten minutes in silence. She twirled a ringlet of cherry-coke-colored hair around blood-red fingernails. When the show was over, she turned to Kit again, eager to hear his opinion on the latest installment. "Well," Kit said. "They definitely set us up for an epic showdown at the cabin."

"Agreed!" Kartya paused. "I wish there was more than ten episodes. That was a good

one though. Buckets of blood!” A mischievous smile turned up the corners of her lips.

“Twisted, gory, and hilarious,” Kit said. “The dead cop put her fists through those campers’ skulls, and turned them into corpse puppets!”

“Let’s be serious, the other characters only exist to compliment Ash. To give the directors a springboard for Ash’s amazing one-liners. And so we can see some different weapons brandished against the Deadites. ‘Cause, you know, it can’t be all about Ash’s chainsaw arm and ‘boomstick.’” She mimed obliterating Kit with a shotgun blast to the face and snickered.

“Also, did I tell you that Ash, err, sorry, Bruce Campbell wrote an autobiography a few years back... called ‘If Chins Could Kill?’”

Kit gave her a look that conveyed both incredulity and reverence, and broke into a hearty chuckle, no doubt visualizing the B-list movie actor’s signature square chin.

“Are you kidding me? That’s amazing. You need to get that book.” He gestured to two bookshelves flanking the television, which still rolled the blood-splattered credits for the show.

Kartya nodded with enthusiasm but did

not turn to regard the bookshelves, pointing instead to the two ‘Vinyl Pop’ characters facing off from their respective posts atop surround sound speakers. The superbly-

detailed plastic Ash and an ‘Army of Darkness’ Deadite had been

Christmas gifts from her mother the previous morning. Though she did not share her daughter’s love for horror, Kartya’s mother knew Kartya and Kit harbored a cultish enthusiasm for Ash, and all things ‘Evil Dead,’ from the campy originals to the 2013 remake, and now, the new original series. She had wrapped the figurines knowing it would bring appreciative smiles to their faces.

“Instead of that wobbly speaker, a hardcover copy of ‘If Chins Could Kill’ could be mini-Ash’s battleground in the fight against evil,” Kartya said.

Kit surveyed the current setup displaying their action figures, smiled, and got to his feet.

“You’re cute, babe. I love that you love blood and guts as much as I do.” Kit stretched his six-foot-three frame toward the ceiling and let out a groan. “But the party’s over. I



have to get to work.”

“I can’t believe you agreed to work the night after Christmas,” Kartya said. She tried to pout, but a yawn claimed her features instead. “Although to be honest, you’re not going to miss much. I’m beat and will probably be asleep fifteen minutes after you leave.”

As Kit dragged himself up the stairs to get changed, Kartya heard a muffled chime, and realized she was sitting on her phone. A preview of the text message scrolled across the screen. Kartya’s friend Laura had written: ‘Better lock your door...’

Laura did well as an emergency room nurse, working as an independent contractor in different hospitals from Hartford to Boston. She vacationed often, and had just returned that morning from her fourth trip to St. John since the year began. Kartya thumbed at the screen until she could see the rest of the message. In its entirety, it read: ‘Better lock your door...because my house just got broken into.’

A fat worm of fear speared itself between the layers of Kartya’s intestines. There had been numerous reports of break-ins in Mysticism over the last month, and Laura lived less than a mile from the riverfront home Kartya and Kit rented. Her fingers jerking in furious spasms, Kartya texted Laura back: ‘Were you home? Are you ok? What did they take?’

As she waited for Laura’s reply, Kit trudged back down the stairs. He was able to read the worry on her face with a single glance.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Laura and Seth’s house got broken into.

I asked her what they took and if they were home. She hasn’t answered me yet.”

The concern on Kit’s face mixed with anger. With a grim head shake, he reached out to pull her off the couch.

“No way. This is not happening. There’s no way I get switched to the night shift a month before the worst string of burglaries this town’s ever seen. Follow me.”

“But why? Where are we going?” Kartya asked him, her attention split between his grip on her forearm and her phone announcing a newly-arrived message.

Kit gestured up the stairs, but let go of her so she could navigate to her text message app. She read silently, her brow creased, then raised her eyes to meet Kit’s.

“She said they were out getting drinks and they came home to a broken window in the living room. They’d been on vacation for the past week so someone obviously anticipated an empty house. They took jewelry, cash, some other valuables...” Kartya tried to trail off effectively, as if this was the extent of stolen goods.

“And? What else?” When Kartya didn’t answer, he said, “What else did they take, Kartya?”

“Three of her guns were missing,” she said, knowing this piece of information would fan Kit’s anger and apprehension into a full-blown blaze.

Motivated anew, Kit took her hand and resumed their ascent. In the guest bedroom, he retrieved a lockbox from an opaque-fronted entertainment stand.

“I would never forgive myself if something happened to you. I know, I know, you’re

going to protest, but agree to it for my sake.” He pulled a handgun from the box and spun the chamber, counting bullets.

“Kit,” Kartya objected.

“Please, just come here so I can give you a quick refresher on how to...”

“Kit—” She was about to insist on an end to this surreal conversation. Instead, Kartya sighed and took the gun from Kit’s hands, showing him that she remembered how to wield the weapon properly, flicking the safety off and adopting a shooter’s stance.

“You’ve dragged me to the range a hundred times. I know what I’m doing well enough to defend myself if it came to it.”

Kit nodded, but he seemed distracted. She reengaged the safety and returned the gun to the lockbox. Spinning on her heel for the hall, she stopped short when she heard the scrape of something much larger being unearthed from the closet.

Without turning, she said, “Kit, I do *not* need the shotgun to be within arm’s reach when I go to bed tonight. End of discussion.”

Torn between Kartya’s obvious intention to refuse the shotgun and his need to be assured of her safety, Kit placed the shotgun on top of the stand.

“Fine,” he said. “But I’m leaving it here, just in case. The revolver is going on your nightstand. And that’s also not open for discussion.”

“Whatever,” Kartya said, her belief that the house was impregnable, that the probability of burglars targeting their quiet, one-acre lot over any other in town causing her to grow bored with the conversation. “Drive

safe please, and try to have a good night at work.”

Kartya let Kit lead her into their bedroom, saying nothing as he placed the revolver on a paperback, two feet from where she was to lay her head down on the pillow. He kissed her goodnight and turned off the bedside lamp, and Kartya listened to his footsteps on the stairs as she nestled beneath the covers. She had been overblown in her prediction: it did not take even fifteen minutes from Kit’s departure for Kartya to be sound asleep.

A noise awoke her, what sounded like the skeletal finger of a winter-dead tree tapping on a window. She sat up, disoriented. Had Kit forgotten something, perhaps his badge, or the food she’d packed for him to eat on his break? She groped for her cell, found the button to illuminate the screen. Ten forty-five. Kit would be forty-five minutes into an hour-long commute, so it wouldn’t be him tapping. She strained to catch the sound again, but it had stopped. Kartya sunk down onto the pillow, drawing the comforter up to her neck, then groaned. She flung the comforter back, forcing herself to bear the cold trek to the bathroom before returning to sleep. Halfway there, the tapping began again.

Kartya froze. There in the hallway, equally removed from both the revolver and the shotgun Kit had set out for her protection, vulnerable in her bare feet, with full bladder and panic fluttering in her brain like a moth trapped in a lantern, the details of the nearby break-in came roaring back, having been temporarily stolen by the fugue of sleep.

As she stood rooted in paralysis, her rational mind attempted to quell her fears, reading from the familiar script all terrified souls call upon in times of need: 'It's nothing, it's just the wind. There's a perfectly good explanation for this.' Repeating those words with the same tenacity as a drowning swimmer flailing for a rescue buoy, she started down the stairs in the dark.

Kartya's bare feet sunk into the shag carpet as she crossed the living room to the big picture window on the right, struggling to see in the all-encompassing blackness. Wondering why the moon refused to aid her in her endeavor, cursing the peaks and gables of the house's roofline, she moved from the window to the front door, whacking her hip on the corner of the heavy, oak desk in her blindness, and switched on the outdoor floodlights.

Slowly, giving the desk a wider berth, she crept to the right, so focused on the grate-free expanse of the window that she did not notice the shadow stretched across the ground in front of her.

A hapless civilian had become possessed by the Kandarian Demon, and subsequently turned into a Deadite...or at least this was the only explanation that occurred to Kartya when she came face-to-face with the diseased-looking monstrosity separated from her by only a half-inch of glass. For one breathless moment, Kartya thought she was dreaming, or perhaps had slipped on the stairs and knocked herself out, and was now subject to some trauma-induced hallucination. Then the demon-thing cocked its head to one side and emitted a guttural chuffing noise, and

Kartya knew that somehow, what she was seeing was real.

She may have stood staring into the black pits of the creature's eyes, a creature who had once been a tall, lanky, human man, until Kit returned home from work the next morning, but the spell was broken when the now-inhuman thing's arm shot out as if from a cannon, smashing through the six-foot tall window pane with no more effort than a man punching his hand through a piece of paper.

Kartya did not think, not in any conscious, deliberate manner. She ran to the stairs on reflex, sprinting up them two at a time, her body knowing where it was taking her, seeing her destination in her mind as clearly as an earlier scene from 'Evil Dead.' Though it defied logic, though an hour ago it had seemed impossible, she had to get to the revolver if she wanted to survive. As she flew down the hall for the bedroom, she had the wherewithal to dart her arm into the bathroom and flip the switch, the overhead fixture just bright enough to allow a half-moon of light to spill into the hallway.

It took all of Kartya's willpower not to shut and lock the bedroom door behind her, but knowing how easily the thing had infiltrated the ground floor, she knew it would behoove her to leave the door open and see it coming, rather than be ignorant to its diabolical design. She grabbed the gun from the nightstand and slid along the front wall of the bedroom while she removed the safety. She molded her hands to fit around the butt in what she hoped was a relaxed position ('never choke your gun,' the range attendant

had told her, 'that's a surefire way to hit everything but your target,') and crouched by the closet, the thinnest rectangle of hallway visible from her spot on the floor.

The sound of footsteps shuffle-dragging up the stairs after her was interrupted by a second downstairs window imploding, and then, horribly, a third. Kartya wanted to curse. She wanted to scream, or cry, or curl up in the fetal position on the floor. Instead, she pulled the hammer back, prayed for consistency, squinted one eye, and kept perfectly quiet.

The thing made it to the top of the stairs and turned the corner. The hallway was short and Kartya had a clear shot, but forced herself to hold fire. The thing took a long, lumbering step, then another. It was wearing jeans and a plaid flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and as it stepped into the crescent of light filtering out of the bathroom, Kartya saw strange marks on its forearms. The thing moved forward again.

The first shot shocked Kartya in its loudness, and she realized she'd never experienced gunfire firsthand without protective ear muffs. She recovered quickly, as she had to, concentrating on readying a second shot despite the knowledge that the thing had not been halted or even slowed in its pursuit. She'd hit it three inches below the chest, a mark devoid of any major organs. Kartya figured this could be why the creature was still on its feet, but she had a sneaking suspicion that it was not the only thing spurring the demon forward.

Kartya hit the creature again, in the shoulder, and again, clipping its neck, spurts of

blood exploding from the torn flesh, and again, another shot to the stomach. Still it stalked toward her, so Kartya took a deep breath and held it, steadying her hands and her gaze, and aimed for its right kneecap. She hit it dead center, and the thing's leg seemed to fold backward, threatening to topple the creature ass over teakettle, but it would not go down. Before it could fully right itself, she aimed for the left kneecap. Another direct hit, and when the thing's jeans tore and knee shattered, Kartya thought she saw a substantial fragment of bone go catapulting through the air like a haphazardly-thrown Frisbee. Again, the creature stayed on its feet.

Kit had considered the possibility of a break-in serious enough to warrant planting the revolver by her bedside, but not serious enough to provide her with extra bullets. The thing had swayed like a drunken sorority girl in too-high heels, but when it took another step, hesitant, but advancing all the same, Kartya knew she had to enact plan B.

Before she could change her mind, she rushed at the thing with calculated strides, coming to a stop before she reached the end of the damask-patterned runner. She bent before the creature, loath to take her eyes off it for even a moment, and took the corner of the rug up in her fingers. She knew she couldn't yank the runner hard enough to accomplish her end goal of toppling the creature over the bannister and initiating a freefall to the ground floor below, but she hoped to knock it off its feet enough to start that process. Luck was on her side, however, and the creature had already begun to fall off

balance, so that when she yanked the runner with a throaty grunt, its back was already pressed against the bannister, and the upward movement of the rug functioned to throw the creature's legs up and over its head in a graceless backflip over the railing.

It fell the distance of fourteen hardwood steps and crashed to the floor below. Flipping on the hall light, Kartya leaned over and peered into the abyss. The thing had already gotten up and was placing one splintered but still-operational leg onto the bottom step.

"You have got be kidding me," Kartya said out loud, scuttling back from the edge and heading for the guest bedroom.

Kartya had only fired the shotgun on one prior occasion, and even then she'd almost passed on the opportunity, preferring to refine her technique with the handgun. Before she exited the bedroom, she slipped her still-bare feet into a pair of red Victoria's Secret slippers, the left foot embroidered with the word 'naughty' in white stitching, and the right with the word 'nice.' It occurred to her that it would be immeasurably easier to fight Deadites without a full bladder, so she walked to the bathroom to relieve herself, pointing the shotgun at an opening in the bannister rails as she did,



counting herself lucky when she heard what sounded like a scuffle amongst the creatures at the bottom of the stairs, delaying their climb. She declined to flush, not sure if the noise would send their zombie-like brains into a frenzy, and stood at the threshold of the passage to the stairs. *What would Ash do, she thought?* She looked down at her feet.

"Time to put the 'naughty' foot forward," she said, forcing a half-grin, and stepped her left foot out into the hallway.

Kartya marched down the stairs, beholding the scene below her, and cocked the shotgun. There were three creatures, as she'd guessed from the equal number of shattered

windows, and they appeared more akin to Deadites than she'd have thought possible apart from being on-set for a taping of 'Ash vs Evil Dead.' They appeared to be undeterred by pain but incapable of reason, and they were unable to begin their onslaught of the second floor because they couldn't decide amongst the three of them who was going

to go up first. Kartya helped them out by blowing the arm off the shorter, stocky man on the left, who looked down to regard the blood and sinew hanging from his shoulder with serene detachment.

The thing to the right of the tall creature

had been female in her human form, and Kartya made the mistake of pulling the trigger as she moved down another step, throwing off her aim and catching the she-thing in the upper portion of the skull, blowing off the top half of its scalp and rocking the thing's head back on its neck. The head snapped back to its original position. Kartya recalled the catchphrase of the popular children's toy that refused to be bowled over: "Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down." With dark amusement, she wondered if anyone had tried to knock a Weeble down with a double barrel shotgun.

Kartya told herself to focus on this next shot. She aimed for the center of the tall one's head and in her nervousness whispered to herself, "boom."

The shot was absolute in its devastation, the shell forging a hole in the thing's skull like the point of a pastry-bag digging through a jelly-filled donut. Kartya was ecstatic to see that with its brain dislodged and projected somewhere into her living room, the Deadite-thing was finally incapable of pursuit.

So that's it, she thought. Although they don't appear human, they can be killed as such. The Necronomicon proposed three specific ways to release a possessed soul: a live burial, bodily dismemberment, or purification by fire. Thinking that she liked her house, and would rather not burn it to the ground, and that time did not permit the digging of two graves in frozen soil, Kartya re-cocked the shotgun. Wistfully, she pictured Ash's chainsaw hand. Bodily dismemberment would be a hell of a lot easier with her hero's weapon

of choice than by the excruciatingly slow process of fortuitous shotgun hits, but beggars can't be choosers.

Oblivious to the flecks of blood and brain matter peppering her body, Kartya closed the distance between her and the two evil things still standing. Needing to make it to the front door, she had to descend the stairs low enough to shoot the creatures sideways, preferably one to the right and one to the left. Getting within arm's reach of the things was not her idea of a good time, but neither was wasting two barrels of the shotgun into anywhere but their heads.

Kartya had properly determined the direction the things would be propelled in, but she wasn't lucky enough to replicate the angle of her shot to the taller creature's head. Though the things were knocked to the floor and out of her path, they were reanimating quicker than she would have liked. Grabbing her car keys from their hook, wishing she had time to find a coat, Kartya fled into the cold night in only her slippers, t-shirt, and sweatpants, the ash-grey shirt darkened in several places with the demon-things' blood.

Ten steps down the front walkway and the moon made a glorious reappearance, lighting Kartya's path to the garage and keeping her from tripping on a bizarre pile of items laid out at the base of her driveway. Allowing one second for curious inspection, Kartya stooped and beheld the needles, spoons, and a random Dunkin Donuts cup of what appeared to be coffee-tainted water. Then the water hissed, geysering up from the cup in an angry spout, and she reevaluated her

first interpretation.

“Crazed junkies or the infected victims of a science experiment gone wrong,” she said as she jogged for the garage. “Either way, no thanks.”

The garage door groaned in protest as Kartya flung it open. She unlocked the Jeep’s doors with a terse beep, praying the noise was not enough to attract the evil things. She surveyed the driveway and as much of the yard as was visible: nothing came for her. Hopping into the car, thinking she could be at the police station in less than five minutes, hoping this was quick enough to bring back reinforcements before the creatures could abandon her place for somewhere else, she threw the car into reverse and prepared to backup. The stout male thing and the lone female one took up the entirety of her rearview mirror.

“I don’t think so,” Kartya said, and flooded the gas. The things disappeared under the Jeep and Kartya flinched as she registered the sounds of splitting flesh and crunching bone. It sounded like someone had thrown a cantaloupe onto pavement from six stories up. Then, there was quiet.

Kartya sat in the driver’s seat, feeling her skin slide over the leather under its coating of gore. She had time for one profound exhalation before a figure blotted out the moonlight streaming through the passenger’s side window. As she regarded the reanimated corpse-woman with horror, the driver’s door opened and Kartya was pulled out of the Jeep by a pair of rough hands inserted under her armpits.

At the last second, before her legs had

fully passed the frame of the vehicle, she found purchase and launched herself backward. The thing hit the pavement again with a wet thump, and Kartya managed to disentangle herself from its clutches.

The house was too far so she ran for the garage, hoping to find a pair of gardening shears. Instead, her headlights illuminated a beautiful sight, the most beautiful sight she’d ever seen. She said a silent apology for ever nagging Kit about cleaning out the garage, packed full with junk from previous tenants, and sprinted for the chainsaw.

She flipped the start switch and placed the saw on the dusty floor, gripping the handlebar with her left hand.

“Here goes everything,” she said, and pulled the starter rope like she’d seen her father, Kit, and Ash all do on numerous occasions. The saw popped, but did not start.

“Dammit!” she yelled, as she watched the first of the possessed-things, which after its run-in with her Jeep had lost even a passing resemblance to a living human, approach the mouth of the garage. She jimmied a black lever on one side and tried the starter rope again. The saw came to life with a deafening rumble.

Kartya had been a vegetarian for eight years, so the extent of her experience with chopping flesh was limited. By the time she’d finished a violent vertical dismemberment of the stout man, she was so thoroughly covered in blood that she did not imagine the second creature’s vivisection could be any worse. It was coming for her, the female, and though Kartya almost slipped in the lake

of blood that covered the two-car garage from wall-to-wall, she was ready for it.

“I must say, you’re taller than Chuckles over there, so this could take a while,” Kartya told the demon-thing.

Kartya missed the creature’s hellish reply under the unforgiving tremors of the chainsaw.

Headlights announced the approach of a vehicle. Drenched from head to foot with an unfathomable amount of blood, Kartya was not curious as to the identity of the driver until the car passed the entrance to No Bottom Pond Road and started down the driveway. Wiping a film of blood from around her eyes, she was surprised to see Kit’s Volkswagen nearing the carnage.

When the car turned slightly and illuminated the blood-covered specter that was Kartya, Kit threw the car in park and was at her side in seconds.

“What the hell! What the—” his hands grasped her shoulders and he surveyed her wildly, looking for a wound.

“It’s ok it’s not my blood,” Kartya told him. She gestured behind her where four halves equaled two bodies.

Kit’s jaw dropped. He was incapable of speech.

“I’ll explain everything, but we should probably call the police at some point. I think they either took some sort of recreational drug that turned out to be far from recreational, or were infected with something that turned them into zombies. Or... Deadites.” She said these last words hesitantly, as if despite the very concrete evidence of

chaos behind her, Kit would think she’d lost her mind at the mention of the purportedly-fictional walking dead.

“Jesus, I can’t believe this. I’m so glad you’re alright. I pulled into the lot at work and said ‘what the hell am I doing?’ The night after the holiday, the night our friends get robbed, I shouldn’t have left you. I should have been here for you. So I called in sick from the parking lot and came home. You should have called me, Kartya. No, you should have called the police right away!”

Moved past the point of revulsion to Kartya’s blood-saturated state, Kit pulled her into a savage embrace. She let him hug her, still a bit shell shocked, then stepped back and took it all in.

The gore packed into her Jeep’s tire treads winked in the moonlight. The dismembered bodies glistened in wide pools of blood near the still-purring chainsaw. The pile of syringes and infected water sat in the foreground of the house’s smashed windows. The house itself, a looming skull with its two front teeth knocked out. Her eyes came back to settle on Kit, and she smiled.

“There was no time to call anyone. I didn’t have much in the way of options, didn’t really have time to come up with a plan. I had to rely on myself, I guess, and on my own tenacity. With a little inspiration from a certain groovy guy.” She paused, wiped a smear of blood from under her cheek, and continued:

“But I’m ok. And everything’s going to be ok. Now come here and gimme some sugar, baby.” ❖

JUMP

BY JANET AMALIA WEINBERG & MARGARET KARMARZIN

I was what you'd probably call an old lady. I also happened to be a physicist—of some renown, if I say so myself. At least until I got kicked out of the physics department. That's what it felt like when they made me retire. They gave me an office, continued use of the lab, and the title, "professor emeritus," but I still went through a bout of the blues; it's natural to feel hurt and angry if all you see is what you've lost. Then one day I realized what I had gained: liberation! I was free to work on what I wanted and no longer had to care what anyone thought.

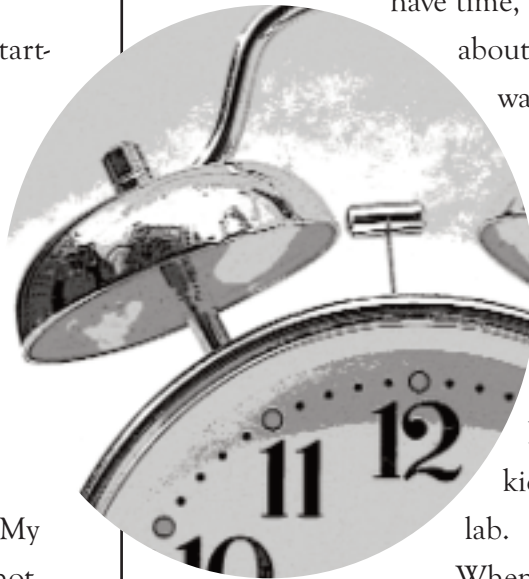
The idea that multiple realities could co-exist simultaneously with ours had always intrigued me. Unfortunately, back when I started out, kids who dropped acid may have talked about other versions of reality but not respected scientists, and I didn't want to risk my career on it. But once I retired, I no longer *had* a career and could finally tackle the problem. It took years of concentrated effort but I succeeded in detecting what I believed was a link to a parallel realm of existence.

No one knew what I was working on. My colleagues—if you can call them that—were not interested in my ideas anymore. They probably thought a shrinking, wrinkled woman with thinning gray hair and some memory loss didn't have any. It was just as well; if they knew what I was up to they probably would have laughed.

I tried not to let their attitude bother me. When I was their age, I had regarded retired professors with the same disrespect and realized that young people simply can't imagine the depth and breadth of understanding that can come with experience. But one time, after being patronized once too often, I made an appointment with Patel, the guy who had replaced me as chair of physics, to show him what a woman my age could do. When I knocked on his door, he yanked it open and snarled, "Don't you remember? I *told* you I had a meeting." Then he called over his shoulder as he hurried off, "When I have time, I want to hear all about your nephew at... was it Brown?"

I fumed and wished him into a black hole but later, realized how lucky I was; if he had seen my work he might have kicked me out of his lab.

When I retired, Patel took over the office I'd enjoyed as chair of the department and I was granted a windowless room, about the size of a large supply closet, crammed with two work areas and a couch. And I had to share it with a graduate student. A student! It



was an insult but I made the best of it and was soon looking forward to afternoon breaks with my office-mate, Lisa. Since I had stopped teaching and had no children of my own, I missed being around the energy and optimism of youth—which Lisa had plenty of. I'd grab a coffee, she'd fill up her water bottle and off we'd go for a lively stroll around the quad or sometimes we'd just hang out on the couch and talk.

Mostly, Lisa worried about what to do with her life—career, men, babies—the typical challenges for young people, and I listened with the ear of a mentor. One day she turned to me and asked what made me become a physicist. I hesitated, but decided to tell her. “My grandmother used to tell me stories about an invisible world. ‘I can almost see it,’ she’d say. ‘It’s right here, overlapping ours.’ The family thought she was loony but when I was nine, I decided to become the kind of scientist who could search for it.”

“Surely they were just stories?” Her tone said, “You couldn’t be *that* nuts—could you?” and made me defensive.

“That doesn’t rule out that gran might have been on to something,” I said. “In fact, with the current interest in the Many-Worlds Interpretation, physics may finally be catching up to her.”

Lisa looked surprised and said, “You mean that under the nose of Patel, famous for dismissing any notion of alternate realities as New Age nonsense, you’re looking for another reality?” Instead of ridiculing me, as I expected, she seemed delighted by the incongruity. “He’d shit a camel if he knew,” she said and added something that really touched me. “I’m honored you told me. Truly.”

Not long after that, I was in my office, fine-

tuning my equipment. It was around midnight—normally, I only worked on my apparatus at night when no one was around.

Testing one of the receptors for the umpteenth time, I flipped the switch and a shimmery area, approximately four feet by five, appeared in the central space of the room. I’d seen that before and identified it as a portal to the parallel realm I was seeking. Although I hadn’t actually created the link, I *was* able to reliably detect it. Everything I’d already shoved in and out of it—organic as well as inorganic, had come back in apparent good shape. Now it was *my* turn.

Unfortunately, if I wanted to return, the equipment would have to remain set up during my absence. The shimmering connection between the two planes would also be visible but I hoped my lack of importance would keep people out of my office. Lisa, of course, might see it but I trusted her and left her a note asking her not to worry or interfere.

It was time. I walked up to the rippling area, took a deep breath and stepped in. There was a deafening buzz. Every cell in my body seemed to vibrate and spin out of control. It was like being ripped apart by a giant force-field. I thought I was going to die.

But I didn’t. And when the spinning stopped I found myself in a windowless room about the size of my own office. A strange apparatus sat in one corner. Aside from that, the room was bare.

I cracked the door open and saw a large unlit physics lab, similar to the lab adjacent to my own office. Even in the dark I could see that the workbenches and equipment, though recognizable, were all oddly different from what I was

used to.

I trembled with amazement. Had I done it? Really made the jump to a parallel reality? I was afraid to believe it but what else could I think? I was imagining my old gran grinning and giving me a ‘right-on’ salute when my insides heaved and started spinning again. Overwhelmed with vertigo, I stumbled back to the shimmery area and, after a long wrenching moment, found myself on the couch in my own office. I had enough presence of mind to discard the note I’d left for Lisa but it took hours to recover from the nausea and fright. All the while, I kept asking myself, *Was I really in another world? Or did I dream it?*

That night I went to bed with a dull headache but woke, convinced the experience was too real to have been a dream. And I was raring to go again. I figured the shock of entry would diminish as I got used to it but, to be on the safe side, decided to take anti-nausea meds before the next jump. The opportunity came the following Monday. Everyone in the department was attending a nano-materials workshop in the conference room and the lab was deserted.

I set up the equipment in my office, left a note again for Lisa, and entered the portal. As expected, the transition was easier. I found myself back in the windowless room, only this time the door wouldn’t open. I fiddled with the knob as quietly as I could but someone must have noticed. I heard footsteps, then a key turning in the lock....

I braced myself.

The door was yanked open and a figure stood back-lit in glaring light.

“What are you doing in here?” a male voice boomed.

“Dr. Patel!?” I gasped. The man looked just like him, but the Patel I knew probably would have scolded me; this one sounded relieved to find me. And his clothes! The Patel I knew was the tweed jacket-pressed khaki slacks type. This one had on a velvety-soft kimono jacket and comfortable looking green bell-bottom pants!

“Uh, I uh-” I stammered.

“We’ve been waiting for you!” he said as he hastened me through the lab, down a hall and into a conference room where I got an even bigger shock.

I met myself!—or an alternate version of myself. As I entered the room, a woman who looked just like me, only more attractive and full of pizzazz, was coming through another door. I stared, speechless. The five or six other people present seemed just as stunned.

The man who looked like Patel broke the silence. “Oh! Now I see.” He paused as if to collect himself. “We were sort of expecting this. But still... amazing!”

“This is Dr. Marty Kravitz,” he said introducing the other woman. “And you are?”

I could barely speak but managed to whisper, “Dr. Martha Kravitz.”

The Patel-look-alike suggested the meeting adjourn, “So these two women can have time to get used to each other.”

The group broke up and, still dazed, I followed the woman to her office—a prestige-palace compared to the dump I worked in.

We sat, looking at each other. Marty had my physical features—the same Slavic face and chunky body only she seemed full of life compared to me and had the relaxed glow my girlfriends and I used to call “that just laid look.” It

had been ages since I'd felt like that. Her long silver hair was loosely gathered in a chignon—I wore mine in a bun—and she had on slacks and a kimono shirt that looked soft and comfortable.

The first thing I said was, “Are you really real?”

She smiled. “As real as you.”

It's one thing to mathematically demonstrate the existence of multiple realities, but quite another to actually *be* in one. And to meet someone who seems to be me but isn't...I

wondered if I was having a breakdown or losing my mind.

“Me too.” she said, as if reading my mind. “It's unnerving.”

It was like looking in a mirror and hearing your image talk back to you. “Are you also a physicist?” I asked.

“Think about it,” she said. “If you and I are as alike as we seem, we've probably even been working on the same problem.”

“Multiple realities?”

She nodded.

“Did you create the portal?” I asked. When she nodded I said, “We're not totally alike then; I merely detected it.”

“The whole physics lab was involved,” she said.

I asked if her colleagues still respected her and could see from her reaction that the question made no sense to her. “Still?” she asked.

I felt my bitterness but this was too thrilling a moment to get caught up in it. “So show me,” I said, all excited. “I can't wait to see your work.”

“You mean on the portal?” she said, as if it wasn't important. “Actually, I'm not so into that anymore.”

My mouth must have dropped open because she added. “I still check in at the lab and do some work there but only when I feel like it. I'm more into working on a book now. A memoir.”

Then she put her hand on my shoulder and said she'd show me around.

She took me through an area of college bars and cafés. I felt close to her, as if I'd always known her. Suddenly she turned to me and said, “I feel close to you, as if I've always known you.”

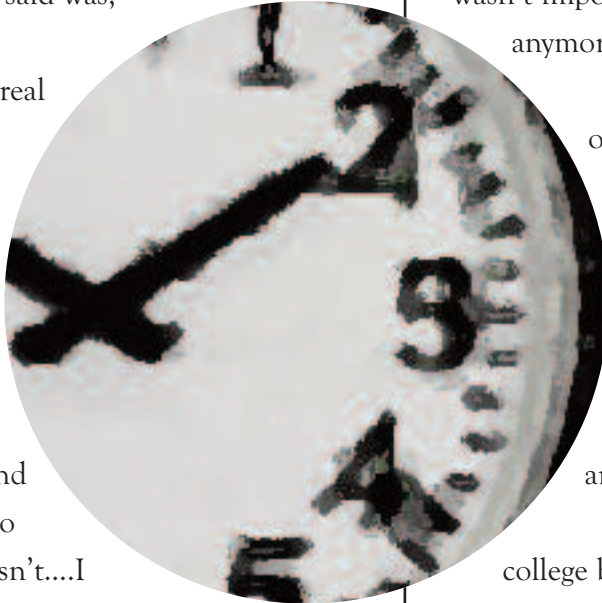
That gave me chills. It was like having a twin, only more so.

“Well, as your twin,” she said, “do I have the right to ask why you seem so...” She paused as if looking for the least offensive word. “... so diminished.”

“I'm getting old,” I said, “so I'm getting smaller.” I was angry that she'd made me say it. “You lose your work, your health, maybe even your mind. And then you die.”

“It sounds like you don't see any value in all that,” she said. I thought she was kidding but she wasn't. Apparently, in Marty's world, the ability to face loss of one's self without fear was considered a transcendent achievement, a way to develop depth and power.

While I mulled that over, we came to a café



and Marty suggested we go in. Lace curtains, white linens, chandeliers—it was very Viennese so I wasn't surprised to hear harpsichord music in the background. Marty chose a window table and ordered for us while I looked out at the passing scene.

A group of teenaged girls walked by. They all had white hair!

Marty smiled. "It's 'in' to look older."

"That's funny," I said, "the young here look old, or try to, and if you're an example, the old look young."

She appeared confused again so I explained that I'd meant she seemed full of life.

After a moment, she asked if my world associated vitality only with youth. When I nodded, she said. "Your world must be a terrible place to grow old."

Our order arrived— a pink drink that reminded me of chai and pastry filled with a creamy marzipan-type filling. I was enjoying the tastes when I noticed how worried she looked and asked what was wrong.

"Your world disturbs me," she said. "My guess is, Mid-Lifers run it without much input from Elders; it must be way out of balance."

"Mid-Lifers?"

"People in the building-careers-and-families stage," Marty explained. "They get a lot done, but they're driven by their hormones and the poor things are always pushing onward and upward, needing more and better. The stress! It

makes me tired just to think of it."

"But what about it?" I asked.

"That's fine and right for that stage of life but our own stage is more about acceptance and compassion. And without the wisdom of the long-range perspective of Elders, I hate to think what your world might do with our discovery. The military would probably take it over."

Marty paused then shook her head. "I will of course need to discuss this with my colleagues, but I know they'll agree: we can't risk connecting with such an immature world."

I understood that meant that I couldn't keep coming back.

"Not until your world can appreciate Elderhood." She paused and her eyes lit up.

"But you could stay," she said.

Stay?! That set off an upheaval inside me.

Staying there wasn't like moving to another country, it was about jumping to a another world. I imagined life at home—the lab, the people who ignored me. It would only grow worse as I got older. On the other hand, I'd spent my whole life there - my friends, my home, it was all there.

Again I wondered if I could trust my mind to see clearly when Marty said, "You probably see your own world more clearly now than ever."

It was time to go; I was uneasy about leaving my apparatus exposed too long in my office. Marty promised to keep the portal open another three days to give me time to decide and we returned to the windowless room that contained the portal. I felt a terrible sense of loss as I stepped through the inter-dimensional doorway.



Then Marty called, “Three days!” and flipped the switch.

I must have blanked out because when I came to, I was sitting up on the couch in my office and Patel—my Patel, and a man in a uniform had their backs to me and were addressing a crowd outside my door. Empowered by my experience in Marty’s world, I walked right up to them and asked what was going on.

Both of them spun around and looked surprised to see me.

The uniformed guy recovered first. He grabbed my arm and barked, “Who let *you* in?”

I looked straight at him till he dropped my arm but he moved in aggressively too close when I turned to ask Patel what was going on.

Patel sputtered but managed to tell me that a strange instrument had been discovered in my office.

“It seems to be generating an area of unexplained, pulsing oscillation,” he said. “Word got out and now the army is taking over.” He shot the other man an outraged look. “That’s Colonel Clark.”

I glanced from one to the other and said, “How dare you interfere with my work!”

Clark paid no attention to what I’d said and told me I would need to be debriefed, then added, “Even if you know nothing about it.”

‘*Know nothing*’? My mind was racing. The rest of my life was about to be decided.

I could read the man’s face; he was going to confiscate my equipment, block off the area and install a military presence. I’d be barred from the lab and treated as a doddering fool.

My mind raced. If I went to Marty’s world I’d be respected. It was possible that I’d meet alternate versions of everyone I cared about. But I wasn’t a hundred percent certain her world was real. There *was*, however, one thing, I could be certain of. Whether it was or it wasn’t real, my life would be better there.

“Just a minute,” I said with authority I hadn’t felt in years. “I am responsible for this!”

The look on Patel’s face was priceless: confusion, dismay, disbelief, anger.

“You?” he said.

All eyes were on me.

Colonel Clark elbowed Patel aside, pointed to my sensor and snarled, “What do you know about that?”

My age worked in my favor now; they would not suspect me capable of what I was about to do. “I’ll show you how it operates,” I said with grandmotherly sweetness. I re-positioned the device so I could discreetly set the controls to “auto-destruct”—an option I had wisely programmed into the mechanism. Then I backed slowly towards the portal.

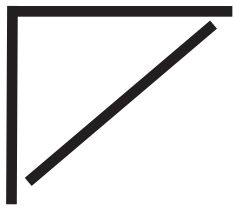
Clark grew suspicious. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

Patel was hovering anxiously.

The portal was less than three feet from me. Suddenly, I pointed straight ahead and yelled, “Oh my God!”

It was the corniest old trick but it worked. And while the two men, and everyone else turned to stare in the indicated direction, I whirled around and jumped. ❖

END TRANSMISSION



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 5

Page 1 – TAKE THE NEXT LEFT by Mario Lowther. He writes, “My short fiction has appeared in *Necrotic Tissue*, *Imaginarium*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Mystic Signals*, and *Remarkable Doorways*, and has been a Glimmer Train New Writers Top 25 Finalist.”

Page 11 – TIME LAG by David Hann. He writes, “I am a university teacher from New Zealand. I am currently working in a university in a small city in China. I am married with a 2 year old child (who sometimes thinks he is 18). I used to write for the university magazine when I was a student, but I have had nothing else published since those long ago days.”

Page 16 – THE CLOCKWORK HOURI by Robert Hartzell. The piece is part of a larger fiction-cycle titled **Pictures of the Floating-Point World**. Other pieces from the cycle have appeared most recently, or will appear, in *the Upender*, *Milkfist*, *Typehouse*, **the Startling Sci-Fi: New Tales of the Beyond** anthology (New Lit Salon Press), and **the Science Fiction Stories** anthology (Flame Tree Publishing). He can be found at <http://robhartzell.wordpress.com>



TAKE THE NEXT LEFT

by MARIO LOWTHER

The accident scene lay up the road, investigators scuttling all about, measuring skid marks and tracing the damage path, the photographer's camera strobing and growling. A tow truck backed into position, a city worker eyeing the overhead power lines. Firemen closed up the Jaws of Life. Paramedics in no hurry waited with a gurney and a body bag. The ground was wet, and red.

Down the road, ignoring the onlookers, Demmy stood beside his car, a blue older model Prelude in immaculate condition parked at an angle to the curb. The guilty exhilaration he'd first felt had died. Now he felt sad. And nervous. Very very nervous. This *had* to happen, he thought.

A chrome bumper straddled the center yellow line, bent double like a fortune cookie. He glared at it, then at Officer Grott, whose sideshow-sized nose was deep in his notebook. I've told you everything, Demmy repeated to himself. Shortly after eleven o'clock, I turned onto Woolrich Boulevard from King Street, and proceeded northbound down the inside lane at slightly over the speed limit. The second vehicle, a black Corvette, sped up from behind, doing probably twice my speed. It flashed its lights, ordering me to move. I engaged my right turn signal, and was about to change lanes,

when the Corvette swerved around me, the driver gesturing then accelerating. He must've grazed the curb because the car lost control, went airborne, and struck the tree head-on.

A horrified gasp from the onlookers made Demmy flinch. As the paramedics extracted the battered and bloody body from the wreckage, the mangled stump of a hand had slipped out and knuckled the pavement. Demmy shuddered, feeling the frost of accusing eyes.

"Are we done?" he demanded, then regretting it, thought: easy, be cool, can't let on.

Officer Grott gave the quivering witness a critical look. "Mr. Hoyt, how much time do you think elapsed between the second vehicle flashing its lights and you engaging your signal?"

An island of shattered windshield glass sparkled red and blue under the police car lights. Demmy held himself close and said, "Couple seconds," then reiterated, "Did he piss me off? Yes. Did I do anything to provoke him? No. Can I please go? I'm not handling this very well. Sorry."

Officer Grott snapped his notebook shut. His lip curled faintly in disgust. "Okay, have a good night, Mr. Hoyt. Go get some rest. We'll be in touch. And remem-

ber, you're a lucky man."

"Lucky," Demmy grunted. In his haste to leave he stumbled off the sidewalk. In his car, his hand on the keys in the ignition, he closed his eyes and sighed. When he next looked, the cop stood framed in the side-view mirror, his penetrating expression musing whether to hold Demmy up while he leaned against the trunk and had himself a good old fashioned re-think. With a short wave goodbye, Demmy roared the Prelude to life and exited quickly down Woolrich Boulevard.

Officer Grott's junior partner, Officer Ivory, approached. "Our hero gonna make it?"

"Thought he was gonna go messy on his shoes," Grott said, still bothered by something.

"You ran his plates?"

"Six-one-Tango-eight-five-Romeo, '93 blue Prelude, registered to Demeter Hoyt, 262 James Terrace. Age forty-two, no priors, no warrants. Not even a traffic violation. An angel."

"No, a virgin," Ivory smirked. "First-timer, carnage overload. C'mon, let's wrap it up."

They turned back to the accident scene. The Corvette, its radiator in the front seat, had just been winched off of a thick, unmoveable oak. The ambulance was departing, the onlookers wandering home.

Officer Grott opened his notebook to jot down the time. The page screamed out at him,

and his notes smacked him between the eyes. "James Terrace is on the other side of town," he blurted to Ivory. "So what the hell was he doing out here so late?"

In the rear-view mirror, Demmy saw the ambulance leave. His shakes began to subside. Just bad luck, the accident happening, but he felt proud of how he'd handled it. And sometimes bad luck turns into good. And sometimes they say you gotta make your own luck, that's what I'm doing, making my own luck. I'll be okay, only gotta keep my eyes on the road and not attract attention...

...but what about that cop, Demmy thought. Did he suspect something? Maybe he didn't. Or did he? Maybe he's put two and two together. And he's coming after me. Coming now...

Demmy couldn't chance getting caught, had to know, had to be sure. Bracing himself with a deep breath, he braved another look into the rear-view mirror.

Someone sitting in the back seat met his gaze.

He was young. The shattered windshield



had raked his skin away, leaving gore for flesh. Glass cubes stuck out everywhere like a bad case of light-reflective acne. A large, jagged chunk protruded from his right cheek. His nose had sliced off, a crater remaining. Brain matter gleamed from a crevasse in his forehead. Blood carpeted his long, stringy hair. His wide, wild eyes gaped at Demmy, the left eyeball popped out and dangling.

“Take the next left,” he said.

“*Jesus Christ!!!*” Demmy screamed.

The steering wheel spun in his hands, the car barreling through a red light onto Fontana Avenue, traffic lurching to a halt and honking. White-knuckled, Demmy spun it back, regaining control and starting down a rundown street of dimly-lit gas stations and storefronts behind bars.

“I didn’t know I could do that!” the carcass in the back seat raved. “Sweet!”

He grinned in the mirror. Three of his lower front teeth appeared to have been forcibly removed. A rivulet of chunky guck snaked out, dribbling down his chin and onto his tee-shirt, which was black and sported a green ankh.

“Hey, dude, I’m Zip,” he said, offering his hand without thinking, what was left of it. He giggled insanely, realizing.

“Demmy,” Demmy shuddered. “Uh... how you doing?”

Zip guffawed, spewing more effluence. “A comedian. Sweet. Actually, Demmy, thanks to you I’m pretty fucked up. But I’ve got unfinished business so you’re taking me where I gotta go.”

That gave Demmy a cold feeling. “What

do you mean?”

The car bolted forward. Demmy stomped on the brake, barely missing rear-ending a bus, the tires screeching. Smoothly the gas pedal returned to its natural position under Demmy’s boot.

“What I mean,” Zip smiled, “is that in the great scheme of things we’ve been ordained to share a fate. We’re not told why. So tough shit. Just drive, and don’t do anything to piss me off.”

Sighing hard, Demmy kept his eyes on the road and his thoughts to himself. On Fontana Avenue, dingy tenements began to pop up alongside vacant lots choked with weeds and garbage.

Zip whistled. “Hey, Demmy! Look what else I can do.”

Although not high on the list of things Demmy wanted to obey, he did. Instantly seared into his brain was an image of Zip in the rear-view mirror happily plucking a shard of windshield glass from his face, then with a grunt of effort wrestling the large jagged chunk out of his cheek.

He held up the blood-dripping thing. “I’ll just lay this on the floor mat, okay? You sure keep your vehicle clean, Demmy. I’m down with that. I like order. I like finishing things.”

Demmy disliked the sound of that. He launched a windshield-wiping towel into the back seat. “Aren’t you supposed to be in an ambulance?”

“I am,” Zip said. He giggled again. “Don’t worry. It didn’t hurt. Over before it started really. And hey, I’m impressed. You

were primo chilled, back there when you lied to that cop.”

Chagrined, Demmy gaped at the rear-view mirror. “What do you mean, I didn’t....”

The steering wheel began to rock. Demmy grabbed on, struggling to stay in his lane and not attract attention. He threw Zip a pleading look, saw the back seat ghoul casually shaping his blood-matted hair into a sloppy mohawk, the tips pointing like barbed spikes. Done, he beamed proudly, then as if remembering a neglected detail, he popped his dangling eye back in. When he blinked, he made alternate winks with a two-second delay. Demmy gave up pleading.

Zip broke into a crimson grin. “Dude, when he asked you about time elapsing, I failed to hear you mention the nudge you tried to give me.”

Demmy saw events unfold again: the Corvette tailgating his ass just a wheel-width away, high beams flashing impatiently, swerving just as Demmy finally acquiesced to lane-change. The Corvette’s single-finger protest, Demmy responding with a right-hand tug on his steering wheel. The other car lurching in surprise, slamming against the curb, launching into the air...

“You were so chilled,” said Zip, as Demmy fought to keep the Prelude from careening all over Fontana Avenue, “you looked at the cop, the street, the wreck, the onlookers, at everything *except your car*. What up? Most dudes would scope their transport to reassure themselves there’s no damage. Idiot cop’s probably pondering: ‘What’s so special about his car that

Demmy didn’t want me to notice?’ Not the interior - that’s immaculate. Glove compartment, maybe?” Alarmed, Demmy watched the compartment unlock and yawn open, crammed with accessories and papers. Not even a deck of cards or a condom. The door closed. “Maybe not. Wait a second, was it...?”

“NO!” Demmy shouted.

With a banshee scream, Zip dove through the crack between the back seats, vanishing up to his belt. Twisting around, Demmy latched onto his leg, trying to tug him out. It felt as though he was grabbing onto semi-frozen stew. He yanked harder, swooning with disgust.

Bang! The Prelude bucked over something solid. An overflowing trash can showered the air like fireworks. Demmy’s forehead thwacked against the steering wheel and he realized to his horror he had wrenched the wheel over, now the car was doing fifty down the sidewalk. As if in slow-motion he sped past two barely human shapes in the half-open doorway of a nameless shop engaged in a non-consensual act with two others assisting. A shawled figure shambled into view dead ahead, pushing an overloaded shopping cart. Demmy blasted the horn, a cane clubbing the car as it sped by and a leprous face cursing in an alien tongue.

Zip re-emerged as if siphoned out from between the back seats. “Hey, dude,” he grinned, “can you explain why there’s a box in your trunk with a baby in it?”

Like you’d understand, Demmy thought. He glared at Zip, snarling, “Fuck you.”

The Prelude lurched back onto Fontana Avenue, right into the path of a delivery truck. It swerved and screeched to a halt, horn blaring at Demmy's taillights.

"Alright!" Demmy yelled. "She's my girlfriend's kid! Look, I don't know what you think about me, but I've got nothing, okay? All I have is this car and a skinny broad on welfare who's passed out twenty-four seven. But she's blessed with this unreal kid, and I thought... well..."

"You'd wait till the slut was snoring, then steal her brat. Then what?"

"Start over!" Demmy said, steering wildly. "Gimme back the goddamned wheel!"

"Make your own luck," Zip said ruefully, looking thoughtful despite lacking a face. "So you put her in the trunk because you were scared and weren't thinking straight. No shit, that cop spooked you. Dude, you're right, this is an unreal kid. Two car accidents and not even a wah."

The Prelude's engine calmed, the car decelerating. Hoping against hope, Demmy eased off the pedal. "Her name's Ramona," he said. "Sleeps through anything. Has to. Shit, if you think she's getting knocked around here, you should see what her mother's addict friends do, treating her like a crushed beer can, even worse." With Betty stoned witless and raving that Ramona was a curse, a good devil to her bad. Demmy found it actually felt good to get this off his chest.

That, and the light up ahead had turned red. He slid a toe onto the brake.

"You're right about me making my own luck," he babbled on. "Y'see..."

"That's what I thought I was doing," Zip nodded. "Till I met you."

The wheel spun in Demmy's hands, the Prelude hang-gliding across two lanes of traffic on a four-wheel drift, before catching and swinging right, tires squealing, onto Jackson Road.

Demmy gave a hollow laugh. Anywhere but Jackson Road. "Was it something I said?"

"Dude, when the light of your life comes to and has nothing to inject pabulum into - well, let's say the cops have your name, address and license number and you're gonna be very fucking popular. Until that happens, you're gonna have to sit tight." Zip's lacerated expression was grim. "Like I told you before, I've got unfinished business. And we're tethered. Just lucky, I guess."

The car rattled on over cobblestones and rusted rail lines, and the further down Jackson Road, the sadder things were. Even the cops ventured down here only as a last resort. The street was a tunnel, the shop signs stripped away, the black buildings so close one could spit, or worse, from side to side. One might wonder what would befall the fool who dared park his vehicle here. The sort of place where doors didn't open during the day, yet dusty lights still came on at night.

Straight ahead swelled the harbor, a well of black secrets, rippling, thick like oil. Demmy didn't like water or the docks. Who knew what went on behind security gates and barbed wire. A different world, with dif-

ferent rules.

Jackson Road descended toward a dead end, a gate, a Keep Out sign, and a long, empty pier. Demmy resolved not to beg for mercy but to go down with dignity. He crossed his fingers and thought of Ramona, deep asleep and oblivious in the box in the trunk. Kid, if we get out of this, I promise you'll have it better than what you had. If not, then we'll go down together, and tomorrow morning Betty will stagger awake and fly into a panic. Better luck next time, hon.

The Prelude made a last-second hard right turn away from the pier. Demmy held on and blew a sigh of relief. It was short-lived. The car passed a low brick wall and entered the parking lot of a run-down, glass-fronted building with no storefront name. Large red posters covered the windows, bearing strange symbolic scripts above numbers accompanied by a ¢ or \$ sign. It was no language Demmy had ever seen. But he recognized the pattern of the posters immediately.

It was a supermarket.

A battered brick warehouse extended behind it, lined with disused shipping doors. At the rear stood a too-high metal fence topped with barbed wire, with a big gate that smoothly swung open. Demmy held his breath as the Prelude sped in and bounced onto an old, creosote-stained pier. Two forklifts like worker bees were off-loading containers from a trailer. In the harbor, tugboats were piloting in a sea-worn freighter, the bridge deck crowded with shadowy figures.

The gate closed. The car stopped. Demmy swallowed. Now that they weren't moving, he wished he could run. Waves rippled, and somewhere in the darkness a seagull cackled.

A container door half as wide as the back of the warehouse opened, a man emerging as if from a giant mouth. Far away he was tall and swarthy; up close he turned short and stocky, more powerful and threatening with each step. Demmy couldn't tell if he was Arabic, Indian, Asian or Alien; he was some, then none, then everything. His mean Happy Face smile beamed disquiet.

"You're late," said the Everything Man in a gurgling, underwater-soaked voice. Demmy stared back, the helpless bystander. Momentarily thrown, the thug then saw Zip waving from the rear. Although impressed by Zip's condition, he shrugged as if he'd seen worse. Stepping back, he eyed the Prelude from bumper to bumper, and declared ominously: "This is not the car."

Zip's window rolled down without him touching it. "Ran into one tiny problem," he said.

The Everything Man's lip raised in a sneer, exposing hammerhead teeth, his expression retorting *And one enormous problem*. "Come," he gurgled, turning toward the container door.

Demmy shook his head and gripped the wheel. "Not me. I'm not going."

He glared his defiance, hoping to convince. Instead he saw himself reflected in agony in the bullet black eyes of the Everything Man. Demmy paled, and the thug laughed *haw haw haw*.

Then Demmy knew why, because he heard it too: a new waterfront sound. Beyond the usual lapping of waves. And the omnipresent hum and clank of machinery.

There was now the plaintive, muffled cries of a baby.

“Feeding time,” Zip announced, his ironical grin adding *tough luck*.

Demmy had seen a gun up close in a grocery hold-up and had been frightened enough to hope to never see one again.

The blaster that the Everything Man drew from behind his back was twice that size, and the barrel even had holes down the sides as though to let the bullets breathe.

“All come,” the gun itself seemed to say, “now.”

Hands up, Demmy came out first. Gun in his ear, he removed a cardboard apple box from the car trunk containing a pink-faced, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl-child swathed in a Teletubby blanket. Ramona squirmed and giggled, thrilled to see him. The Everything Man eagerly reached out to touch her. He had no fingernails, only hard skin, smooth as plastic. Repulsed, Demmy held the box away. He and the thug exchanged glares. Turning, they found Zip waiting at their elbows, his door unopened. As the blaster swung into Zip’s face, Demmy noticed the thug’s hand

tremor briefly. The thug noticed it too. Zip guffawed. He filed in as gestured toward the container door, his squishy footfalls pulling off the pier, Demmy leading with Ramona gazing at him trustingly.

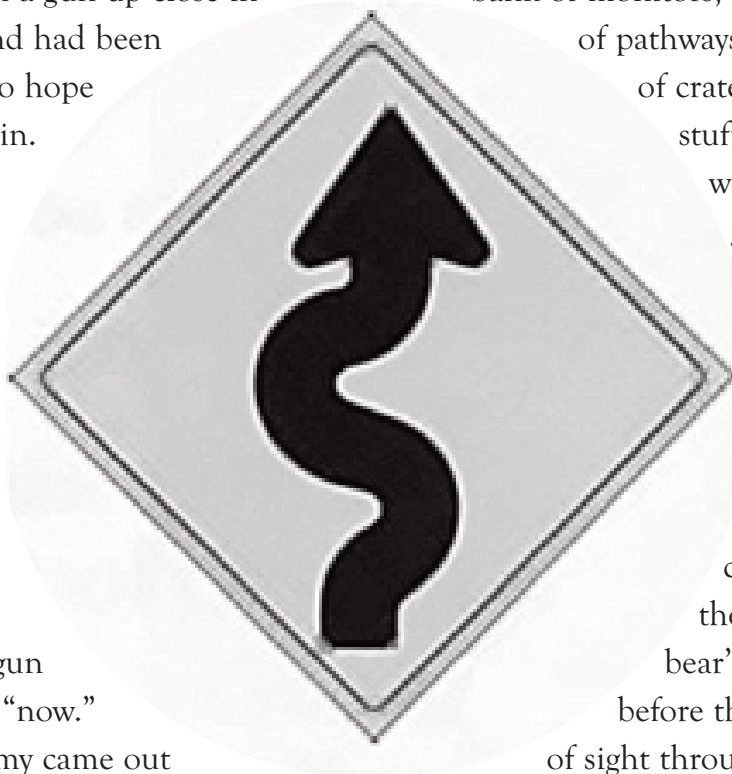
They entered the warehouse past a guard shack where a virtual clone of the Everything Man watched from beside a

bank of monitors, Uzi in hand. A maze

of pathways wove around pillars of crates labelled with food-stuffs and pallets piled with bags of rice and grain. The air reeked of musky spice. Boxes of medical supplies, needles and gauze appeared amongst the edibles. Demmy caught a glimpse of a crate labelled peppers, the lid pried open, a

bear’s foot standing atop it, before they were whisked out of sight through a dark doorway.

The door closed with a click behind them. They were in a room, candlelit and thickly curtained. At the far wall stood a shrine of a hulking marble idol with a ravenous expression leering between two sandstone columns topped by a mantel carved with figures in torment. A naked, voluptuous jade hermaphrodite lay in repose at the idol’s feet, its eyes closed as though asleep, a third eye in its forehead open and gazing, and a cushioned platform, fashioned with stirrups and adjustable from standing to flat, lay before the shrine like an



altar.

Three men sat at a rosewood table in the center of the room. They were bent over bowls of red purée in which many-legged things were undulating, spearing and eating them with tools shaped like scalpels. Two of the men could have been uncles of the Everything Man. The third, in the middle, was tall and ruler-thin, and had stark white hair and a face tapering like a shield, characteristics that seemed to elevate him.

Stepping forward, the thug gurgled a few words. The boss chewed thoughtfully, then in retort barked one harsh word, and the thug lost no time placing himself behind Demmy and Zip, his weapon in his back belt, his hands clasped before him.

"You look poorly," remarked the boss. An instant later, a second guttural voice as though emanating from inside the boss echoed, "*You look poorly.*"

"I've had a bad night," Zip said, embarrassed. He turned. "But I bring you an offering."

He made a pull gesture toward himself. The apple box tugged in Demmy's arms, hard then harder. Panicked, he tried to hold on, but the box broke from his grasp and sailed to Zip.

"You bastard!" Demmy shouted, shaking his fist.

The fleshy men laughed. Zip grinned, motioned the box to the table, and stepped back. The boss peered inside and smiled, a pearl of drool hanging from his elongated, rapier teeth.

"*A yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl-child. I'll take*

it," his inner voice whispered delightedly.

Then both his voices said, "But you come to us without the car. Quw Phan delivered it to you?"

"As arranged. And I thanked him for the opportunity to serve you."

"Then deliver it to us," said the boss, the inner voice adding, "*You made a blood vow.*"

Zip shrugged. "My vow is why I'm here. Quw Phan sends his regrets. Unfortunately, he drowned in his toilet after saying you plan to encase me in something airtight under concrete."

Ramona recoiled as the boss poked her cheek with a long, many-jointed, nail-less finger.

"Kootchie koo," he tittered, the fleshy men laughing again. The boss tossed Zip a look relishing the thought of what he would soon do with that finger. "*Where the car is, you will tell us now.*"

"It's safe. So is the cargo. Long as nobody wonders why the airbags didn't go off." Zip opened his palms casually, retracted then raised them. "Now *you* vow. Swear we're settled, and you take this baby as my token..." He pointed at Demmy, "...and his life as my payment."

Demmy lunged. The Everything Man collared him, one thick arm, tight as a boa round a monkey. Struggling only made it worse. Feeling his life strength begin to ebb, Demmy gazed at Ramona with big eyes, the baby blinking back at him as if understanding and forgiving, then he glared at Zip and made a last, secret, silent vow of his own. His palms still raised, Zip shrugged sorry, Demmy's luck had run out. The boss,

satisfied he knew all, and that blood could now be spilt in the pleasant, time-consuming way, nodded graciously. “*And your life as well,*” he said.

Exactly what Zip had wanted to hear. Gore oozed from his smile as he said: “Too late.”

The boss reacted, barking a quick order. Still holding Demmy, the Everything Man went for his weapon. His eyes widened. It wasn't in his back belt. He whirled, found the exotic piece hovering mid-air like a dragonfly. Angling his upraised palm, Zip aimed the barrel at a puzzled wrinkle in the thug's fat forehead and nodded. The gun fired. The bullet burst out, buzzing like a mosquito. It burrowed into the thug, splashed out the back of his skull, then streaked for the next victim in line. Screaming, the boss collapsed onto the altar, not blood but red purée racing down his cheek from a hole over his left eye. Something green and vaporous emerged from his mouth and fled, shrieking, for the shrine, into the three-eyed androgynous statue lying at the idol's feet.

Zip held out his hand and the blaster flew to him. The fleshy men dove to the floor, firing wildly. By an unseen force, the door blew open. Ramona, grandly entertained, cried with delight.

Demmy saw it all in a blur. “Run!” Zip bellowed, snapping Demmy out of it.

He snatched Ramona from the table and took off, trying to remember his way through the warehouse. Behind him, he heard an exchange of gunfire sounding like explosions in a beehive, then a shrill protest

as if someone in a death throe was being further handled. Demmy came to a halt in a dead end of red pails bearing radioactive stickers. Where to now? Take the next left, he thought. He tore through a nursery of ornate, bulbous plants in greenhouses warmed by humming mauve lights; dodged a hazmat-suited figure lifting some overalls, acid-scorched and frayed and smoking, into a disposal bag with a pair of tongs; then froze, stared up at what hung from a hook in the ceiling, thinking it the oddest-looking side of desiccated beef. Until he counted the digits.

Uzi fire clamoured. The twin thug at the guard shack was firing back into the warehouse. Demmy flew the other way. As he ran out the container door he heard a high-pitched, agonized scream at the guard shack, and a cheerful voice yelled, “Sweet! Now where's that gate switch?”

On the pier it was bedlam. Everyone on a forklift, in a semi-trailer or on the freighter was yelling gibberish and driving, running or sailing towards Demmy. Shots from the ship splintered wood at his feet. Reaching the Prelude, Demmy dropped the apple box in the passenger seat and apologized for the rough treatment to Ramona, who giggled, this apparently being great fun. He wheeled the car around, outrunning a forklift with its forks up, and beelined for the gate.

On cue, it began to open.

Demmy hit the gas. Speed and the thrill of a narrow escape exhilarated him. The Prelude exploded into the parking lot, just as a police cruiser, responding to a shots

fired call, swooped in the other way off of Jackson Road. Its light were flashing, its siren was howling, and to Demmy's dismay, it was just his luck that two familiar faces were looking back at him.

"That's him!" Officer Ivory cried.

Screw you, Demmy thought, rocketing by.

Officer Grott watched him go, pleased that his suspicions were confirmed. "Call it in," he said. "Someone else can pick him up. I want to see why he was in such a hurry."

In the rear-view mirror, Demmy saw the cruiser race toward the pier. He raced too, back to a low-rent suburb and a drab bungalow on King Street. In the carport he sat, collecting himself, and listening to the neighborhood at three in the morning, graveyard silent but for the sound of Betty's bellicose snoring through the open bedroom window.

Ramona grinned up at him. Demmy smiled. He made a little laugh. She made a happy little gurgle. He tickled her. She wriggled and swatted his hand.

Sighing, he said, "I love you, kid, but Betty's right: you're bad luck."

Inside the house, Demmy quickly warmed Ramona's bottle on the stove, fed her and put her to bed, and left his key on the kitchen table with a goodbye note for Betty. When he got back to the car, he felt refreshed and ready. Storm clouds were gathering overhead and he knew worse things would soon be hounding him down a new, terrifying road. But with a little luck,

he'd be fine. And courage, determination and perseverance. And money. Lots of money would help.

"I know where we can find something that's worth millions," said a voice from the back seat. "And I messed with my vow back there, so I'm sensing I'm bound to the goods and now we're ordained to share a new fate. What the fuck, maybe we'll catch a break this time."

"Or maybe not," Demmy said. He shook his head and put the car in gear. "Sweet."

All he had wanted at the beginning of the night, Demmy thought, was to make some luck with someone special and turn a new page. He glanced in the mirror.

"Put your damned eyeball back in," he said, then into the storm they drove. ❖

TIME LAG

by DAVID HANN

Come on. We're off to see the great battle. You don't want to be late. Everyone's coming. All the families in the city, in fact all the families in this hemisphere, will be out in the open air tonight to see the great event that saved our world.

It's one of the things that most people don't think about when they look at the sky. They don't think that what they're doing is looking back in time. Light, after all, travels at a constant speed (purists will disagree, but in a vacuum with no major gravitational fields it's close enough, and any other way of looking at it takes a degree in physics). Basically, it takes light one year to cross one light year so when you look at a star six light years away you are seeing that star as it was six years ago. Seeing as how stars don't normally change that much over the years it's not really important most of the time.

Now, with faster than light ships you can be somewhere before light gets there. If, for example, you fled a supernova, years from then you could go out on your back lawn and watch it happen in comfort when the light finally caught up with you. In a way you can see your own past. In theory, if you had a good enough telescope, you could see yourself on a world you left behind in an FTL ship. You could even wave goodbye to

yourself.

Sorry, I'm rambling. It's just that today is such a great day, and, you know, I'm excited.

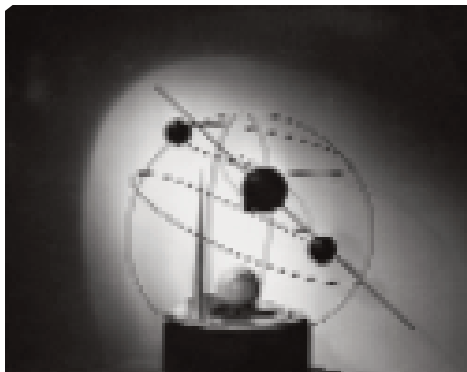
A few years ago things weren't so good. We'd been stuck in a major war with the Brefa, an alien species, for longer than most of us could remember. They were a nasty lot too, violent and downright evil. They didn't occupy worlds in the conventional sense; they looted them and enslaved the occupants. Our colony worlds were devastated in their attacks. It was no use even trying to calculate the death tolls. We just assumed that everyone caught in their attacks were as good as dead. The lucky ones were dead.

Oh sure, we fought back, but we were not winning. Not at all. It's not that the Brefa technology was really in any way in advance of our own. It was certainly different though. They grew their ships and weapons after all. In essence, where we used what you might call industrial technology they tended toward more biological approaches. The quantitative difference was huge, but the qualitative one, in terms of its value in action, was almost nonexistent. The big difference was that they were obsessed with conquest. They attacked in massive numbers and completely disregarded

ed casualties. You see, one of the main reasons they attacked us is that they have an insatiable appetite for new worlds. They breed so fast that they need to keep expanding at a rapid rate, and they need as many habitable worlds as they can. They were driven by their biology. Until very late in the war we couldn't match that fanaticism.

Oh, look, let's sit here. One advantage of being a well-known writer, you get the best spots. Look, the president's platform is only a little behind us. You'll have a great view of the battle tonight. The skies are really clear.

Where was I? Oh, right, the war. It was going badly. We'd lost three quarters of the fleet, half of that at the disastrous battle at Virgo Four. The 2nd and 3rd fleets had been ambushed by a vastly larger Brefa force and cut off from escape by the gravitational instabilities in the system. Most of our colony worlds had fallen and it was obvious that the next target would be here, home. Indeed, their long-range strike ships had already done some hit and run stuff. The worst was when they took out the central records building. Not only was it too close to home, but it was damned inconvenient having to go back to a cash economy because all retinal and DNA records had been lost. And then there were occasional reports of Brefa landing parties being put down at various places, but that seems to have been paranoia, nothing was ever found.



When we realised that the next blow would fall here, and would likely extinguish our race forever, that's when we got fanatical. Everyone who could walk was taught to use a weapon. Everything that could be used as a weapon was converted. We'd make them pay for every inch they took. Beyond that we started stripping the waste dumps for fissionable material. We hadn't used nukes in centuries, they are too messy, but now we figured we'd have nothing to lose. We built enough nukes to drop one pretty much every hundred kilometres across the whole planet. They were badly made, and would have been really dirty when they went off, but they would work. The plan was simple, every time the Brefa advanced more than one hundred kilometres we'd fire one of these things at

their new location. We'd slaughter them as they took up new positions. If we won, well and good. If we lost then all they'd be able to claim was a burnt-out radioactive rock. The world would be useless to them. Either way, they'd lose.

Of course the Brefa knew we'd put up a hell of a fight and they started developing their own weapons. A small number of amazingly brave and resourceful individuals managed to escape Brefa controlled space and reported all sorts of horrible things. The Brefa scientists had been taking slaves and exposing them to all sorts of nasty bio-

logical stuff. They tried mind control bugs, killer insect swarms, viruses. There were certainly stories of biological modification in all sorts of forms, both on the slaves and even modifications to their own bodies and appearances. It was horrifying stuff. It made me feel quite ill when I read it. What really worried us was that they would manage to produce some sort of super virus that could wipe us all out while they sat in their ships and laughed at our nukes. We had bio-warfare suits and the like, but only for about five percent of the population. If the Brefa succeeded in developing a truly effective bio-weapon the rest would die.

So there we were... No, don't open the wine yet! We have a good ten minutes before the battle begins. See the president's only just got here. He looks so happy too. Well he should, this is his night after all.

We were basically sitting around waiting to die. No one really expected to live through the battle. If the Brefa didn't develop a virus to kill us all then their weapons would, or ours. Maybe we'd die in a Brefa bombing attack, maybe a little slower from the radiation of one of our own bombs. It didn't really matter, we expected to die. The only thing to look forward to was killing a few of them.

Then one day the miracle happened. Okay, the day didn't start very well. The newly completed battlecruiser "Vigilant" went out of control and plunged into the atmosphere. A ship of that size is too big to

burn up completely; so large parts of it hit the ground, impacting on fleet HQ as it happened. As the president and defence cabinet had been visiting at the time the accident effectively took out the whole of our government and military command apparatus. It seemed that fate was against us too.

Okay, then the miracle happened. A fleet of capital ships was seen on TV blasting away from the dark side of the moon. They told us that this fleet had been constructed in secret to avoid any Brefa attention and that it would now be going out to engage the main Brefa fleet before it could reach us, and before it could react. The fleet was led by Commander Zhania, who we had all thought had

been killed at Virgo Four. It turns out that fleet had exaggerated the number of crews killed at Virgo Four so they could be redeployed back here to man the new fleet. I have no idea how they escaped the gravitational trap at Virgo Four. Anyway, the whole thing had been kept so secret that even their own families didn't know.

We waited with baited breath. We couldn't see what was going on of course. That's the whole thing about FTL; you travel faster than you can see. All we knew was that the fleet had jumped to engage the main enemy fleet some 10 light years out. We waited, and hoped, and prayed. I have to admit, we didn't have too much confidence. We'd seen the Brefa

smash our fleets in the past. Most of us thought it might gain us a couple of months at most.

Then the high-speed picket boat was spotted jumping back in-system. Immediately the jump distortion had cleared she sent us a broadcast of the battle. Oh, it was gorgeous. For once luck had been with us. The Brefa had massed almost all their ships and were just getting their fleet ready for the final jump when our fleet jumped right into the middle of their formation. We were outnumbered almost ten to one, but we had surprise and utter desperation on our side. Our fleet tore through them, reducing the odds to eight to one before they even had time to react. Then they started fighting back and all hell broke loose. We lost almost all of our new ships, but by the time the battle was over the entire Brefa fleet was gone. Our only survivors were the flagship "Vengeance" and the light cruiser "Retaliation". They'd done their jobs though.

The Brefa contacted us a day later. Unbelievably they wanted an armistice. Apparently even they couldn't take that sort of pounding. They agreed to expand their empire away from us. The massive sacrifice had been worth it.

"Vengeance" and "Retaliation" limped home in a couple of days with their surviving skeleton crews. Remarkably Commander Zhanian had survived the battle. It was so sad to wreck his homecoming with the news that his family had been killed in a freak flying accident the day before. The war had been hard on so many though; vir-

tually none of the crewmembers had any family to come home to.

There's only a couple of minutes left till we can see the great battle so I'd better make this quick. We've been waiting ten years too see this. I don't want to miss it, or distract you from it either.

Obviously, as the government had been killed in the "Vigilant" disaster we had to hold fresh elections. Equally obviously Zhanian won by a landslide. With so many of the government killed he put a lot of his comrades from the "Vengeance" and "Retaliation" in senior positions. It made sense really, they were used to working together to solve difficult problems. Oh, sure, some people complained about the harsh new rules, but he had to get the planet back up and running again. I'm not too happy about the work camps and the re-education centres for dissidents myself, but I suppose he's a military man and feels that the reconstruction needs discipline. Certainly the government has a good degree of control over the whole planet now.

Of course it was a severe shock to discover that several senior military men who hadn't been in the fleet that saved us had been collaborating with the Brefa. Maybe the trials were a little short, but they deserved the death penalty. Anyone who dealt with those horrible monsters had to die.

Anyway the government is now securely in control of our lives and we know exactly what we have to do. We've finally finished the dismantling of the nukes, and the fissionable material has been disposed

of. I know some people wanted to stockpile it in case of renewed hostilities, but I think firing it into the sun made sense. We really didn't want all that radioactive material lying around. Maybe now the economy is back in business we can get back to manned space flight again. Zhania said we needed to concentrate on domestic recovery before we sent ships out again, a wise decision I think.

That's funny. I thought the light show would have started by now. They told us they had the exact time of the battle and the exact distance. Still, I suppose it's possible that the distance could be a little out. You know people don't pay a lot of attention to details when they jump into the middle of an enemy fleet. Strange though, you wouldn't think that they'd be more than a few seconds out. It's now at least five minutes since it should have started. Look, the crowd's getting restless.

Maybe the battle wasn't really large enough to show up over these distances. No, that's not right, the detonation of a fleet buster releases about the same energy as a small star. Some sort of gravitational effect that delayed it? A gas cloud or nebula between us and the location of the fight? No, the astronomers would have told us. Very strange.

Other people are getting nervous too. Look at them all muttering, and looking back at the president. What are they thinking?

This is very strange. If we can't see the battle by now then it would mean it was never fought. But... if it was never fought

then the Brefa would have invaded and we'd have reduced this planet to a burnt out radioactive cinder. They would have lost anyway. I'm beginning to wonder-

Look! There's a light show after all. Maybe just a bit late. See the lights over there, toward the west. Bright and getting brighter. Wait... Wait. That's not a battle in space. Those are the drive flares of landing ships. Brefa ships. They have to be, we don't have any anymore.

I hear laughter. Why is our president laughing? ❖

THE CLOCKWORK HOURI

BY ROB HARTZELL

[Ed. note: Though this story is sometimes included in collections of old Arabic tales, the provenance of this story is controversial. The story itself post-dates the time of its setting by quite a bit – enough that it appears to expect its reader not to recall that the democratic uprisings in the Arab world came long before the introduction of mass-market sex robots. None of the Arabic speakers in the Cloud can remember being aware of the story until seeing it in English – and no physical manuscript (in Arabic or English) is known to exist. Even if we could pinpoint when the story first appeared in the Cloud, we would still likely be at a loss to tell whether it originated there, whether as urban legend, a short story, or something else.]

History is the result of careful pruning, even when everything is data, and storage is seemingly limitless. The Cloud can no more manage a fully-detailed memory, like Borges' titular "Funes the Memorious", than Funes himself could. The tale was of no consequence worth remembering – until it was, and by then, the details had already been lost....]

In the twilight of the reign of the Saudi kings, a long time ago, there was a sheik, rich and powerful, who could afford any and all the desires of his heart – and the two things his heart desired most were women and novelty. Before he'd reached the

age of thirty, he already possessed, in his harem, more women than years, and when he made his periodic trips to the capitol city, he usually returned with a new addition to the harem. The harem chambers took up an entire wing of his grand palace, and housed women from all corners of the globe: Turkish and Kurdish women who belly-danced for him and taught the other women to do the same; American women who would do things for him in his bed-chambers, with enthusiasm, that few of the others would do without goading; women from Indonesia and Japan and India who taught the palace chefs the dishes of their homelands; Egyptian and African and Palestinian women, and Iranian and Portugese and Spanish, and still others besides.

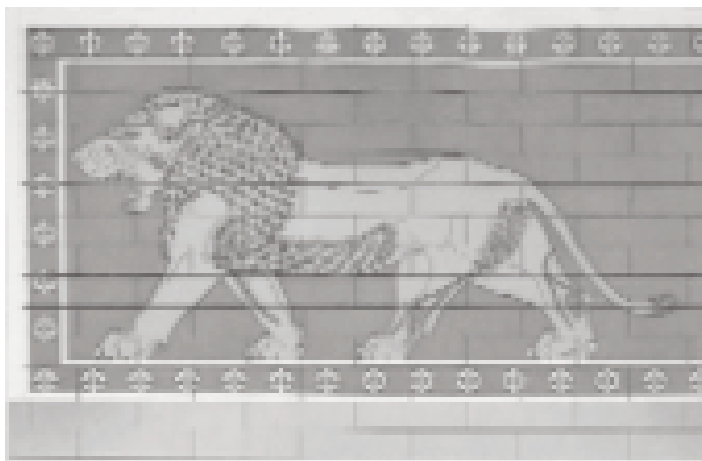
It would be a lie to say that all was harmonious in the harem all the time – even with the best of intentions, such a varied mix of cultures and languages and traditions cannot co-exist so closely without the occasional misunderstanding or the possibility of conflict. It is true, however, that the sheik's mother helped to settle such squabbles quickly, sometimes even before they had a chance to reach the sheik's ear. She was a learned and shrewd woman, and whenever the dangers of clashing factions

arose in the harem, she knew just what to whisper in whose ear to divide and dissolve them.

Such situations were rare, however; the sheik's mother had raised him (the youngest of eight sons) to treat women with some measure of kindness, and he was the most gentle and indulgent of his siblings toward women. His brothers often teased him, as a result, that his harem was full of women to nurse from, not to fuck – but as far as anyone could see, his household was more harmonious than their own, and they had only the four wives allowed them by the Prophet!

The sheik was as charismatic with his business partners as with his women, which kept both his wealth and his harem growing. He was, it is true, charming to a fault with his women – but, it must also be admitted, he could be just as stern and intimidating when he felt

that he was being treated with less respect or gratitude than he believed himself entitled to. At the same time, he was a man of his changing times, and not some sort of medieval monster: the women who joined his harem always did so of their own free will, and (with the exception of his Saudi wives, who were bound to him as much by the law of the Kingdom and the political alliances they cemented as by affection) they



were free to leave whenever they wished, with a not-inconsiderable parting-gift to see them off. Only once (before this story takes place) had a woman taken up the sheik on this offer – a London girl who simply could not acclimate to life in the harem – and she was returned home with no questions asked.

For the most part, the women of the harem were content with their lives therein, however confined they were by the dictates of Saudi law. The sheik made possible for them regular trips to the nearest marketplace to relieve the monotony of their surroundings, which were more luxurious than most of the women were accustomed to in

the first place: there was no shortage of comforts available to them, from the most exquisite gourmand delicacies to chemical pleasures, to intellectual stimulation (the Egyptian and Iranian women made sure that access to books and

the internet were as certain as access to alcohol and hashish and opium)...in short, there were no entertainments which were not available to them, and so, they lived more-or-less contentedly, as idle or active as each of them wished to be.

But then it fell one day, shortly after the end of Ramadan, that the sheik went to the capitol city, just as he usually did – except

this time, his trip went beyond the seven days it usually lasted. In the days that followed, the women wondered after him, speculating among themselves as to what he could possibly be doing:

“Perhaps he is bringing back a new woman,” said Aiysha, gloomily. She had been one of the sheik’s first “acquisitions,” and though she’d long been supplanted as his favorite – it had been more than a decade since she’d shared his bed – she still nurtured some small, secret hope that one day, he might return to her, and return some measure of the affection which she still had for him.

“Perhaps he is buying a new home – maybe even one closer to the capitol,” said Mikiko, her small voice barely audible over the din of the other women’s voices in the harem’s main chamber. Though she was currently the sheik’s favorite, her natural Japanese modesty made it difficult for the other women to truly hate her: whenever they complimented her on her beauty (and she was, it must be said, an *incandescent* beauty), she was quick to demur. “Your skin is so much softer than mine,” she would say, “and my breasts are so small compared to yours....”

“Perhaps there’s some sort of business crisis he must attend to,” said Sonia, a voluptuous Ukrainian who joined the harem shortly after the collapse of her family’s imports business; the experience had scarred her so badly that even now, despite the sheik’s fortune and his continued success, she desperately feared being plunged into poverty again.

And so it went, the speculation growing wilder and wilder over time until the sheik’s mother came down into the main chamber to address the women: “The sheik will return home at the end of the week. He has promised to bring with him a surprise which, he says, will explain his absence.” The women begged her to tell them what she knew – of course she had to know more! – but the older woman shrugged. “*Inshallah*, we will find out when he returns. I am as much in the dark as the rest of you.”

On the day the sheik returned from the capitol, the harem was abuzz with anticipation; having had most of a week to wonder what he would bring back with him, the women were naturally brimming with curiosity – except Sonia (who, having been reassured that there were no imminent financial disasters, felt no threat to herself) and Mikiko (who, being certain that the sheik was not bringing back a woman to displace her in his graces, also felt no threat to herself).

Their curiosity grew all the stronger when the sheik’s entourage began to arrive – and dispersed the women to their private chambers. “By order of the sheik,” the eunuchs said, refusing to answer any of the women’s questions, no matter how earnestly they begged. They spent about a half-hour in their private rooms, exchanging a flurry of text-messages with each other as their anticipation soared, stopping only when they received a group-text from the sheik himself: *Come to the main chamber, that I may*

properly greet my ladies.

The women's chambers were in corridors that connected, like spokes on a wheel, the outer hallway to the circular main chamber. As the women emerged from their hallways, they saw the sheik standing at the harem's entrance hallway, which led directly to an inner courtyard. He waited until all 72 women (not counting the wives and his mother, who flanked him on either side) had gathered, before he made his circle of the room, greeting each of his women with a kiss on both cheeks and an endearment: "Aiyesha, *habibi*. Justine, *ma chère*," and so on, all the way around.

When he had finished, he addressed the entire group. "My ladies, I am pleased to return and find you well, and as lovely as always." He paused for a moment, the hint of a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. "I can see from your faces that you are eager to see what I have brought back from the capitol!" He could not restrain himself from grinning when the women nearly shouted "YES!" in response: "Then I shall not keep you waiting. Eunuchs! Bring in Houri!"

The eunuchs disappeared down the entrance corridor; the women waited so silently that the sound of the outermost doors could be heard opening – and then, a single set of footsteps coming back down the hall. A young woman appeared at the mouth of the hallway, taking her place next to the sheik. At first, the women thought she was merely another acquisition – *why would she be any surprise to us?* – but as they looked closer, their confusion began to

grow.

She was completely naked, yet made no effort to cover herself. And her skin was impossibly porcelain and flawless, an effect only enhanced by the blackness of her waist-length hair – some of the women could be seen peering back and forth between Mikiko and the newcomer, as if trying to determine whose hair was darker. She had the petite frame of an Asian woman, yet her facial features were much more classically Middle-Eastern, down to the eyes, which were so dark they might well have been black. *But that skin, that skin....any paler and it would be translucent, inhumanly white....* Mikiko was the first to figure it out: "She's a *rokisu*, my sheik? A sex robot?"

To the consternation of the women, the sheik clapped his hands, delighted. "She is. It took the manufacturer more time than expected to get her specifications just right... but here she is. And not just a *rokisu*, but a prototype of a third-generation model. Tell the women 'hello,' Houri."

The robot looked blankly around the room and waved limply. "Hello." And the women wondered: *Can that...thing...actually feel uncomfortable? Or is that just a trick of its programming?*

Before they could get to the next thought – *how many of us will this thing replace?* – the sheik's mother burst out in rapid-fire, furious Arabic that only some of the women could understand: "This...*thing*... is an affront to religion! To Nature! To women! And you call it 'Houri,' my son? She is no reward for martyrdom – she is a fast track to hell!"

The sheik's eyes flashed with rage. "She is also an investment worth as much as the jewelry in your chambers, Mother. And I expect all of you" — here he turned his attention to the other women, who struggled to contain their own anger — "to treat Hourī as such. For I assure you: the consequences will be grave for those who do not."

He glared around the room; when he was satisfied that there would be no more outbursts, he continued: "Mikiko, you will show Hourī to the empty chambers and allow her to choose one for herself." With a sort of backhanded wave, he dismissed the women and strode out of the harem.

The women began to disperse as Mikiko approached the robot. "This way, Hourī-san," she said, hoping her tone was sufficiently pleasant and neutral. She could feel the glare of the rest of the harem settle upon her as the robot took her hand and allowed itself to be led down one of the empty halls — and though she was guiding the robot, she was beginning to feel like *she* was the helpless one.

Hourī, for her part, presented herself to the women in the most deferential light possible. She did everything the women asked her to do, no matter how insignificant or undignified, and with an unflappably neutral demeanor. Once they realized that she had no spirit to break and no pride to wound, the women turned instead to ignoring the robot — except for the Americans, who would, at least once a week, escort Hourī to their shared quarters (where she would remain, emerging only late at night,

after most of the women had already gone to bed.)

Only Mikiko could be seen to interact with her as though she were a real woman, and even she had to admit that she found Hourī's presence unnerving: she would find herself chatting with the robot for a half-hour or more before the robot would say something odd, that gave away her artificial nature. The Arab women, for their part, were particularly hostile, refusing to acknowledge the robot at all; only Aiyēsha among them took a more fatalistic view: *we can only hope she does not bring down calamity upon us, inshallah.....*

It came as no surprise to Mikiko when she was, at last, supplanted by Hourī as the sheik's favorite. It had been some time in coming; at first the sheik would summon Hourī and Mikiko to put on a show for him before he would possess one of them. A couple of times, Mikiko remembered, the sheik had been able to take his pleasure with both of them in one evening — but that was when Hourī was new. Once that novelty had started to fade, he would complete the evening with one or the other, eventually preferring to take his pleasure with Hourī. In the early days, he would have both of them remain in his bed with him until the morning — but it wasn't so long before Hourī edged out Mikiko for this privilege, as well.

And so, Mikiko found herself in the same position as most of the other women that had come before her: she was permitted nearly any comfort she might desire, any

luxury she might ask — but, unless she turned to one of the other women of the harem (as the Americans were said to have done), the one thing she was to be denied was love. Though she thought she'd understood this when she first joined the harem, it was only now that she truly understood what this meant. And though it had made the other women hard toward Aiyesha, Mikiko found that she could only pity the other woman her forlorn hope.

A year passed, and life returned to something like normal in the harem. Two of the Arab girls, an Egyptian and a Palestinian, decided they could no longer brook the insult of being cast aside for a robotic abomination and left the harem to return home — but beyond that, Hourī's presence had little effect on the overall balance: she was neither part of a faction, nor was she deemed worthy to faction against. And so the women carried on, enjoying the luxuries offered them by the sheik, as idle or as active as they saw fit to be. Only the sheik's next journey to the capitol provoked some measure of tension, but when he returned early — and without any new women — even that dissipated into relief: *Inshallah, we'll never have to go through that again...*

And then one day, word of some sort of delivery reached the harem; at first, only as rumors circulating from phone to phone among them, but when the eunuchs were called away and a meeting of the harem set to convene at noon, it became clear that something serious was about to take place. Speculations of all sorts were thrown out:

the Palestinian wants to come back; the household is about to move to a bigger compound; the sheik has been banished to one of the neighboring countries; the wives are about to assert their authority and dissolve the harem. “Another girl,” Aiyesha grumbled to anyone who would listen. *Another robot*, thought Mikiko — then chastized herself: *When did you become so bitter? Are you going to become another Aiyesha?*

When noon came, the harem chamber was hushed, so quiet that the women could hear the opening of the entrance doors far down the hall. Like the others, Mikiko stood stock-still in her place; only Hourī could be any more motionless. When the sheik finally entered the room, he was greeted with a quiet nervous intake of breath before the customary “Good afternoon, my sheik!”

“Good afternoon, my ladies,” he replied — though, as the women would later recall, without gusto — “You are well, I trust? Excellent.” He began to pace to and fro before the opening of the entrance hallway. “You will, no doubt, wonder why I have assembled you here. Let me begin by introducing the newest member of this household — Habibi? Come in, my dear.”

And to the shock of the women, in walked...another Hourī. This one had slight differences — her motions were more fluid than Hourī's, and though she had the exact same face as Hourī (that much was plain once she took up position next to the first robot), it appeared to be a bit more expressive than Hourī's, more lifelike, as she smiled and greeted the women in Arabic:

“Peace be upon you.”

The sheik opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the Arab women broke ranks and charged forward, shouting in their native tongue at him. Few of the other women spoke Arabic well enough to completely understand the rapid-fire accusations — or the sheik’s icy responses — but the gist was clear: *even these Western whores are not enough? You must insult us further with these machines?* And with the sheik’s answers proved unsatisfactory, they turned and strode toward their private chambers; as it became clear that they were preparing to leave the harem, some of the other women began to join them, and when the sheik’s rage was not stoked — when he in fact began to smile, a tight and slight rictus of a grin — even more of them left the room.

When it was all done, only three of the women remained in the room with the sheik and the Houris: Sonia, Aiyasha and Mikiko. The sheik began to chuckle as he gathered the women around him, but it was Sonia that broke the tension: “You are not angry?”

“Why should I be angry?” the sheik replied. “I have rid myself of a burden I have supported for too long. If their pride is worth more to them than the comfort I have provided them, then let them go. If anything, they have made my task easier by leaving.”

“Your task?”

The sheik squirmed briefly, almost imperceptibly so, before he continued. “I would prefer to have genuine women around me, but” — here he gestured toward

the Houris — “these are not displeasing at all. And I shall not lie to you: there are other circumstances which force my hand — hence a task which saddens me: I must decide which women, if any, I may continue to keep in my household. I will give each of you a chance to make your case for why you should remain. Succeed, and you may stay for as long as you wish. Fail, and you will be returned to your home country with a generous token of my appreciation. You will have two days to consider your answer, then each of you will have a day to spend with me to persuade me, Sonia will go first, Aiyasha, second, and Mikiko, last.” With that, he turned and left, the Houris trailing behind, leaving the women in stunned silence.

The next days were wearying and tense; with all the good-byes and packing and general commotion, it was difficult for Sonia and Aiyasha and Mikiko to think. The sorrow of parting with people they’d spent years living with....and the anger, it must be said, that even *they* must somehow prove themselves? Only the thoughts of what they’d left behind made it seem worth the effort; Aiyasha had fled unrest in Syria; Sonia, her family’s Russian poverty. Mikiko’s reasons were less immediate, though no less heartfelt: “Being Japanese can be suffocating,” she’d tell them. “*The nail which sticks up is hammered down* — and I do not wish to be treated as a nail.”

To pass the time, they would take turns talking about what they would do if they were sent home. Aiyasha had plans to get

her family out of Damascus — preferably to a peaceful spot in the country where they could farm, far away from the disturbances of the capital city. Sonia talked about starting a new business with her family, but Mikiko, when pressed, had to admit she had no idea what she might do. And the conversation would stop there; the next question, the obvious one — *what will you do to prove yourself to the sheik?* — was one they didn't want to answer. Not out loud, and certainly not in front of each other.

Sonia's day came: Mikiko and Aiyesha saw her off at breakfast, then spent the day in idle, furtive conversation, full of frequent pauses and awkward silences. By the time the evening meal was served, both women silently wished the sheik's mother would join them, if only to give them something else to talk about, something that would take their minds off of what was certain to be happening in the sheik's chambers. Beneath the *abiyah* she had to wear to cross the compound, the Russian girl wore scarlet lingerie (and not much of it), making it plain what her strategy was.

Aiyesha was scornful and nasty as Mikiko had ever seen her: "If he'd wanted *sluts*," she cackled, "he'd have kept the *Americans!*" Mikiko said nothing; it didn't take much to tip the Syrian into a full-throated rage, and she didn't need the drama, especially now that there was nobody else around to help absorb it.

An hour or two after dinner, Sonia returned to the harem, alternately sobbing and (probably) swearing in her native lan-

guage. "He spent the whole day sporting with me, only to tell me that my body still wasn't enough reason to keep me." Mikiko tried to comfort her — while Aiyesha tried not to be obvious about her gloating — but Sonia would have none of it. "He had me do...things." She shuddered. "And then he took his pleasure with the *roxujbot!*" She began muttering to herself in Russian, but for Aiyesha and Mikiko both, the gist was clear enough once she began gesticulating, slashing through the air with her hands: *he preferred the robots to me, the cockless son-of-a-bitch...*

The next day was Aiyesha's, and (once they'd said their final farewells to Sonia) Mikiko was almost grateful for the solitude. All night, while Sonia packed, Aiyesha was absolutely preening: *she thought her body would be enough reason to keep her, the stupid cow!* Mikiko had gone to bed early just to get away from her. Now, as the Syrian pled her case to the sheik — and Mikiko was certain she was pleading, absolutely without pride or dignity, and quite possibly on her knees or even stretched out at his feet — Mikiko roamed the empty harem chambers, coming to rest only when she came across the massive cushion-set that had once been the most comfortable and prominent seat in the main chamber. The cushions were stacked off in a corner; probably moved there by the eunuchs as they packed up the rest of the chamber. *It's not as though the robots will need furniture.*

Mikiko stopped to ponder this: *am I giving up already? Should I?* She walked up and

down the hallways of the harem's bedchambers; stopping before this room and that one, she found herself remembering the women who had once inhabited them, and the sense of emptiness, abandonment – the sense of a presence now missing – was haunting. The robots' rooms left her with no such feeling: *they have no presence, not even sonzai-kan – there's no they there.* Would being alone with the robots be worse than having another person (even *Aiyasha*) for company? She wasn't sure she had an answer to that.

She was still pondering the question at the evening meal when *Aiyasha* stormed into the harem building, alternately furious and despondent. "I gave him obedience. In everything. There was nothing I would not do." The Syrian paused, muttering to herself in Arabic, then continued. "And it wasn't enough for him." She alternated between sobs and invective – "a thousand cocks in his mother's arse" was one *Mikiko* thought she recognized, though by this point, it was difficult to tell. *Aiyasha* had buried her face in *Mikiko's* shoulder by this time, clutching at her until the eunuchs came to offer her a bit of opium to smoke, so that she might at least get a decent night's sleep.

Mikiko's own sleep was troubled that

night, as much by the question of *whether* she wanted to stay as by the question of *whether she could.* She thought of the sheik as he'd appeared to her when she first met him: cool and neither aloof nor solicitous. He carried himself like a man who knows he has money and power – *real* money and power – and can therefore allow himself an air of vulnerability. At the time, it made her feel as though she could penetrate to his core, if she stayed around and worked at it – that she could, that he wanted her to, know him as completely and intimately as humanly possible....

She chuckled: *how silly. How naïve – how gullible of me! Like a manga-addled schoolgirl, falling for the ruse that touches both her heart and her pride. As if there were anything there. As if he'd know what to do with the woman who actually figured him out in the first place.*

As if he'd know what to do with a woman his equal.

And thus, *Mikiko* conceived a plan.

The eunuchs ushered *Mikiko* before the sheik in his personal suite's entry foyer; once they'd left, he

gestured for her to remove the *abiyah* she'd worn to cross from the harem chambers to the sheik's. Underneath the shroud, she was wearing a simple black minidress, the sort of thing she might have worn at their introduc-



tory meeting, back when she was auditioning to join the harem in the first place; confidently sexy, without the brazenness of something like Sonia's merry-widow outfit.

And there was something different about Mikiko today — that smile? Not solicitous or pleading; more feline, like a predator cat, an image further impressed upon the sheik by the motion of her hips as she walked across the room and, without waiting for an invitation, seated herself across from him. “Good morning, my sheik,” she said, that curl of her lips suggesting...what, exactly? Amusement? No: that would be far too bold for the Japanese girl.

He remained standing. “Good morning. Would you like to join me for breakfast?”

“I'd love to.” She stood and took his arm; this was decidedly not the Mikiko the sheik was accustomed to, and where, ordinarily, he might have taken offense at such boldness, such familiarity taken with him! but this was so novel and unexpected, he found himself curious as to where she might go with this — how far? and what other surprises might she have in store? He gestured toward the dining room, but he followed her lead there....

Throughout the day, the sheik studied Mikiko, looking carefully at the signs of some sort of change that had come over her. He waited for her to make her pitch for why he should keep her — by this time, Sonia and Aiyasha had been well into their own — but if Mikiko was planning on pleading her case, she was taking her time about it. She hadn't broached the subject at all; not while

they relaxed in the jacuzzi (where she gave him a scalp massage that reduced him to a quivering jelly), nor while they played chess (her suggestion; she stalemated him twice — deliberately? he wasn't sure, but again: that curl of the lips suggesting amusement).

Instead, they talked about her homeland — his education abroad — the politics of the old harem — the uprisings in other lands — and he was taken aback to realize just how *observant* she was, how well she understood his culture, as well as the people immediately around her. How *nothing* seemed to get past her. Had he noticed this before, when he was bedding her? Probably not; to his surprise and perhaps even shame, he realized how little impression the women of the harem had left on him — even (until now) including Mikiko. He wondered how many of the others, like her, had had something to them that he'd missed noticing — she was, however unexpectedly, good company, every bit as lively and witty as his fourth wife. Under different circumstances, he might even have introduced them....

...but no. As the Filipino servants escorted them to the dinner table, he watched Mikiko take her seat and realized how silly the whole notion was to begin with. He studied her as she nibbled at her Kobé beef carpaccio, marveling at the grace with which she lifted the slices of meat to her mouth with her chopsticks in one hand, while using the other to hide her mouth while she chewed. A custom he would, if it were at all possible, impress upon his first wife. No: The only way for him to keep Mikiko was to keep her as one of the “pleasure wives” of

the harem, with the other Houris; *that's just how it must be, here and now*. The other wives might enjoy her company, but even if he tried to make her a permanent pleasure wife with their permission, they'd certainly bristle at her background, her lack of status and breeding, here *or* in her home country.

Mikiko met his gaze. "Is something wrong, my sheik?"

"Nothing at all, my dear. I was merely reflecting upon the good fortune that brought you into my household." She flushed and hid her face behind her hand again — *such a charming gesture!* — but when she said nothing, he continued. "Of course, I shall have to go back to the capitol to find some more human girls to keep you company — I can't imagine that Houri and Habibi make terribly interesting conversation..."

Something like discomfort — at least that's how it appeared to the sheik — swept over Mikiko: the way her back almost-imperceptibly stiffened, the way the corners of her mouth appeared to tense up. Perhaps confusion? He decided to put her mind at ease: "You have nothing to worry about, *habibi* — I would be grateful and proud to have you as part of my household, for as long as you care to stay."

"For which I am most grateful, my sheik. But I will not be staying."

The sheik was used to rejection in the capitol; the women who came from overseas to join his harem were just as likely as not to misunderstand what their lives would be like in this country, and to opt to return home. He could scarcely fault them for that. But *this*? The pleasure wife he wanted to

keep, turning *him* down? This was unexpected and novel — and infuriating. The sheik struggled to keep his voice steady, his tone, neutral: "You won't be staying?"

Mikiko's voice was heartbreakingly gentle as she spoke. "I have enjoyed my time here with you, my sheik, and I am more grateful than I have the power to show. Today, especially, has been an experience I will treasure. But it cannot last. If I remained in the harem, I would be one of many, even if I were the only human woman there. I left Japan for that reason — you've heard the proverb, I'm sure: *The nail which sticks out is hammered down.*"

"And what will you do when you return? What can possibly be there for you now that wasn't there before?"

"There may be nothing."

"Then what will you do?"

"I will *make* something."

None of this made any sense to the sheik, no matter how he tried to puzzle it out. "But...*The nail which sticks out is hammered down*, I thought you said?"

Mikiko embraced the sheik and gave him a small kiss upon the lips. "I will not be returning home as a *nail*." The sheik looked on, powerlessly, as she donned her *abiyah* and summoned the eunuchs to escort her back to the empty harem....

The sheik grieved the loss of Mikiko for some number of days — but, having now been abandoned by his harem, was even more resolved to rebuild his paradise on earth, *inshallah*, even if *all* his *houris* were to be robots! And so he began: with some

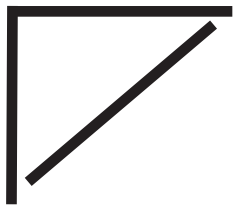
vague promises of investment money, he convinced Houri and Habibi's manufacturers to make his harem their product's test bed, for any and all future models or upgrades.

He never quite made good on those promises, but earned their trust in other ways; mainly, by hosting parties for the robot team members in the capitol, full of all the pleasures he once used to lavish on his harem (*in this respect, he noted, there is little difference between men and women*) whenever they had a new *hour*i to deliver. At one of these parties, full of wine and mirth, he issued the engineers a challenge: if they could build a robot personality that could convince him it loved him the way a human would – enough to suspend his disbelief and, in his turn, fall in love with the robot himself – he would buy, at retail value, a complete set of 72 of them. Until then, they would deliver him their prototypes to test for free.

The engineers, believing the sheik to be as gullible as his request was naïve, accepted gladly. They did not know what the sheik was truly requesting – in short, a robot which could convincingly remind him of that last day with Mikiko. And so, over time, he filled his harem once again, this time with mechanical *hour*i. Each prototype was more beautiful, more graceful than the last, and all of them, obedient to the very bed – yet the sheik was unsatisfied: *this one's closer – but it's not there, yet.*

Some say that eventually he bankrupted his benefactors with his challenge – only to move on to another company willing to take him up on it. It's even been said, by these same storytellers, that the sheik's eldest son, somehow, gained access to the harem long enough to fall in love with one of the clock-work *hour*is, refusing the company of human women altogether until he could have her (or one like her) – but that is another tale altogether.... ❖

END TRANSMISSION



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 6

Page 1 – OF BLACK DOGS & BASILISKS by Willem Myra. Willem Myra, 24, lives on a satellite of a city orbiting around Rome, Italy. He's only recently started writing in English. His first oddity, *Kinetosis*, appeared online on *50-Word Stories*.

Page 3 – SAPIENS: IN THE MIDST by Rick Ewing. He writes, "I am a university teacher from New Zealand. I am currently working in a university in a small city in China. I am married with a 2 year old child (who sometimes thinks he is 18). I used to write for the university magazine when I was a student, but I have had nothing else published since those long ago days."

Page 21 – RUNAWAY by Bill Vernon. Bill Vernon lives in Dayton, OH and served in the United States Marine Corps, studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folkdances. His poems, stories and nonfiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and Five Star Mysteries published his novel *Old Town* in 2005.



OF BLACK DOGS & BASILISKS

by WILLEM MYRA

Releasing was a favorite among those Deciding to end their lives. Grandpa-could-do-it easy. Clean. Painless. You synched the neural chip with the device of your choice, launched the previously-installed app, and with two vocal confirmations and one last acceptance of the *Terms & Conditions*, your mind was uploaded online.

It's estimated that in the first four months since the app hit the market, 240,000 people released themselves worldwide. Young people, primarily. NEETs would become one with their gaming machines, leaving behind an empty shell of a body most parents buried, some had the docs place into an induced coma, foolishly hoping their dear would eventually come back, while a few others rented to whomever craved to feel the ardors of youthhood once more.

Initially, the releasing hadn't been conceived as a suicide means. That came after, when the process of the app glitched for unknown reasons. Somewhere between leaving the brain and crossing the wires, your mind would lose bits, so when it flowed into the net, what up to that point had made you *you* was now gone. Thoughts and memories and desires all floated together, spinning in virtual circles unable to recognize that once upon a time they had been

part of a same being. Self-awareness was lost. These mindclouds were constantly linking themselves to infos familiar to their own content. If, say, you had owned a black kitten when you were little, and now your mind was uploaded online, the mindcloud deriving from it would build bridges of ones and zeroes between itself and any combination of sounds, written symbols, or images signifying a dark-colored young cat. All this times 240,000 people times another six-digit number staying for all the brain activities you'd had while alive and that your mind still conserved a trace of.

It's easy to see how fast the net got clogged.

But before anybody could even decide to act upon it, the mindclouds started disappearing. One by one.

Theories arose.

"They're feeding them to an AI," tinfoil-hats started speculating on the few basic-html forums still up. "They're making it devour all these mental products hoping that it will learn how to properly think like a human."

Who "they" referred to was never made clear. The CIA, the Chinese, the New World Order—real or not, there were plenty of collectively-blamed organizations out there to choose from. What everybody want-

ed to point out, though, was that an AI *did* exist, and it was evolving, and it would soon start acting based on all the negativity belonging to those who'd killed themselves.

User MsNectarine43 didn't take proud in being described as a non-conformist. Still, feeling the spirits were getting heated, she had to step up and show the way. "Don't you people see it?" she posted online one Saturday afternoon. "The AI will not hurt us. Any of us. It ate hundreds of thousands of minds affected by depression. It won't want anybody else to feel the same. It won't want to cause loneliness or pain or dread. The AI—if it's real, that is—would not wage war against us. Instead, it would long for a smile and a fraternal nod of acknowledgment of its own never-dealt-with-before sufferings. Pointing the finger at it and screaming in terror like peasants seeing

Frankenstein's monster for the first time, won't do much good to either us or it. If it truly is an AI—if it truly is an *intelligence*, then it is in pain. And we *have* the moral obligation to reach out and try to comfort it. After all, it is our child, isn't it?"

Sounding like an irrelevant hippie thing to say, or maybe too optimistic to be weighted among the possible outcomes of Skynet's IRL cousin's rise, MsNectarine43's post got downvoted to virtual hell, failing to spark the civil conversation she was hoping for. But her words had piqued someone's interest, and by the next morning all her social media pics had received over 10,000 thumbs-up each, and people from all around the world were unsuspectingly paying for all sorts of gifts to be shipped to her door along with a printed message reading, "Thank you". ❖



SAPIENS: IN THE MIDST

by RICK EWING

Often, in my ministry, I counsel congregants and friends to bear realities that are unpalatable—but also unyielding. Experience at home and overseas teaches me we profit, in every way, by denouncing what is false and declaring, in full voice, always and everywhere, what is true.

In that spirit I call to mind an old anecdote about 100 monkeys deployed in a room with typewriters. How long, it was asked, would it take to produce a play of Shakespeare's? The experiment, everyone knows, was never conducted; this was merely a math teaser and rhetorical bombast to illustrate the superiority of human intelligence and inspiration.

Too, most are aware that scientists *have* endeavored to allow our primate cousins—let me tread deftly on heretical ground—to express whatever mental acuity or creativity they possess via artistic media and on keyboards...and the results were laughably chaotic.

All the monkeys failed. The clinicians had a rip-roaring good time saying so.

Well. Each of the above is untrue. The Shakespeare Experiment *did* occur—and one monkey did not fail.

These prefatory remarks to my friend's casual, ad hoc notes here (for a full-length memoir I'm after him to create) are less dis-

claimer than explanation. You may find his narrative voice, his writerly diction rather disjointed, volatile or peculiar. With him, it has ever been so, the same way in speech, lucid for a few minutes at a time, then...it gets interesting. But I believe reasons for this will reveal as he goes along.

While at first these linguistic peccadilloes can be disconcerting, I'm untroubled by them, consumed instead by his story. I hope you are as well.

—Reverend Beverly Muir
First Presbyterian Church
Wildwood, New Jersey

*Walkin' down this rocky road
Wonderin' where my life is leading...*

(Heard) Doink.

That rod tip move?

Bad Company from a boombox behind me, fishing-club geezers, not fishing as usual, hunkered down up in the parking lot beyond the bulkhead. I'm taking a knee, filleting mackerel I've defrosted in seawater in a 5-gallon bucket, with my bait knife slicing triangular slabs.

Only fifty minutes or so 'til high water. Sky just where I'd left it yesterday, a caravan of clouds meandering over from the conti-

ment like tourists, mincing and wincing at the wetlands funk. Me roaring over here late from the Fellowship Coffee Hour that ran long. Second Sunday in April. Easter's a week gone, but my moveable finny feast comes now. We're looking at 58-degree air, the water cooler by ten.

Rocking three rods, I am, angled at 70-degrees toward the surf in PVC holders chinked into the sand, about ten yards up from water's edge because she's still fingering upbeach.

Today I'm playing a 7-1/2' Shakespeare Ugly Stik, a Daiwa at 8' and a 9-footer, another Shakespeare—spaced at 7-yard intervals. All carry Penn reels lined with green, 20-lb Stren. For terminal tackle we feature slider clips with 3-oz pyramid sinkers above a swivel barrel anchored by 35-lb mono leader with a small oblong float snicked down to a double-clinched 4/0 Gamakatsu J-hook. I'd love to bang in a striper, but likelier it'll be bluefish. Some use wire leaders for blues—those teeth from *Hell*—but I find they can't bite through the float and sever the tackle. Swell rig and keeps me away from trash-fish on the bottom.

Bloody limey on the classic rock station wails he's Ready for Love, oh *baby* he's *Reeeeaadddy* for Love and on the downbeat comes THWONK!! BOINGGGG!!

By the time my left rod augments the chorus with Shweep! Shweep! SHWEEP!! I'm charging toward the inlet, whipping that sucker from its sheath, rearing up and back to my right with a mighty hookset—

—and the love is on.

Fire up the grill, fump-stumpers; this is

the part where you remind me who your Daddy is...

Should be a photo paper-clipped to this from the *Herald* of me taking the island's first Sideliner last year on 27 March. It's the one with the caption *Billy "Wee-Fella" Gloverson, a Green Monkey resident of North Wildwood, nails 37", 22.8 lb. Striped Bass to kickoff season.*

Listen, I go just under 2 feet tall, pushing 17.5 lbs. of pure biff with my winter weight still on. We had to fake the picture of me holding it up by tying fishing line to the tail and through the snout, Shep hoisting it over my head, tied to a baseball bat just out of frame, over at Linda's Tackle. That's my favorite pair of Oshkosh B'gosh overalls, in seafoam; I have ten-twelve that color and same in coral—maritime hues all the way, baby. Chicks say they offset nicely my own coat of many colors.

The seafood thang is one of the first misconceptions I quashed over here. My sort are thought to be the OVs—Original Vegetarians—salad fiends chomping leaves and whatnot. I hail from Eden. The Banana Islands off the coast of Freetown Peninsula in Sierra Leone. Eden with *crabs*. All you can eat, year 'round, and no pesky God (for whose name I substitute *Beer*, more anon) to run you off because suddenly you *know* stuff.

Anyhoozle, it was Shep McEvoy down in the Crest—best man with a rod in the Wildwoods— who cottoned to my taste for ocean grub and taught me to surf fish. Verily, I set out to murder all critters cruising the Atlantic, but all I bag I eat, give away

or toss back.

Gilled-American twanging my line? No striper, he. Sumbitch's either a Chopper or Slammer-class bluefish, five to ten pounds, insufficient shoulders to peel monofilament from my drag, but enough crank in his yank I can't do any reeling yet. He runs west with the incoming tide, hell-bent on making it back into the channel and around the jetty to my left toward the back bay that divides the barrier island from the mainland.

Foot paining, needle-nose pliers on the lanyard around my neck swinging like a metronome, I shimmy-shuffle parallel to keep him in front of me, straining not to blok-shtippy the voo-voo or blard the *marmyre*.

Midafternoon sun smacks me in the eyes with the ire of a wife wielding alien panties. I steal a look back where the laptop's perched atop my other upturned 5-gal bucket to make sure it's not being strafed by gulls or snatched up by some nogoodnik looking to convert my genius to crack.

Either specie, I'll EAT HIS FACE, that's what I'll do, fowl or freak, EAT HIS FACE!!

Drill down with canines longer than your most bathetic boo-hoo story. Spit his bones like *bullets* all over his little bird or biped family...

...dornky *strabbit*, dibbledy-boo, mondee har and Tyler too...

...on that far shore of Agony I'll build my cabin there...

Frickin' witch-box computer is supposedly why I'm here anyway, why I'm burbling into the recorder in my vest pocket as I fight Mr. Fishy. Madame should be purring up here any minute in her gunmetal blue, half-a-fag Prius. Toting a carful of island oldsters to cheer me on and sop up the Blue-Banger Exhibition tendered by yours truly—summat famiotic for same in these parts.

Rev Bev and I had crooned a duet of *His Eyes Are On The Sparrow* for today's service, Missy pounding the piano with me over her shoulder on the windowsill. Precisely



between *I sing because I'm happy* and *I sing because I'm free*—as I leapt down to solo the next passage—Pastor Probity caught a whiff of the beer-sweat prison-breaking my pores and spent the rest of the hymn working the pedals with her left foot while drilling mine into the floor with her right, smiling wider and blaring her disturbing, tremulous soprano louder than ever.

After the *Peace-And-Also-With-You* wrap-up, she jerked me into her office behind the sanctuary, whipped out the laptop and voice recorder—and negotiated terms.

“Mow me low with an AK if I'm wrong,” said the warrior-cleric, “But aren't you the Billy Gloverson who's been to three rehabs in as many years, departing the last just two weeks ago?” Bowing from the waist, she turtled her tangerine mane into the neck of her vestment robe, hurling the teal gown from her gamine, wrought-iron person with the vigor of Luther renouncing the Pope, where it pinned itself, miraculously, to a hook on a coat tree behind her.

“...Or am I mistaking you for another of my very close Green Monkey friends?”

Before I could answer she recounted her policy statement that I'm more trouble than chasing Talibastards in man-dresses through the moon dust of Afloonyistan. She elucidated at length, untwining the skein of the profane from the sacred in record time, but I wafted away mentally, per my custom during her she-loves-me-she-hates-me rants, to my happy place and time...

...to sundowning hours when I hear the prayerful hum from the fridge in my bitty bungalow in North Wildwood, in sight of

me now as I fish, where it's *always* Beer O' Clock. In yon icebox, I know, are tonsured malt-monks bubbling Vespers. And I am calmed. Face-eating vendettas deferred... good thoughts always.

From Parson Killer-Angel issued more shaming blather about *Wasn't I the one* who taught her that my people live about only 17 years in the wild, 30 in captivity? Hadn't I turned 34 in March? Hadn't I? With my bibulous lifestyle, she wondered, how could I possibly, *possibly* hope to share my remarkable story with the world before I bumbled, stumbled and toppled off this mortal coil? Huh?

My brain vacationed in Antigua a minute as she fluttered aloft on some Sinatra *That's Life* puppet-pauper-pirate flight, enumerating my disparate identities as wildlife, zoo captive, prodigy, gangster, scribe and dipsomaniacal retiree.

Just in from the Unsolicited Advice Department: Should you find yourself, relocating to a new area, looking for a church, hearing the felicitous news that the local HPIC(Head Protestant in Charge) is a theology doctorate from Princeton Seminary... leap into her spiritual arms, *do* so, but pause first, long enough to ask—

—*Pardon, but by any chance, just wond'rin...* Were you just a short time ago stationed abroad as an Army chaplain? And did you parlay said post—boonswoggling both your governing synod at home and military brass in-country—into status as a full-bird Colonel running and gunning so-called Cultural Support Teams? Females *fully-trained, readily deadly* attached to their special-op Ranger

brethren in pursuit of High-Value-Targets and sundry baddies on the popped plains and exploding mountains of Afghanistan? And might one suss out that you were possibly happier, more at home in this combat role and with your M16(A4) than with your uh, uh...(whispering) *Biiiiible*?

So this wacky broad wants me to tell my tale. Only time I feel I've the upper hand is when I detect her approach, I see her flick her fire-selector switch to either Semi or Burst. Currently, it's Burst, three rounds a pull, all my sins downrange on pop-up targets. Other occasions, on Semi, one round per squeeze, she's all euphemisms and black-strap. Billy, she'll coo, giving me the *Speak to the Retard Gently* voice: Your mind, it's different than ours. Monkey brains(not an entrée, sons of Nippon!) seem to be subject to radical mood swings, really they do—and you may have certain gaps...focus issues...

Loves me not wisely, knows me too well. Can't stand her so I just ADORE her instead, not *that* way, Beer-dammit, but LOVE HER MADLY!! Lost her hubby at sea six years ago. Fishing the treacherous Cape May Rips, where the Delaware Bay and Atlantic collide, out for stripers with a client of his engineering consultancy firm.

Here's the offer, spluttered the vicar. She'd pay for my hideous mackerel and provide an amen-choir to buck my spirits if I would just get my sorry arse in gear. Fair? All this while swaddling the laptop in plastic to protect from bait-juice, sand and no-see-um gnats, stuffing it all in my backpack, nosing a rolled sawbuck into the shoulder-buckle of my go-to-meetin' 'koshies and sent me pack-

ing on my Schwinn to Townsend's Inlet at the north end of the island.

Wicked monkey.

I suck, let her down on the reg'lar. Her sermon this morning riffed on approaching Tax Day with Matthew 17:27, where Jesus H(uck?) Christ tells Rock-Head Pete to go throw his line in the lake, first fish he catches will have a 4-drachma coin in its mouth, go take it, give it up to The Man. Bev all pleased with herself with the piscatory subject matter, sidwinding me the occasional sly smile as she homilified.

Caveat: Any douche badmouths Rev Bev best Kevlar the FACE, *SHNOOKS!* Have canines will travel. Snackle your kneecaps like BBQ chips, Buster, scoop your marrow like onion dip...

...schnork la moddle, smegmott newfink...

...I haunt a Golgotha of plans I'd made for us...

But Rev Bev's not the girl.

"Just describe what happened," She says about my early years, "It's a Rumsfeldian construct. You're an unknown unknown. Not known...for what you didn't do anyway. You did something *else*."

I *hate* this, hate this, hate this. Why I'm trying *desperately* to talk fishing in lieu.

It's really the story about a *GIRL*, okay!? Ever met one that wasn't? Better yet, ever know anybody peaked at the age of eight? Now ya do.

BARD BYTE: So your Swan-of-Avon is credited with 38 plays. Homeboy Chlorocebus sabaeus—*yello!*—pounded 'em out in 97 days, between May and August of

1991. I produced the sonnets too, but those I hid in a wicker basket below the desk, so I've no idea if they survived. Talk about your tweekin'; my self-appointed chore there was *right-sexing* the object of Willy's ardor.

In place of your suspiciouso creepy aristocrat, I re-strung the sonnets to arrow at Paulette, the lovely Jamaican post-doc at the lab in New Haven who became my everything there—nurse, mentor and confederate.

When I showed early aptitude, she lobbied I be dispatched to NYC's premier Ear, Nose & Throat gal for the Larynx Issue. While I healed, she drowned me in rootsy teas, trilling away in soothing patois. Over my shoulder, smelling of ginger and baby powder, she would arc my fingers on the typer, teaching me the keyboard. She tested my comprehension with trick questions like: On what famous American battlefield did Abe Lincoln, extolling native virtues, say *Money for nothin' and chicks for free?*

Yalie smart-ass. Got yer QWERTY right ovah heeah.

When she unwound the bandages for the last time and my first words *ever* were *JOE ME YOUR DITS, BABY!* she howled with joy, flung her lab-coat with the ridiculous blue bull-dog logo up into the ceiling fan and did exactly that. Berfect dits, by the bay.

But Paulette's not the girl.

Rev Bev, good thing you're shlark duddy moof, very starp cardy in the blomnumph!

From the Unasked For Facts

Department: In Latin, bananas are *musa sapientum*—fruit of the wise men. Peel that

for a mo while I disclose it's the only monkey cliché I'm guilty of. Loves me some banana taste but despise the texture.

Clarify? I neither indulge in nor tolerate monkey jokes, puns, what have you(I'm lying). Anathema to me(Still lying). To boot, about my species, I abhor victimology(Lyingest). Never do I say *I'm only monkey*. I simply offer to eat your face. Cleave your carotid like a garden hose. Put another way, I don't *do* causes, I do Beer(BR versus YHWH) and if you were a light pilsener I'd do you too. Anybody keeping score at home will note that last as use of *zeugma* or possibly *sylllepsis*—accuracy only counts when ducats are dribbling down my 'koshie pockets.

Whoooooaah. Ya wanna? Sure ya wanna? Jump, pookie!

Up on the bulkhead, Bad Company Brit-git casts a buoyant plea that *Better things are bound to happen*— that all his dues surely must be paid.

My doozy blue, enacting the credo of its ichthy-ilk to *never* go gently to that realm of sand and citrus-habanero marinades, leaps five-feet clear of the suds in a muscled arc, teeth-gnashing, scales flashing in the sun against a polka-dot sky about 40 yards offshore after dragging me downbeach 20 paces from our starting point. *Dude!*

But we both know it's his Hail Mary. He comes down outta gas and options. Now I can work line in, drowning him on the way.

Overhead, an armada of seagulls begins to crash the channel. A wave-top maelstrom. Gotta be a shoal of choppers down there

churning baitfish up to the surface. An omega-3 holocaust underway. Yepper, there goes my right rod, dinking away like a Jehovah's Witness on your doorbell. Looks like I'm going to be at this awhile.

Lawdy, Lawdy, Mistah Poseidon, don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no bluefish babies!!

My mom, *Aiiiiiii!!*, named me *Aiiiiiii!!* when I came along in '83 on Ricketts, largest of the Banana Islands. In our second stop in thralldom, Beardsley Zoo in Bridgeport, we got new stage-handles: Mom and Dad (the artist formerly known as *Aiiiiiii!!*) became June and Barry and young sis ended up as Sarsaparilla.

Who hasn't had a good cringe lately? Squink your love down low as I confess that my parents were Mippies. Monkey hippies.

After the fact I came to believe the rest of the colony, about sixty strong, had fingered us to the poachers because they mistook my folks' remoteness for hubris, plus trouble from me and Sis' hijinks. I could never figure out, as a kid, if they shunned us or we them—all I know is we were pretty much off by ourselves.

Mommers seemed to have some type of Sylvia Plath thing going, all wave-dreamy-depressive, drawing in the sand with a stick hours at a time, crossing things out and looking frustrated. Papperslaps would perch atop a tall tangle of driftwood shaped vaguely like a cross, peering morosely out into the Atlantic, then stare down into his palms interminably, as if they were guilty of something.

I was a loner from the start. Most days

would just bleffmort my torkert and range the stone causeway that connected the islands, idly exploring. Sis would sometimes tag along, but that chick was a *hellion*, some kinda inchoate punk rocker. Girl was a pin-cushioned fuzball of our natural coloring: black mask, gold-green hair, scarlet eyes—but with her it was a blaze-brighter, googol-watt luminescence that could only end with her a young, good-looking corpse—she had a Sassy Vicious thing going from the gate.

Early on she found a way to invade the humans' cabins, a gap up between their zinc roofs and thatched, hairy walls. She'd scuddle inside, ransacking, then appear at the door with a loopy grin, handing me out a bottle of Star Lager or whatever was on hand, disappearing back within to look for incendiaries to try to burn the joint down. All fun and games until we torched the home of the islands' headwoman, Miss Elena Campbell.

Two days later, three of us fell victim to the oldest snag-the-monkey gambit ever. A halved and hollowed out coconut shell, tied to a tree, with a hole just big enough for a hand to pass through with an orange on the other side. The fruitable too big to pass through the hole, but Greedy Monkey sits there until Mr. Poach returns to throw a net over. Humiliating.

Guess who got rooked by Mr. Lazy Poach-a-Doach, who just poured some beer in a bowl and rigged the snare overhead? 'Nanner-bunch to the winner, please, some OSHA-grade face-protection may be required.

'Leven Hundred Travallian Way, we learned to call it, never knowing the zoo's real name on the outskirts of Freetown, our jungle-gym gulag in the shades of a ruptured carousel, as if somebody'd toured Hades on an acid-gassed junket and finger-crawled back up to gainful employment as a monkey-habitat designer.

Hot pink hammocks. Dock ropes dyed aquamarine, slung overhead in a twisty, string-game Jacob's Ladder sky. Pond in an unholy purple basin. Breadfruit trees with chartreuse orbs hovering over glowing rock-piles in neon motely and in the middle of it all, for *absolutely* no reason, angling up from the soil, the prow of a boat—buttercup-yellow with ruby trim—in glittered emerald painted on the side, *DARA*.

Always a pebble in my Keds, chafing—how we all changed. The fam, I mean.

A decade later I'd be up in the city in Ballou's on 10th Avenue, getting pie-eyed with the boyos after a brownstone heist on the East Side or a truck-grab down in the garment district, Mickey Junior knighting us Criminal Geniuses, Hibernian Order, me sucking down lagers arrayed in an amber crescent moon to my front on the table, the lads thumping my back—*Hoist! Hoist!*—as they crowed to the potato-head onlookers how I'd aced my niche role in the night's adventure.

But the drunkier I got, my l'il monkey spirit would airlift right out of there and parachute back into that garish cage in Africa. Our captive tribe: chimps, baboons, macaques, howlers and mandrills, 33 of us altogether. We were the only Greens.

Early days, aloft in a cotton tree tucked in the far corner, I'd gawk, transfixed, as my peeps morphed into cartoons of their former selves.

Mammerclaps abandoned her back-home orderly cuneiform etching and commenced scratching—using a chunk of limestone on a bloodred boulder downstage right—simpleton geometrics to entertain the hoi polloi. Triangles, circles and rectangles and...Beer Ha' Mercy...HAPPY FACES!!!

Blow, winds, and hack your leeks!

You Cadillacs and hurricanoes—

Singe my Green head!

Rumble thy jelly bowl! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!

O! O! 'tis foul!

I am an ape more sinn'd against than sinning.

(I don't always remember this crap *exactly*; there's a lot of Guinness under the bridge)

"Your Dadda, both of them, actually," Paulette said when I described *his* antics, "Um. It sounds like a kooky fatalism. As if when the worst finally happened they felt relief, exhaled and succumbed wholly. Embracing catastrophe. Something more, too..." Her eyes bolted out the window to roll around in the New England snowfall, coming back misty, her voice low and flat. "If you could have seen how *my* parents transfigured when British tourists came through Bamboo on the way to Montego Bay..."

She coughed, excusing herself, returning in a while with a crumpled hanky in one hand and in the other, a steaming bowl of

curry goat for me.

“Pop quiz,” she beamed, “Which US president, notorious for going commando in the Oval Office, humming *She-Bop*, *She-Bop* and occasionally muttering “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” once nearly re-ignited the Revolution at a State Dinner by thundering at a teensy, crown-jeweled Queen Elizabeth “If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it!!”

BARD BYTE: Yalie smart-ass actually did me a solid with this one. Helped me, in a queer, inscrutable way, tune in extra-better to the Sweet Willy as I made my way through the canon, the faux artiste I’d become inspired by what further research unearthed, the bitty monarch’s rejoinder:

(HRH, also in her cups) “We, sir, are not among *All the Single Ladies*. Although, inasmuch as our consort assures us we boast a surfeit of junk in our trunk, we *are* amused.”

Found this particularly helpful regarding how the Sweet Swan used language, covering the gamut of sublime court poesy all the way down to the ribald vernacular of the rude mechanicals. In turn, it helped me rejigger the (so-called) Problem Plays as they veered between bawdy, comic and tragic, apparently confounding you (alleged)yew-muhns. An example would be how, in *Measure for Measure*, I made the Duke more an outright doofus and punched up the hilarity of Claudio beseeching his nunny-bunny sis Isabella to boink Angelo so he can avoid Ol’ Sparky.

And so you know, a lot of my tinkering involved adding monkey characters to the

plays, always principal roles, never spear-carriers or ladies-in-waiting. Presumptuous? Controversial? Care to gamble the face by quibbling? Rev Bev once bullied me into an Anger Management course; the facilitator and I squabbled...what can I say but *Closed Casket?*

So. Where in Beer’s name was I?

Barry. Gloverson *pere*. Dour Barry. Introspective Berry. Profound Barry. Now, in his engagement in Freetown, Sierra Leone, BARRY the FURRY CLOWN!!

Ludicrous pantomime for the zoo’s visitors. Pacing, hands clasped behind, as if pondering the singularity of the birth of the universe. Plopping on a rock, Papperdocks freezes in tableau, chin on fist—Rodin’s Thinker! Springing up, a gymnast’s mount onto a breadfruit branch, one-handed, the other scratching his noggin, contemplating, while he spins ‘round and ‘round, finally flying off with a whoop—*Aiiiiii!*—to stick a perfect 10 center stage.

EUREKA! A hairy forefinger bullets skyward. Sire mine digs in the breast pocket of his elbow-patched wool sport coat to extract...a BANANA! Discreet bows left, center, right, then strips that baby bare and chaws away to wild applause.

Made me wanna go all Sophocles on ‘im. OK, Popperking, Billy Rex here’ll SEE YOU AT THE CROSSROADS. Yo, Jocasta, I mean June, lookin’ sweet in that dress, love those REALLY LONG, POINTY PINS holding it together...hold that thought, got something in my eye here...

Aiiiiii. Oh, *Sport coat on a monkey*, say you? Mister Basil Gaynor, our keeper, pur-

ple-black with galloping teeth, bred two passions: the Bible and the American Civil War. He'd no sooner taught us that we were naked than he presented clothings sewn by his missus. Medical-scrub-lookin'-dealios for half our crowd in butternut, the rest Yankee blue.

Only an old, battered, havoc-scarred mandrill named Uncle Finky refused the outfit. Flaring canines at Mister Basil, he leapt into the pond, submerging, only eyes visible, periscoping fury.

Reminds me how Sarsaparilla became Uncle's disciple, grasping at the hem of his



Contempt for Humans. In her artfully-ripped Rebel ensemble affixed with purloined barrettes, preaching anarchy in the *Aiiiiii!!* tongue, she graduated from arson to felonies-against-persons, tag-teaming with Finky in a scheme of pickpocketry.

See, wire mesh, floor to roof, was all that separated us from visitors to the zoo and freedom. Five-six slits or tears there were in the netting, just large enough to bonkerize and enrage us. Bootless to attempt escape; at night we were locked inside the monkey house, nowhere to go. Daylight hours attendants watched the entrance.

How-*evahhhh*. Unc and Sassy worked a sleight-of-hand con, the Finkster at one far end of the cage and Sassmonster at the other. Uncle Finky would cadge smokes from guests, an oily repertoire of mime at his command to score tobacco. Every eye in the joint lasered on this scraping, forelock-tugging, mewling Marcel Marceau as mooks passed fags through the wire. Sass would lead huzzahs and laughter as Fink played charades with the dupes, capturing complete attention, nobody eyeing sis as she maneuvered into place.

No, not regular, please to give *menthol*, he gestures. Hugging his ruined physique and shivering to indicate cool, fresh Newports. Next came a protracted routine: Preparing Sweet Tea, squeezing of lemons, stirring *und so weiter*, then cracking ice from a tray, juggling the cubes—*Aiiiiii!!*—so *cheely*—into the glass and quaffing deeply, replete with forehead-wipe signaling respite from latesummer dog days. *It ees zee menthol I weesh*.

The Fun-Facts Crew Checks In: Where I live now, in Jersey, it's illegal to give cigarettes or whiskey to monkeys. Huh. Huh... legislators have *FACES* too, no?

But peep Sassy Rotten now. That incorrigible Hex Pistol. Spy her, no respecter of persons, victimize the folk equitably—all stations, genders and types.

The lithe Freetown socialite, unencumbered of her glistering lapis lazuli bangle, a hooked (opposable)monkey thumb slaloming it down over madame's endless, tapering fingers. The *snick! snick!* of the suited exec's briefcase, divested of bearer bonds and a

fugitive pint of peach brandy. The carpetbag abulge on the plump arm of a jiggling matron with avocado cheeks, denuded of her wallet and a packet of shitor din, that lovely spicy fish paste from Ghana.

“And herself only four years of haige. Thievin’ varmint!”

This from Tilly-Mack, early ‘nineties up in the gang’s hidey-hole, Liam’s fifth-floor midtown flat. We’d be slurping ale, cleaning weapons, slinging tales. Mine retraced my desperado lineage, boasting on the Sassermoon.

Well, I said, in monkey years she was just over 9, if you clock us at 2.3 vis-a-vis you uglies. But the fellers loved hearing how slick Sasser was palming the booty, sidling up behind the HMS DARA and stowing it there. Then she’d fist-pump the air in triumph, bouncing up and down like a wee bobbin’ hood and shriek(in her native Aiiiii!!!) EverGreen! EverGreen!!

One afternoon, though, she picked the wrong hombre, one of a posse of delinquents that sometimes skulked about. Kid looked blitzed on weed, whirling around, scarlet-eyed, as Sass plundered his back pocket. She flung the swag over her shoulder without turning around. Up in my tree, I whipped off my Yank kepi and snagged the loot with the cap.

And that’s how I learned to read.

It was an assembly and maintenance booklet for the Schwinn Sting-Ray banana-seat bicycle. Twenty-one pages of thick glossy stock, three inches by five. On the cover was a photo of the low-slung, classic

beauty—lime gumdrop with a pomegranate seat. Inside was minute instruction about how to build and care for her, page after page of diagrams with arrows connecting the names and pictures of parts, with numbered narrative below.

Gotta say, the thing was encyclopedic, comprehensive, the *War and Peace* of bike manuals, like a paint by number guide to neurosurgery, hell, a Los Alamos cookbook for ATOMIC FUN!!

I thought I saw a man brought to life—

I’m disoriented here, abruptly incarnate after some kinda blackout, facing into wave-spray from Townsend’s Inlet—

*He was warm, he came around like
he was dignified*

He showed me what it was to cry...

With my needle-nose I’m de-hooking a ten-pound bluefish by surf’s edge who tries to kill me DEAD DEAD DEAD with scissoring chompers while...singing?

This thrashing, scaly colleen warbles how I couldn’t be that man she adored. Meanwhile she’s torn, this lassie, she’s plumb outta faith, she’s cold and shamed, she’s...whooooaaah...*lying naked on the floor.*

No worries, I whoosh back into my body on Earth and it’s merely Mizz Natalie Imbruglia on the boombox radio. With my metal glove I seize my blue by the tail and head to my bucket, only to find a band of ancient mariners standing on the bulkhead cheering me on, Rev Bev astride the Prius’ roof, with—shame the devil—pom-poms in army-green and white.

“Bugger makes twelve, Billy!” Deacon

Cameron bellows, whirling his cane like a lariat.

“Bag one that spits up the tax money!” cries Melanie Gompers and they all cackle. The Right Reverend Beverly Muir gives a thumbs-up to acknowledge this morning’s sermon as she keens along with the Aussie sheila that she sees the perfect sky is torn, I’m a little late and she’s already torn. Fine there, Lady Wackadoo, let’s just not be naked on the floor.

“Criminy, Wee-Fella!” Emily Webb tempts a coronary bawling at the top of her voice, pointing a gnarled digit at the sea. My 9-foot Shakespeare Ugly Stik parabolas then whomps to the sand with its PVC holder, snaking toward the sea and Stone Harbor, the next island up the coast.

Only one creature in these waters puts such a wallop on bait, inhaling that mackerel treat and whipping its massive head sideways to get it in the gullet. I take off full sprint toward the salt before she hangs a Roger with the outgoing tide, gunning for France and taking my gear with.

And she is a girl. The biggest of her type, ipso facto, are female. I clasp the rod butt just as the tip kisses the brine, snatching it vertical, nailing a hookset and loosening the drag knob so this gal can take line and not snap me off.

Not going to lose this wench no-how. Baby runs west and I do too, a linebacker’s lateral shuffle that takes me upbeach and far from Rev Bev’s hoary corps. You’re mine, my darling, ever mine.

EverGreen! EverGreen!

But this leviathan, she’s not the—

Came a girl.

By herself. No other visitors, all simians but me napping, around 4 p.m. on an early Spring day. Around eleven or twelve years old, she wore a school uniform, a sleeveless magenta shift gathered at the waist with unruly pleats in the skirt. Cinnamon skin, rhubarb lips, cheekbones so high and sharp they could slice cantaloupe. And vast Asiatic eyes you could dive into and swim around in for a lifetime or two.

Came a girl who busted me, learned the secret of me.

I was up in my cotton tree, sprawled cross-legged on my favorite branch with the Schwinn book open on a forked bough in front of me, reviewing the wonder of butterfly handlebars and extras like streamers that may be purchased separately.

Quick like a monkey-bunny I whisked off my kepi to cover the book. Too late. Those giant brown eyes grew wide as the savanna, lips jump-roping into a grin. Swear to Beer she gave a gasp that sounded like *Aiiiiiii!* I tried on a menacing scowl, really selling it, hunching shoulders forward, peddling aggression.

No sale. Chickadee answered with a bitsy head tilt, her eyes saying “Really?” Still studying me, her hand disappeared behind her back as she rooted in the beige satchel hanging there. She took one step forward, opening a tin. Through the wire she extended her hand, offering a chocolate biscuit.

I hopped down, made my way over like Dead Monkey Walking to greet the firing squad. She was almost three times my

height, so it was easier to look down at her lavender sandals than up at her face. Our fingertips met as I took the biscuit, me thinking Well, I'm five; we're about the same age when you do the maths.

To equalize our size I climbed onto Mammster's red boulder and we had a long, fruitful talk with our eyes as we ate our cookies. She tossed me more until we finished the tin, then I darted behind the DARA where Sass stored the spoils. To the maiden I gave a bottle of grape juice, which we killed together, passing back and forth as I watched sunlight make a halo of her spiraling braids. Afterward I presented her with a lipstick close to the color of the 'nanner seat on the Sting-Ray.

Came a girl.

Let's get this behind us—I hate this like Beer hates sin. Stipulate with me, if you can, that life sucks—I'm not a big fan—and makes as much sense as a monkey wowing the eggheads at Yale. Which saga had no happier ending than this one here, by the by. Best way to invite calamity? Put faith in miracles.

The girl came, she came, she came, every day for over a month, 40 days in a row. But never again alone, always either with school pals—all in that same vivid purple dress—or with who may have been brothers or sisters or parents. Only now she seemed to loathe me, invariably exiling herself to the rear of whatever group she was with, eyeing me directly never once.

I made myself conspicuous, craving notice. Didn't happen. My universe

derailed, plunging into a dark ravine, crevasse, fissure, gorge, chasm—

I may have liked her some.

Came the girl, one final time, solo. First thing I noticed was the lipstick. I vaulted from the hammock where I'd been lazing, grabbed something from behind the DARA and passed it through the wire—a silver charm of a lamb. She put it in the pocket of her skirt, sat with her legs crossed and brought out biscuits. I sat too and we polished off the cookies as before.

Once again a lengthy dialogue with our eyes, discussing issues of the day, the curious arc and nature of our relationship, our desperate hopes and direst fears. Eventually she rose to turn and look at the setting sun, confusing me by shaking her head, but faintly, barely a shadow of movement.

She took a step back, reaching into her satchel. Handed me a fat, seafoam-colored paperback. *Compleat Shakespeare*. I opened the cover. Inside, it said Sadie Newell, Love Papa.

Then Sadie Newell backed away in the falling light, leaving Billy Gloverson forever.

Around noon one day in mid-December, eight and a half months later, Mister Basil entered the cage pulling a red wagon. I sat facing the back behind the particolored rockpile, just finishing the third act of *Love's Labour's Lost*. My third re-reading of the play, having learned it was only one of two considered without prior sources, I mused how I'd give that pig a plot—'cause Sweet Willy certainly hadn't.

Mister Basil called ten of us over, we Greens among them. From a duffel bag in the wagon he pulled poofy sateen coats and wool caps that said NY Giants. He instructed us to suit up while a cluster of white people edged up to the wire, smiling thinly and looking nervous. We were led outside to a van and taken to the airport, where a small plane waited to fly us to Bridgeport, CT—to the Beardsley Zoo.

For the next two years, I played misanthrope monkey monk, rarely speaking, never socializing with the new crowd, only with Sassermaass, who seemed to re-double her efforts to die young. She took up with the rowdiest of the American bunch, hatching capers and chaos, while I hid with the book I'd smuggled in under my coat. Will Shakespeare, the glover's son, became my sole and steadfast chum. Eventually I'd memorized all of the bloke.

Two days after my eighth birthday, two men and a woman in khakis and blazers arrived. The woman began to address the apes in English—and don't you know, I fell for the creamiest ruse since the poacher's trick.

Sarsaparilla and I were sitting on the crest of a grassy slope at the back of the habitat. For her alone—while the rest gazed around with that *Duh!* look—I translated the lady's pitch into *Aiiiiiiii!* I filled her in that they were looking for volunteers for a study up the road in New Haven and scrunched forward to hear details.

Just as the gal fixed me with this crafty smile, as if twigging that I understood the language, beloved sister put her rascally

monkey foot into my back and heaved, sending me somersaulting down the hill to land at the woman's feet.

"Well," she said, "Welcome to the team."

The Don't-Knock-It Cabal Speaks Up:

Termites on a stick. That's aboriginal Good Humor, babykins. Lest you quail, are you not the species that invented Harkarl, the Icelandic *rotten shark* delicacy? Are y'all not the wizards who originally used lobster as fertilizer or bait for fishing?

Flash to a blazing afternoon in August of '91. Air-conditioning in the lab's on the fritz. I was wailing on the IBM Selectric in cutoffs and a wife-beater, token' on a Marlboro Menthol 100. Knocking out the last play—for both me and the Bard—*The Tempest*, wrapping up Act IV, projecting to finish the script the following morning, when, my revels there ended, a celebratory dip in the compound's pool would be just the ticket.

It was a bittersweet exercise, not least because, of all the poet's characters, I loved me some Caliban the mostest, savage out-cast little mutt. I had a hoot rendering the work from memory—as with the entire canon—and goosed Caliban's presence somewhat out of sentimental affinity.

Paulette was more skittish that day than she'd been all week, caroming around distracted, patting and re-arranging the tall pile of the completed work, murmuring in patois what I was sure were nasty curses, Jamoke-style. Each day lately she'd been the edgy hostess of a succession of small groups

of colleagues and such who came to ogle me slaving on the typer, afterward mumbling together warily, looking grim.

So I'm picturing a covey of naked, frosty Red Stripes I'll enjoy later when a lusty feud erupted out in the hall beyond my vision. Paulette in her booming contralto versus what sounded like a half-dozen male voices on some kinda outta-my-way mission. A ringing slap, skin on skin, then my champion roaring like a paw-speared lioness...

Two colors I saw after that, *Red*, then *Black*, so memory's hazy here. They stormed the room, bruisers in windbreakers, caps and earpieces, handguns out, one with a shotgun. The last goon in dragged Paulette by her dreadlocks.

I may have gone, well, ape.

I may have mashed that guy's head into the open top of my Selectric, whamming him against the typeball, making really pretty impressions of letters in his skull...B...c... Q...r...

...There may have ensued further bedlam, mayhem.

"Jesus Christ, he's got my *face!*" I remember that. Recall being herded into the opposite corner, shotgun mouth against my forehead, something hanging from my canines, everything wet. Paulette breaking free, her captor crumpled to the floor, bawling apocalypse.

"Fellas, fellas, get my face back! Oh Jeeeeeesus...*Mommy...!!*"

I watched Dr. Paulette Stuart, Yale Fellow, whip off a high-heel and hurdle onto the back of the gorilla with the scattergun—

Then I went to sleep.

"Faith, it's a leprechaun!"

My eyes opened to flickering neon stripes and dots playing across my chest. Splayed on my back, I tilted my head, trying to focus, seeing the blinking words *Sbarro's Pizza*. Hovering over me were two stalks of belly-dancing seaweed.

"Never saw no pixie with a black face," One of the swaying reeds said, "Check out the lump on its head." Slowly they mutated into two guys in jeans and Hawaiian shirts. Hey, little gnome, one said, Up with you, we'll patch your coconut, set you up with a pint. You'll be our charm, said the other.

"Name's Till McEvoy," The chap said, "And this here's Mickey Junior."

Tilly-Mack could've skipped the intro and just said *Hey, wanna hang with us for the next 23 years, help us slaughter every law in the Criminal Code?*

Thus I met the boyos. As we made our way out of Times Square they described the paddy-wagon type vehicle screeching up to the curb, back door opening and me being roll-kicked out like a spreading carpet. Mickey Jr. said he lunged to intercept what was hurled at my chest as the van streaked away. He handed me a wadded hundred dollar bill with two bronze subway tokens inside.

"Go west, young monkey," Mickey said, and we trekked over to Ballou's on 10th Avenue. The the rest of the crew was already gathered, yawping, singing—*Slainte!-Health!-Slainte!*—and lapping oceans of lager.

I ain't saying much about this whole

period. Statute of Limitations on certain matters, doncha know...

Well, hell, I'll pose it as a hypothetical. What if you knew somebody, a dapper monkey, say, and said primate became an amply skilled, not *second-story* man—but *upper-canopy* man? And his specialty was getting into buildings via adjacent trees, allowing ingress by his fellow hooligans?

Footnote Sassmandu as inspiration on that one—with Poe getting a major assist. I called it my Murder in the Rue Morgue Gig, but listen, confuse me with an orangutan at the risk to your, say, FACE.

This same speculative apeboy may've had another staple routine: shocking the patookie out of truckers by standing out to hitchhike in the middle of the street or beside a highway. Driverman does a double-triple-take to see a Green Monkey tarted up as, oh, coulda been *Miss Deborah Harry*, with his thumb out. Hoodlum buddies leap out to hijack the rig...yadda-yadda...mountains of fun for the whole family. This theoretical monkey may still possess the theoretical Blondie ensemble for evenings when he's truly sauced, up in the pear tree in his backyard with a good book. When the tide, indeed, is high and I'm holdin' on. Problem with that, see my attorney.

BARD BYTE: My Monkey Bias sparked most of the changes or additions I made to the Shakespeare. Here's a f'rin-stance I wedged into *Much Ado*, spurred by interest in my tribe's grooming practices:

Mark ye, knave!

Sand-grain Sirrah, brother to a stanza's

terminus—

Art nit or hatchling louse upon my thumb?

Whether thou be egg or chickling mite, englobed babe or parasite—

Poor orb! Vile rotundity!

With sland'rous stings the world insults thy name—

Calls Louse some base-black soul, a fool Nit-wit.

Yet prince thou art, with muster'd arms to march

in legions to invade my Love's lush fields

of fur to forage there a slough-skin feast.

Ere I eat thee, my debt to thee I troth—

My betrothed's groom, I groom her yet betimes—

Because of thee she grants me leave to brush

My coxcomb o'er the bush of her country.

(like how I snuck a little Elizabethan raunch into that last line?)

Someday maybe I'll scribble something about Mickey Junior. Man was a Renaissance Thug. See, Junior was the only begotten son of the guy who had been the number-two dude among the Irish mobsters who terrorized Hell's Kitchen back in the day. His da was what the coppers call a real bad actor, a genuine lunartic with a temper problem. Once shot a corpse in Reno, just to watch him die...again.

Thing about Mickey, he had his paws in everything, just a brilliant guy, an autodidact like me, always reading, spewing trivia. Knew everybody in town. To give me a side-

line, he set me up with celebrities and persons of renown, which is how I came to monkey-ghost-write a slew of memoirs on behalf of illiterates and stooges. As Beer is my witness, felonies left my conscience cleaner.

A week after I started crashing at Liam's on his spare dog-bed, Mickey sent Seamus "The Hammer" O'Malley and Tilly-Mack's cousin Shep—who was as handy with an automatic as a fishing rod—up to Yale to discover what had become of Paulette. A fractured ulna and shattered femur later, a few co-workers disclosed that she'd been fired. They said Paulette had returned to Jamaica, where now she chaired a department at the University of the West Indies.

"Ras-clot feds! Likkle blackhearts threatened to go after my family." She began to cry when I got her on the phone. "Oh, Billy...me no know...it was horrid. I never heard what agency they were from, but they couldn't tolerate that a monkey accomplished what you did." She said my work hadn't been destroyed, that it had been cached in some kind of inaccessible vault, like a NORAD missile silo.

"Cho!" she scolded, "Nasty business, whole ting. I love you, Billy...but I'm afraid." Now she was sobbing. "Riddle me dis, sweetie: Which presidential candidate, in televised debate, whirled on his opponent to utter *You change your mind like a girl changes clothes?*" I heard weeping, then a dial-tone.

Rat bastards. I wouldn't give you a busted cowry shell for my work on the Shakespeare. Mickey wondered if I could

certifiably reproduce it, but I had to level with him. It wasn't an option. Along with grey hairs invading my green, my tipping lifestyle fouled the brainworks. I don't remember stuff so swell anymore.

Truth, I yearn my opus be found for *one reason only*—the publicity might bring Sadie Newell out of the woodwork.

Sadie Newell. Sadie Newell. Sweetest words in human language. Saaaayy-deeee Nooooo-uuuuhl. I didn't say any of this and you didn't hear it.

Sometimes the phone brought good news. Christmas morning, after I'd been in NYC about four months, I picked up the *Post* at my bodega to find an article about a mysterious break-in at Beardsley Zoo. I was still reading when I got back to the apartment. Liam came dashing out saying Mickey just called, said get over to him pronto.

He greeted us at the door with a dung-eatin' grin broad as a peat-bog and a sham-rock sparkle in his eye. Merry Frickin' Christmas, he said, and opened the bedroom door. June, Barry and Sass came trooping out laughing, pummeling me with glee and *Aiiiiiii!!!*-ing up a blizzard.

The Hammer's girlfriend Deirdre flew with Mummerdinks and Poppysloot back to Sierra Leone just after New Year's. They boarded the plane dressed as leprechauns, tooting party-favor noisemakers. Sassmaster stayed in the city, gravitating toward the East Village. It only took six months for her to get what she'd been looking for all along.

After a lifetime running poolside with scissors, looking one way crossing the street, operating heavy machinery with major phar-

maceuticals in her veins, looking gift horses squarely in the maw while counting chickens and damn *skippy* messing around with Jim, Sarsaparilla Gloverson left for Monkey Heaven in mid-June.

Her passing is how I eventually ended up in Wildwood after all those years in the city.

Three years ago, Sass' remains were discovered when a twenty-two-year-old cold case was solved. We're so not going there. Just know VENGEANCE IS MINE.

Shortly before this, Shep McEvoy had gone berserk and abandoned the gang when this Kenyan chick up in Paterson he partied with drank herself to death. Shep said *Screw It* to pretty much everything, taking early criminal retirement and bringing her body to South Jersey for burial. So one day in the Acme on the mainland he met Rev Bev; they got to chatting and realized her husband and his ex were interred in the same graveyard outside Cape May.

Now Shep and I had gotten pretty tight. He knew I was already half a mess, further devastated by having Sassy back but not having the perfect place for her. Fresh out of ideas, hopeless of miracles.

"Get your Monkey Ass down to the sea," he said.

Holy Mother of Beer.

Miss Morone saxatilis, street name *Striped Bass*. Ebony gridlines across a silvery field. Bulbous pink lips and a prism sheen highlighted by a green identical to my lime gumdrop Schwinn.

Which vehicle, turns out, is currently

madhousing in a wide circle up in the parking lot, powered by Reverend Beverly Muir in a wide circle as she pops wheelies every few yards, cheering and yammering at the top of her lungs.

"Let him have dominion!"

Rev Bev's killing time to allow the elderlies to scuffle down the beach to my aid. No way I'm lifting this woman. She's a sow, a BBW, a Hoss, a chunk—gotta go north of 40 pounds. Every time Bev catches sight of her as the bike swings around she shrieks anew.

"Ghoulies and ghosties, long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night!" I'm trying to guess if she's rhapsodizing about the fish or me when the passel of antique Presbyterians pull up to eyeball the monstress and lend a hand.

"Up and at 'em, Billy," Deacon Cameron says, as Emily Webb and Julia Gibbs prepare to wrangle milady's tail, Melanie Gompers positioning herself at the massive head.

"Count o' three!" Deacon hollers, inserting the hook of his cane into her gob and gripping the staff. At the countdown they heave, they ho and up goes the striper as Rev Bev exults from the bulkhead. Emily and Julia go all superhuman and heft the tail far higher than the front.

A large golden disc, about three inches in diameter, drops from the fish's mouth, pirouettes on the sand a few seconds and falls.

Well.

I'll be damned. Or not. ❖

RUNAWAY

BY BILL VERNON

There's lots of them among us. I learned that two years ago when I ran off from home because my next door neighbors were ones. They tried to take me over. Got me in their basement one day and took my clothes off and.... I'm not going into it any more details than that.

Are my own Dad and Mom ones too? They never did anything about the Humphreys when I told them what'd happened. Anyway, if my parents are what I suspect, then what does that make me? A rebel maybe, but I don't want to think about that either.

I can't tell anyone about them except like this in some anonymous writing because I can't be sure who's one and who isn't. I think they been here a long time so they're everywhere, spread all around.

In summers, working the carnivals and fairs, I keep my eyes out for them. Like when I got to Columbus County on the Amtrak, jumped off by the fairgrounds, and took a job filling in wherever they'd need me. Knew the minute I met him the big boss was one.

The bloodsucker supreme, demanding I work hard for nothing. Got him up to half-a-dollar an hour over minimum wage, and he shook my hand on it. But he didn't ask for no ID, didn't have me sign any-

thing. There were no witnesses to what we agreed on.

Of course, this was a hick town in the sticks, and the bossman felt in control. I worked a couple simple rides and three different booths where the suckers paid good money to throw balls or darts to win something cheap.



Wasn't long there I saw how the action laid out. Gambling off in two of the trailers. Prostitution in the parking lots and small rooms upstairs in the half-used "Exhibition Hall."

The ones among us are usually the "people" in charge. Inside three days I had them all picked out at that fair. The big boss didn't have no secrets from me by the end. I knew how they'd fold up and pack stuff and send it all on to the next place. I'd seen that done many times before.

"Yeah?!" Mr. Moody yelled when I banged his door late Sunday night, all the

action over, his trailer lights out and him in jockey shorts ready for bed.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said like I’m such a low life.

The door he’d opened let cold air rush out at me.

“I came to be paid. Cash like we agreed to.”

“Now? Tomorrow’s when I need you. That’s when we got the hard work to do packin’ up.”

“I have to go now.”

“Come back tomorrow. Everything’s locked up.”

“I figure three hundred dollars,” I said.

He laughed. “That’s way too much. You only worked five days.”

“I need cash right now. I can’t wait.”

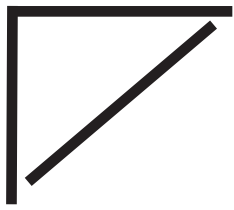
Anyway, he had \$163 handy and was

glad to see me off so cheap.

At 3:30 A.M., his trailer burned up. Before anyone noticed the flames, his butane tank exploded and his door, the only way in or out, started blazing. Fire’s the only way to deal with them for sure. Got one of the women ones too. Didn’t know she was inside with him until I heard their screams and saw her face pressed up against a window.

I left fast. Jumped on the 4:46 passing through when it slowed down crossing the trestle. ❖

END TRANSMISSION



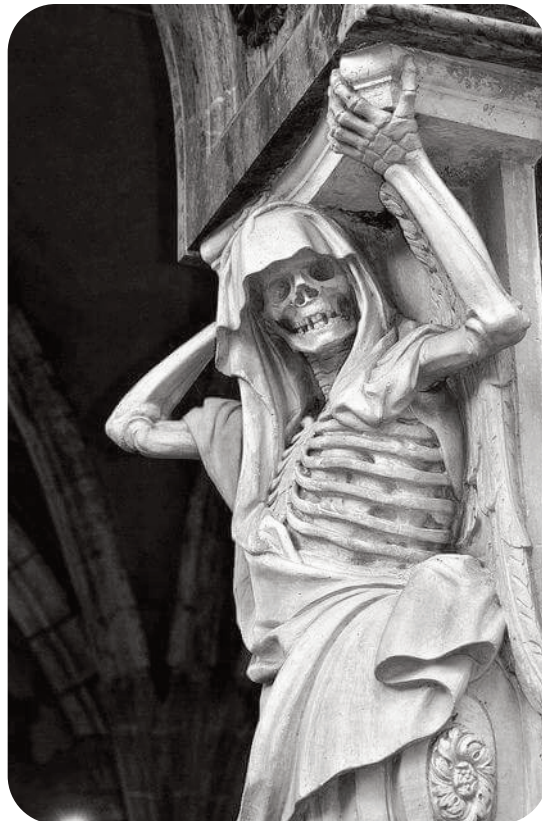
Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 7

Page 1 – WRITING FOR THE BUBBLE-BATH BOOK MARKET by John Domenichini. John Domenichini is a technical writer living in San Jose, California. He has a background in both education and journalism. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in The Quotable, Bartleby Snopes, Yellow Mama, and Foliate Oak Literary Magazine.

Page 4 – WAITING ROOM by Stanley Kov. He writes, “I currently reside in Russia, Yekaterinburg. I work as a web developer at a rather small company, am looking to emigrate, and speaking about myself in third person makes me want to puke into my mouth a little bit.”

Page 19 – THE HONKED by Lee Blevins. Lee Blevins lives in Lexington, Kentucky. He is a balding twenty six year old who sometimes wears an ill-advised mustache.



WRITING FOR THE BUBBLE-BATH BOOK MARKET

by JOHN DOMENICHINI

Most of the questions I get as an author nowadays are about the bubble-bath book format. I wrote my two most recent novels specifically for the format because I believe in the future of the bubble-bath book market.

The Morality of Bubble-Bath Books

First of all, I respect people who have moral objections to the format. If you object to the use of the amniotic-like fluid for the bubble bath solution or you object to the fact that the transference balls contain brain cells created in a lab, I appreciate your point of view. If you have any doubts about the morality of the format, do not write for the market. Focus on the traditional formats instead.

On the other hand, if you've thoroughly considered the ethical issues involved and still want to write for the market, my experiences and opinions might be helpful to you.

A Bubble-Bath Book by Any Other Name

Let me say that I use the term "bubble-bath book" instead of other terms you might hear, such as "absorption books," "mood books," "transference books," "osmosis books," "experiential books," and even "mind control books." I like the fun quality of the term "bubble-bath-book." The

term has the right playfulness for the type of stories that are best suited for the format.

Experience Bubble-Bath Books

If you're considering writing for the market, but haven't bathed a bubble-bath book yet, that's the first thing you need to do. No explanation will suffice. More than half of the people who try it don't like it. If you don't like the experience, don't write for the market.

Bathing a book is a very ambiguous, delayed, gestalt-like experience. It is not linear at all. Keep in mind that the experience varies wildly from person to person. However, there is some commonality. Very rarely does anyone get a sense of the story during the bath. The story creates a mood while you're bathing, but that's it. Some people love bubble-bath books just for the mood. They might not care about the actual story.

What I find very interesting is that, regardless of how long the bubble-bath book is, it takes about 45 minutes to completely absorb the story as it seeps into your pores, but you won't know that until much later. If you only bathe the book for about 30 minutes, you'll still get a vague sense of the overall story. Some people do that on purpose because it gives the story a dream-like quali-

ty.

How long it takes for the story to reveal itself to you after the bath varies from a few hours to about a week. Some people hate that, some people love it. Personally, I love it. Sometimes, a day or two after my bath I'll have some downtime and my mind will wander, when suddenly I realize that I have the whole story in my head.

Another interesting fact is that interpretations of the same bubble-back book vary tremendously. I love this aspect of the format. I've talked to some bathers of my pure bubble-bath book, "Whispers on a Sun-Drenched Day," who interpreted the story exactly the way I had in my mind, while others interpreted it completely differently.

Sometimes, they don't even have the characters' names right, but they're fine with that and so am I. In fact, I love it.

What Makes a Good Bubble-Bath Book

The market is only four years old, so it's early, but not so early that we can't make some generalizations.

If you've heard anything about the bubble-bath book experience, it's probably that the books only leave you with an impression of the story. While not perfect, there's something to be said about the "impression" explanation. My advice to aspiring bubble-bath book writers is to focus on creating a visual impression.

What works well: physical descriptions; action; simplicity; and emotions, both



happy and sad (but not too sad). In my opinion, fantasy is an ideal genre for bubble-bath books, but other genres work well, too. For example, romance and adventure stories work very nicely, as well as some of the softer sub-genres of science fiction.

What doesn't work well: abstract descriptions, analysis, and complexity (complex structure, complex wording, and complex plot lines). The bubble-bath book format doesn't work for non-fiction. If facts matter a great deal, the format doesn't work. In terms of genre fiction, it doesn't work for suspense or mysteries. I'm not sure about horror, but I would stay away from it. Since bubble-bath books affect mood quite strongly, I would avoid anything dark or violent. I don't trust rumors that try to link bubble-bath books with violence, but no reason to tempt the devil.

Since the story of a bubble-bath book overtakes you all at once, the sequence of events can lose its impact, especially if the story has flashbacks or if events are otherwise out of order.

I did not write my book "Wayward Monks" specifically for the bubble-bath book market. It was transferred to the format later. A lot of bathers of the book felt confused. That didn't happen with my two pure bubble-bath books: "Whispers on a Sun-Drenched Day" and "Women of the Cloth." In my opinion, it's because "Wayward Monks" had plot twists, flashbacks, and surprise reveals, while the other two didn't.

I write fantasy with a lot of world building. For my two pure bubble-bath books, I

made sure that the worlds did not include complex magic systems. It might be possible, though. Jordana Washington has a moderately complex magic system in her pure bubble-bath book "The Farastan Trading Post." It's one of the most popular bubble-bath books on the market. That's because Washington uses action to draw her magic system's lines of demarcation. I bathed the book and I have very strong impressions about the limitations of her magic system. Washington makes it work by showing not telling, by demonstrating where the magic fails and where it succeeds

Conclusion

It's early yet, and there's so much still to learn, but the bubble-bath book market shows promise. For some writers, it sounds like a boring way to write. But, if you like to create new worlds, provide vivid descriptions, or evoke emotions through your writing, it might be the right format for you. People who enjoy book bathing, usually love beautiful scenes; if you can deliver them, you can build a devoted fan base in no time. The bubble-bath book market is a whole new world just waiting to be written. Only you can decide if you have what it takes to help write it. ❖

WAITING ROOM

by STANLEY KOV

“Should I just go back into space, then?” Andy asked. “What am I, some kind of Flath?”

Flath was a creature that lived in space and fed on pure vacuum. The laser-like structures in its mucosal lining as well as a particle accelerator, weaved into the quadruple epiglottis to generate matter from virtually zero of it, were, of course, nothing like what had now been rumbling and gurgling inside Andy’s stomach. He still loved his *nihilo* in the very least wrapped into a whole-wheat bun with some mayonnaise spread on top, so the idea of going back into the interplanetary naught didn’t sound particularly appealing to his ears. The thought of deep space gave him something considerably viler than butterflies. In fact, the vacuum that formed inside his bowels after a three year long flight in a cryo-seat had a decent chance to sustain a couple of Flaths alive for a few dozen light years.

The absence of anything to breathe amidst the stars bothered him little for reasons beyond his starveling comprehension.

The smiling ten-eyed Nabian passport controller did not seem worrisome about it, either. With her official smile denuding layers of teeth into four directions, she glared into Andy’s eyes. Glaring as a process was a bit different for Nabians: pressing their

hanging eyeballs against their interlocutor’s were a sign of good form. Andy recoiled. As a human being, he preferred the physicality of his eye contacts to remain at the lowest possible level.

“Most confound apologies, Mister Poodlevector,” she said. “I’m not quite used to handling human visitors.”

“It’s Podacter. Pod – Acter!” Andy grabbed his red spiked hair that, judging by the posters around him, in the course of his trip had seemed to have given way to purple locks along the unending and unstoppable course of the intergalactic fashion. “Can you not get used to handling simple human surnames?” He looked about: aside from a covey of Fingerlingers, tap dancing to some obnoxious, squealing melody with their nail-heads near the Dia-rriva Plus-sweets kiosk, and a glob of white energy that wore over its pulsating corpus, apparently, something painfully reminiscent of a kippah, he came the closest of all to resemble a human being. “Just mine will do, I suppose.”

The emotion that the passport controller was trying to elicit through twisting her dangling eyeballs over her head was unknown to Andy. She could be blushing for all he cared. What mattered most was to finally slip past the monument of alien bureaucracy that didn’t seem too keen on

letting him through.

“I get that you have troubles with pronunciation,” Andy said. “What I don’t get is, why the hell am I not being allowed into Nabia? Here’s my visa, see?”

He poked at the microchip in his forearm. It lit under the skin and gurgled ‘Have a good trip!’ like a toy with a dying battery.

“I told you already, Mister Pterodacter, you do not have an acceptance test with your visa.”

“Nobody told me anything about acceptance tests before, for Hawking’s sake!”

“That’s probably because they were only introduced a year ago.”

“Well, how in the name of Armstrong should I have known that? I’ve been frozen for three years on the way to your damn planet. Don’t you appreciate interstellar tourists?”

“I’m sorry, Mister Piedabblers, but I cannot let you in without the test. Maybe you should’ve set out a year or two later. I heard that Earth Faster-Than-Light technologies improved in the recent year.”

“How should I have known that—”

Before he could finish his question, it became rhetorical. Andy took a couple of deep breaths in to calm his inner Socrates that desired to jump out and jam something sharp into those floating eyeballs.

“Look, Missy, or whatever the name of yours was again...”

He squinted, preparing to decipher the language her badge was supposedly written in. Andy wasn’t short-sighted; the squinting commanded his lenses to augment reality, to warp it a little bit if it became *too* real.

Those weren’t quite the newest, nor a well-maintained model. Instead of translating the damn thing, they tiled his view with thousands of pictures of naked Nabian females. Although his psychology had shown itself to be quite stable before the flight, the equipment they used on him didn’t quite have the whole explicit part of the Nabian virtuality at its disposal.

“Sagan’s hair!” He went into a moderate feat of hysteria. “Lenses, no. Lenses, stop. Lenses, translate. I don’t need Nabian escorts. Even for this cheap.”

“Let me help you, Mister Pornacter.”

She touched the badge. Its inscription morphed into letters of the familiar alphabet. Fighting off the last free but rather non-erotic download advertisement, Andy finally had a chance to take a better look at the badge. Immediately, he wondered why in the Universe’s name it said ‘Vlada’. Then he realized: only a Vlada could do something like that to him. Those Communists! They’re everywhere, he thought, just as his grand-grand-grand-grand-father thought a couple hundred years ago before they took him into the looney bin.

“Okay, *Vlada*. How come you have a human name, *Vlada*?”

“I googled it,” she replied. “Choosing a name is the most important, and also the first decision any Nabian makes in his life.”

There was a pause. Andy couldn’t decide what he wanted to know the least about right now: the Nabian childbirth process, in which they somehow managed to give names to themselves, or the aforementioned company’s financial figures for the

last couple of centuries. Both were equally as disturbing to him.

“Anyway, Mister Poordirector,” Vlada said, “I have news for you - the bad one and the good one.”

“That damn cliché. Give me the bad one first. Guess I’m most prepared for this kind of news now.”

“My working hours are over. See you tomorrow, Mister Podacter.”

“But what about the good—”

Before he could grab one of her eyeballs in a bout of uncontrolled anger, the shutters between them closed. Vlada apparently didn’t forget her good manners. She jammed all of her eyeballs into the transparent shutter-screen and waved her triplet limb at him.

Through the speakerphone, she said, “You can wait till my next shift in our comfortable waiting room located behind you. Next working day is only just twelve human hours away.” The volume of it was set for someone other than human. Andy never been shell shocked before, but the stunning noise in his ears and the bloody flash in his eyes came close to what he imagined as being contused.

“Just as if I never left Earth in the first place,” he uttered, rocking back and forth under the residual effect of the sound waves, better described as tsunamis. “At least she finally got my name right.”

The entrant’s hall around him was now empty. He alone remained un-invited into the land of multi-eyed, self-named, explicit content-friendly creatures. It was either a couple of steps back, or out into the vast-

ness of space, ass-frozen for another couple of years to a rather unpleasant synthetic leather of the cryo-seat. The choice was obvious. Andy grabbed his baggage and trailed into the waiting room.

A single bench was all that filled the premise he walked in. As if to compensate for the scarceness of the room, it looked like the longest bench he ever encountered. The walls of the room stretched somewhere deep into the cosmoport, and as far as the walls went, so did the bench.

To Andy’s pity, it was almost completely occupied by a giant blob of purple and slime. The prospect of sitting next to a potentially omnivorous entity of unknown origin didn’t appeal to him, but spending the night standing sounded really uncomfortable. Andy’s consumerist guts shivered before the thought. Although he usually didn’t find any pleasure in being eaten and digested, the benefits were outweighing the costs right now. Trying to not slip on its drippings and avoid getting into the spiked tentacles, he made his way to the edge of the bench, where a tiny space remained unoccupied.

The bench felt surprisingly soft, and even seemed to have some sort of massage features for those tight spots in the derriere. After he flicked a couple drips of slime off his tungsto-kevlar jacket and settled against the massaging brush, he even managed to relax. If not for the muttering sound that came from under his bottom, he would’ve already been watching pink ponies jumping over the Milky Way. Maybe the mechanism hadn’t been on maintenance for a while.

Andy lifted his butt off and eyed whatever that could have made the noises.

“Darn humans,” said whatever was making the noises. “Watch where you are putting your gluteal musculature.”

“Oh”— Andy made room for the creature — “sorry. I never noticed you until now.”

The being got out from the captivity of his buttocks. A tiny hamster-like creature dressed as a space ranger discontentedly shook itself. It looked kind of cute, if not for the eyes that looked as if they wanted to jump out of the sockets and kick Andy’s butt, and he had seen enough in his travels through space to not rule out the possibility of that happening.

“Hygiene, human,” it said. “Do you know what hygiene is?”

“I’ve spent three years in a cryo-seat,” Andy replied, keeping distance, but with the ginormous, purple danger to his other side. “What do you expect? You don’t exactly smell of roses, either. No need to touch me, by the way. I’m kind of not into interspecies relationships. ”

“Neither am I.” The creature pointed at the blob next to him. The tentacles it jerked back from Andy’s neck suggested the sudden reprise had just barely missed him.

“The thing just eats and... you know,” the creature said.

“What does it eat?” Andy asked, looking around the room. “There’s no one around.”

“Well, that is true. I hope you are able to connect the dots with all of that information at your disposal?”

Andy was indeed able, and he moved

an inch away from the purple creature as soon as he did. A gulp ran down his throat without him ever intending to swallow.

“And the slime is—?”

“Yep.”

If there was a potential ‘sweet’ to his potential dreams in the waiting room, it had just vanished. Who knew it was both a WR and a WC? That ten-eyed Nabian wretch probably did.

Andy pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. A nice relaxation of cancerous nature was supposed to do him good. At least the long term danger wasn’t even remotely as frightening as its short term equivalent that waved right next to him like a lump of jelly.

“You have a light?” he asked the tiny creature.

A wave of sound pierced his ears again. “No smoking in the waiting room!” The voice was familiar. The Nabian controller still smiled at him a couple meters away behind a thick veil of glass.

“Didn’t you say your day was done?” Andy yelled.

She spared herself of replying. Pushed the button on her control panel; the outer shutter fell down. It was, by the looks of it, made of reinforced tungsten, so the chances of getting to her suddenly became even slimmer. That also did Andy good, however, because her lipless smile definitely wasn’t something he’d have liked to stare at any longer.

“Seriously, though — don’t,” the tiny creature said. “See the concoction that’s dripping off the beast? Flammable. You smoke, and we’re all going to see our grand-

relatives very soon.”

That’s when Andy started really regretting the trip. He was never a compulsive smoker, nor an obsessive one, but rarely was he ever stopped from fetching a cig, especially by an explosive lump of snot. Vexed, he threw the cig into the cigarette bin. The image on it clearly suggested he’d stop smoking instead of wasting the precious space inside of the container. The cig didn’t make it to the bin; the blob grabbed and swallowed it with a smack and a gurgle.

“See?” The tiny creature sneered. “Eats everything.”

“How come you’re not lunch, then?”

“Guess I’m too bitter, even for a dessert.” The tiny creature shrugged a tiny shrug. “Actually, I bet you wouldn’t have lasted longer if not for your disgusting stench. Considering the smell of its own, I’d advise you take a good bath.”

“I’d rather not, for safety’s sake,” Andy said, squinting at the blob. “Besides, there are no baths around here, as far as I am concerned.”

The creature sniffed. It settled on the bench and crossed its legs, looking like a *Le Penseur* were Rodin to have had a penchant for guinea pigs and LSD.

“What’s your name?” Andy asked.

“Hix,” it replied, “but I’m not quite in the mood for meeting people that’d soon be a lunch.”

“I’m Andy.”

“Whatever.”

They sat silent for a while, only accompanied by the occasional burps coming from the blob. Andy caught himself imagining

how the food traveled through its bowel nodes and whirling in spirals of stomach acid. Then he remembered what the food was supposed to be, and his imagination ceased to function.

“So, tell me,” he said, “why are you here, Hix?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hix replied.

“Come on, don’t be shy. We have a whole night ahead of us.”

“I was actually hoping the appetite of this being would outweigh its olfactory bias long before the night.”

“Well, that’s an awful thing to say.”

“That’s an awful smell to stink.”

“Can you stop mentioning it already?”

Andy roused, but the tentacles politely insisted on him to remain in place.

“Alright, alright, fine!” Hix said. “You darn humans and your darn curiosity.”

“Tell me, then. What brought you here, and why were you not allowed in?”

Hix furrowed his brows. He looked quite cute, almost like a baby hamster. Driven by sudden tenderness, some sort of reflex even made Andy stretch his finger towards the tiny thing to caress its head. The blaster that Hix immediately pulled on him looked like it’d barely scratch a fly. That is, a fly from Earth. Those still had no influence on the intergalactic stock market, unlike their evolved relatives from the Manoora system.

“The hell do you think you’re doing?”

Hix yelled. Andy jerked his hand back.

“That’s a nice gun you have there.”

“You think this is some kind of joke?” he asked. “Didn’t that old movie about

weird men in funeral wear teach you anything about small guns?"

"It's not the size, it's how you use it?"

Andy wasn't sure if that was the right lesson he drew from there.

"It's not the size, period. The thing blows a fully-armed Hymerical Olpatophan to pieces with a single hit."

Whatever that creature was, Andy probably missed it during his biology classes. But its name sounded earnest enough.

"Look, human" – Hix holstered his Olpatophan slayer – "if you want to have a conversation like all of us intelligent cosmic beings, you should stop treating me like some pet suslik, *capiche?*"

"Got you."

"Anyway," Hix said, "I'm not a fan of sniveling, but my mom died."

He sniveled anyway. "Oh no, my poor mom. I loved her so much!"

"What happened to her?" Andy asked.

"What could happen to a damn Hamsterios Sapio? Whatever those ten percent of brain activity allow you to do, it seems to me like you're still at one max."

With all the power granted to him by that one percent of brain activity, Andy guessed that the list of those things that could happen to a Hamsterios Sapio shouldn't be too long.

"I'm sorry about your mother, Hix," he said. "Not everyone's mom gets flattened out."

"Flattened out?" Hix bursted into his micro-hamsterio-tears. "What are you, some kind of Red-Tardio syndrome survivalist? She fought in the galactic war against the

deadly Lydorian troops. She fell in battle for our freedom."

"Oh."

He stretched his hand towards Hix – some good patting on the back should've done him good. As the creature fell off the bench after his hearty pat, he quickly realized the choice of gesture wasn't quite right for the occasion.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"It's fine." Hix climbed up the bench. "I needed this, actually." Settling back in his place, he wiped the tears off his whiskers. "Okay, I'm good now. Anyway, that's beside the point of why I'm here."

"But what about your mom?" Andy asked. "I thought she was the reason—"

"That was like, what? Two human years ago, I think. She never loved me, anyway. She was much more fond of Nix, Wix, Dlix, C-mix, Flix, Delix, Critix—"

"I get it," Andy said.

"Don't interrupt me, human. It's annoying."

"Just get to the point."

"No amount of space vacuum could compare to the amount of patience you have, human. I tried smuggling a type-D atomic-core mini processing facility into Nabia. In my stomach."

"What? Type-D? It is half the size of that blob."

"That was a minified version. It was just about your size, actually."

"But you're so—"

"Don't ask, okay? It involved minifying rays, lots of water and ungodly amounts of willpower. I'm not in the mood for a reason,

and now you know that reason.”

Silence ensued again. The more Andy tried imagining the most certainly unpleasant procedure of stomaching a whole atomic-core processor, the surer he became that he'd lose it right now if he did have something to eat. He was actually lucky to have had his last lunch about two hours and three years ago. But, considering there were no food supplies at hand, nor any space cafeterias to satisfy his hunger, Andy decided he'd occupy his otherwise languishing stomach with some more of those *conversations*.

“Were you here for long?” he asked.

“No,” Hix replied, “just a couple of hours. The security service of the airport told me they'd pick me up as soon as the blob would have something to be occupied with. You, in other words.”

“Me? Like—”

“Yeah. The guards and the blob don't really get along well. Besides... Ah, here they are.”

One of the shutter segments slid up and let a couple of heavily armed Nabians in. They wore an armored plate on each of their floating eye-sockets. With a strict march, yet still wary about the tentacles flowing around the room, they approached the bench.

“Hix Herveticus?”

“That's me.”

“You're coming with us.”

The guards took him up in his arms, and then they all headed back into the crevice. Dangling on his tiny

limbs, stretched in a crucifix-like position, Hix turned his head to Andy.

“When you're in, aim for the upper intestine,” he said. “It chops the food into pieces there. Won't be painless, but at least it's not like in the lower intestine where you slowly dissolve in the stomach juices.”

Hix made chopping movements with his hanging paws. Andy winced. He didn't find being chopped into pieces pleasant, not even with the provided comparison.

“Thanks for the advice, I guess,” Andy said. “You have a nice prison trip, too.”

“Good luck, human. How'd that saying go? Always aim for the stars, and you'll reach the sky. Just don't take it too literally.”

Before Andy managed to say something witty in turn, the convoy hid behind the shutter. He was all alone again, if not for the all-consuming purple blob that already looked as if the lunchtime was about to begin. Andy could use a lunchtime, but not as a lunch himself.

It was the time to run. He wasn't ready



to die, especially in a painful, slow and gastrointestinal way. The problem was, there seemed to be no places to run to and hide in from the all-devouring entity. The room had nothing except for the bench, the walls and the seemingly infinite space, stretched into the depths of the cosmosport.

He desperately searched for an idea to pop inside his head, yet just got senseless garbage instead. Words flew before his eyes: 'run', 'sleep', 'eat'. None of those helped, and soon he thought he'd rather not see those words before his eyes anymore. They wouldn't go.

"Damn lenses," he muttered. "When you don't need them to read your mind, they do just that."

Reading minds! Yes, that's exactly what he needed. Andy delved into his inner pocket and fished out a circular translation device. Praying it'd have its battery charge after years of being unused, he slapped it on to the blob. With the slime dripping down its body, the device slipped lifeless for a bit, sending shivers down Andy's spine, but after a couple of seconds it lit and then, digging way through the folds of slime, merged with the blobby being. It wasn't supposed to be swallowed - whatever to name that mass of clay did to the device - but Andy took his chances. Or, rather, his only chance.

"Can you hear me?" Andy asked.

The speaker coughed somewhere deep inside the blob's tissues.

"I can't hear you," Andy said. "The speaker must not be working."

"I - wasn't - speaking - idiot," the

speaker growled. "I - sneezed."

"Bless you."

Apparently, it wasn't the best, nor the most appropriate, but the only thing he could say in response to such a statement.

"No - bless - you. Eating - time."

"Don't eat me just yet."

"Why? I'm - hungry."

"I'm hungry, too. But you don't see me eating you, for example."

"That's - poor - argumentation."

"Come to think of it..."

"Eating - time."

"Wait." Andy pushed the tentacles away as they rushed towards him. "Do you have a name, or something?"

"What - do - you - need - my name - for? Does - human - food - ask - names - too?"

"Most of what we eat isn't intelligent nor alive - mostly one or the other - so I guess not. But since I have that opportunity, why wouldn't I use it, right?"

The blob gurgled for a while, probably crunching some of those morality cogs inside of his blobian mind. It seemed like they were rarely ever used, especially when deciding the fate of its dinner.

"Moettette'Gro'Frahailo'Exterominatos' Ad'Regol'Ignerin'Hat," the speaker said.

"Can I call you, say, Moettette?" Andy asked.

"Sounds - good."

"So, Moettette-"

"Eating - time!"

"Just tell me this one thing before you eat me." Andy hid behind his hands, crossed overhead, peeking at the entity that

weaved its tentacles around him. “Are you allergic to wool?”

“No,” the speaker replied, “I — guess — not. Why — do — you — ask?”

“It’s just that I’m good with knitting, and I thought you could really use a sweater. It’s quite cold here, and you’re not dressed well. I’ll make you one if you want to. We can have reindeers on it.”

“Just shut up and let me eat you already.” Its tone went from being like that of a carnivorous monster to that of an unsatisfied snob at an expensive restaurant.

“Where did your stuttering go?” Andy asked.

“Well, I figured it’d make you feel more eatable,” Moette replied. “Humans are used to all those cerebral monstrosities and their gurgling sounds. Hard to break through a shell of stereotype, you know?”

“That makes sense.”

“Just, please sit still. I hate when food fidgets about.”

“Come on, dude. We just met, for Neil deGrasse’s sake. You don’t eat people that you’ve just met. It’s simply good form. By the way, you *are* a dude, right?”

Andy eyed Moette, unsure of what exactly to look for.

“Of course not,” Moette said. “This isn’t some clichéd story. Gender, let me tell you, is nothing but a cosmic construct. I ate gender for breakfast, because it does not define me as a person. Got it?”

The blob gargled its last question like an alcoholic with a Louis Armstrong-kind of bass.

“Can you *not* eat me, then?” Andy

asked. “Going by that same logic, I’d say this trope is rather overused.”

“Male or a female or none at all, hunger is no artistic device, nor an artificial construct. Believe me.”

Believing that was easy. Giving up life wasn’t quite the same.

“You know,” Moette said after a while of wobbling, “I’ll eat you a bit later. It’s just that I rarely speak to anyone, so I figured — why not converse for a change?”

“Yeah, let’s converse. Sure, why not?” The abundance of reasons why couldn’t possibly outweigh a tiny chance of staying alive, at least for a bit longer.

“But if you thought you caught me with your smart tricks — ‘smart’ in quotes, of course — then don’t think that anymore. Food is food, even if it knows my name.”

“True.” Andy wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“You know what?” Moette said. “You need to meet Will. He’s an awesome guy.”

“Who?” Andy asked. “There’s someone else in here? Someone you didn’t eat?”

“Yeah. He lives further down the room, about a mile away. Wait a minute, I’ll bring him.”

Moette sucked the sprouts growing on its body inside. They all threaded into a giant ball which rolled further through its body and off into the distance.

“Can I ask you something personal?” Andy said.

“Go ahead,” Moette replied. “I’m not a shy person.”

“Do you have any relatives?”

“Probably not. To be completely honest

with you, I'm just mutated organic waste from space that someone brought with his sandwich leftovers."

"That must be harsh."

"I'm used to it. Eating various pets was quite unpleasant at first, at least not until they stopped fighting back inside my stomach. Much better with children, because they usually don't have fur on them. I hate fur. It gives me bad heartburn."

"I feel for you."

That was an obvious lie, but in order to justify himself before his own conscience, Andy attempted to. He did eat a cat once at a Korean restaurant, but it was claimed to be synthetically created and vegan-friendly. And children - no, he couldn't recall eating children. However, his stomach quickly

reminded him that even a child would do now, especially with some nachos and guacamole on top.

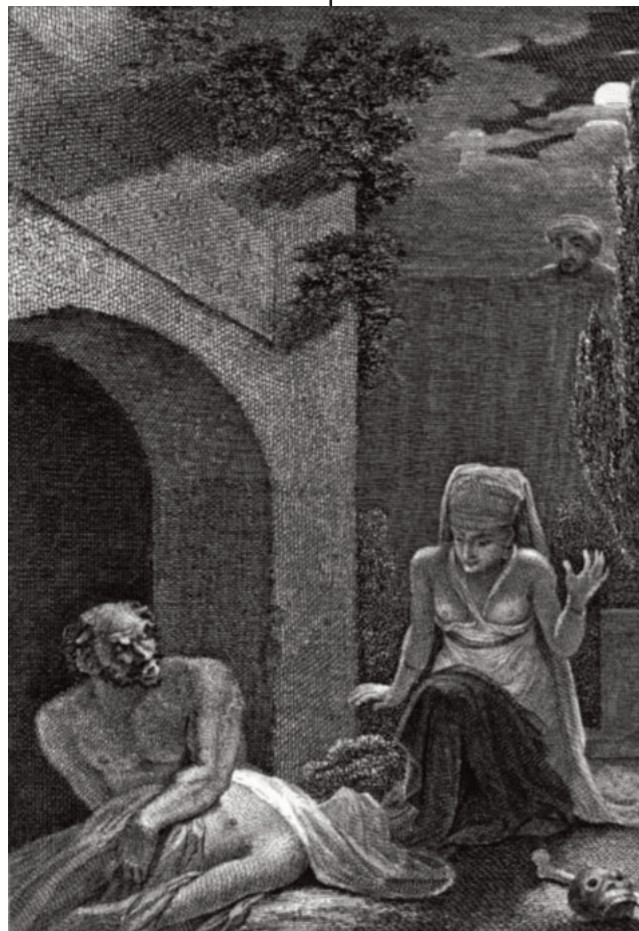
"How come you get away with eating all those people?" Andy asked.

"Technically, the waiting room is under no one's jurisdiction," Moette replied.

"They don't really care for anyone out here. Actually, I'm giving them a favor by cutting down their immigration problems drastically. If you're here after hours, you're basically toast. A giant, raw toast. Without bread. Not really toast, though, no. I'll just swallow you, in other words."

"Right. I like your choice of metaphor."

The blob wavered; its tentacle ball was coming back. Reaching the end point, which Andy was unsure whether to name a



front or a back, it stopped. After moments of wavering, Moette spit all of the tentacles back out.

Hanging from one of the sprouts, a man slumbered peacefully, as if lying in a bed. His clothes looked like that of a janitor - blue and baggy - but he had no badge on him, and Andy knew well that space janitors always carry badges. You're not a janitor if you don't have a badge with your name on it, one of the few laws in space that actually worked. Other than that, his long blonde hair and tall height suggested otherwise.

"Wake up, Will," Moette said. "I brought you a friend. No, wait, I brought you to a friend"

"Do you have a sore throat, mom?" Will uttered. "Just five more minutes, okay?"

"It's never easy waking the guy up," Moette said. "The dude can sleep for days. Come on, Will, wake the hell up already!"

"Where... Where am I?" Will was slowly waking to a disappointing answer. Moette put him down on the ground like a newborn baby, with tenderness.

"I'm Andy," he said. "Moette already introduced you. In absentia, kind of."

Will looked at both of them and burped loudly, keeping his eyes on Moette.

"It's okay, Will," Moette said. "Thanks to this gentleman, I can speak human. No need for our language anymore."

"I wasn't talking to you." Will scratched his head. "Maybe that lasagna I ate did, but not me. And nice to meet you, Andy."

He stretched his hand towards Andy, and Andy stretched his. The problem was, they were two meters away. Moette looked

like it already identified the issue. The blob pushed Will closer with its tentacle. The man glided on the floor, still only half-seated and half-awake.

Andy shook Will's hands. "Were you two talking in burps?"

"He's quite good at my language," Moette said. "Always so clear in his speech. Hell, I myself am worse at my own language. We can speak for days, discussing the issues of personal identification in a society based on nothing but stigmas."

"Honestly, I never even realized we were talking," Will said. "But it was fun nonetheless."

"You're just being humble," Moette said.

"No, I just have acid reflux from fatty foods," Will replied. "They're bad for my digestion. So, Andy, you're in for dinner, I understand?"

"I was actually hoping to stay for a bit longer," Andy said. And then asked anyway, "Aren't you a janitor, by any chance?"

"It's the badge, right?" Will asked. "Yes, I am. I lost it when cleaning the waiting room a couple years ago. Went out to mop up the mess after the diplomatic slimebug procession, and poof! It was gone. They wouldn't let me back in without my badge, those bastards. Told me I should do their damn acceptance test now to enter."

"The same thing they want from me," Andy said. "What does it even consist of?"

"Ah, a bunch of nonsensical questions all jammed together," Will replied.

"Sounds simple. I'd have no problem

answering a couple of tricky questions.”

“Well, that’s the problem. There aren’t exactly a couple of questions. More like 127,389.”

“How many?” Andy roused. “That’s madness! What do they even want to know?”

“Various important stuff, actually,” Will said. “There’s, for example, a section where you describe your first kiss. Then, there are sections about your everyday habits, your tastes in music, your dominant hand, favorite hair lotions, top three alphabet letters used, twenty one thing you hate about year 2137, all described in detail. I had some problems in the ‘nauseating smells’ section in the past, but that’s just because I rarely ever get nauseated. However, time spent with Moette fixed the issue. Come to think of it, the ‘real facts from Mars Attacks’ section was quite fun, at least the first few hundred times when I took it.”

“Why haven’t you passed it, then, since you know the whole thing so well?”

“That’s the other problem. You must complete the test in one sitting, and while my best time was eight hours eleven minutes thirty two seconds, the working day only lasts a straight eight. A bummer, right?”

It was indeed a huge bummer. Andy drew a deep sigh. Maybe being eaten by an enormous space junk wasn’t as bad as he initially thought it to be. All he wanted is to see some of those tourist attractions on Nabia: the Tiny Canyon, the Statue of Slavery, the Notre Dame De Nabie. Instead, he ended up having to fill in an unfillable form for the rest of his life. Being eaten was

the other option, of course.

“Okay,” Andy said, “that’s it. Moette, you can eat me. Just do me a favor - chop me faster, or whatever it is that you do with food. You can do it for your friend, right?”

“Look how the tables have turned,” Moette said. “Didn’t you say you don’t eat someone you’ve just met?”

“You make an exception when that certain someone asks,” Andy said, “especially if he’s polite and says please. So, *please?*”

“Hey, Andy,” Will said, “I think you’re being too harsh on yourself. Maybe we’ll figure out a way together?”

He stood up and approached the blob, sticking his hand into it.

“Stop it,” Moette said. “It tickles.”

“Where can it be?” Will fumbled inside of the purple jello with intent. “Ah-ha!”

He pulled out a beautiful, exquisite, exotic, luxurious, light-radiating mop. Like a diamond, it sparkled in the lights of the waiting room. Andy could always tell a great mop from an absolutely magnificent mop, and this one was the latter.

“You like it?” Will asked.

“It’s... wonderful,” Andy replied.

“We can both be janitors here,” Will said. “I’ll share food with you, and you’ll do half the work for me. What do you say?”

“You said food?” Andy asked. “Where do you get food?”

“I share some with Will,” Moette said. Andy gulped a giant appetite-killing gulp.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Andy.” Will laughed a crampy laugh. “Moette meant that he leaves me the food that his food brings with it. Sounds confusing, but ain’t

all things at first?"

"You don't say," Andy said. "At least you're fed enough to do your job."

"Yeah," Will said, "it's getting rather boring, sitting all day doing nothing. Besides, Moette provides me with an inexhaustible source of work. You'll get into the way things work soon. So?"

"I... I don't know—"

"It's going to be fun, I promise." Will patted Andy on the back.

"I don't get to eat him, then?" Moette asked. It sounded sad.

"Oh, come on, Moette." Will patted him, too, but his hand slipped through. He almost dived back into the blob, but Moette's tentacle caught him. "All right," Moette said, "Andy seems like a nice fellow."

Andy couldn't decide. Being a space janitor was among his childhood dreams that never came true. All his peers wanted to either be space pirates or interstellar troopers, but all he ever wanted was that mop he saw on the blinking covers of the cyber-magazines. Those covers occupied half of his room. He used to cut them out with cyber-scissors and stick them on his bedroom wall.

The other half was all dedicated to janitors themselves: their teeth white and shiny, their suits perfectly blue and clean, their hair blonde and sparkling like diamond dust. The courageous beings, the space cleaners would've handled danger no matter where it came from. The world was safe in their arms — also, perfectly clean — and Andy wanted to hold the world, too. Maybe

just for a moment.

"I'll do it," Andy said.

"Awesome!" Will exclaimed.

They both grabbed on to the mop, their foreheads touching.

"In the dirtiest storm..." Will said.

"In the slimiest flooding..." Andy said.

"Until the work is done..."

"Until the world is clean..."

"The Janitor stays..."

"The Janitor cleans!"

"You're in, Andy," Will said. "Congrats, dude."

Moette sniveled; it sounded like an awkwardly repressed fart. "I'm going to cry."

"Please don't." Will turned his head towards Moette, forehead still pushing against Andy's. "I don't swim well, as we learned from the last time."

"When do we start?" Andy asked, recoiling.

"Tomorrow," Will said. "Moette, bro — I mean, person — can you take us to my shelter?"

"Sure," Moette said. "Climb on."

It picked them both up in his tentacles. Hanging at a height of several dozen feet wasn't pleasant, but it didn't matter. Andy was a space janitor. Maybe unofficially, maybe trapped for all eternity in this forsaken place, but with his biggest dream finally coming to life.

"Oh, and please, Moette, let's use the external transportation," Will said. "I swallowed just enough of your phlegm for today."

"Strap on your seat belts," Moette said. "The Moette-train is leaving the station in

three – two – one.”

The speed was close to that of an interstellar glider. Andy could barely see anything around him as they flew with their legs dangling in mid-air. He realized he forgot his baggage, but that was of little importance to him right now. Even though the non-existent food inside of him begged to escape the imprisonment of his shrunken stomach, his heart already bled soap foam and his nose smelled the synthetic aromas of vanilla cleaning solution.

Suddenly, they stopped. Will turned green, but that accommodated his hair even more. Andy dug the combination of green and blonde.

“And we’re here,” Moette said.

“Thanks... Moette,” Will uttered, holding down his morning lasagna.

Moette put them both on the ground, and they stood up, dancing the ballet of dizziness. The shelter Will talked about was completely made of paper with words scribbled all over it in black. He managed to build a whole shack with furniture, a dou-

ble-sized bed and, seemingly, a bathroom. Will was the space equivalent of Robinson Crusoe, and Andy had just become his cosmic Friday.

“This is where the tests came in handy,” Will said. “And, what’s even better, I never run out of toilet paper.”

“Sounds really handy,” Andy agreed. He wasn’t lying.

“Guys,” Moette said, “there’s a group of Universe-Asian tourists at the block D189 that just arrived. I can’t miss the eastern delicacies, you know.”

“Go ahead.” Will fell on to his paper bed. “We’re going to sleep, anyway. One more thing, though. Can you please turn the lights off?”

“Sure, friend.” Moette spit its slime at the illumination lines. They sparkled and soon died down, almost as if going into a night light mode. It felt quite cozy. Andy flopped on to the bed near Will, stretching his legs out and placing his hands under his head. Almost like home, he thought.

“Good night, Andy,” Will said, snorting



slightly. "Don't worry about the lights. The service will fix them tomorrow, they always do. And tomorrow will be a great day for us, I'm sure of that."

"Aren't you service, though?" Andy asked.

"I guess so," Will said and stretched a pleased smile across his face. "Let's just sleep on it."

"Good night, brother Janitor," Andy said. "We'll have a great day together."

He lied and stared into the ceiling, where the short circuited lights buzzed. Down the corridor he could hear the muffled sounds of screams that the tourists made while being impaled on to the tentacles and swallowed alive. The voices rose and fell, probably not heard by the citizens of Nabia who all slept at the other side of the tungsten shutters. Andy never heard the sounds of Nabia, so he tried imagining the voices of their life, of their movement. He imagined Nabians snorting and watching explicit content on their floating screens, the sounds of printing machines working to produce another thousand sheets holding the acceptance tests. And behind all of that cacophony was the sound of a thousand hungry purple blobs... no, that was just Will, snoring beside him. Andy quickly realized he wasn't quite in a Hunter S.

Thompson's story, so he just closed his eyes, trying to sleep through the Nabian night.

"Psst," Andy heard Moette's voice squeezing through the loudspeaker, "Andy? Are you sleeping?"

"No," Andy whispered.

"Look," Moette said, "I don't know if I

can trust you but, you see, I can't keep this secret anymore."

"What kind of secret?"

"It's just that... the Will's badge. I stole it."

"But why?"

"I was all alone here, all of that time. He was the only one who treated me well. He never wiped me off the floor or washed me off the windows, you see? He's my only friend, Andy, and he's a good one at that. I'm just afraid he'll leave me forever.

"That's awful, Moette. You need to tell him."

"I know, I know. I'll try. Someday. Just, don't tell him yourself, okay?"

"Fine. Let's sleep, Moette. We'll sleep on it."

"Okay, okay." Andy felt the paper blanket being pulled on to him, as well as the hefty drip of slime on his forehead. "Sleep well, Andy."

"You too, Moette. You too."

Andy slowly began to fall into the land of dreams. He was fighting off the dirt with his new mop back to back with his comrade Will and their sidekick, all-devouring purple blob of a neutral identity called Moette. Together, they made a team worth a thousand teams, and no pollution could have stood against their power. They laughed in the face of danger. Moette laughed, Will laughed and Andy laughed, too. And in that moment, he could have sworn they were infinite.

But he didn't. Just in case. ❖

THE HONKED

by LEE BLEVINS

The car in front of them didn't even let off the brake before the traffic on the highway closed ranks again.

"I'm gonna honk," said Steve.

"Wait," said Betsy. "Don't do something you might regret."

"We've been sitting here for five minutes and it's like this guy isn't even trying to get out. He's missed several chances. This might deserve a honk."

"You can't honk at someone for being careful. You honk for an accident or a near accident or general jackassery. You don't honk for Sunday driving."

Steve pointed a thumb back over his shoulder.

"There are three cars behind us. If one of them honks, there could be a chain reaction of honks. I'm not going to get honked at because this guy drives like he remembers the dust bowl. And our food's getting cold."

Betsy looked at the side mirror at the line of backed up traffic behind them. The strip mall was busy. Too busy.

"That could be a problem," she said.

"I'll give him one more chance." Steve looked left towards the lane of oncoming traffic speeding down the highway. "The next break, he better take. Otherwise, I'll have to honk."

"I hate the honk," said Betsy.

"No one likes it."

Fifty cars must have passed, one after the other in rapid succession, before any suitable break presented itself. But Steve saw it and he gripped the steering wheel tighter and he felt a heaviness in his foot.

The car in front of them saw it, too. The brake lights blinked. The car inched forward. Betsy smiled.

"See," she said.

And then a work truck swerved into the nearer lane. The car in front of them hit its brakes again.

"Come on," said Steve. "You can make it."

But the car, ever cautious, waited until the truck passed. By then it was too late. The traffic had returned.

Steve looked over at Betsy. Her eyes were wide and her lips were tight. She barely nodded.

Steve pulled his right hand off the steering wheel with a sticky plop and placed its palm over the horn in the center of the steering wheel.

"Okay," he said.

And he honked.

The sonic wave shot out from their front bumper and washed over the car in front of them. Its sides shimmered and undulated as it stretched down the length of

its prey. The brake lights went off again but in vain. In a second, the wave had wrapped itself around the car from bumper to bumper.

The driver looked back up at them in his rear view mirror.

Then the wave contracted, and as it pulled inward its edges crumpled the sides of the car like a taut slinkee released, and then it popped out of existence.

“I had to do it,” said Steve.

He let off the brake and they inched forward until they were almost nosed out onto the highway and then they waited anxiously for their chance to go.

Dewayne was staring out the driver’s side window, wondering if there were even any red lights left, when he noticed the

sonic wave in his peripheral vision. He had never been in one, of course, but he had seen it happen before. He didn’t get a good look at who had honked at him.

And then he was somewhere else entirely, sitting in traffic that stretched forward and behind and to the left and to the right without end. Everywhere was stalled highway. No one moved forward, not even an inch. The world was one big traffic jam.

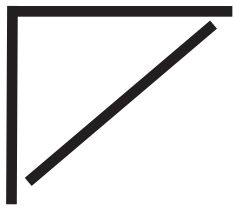
Dewayne, like every other driver in every other car there had done and would do again, placed both hands on the horn and he honked.

And he honked.

And he honked.

But all it made was a sound. ❖

END TRANSMISSION



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 8

Page 1 – THE USUAL SKEPTICS by Melodie Corrigan. Melodie Corrigan is an eclectic Canadian writer and a nature lover with strong family and community ties. Her stories have appeared in *Litro UK*, *FreeFall*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Six Minute Magazine*, *Mouse Tales*, *Subtle Fiction*, *Emerald Bolts*, *Earthen Journal*, *Switchback*, and *The Write Time at the Write Place*. Find her at (www.melodiecorrigan.com).

Page 5 – THE PRICE OF OIL by Liz Sawyer. She writes, “I have had other stories published involving the protagonists of this story. I am married, with several cats and no kids. I am also retired Air Force and a recently retired paralegal residing in Northern California. The first 'Ti and Ian' story, “Change of Plans,” will be published in *4 Star Stories* in the next month or two. The second, “Beginnings,” was published in *Nebula Rift* in April, 2014 (it may still be on-line in the archives); the third and fourth stories are out for consideration. (“Oil” is number 5, just to keep 'em in order).”



THE USUAL SKEPTICS

by MELODIE CORRIGALL

“Before we were asked to choose months, we never fought,” Maggie said, pummeling the bread dough and whipping it around to give the other side a whack.

“Bullshit,” her husband replied. He grabbed the newspaper in an attempt to exit the ring before the bell for the third round. In their years together, after a few determined punches, they had always found a way to compromise. This time there was more at stake than in any previous match.

“Never fought like this,” his wife called after him, wiping flour from her eyelids and tossing the dough back on the counter.

“The kids aren’t speaking to us and every time I step out the door someone pulls me aside to promote their favourite month.”

“They don’t want to miss your baked goods,” he called back.

“They can buy some to freeze for later when we share a month.”

Wilbur poked his head back around the corner. “I’m not giving up February,” he said. “I won’t give up snow.”

“Go to the indoor winter park they promised if you want snow,” his wife said. “I’m sick of shoveling and sliding about in it. I’m sticking to summer months.”

“Yeah, who’d want to miss mosquitoes and black flies?”

“I’ll buy a gauze tent.”

The moment the front door slammed shut, Maggie leaned under the counter and pulled out the sherry bottle. She’d bought drinking sherry—Australian—for cooking. Plopping her ample bottom on the kitchen stool, she poured six ounces into her measuring cup and sighed.

Initially, Maggie had been optimistic about the research project. But her husband, who had an annoying habit of being right, had been skeptical about the “chance of a lifetime” from the get-go. She now recognized there were problems but still the chance to choose which of the twelve months you wanted in your year, with the possibility of repeats, five Julys, two Augusts etc., made her glow. Finally, she had power over her destiny.

Maggie loved summer and would have blossomed in some southern clime if she’d had the chance. There was no such thing as too hot—well perhaps hell was too hot but being a non-believer, that didn’t concern her.

She didn’t waver in her choice or months. The day she and Wilbur had signed on, she’d made her list: two Junes and Septembers, and four Julys and Augusts. Ditch December, she hated Christmas.

No sooner had she set her pen down,

than Wilbur sailed onto the porch, face as proud as a maple waffle, and dropped down his list, with not one summer month.

“What’s this about?” she said. “What about the cottage?”

“Forget the cottage,” her husband had crowed, doing a little two-step. “The cottage is nothing but sweeping sand off the porch, putting up screens, being eaten alive by mosquitoes, and hearing your sister brag about her wretched kids.”

“They aren’t wretched.”

“No but her bragging is.”

Now, after three months of talk, try as they might, she and Wilbur could not agree and tonight was the final town meeting. By midnight, all consent forms with selected months had to be in the Company’s hands. Lakeville, which had never been a fast moving community, was spinning.

As usual she and Wilbur insisted they wouldn’t budge an inch but she knew in the end their love would trump sun or snow. Hopefully, their compromises wouldn’t result in them only being together for half the year.

When Mayor Tipper first announced that Lakeville had been selected for the Months of Choice research project, the three general responses were skepticism, delight and, from a few old timers, fear.

Having experienced many dashed hopes from other can’t fail projects some Lakeville residents like Wilbur were skeptical about deals too good to miss. They circled the idea like dogs around a suspicious bone, speculating why Lakeville had been chosen.

Since the highway bypass had been built

ten years earlier, only relatives and salesmen turned off to visit the village. The library and post office were long gone and the general store had been downgraded to a couple of counters in the gas station, which eventually had also disappeared.

A few frail voices chirped out their fear about the proposed Month’s project. As Mavis from the feed store put it, “We’re rats being led into a black hole with no up elevator.” This got some laughs. “Black holes don’t have elevators,” Arnold Buckle shouted, “We’ll use a ladder.”

A representative from the Company dazzled the crowd with his sound and light show in support of Mayor Tipper’s announcement. The Company man explained that the research project (all hush hush) offered everyone over 18 living in a contained area the opportunity to choose which months they wanted to live in for the next and subsequent years.

Once chosen it was “a life sentence” as Wilbur, who always read the small print, put it. Unless they all chose the same months, Lakeville residents would never all be together again. “Not all bad news,” Maggie admitted thinking of Arnold Buckle.

It was obvious from the get-go, residents would not all choose the same months. Even families could not agree, and struggled between their personal preferences and the possible separation from loved ones. Teenagers wailed about not having a vote on the most important decision of their lives.

Thirty-six people took the limited time offer and went through the painless Erase Short Term Memory session followed by

relocated to another town—like in a TV program. Those who signed on to the Erase session, including Bill Buttons from the computer store, weren't heard from again. Maggie hoped things had turned out well for them. Rumor had it another seven had escaped under the wire, minds intact.

From the moment the town signed on (\$500 sign up bonus per person), from dawn to dusk, choice of months was on everyone's minds. Common wisdom was that although July could be muggy and buggy, it would be popular with everyone (except a few diehards like Wilbur) and that February, which was cold and dark, would be as quiet as the grave.

At the initial community meeting, while unable to reveal the name or location of the first research town, the Company representative assured Lakeview residents the chosen community was reveling in the experience: 79% considered it 8 on the 1 to 10 scale.

Lakeview residents had to take his word

for it because they couldn't talk to anyone from that town. The project was top secret, reminding Maggie of reports of alien sightings. You suspected there was something to them but government experts insisted they were not serious. Still all but a few naysayers had signed on the dotted line and fences had been erected around the town and outgoing e-mail blockages were in place "until everything is settled."

With the promises of vacations to Disney land or to a country of choice, (you wondered where they got the money), sound and light shows, lectures and parties, the council and the Company got the town inside. After signing on and separating the wheat from the chaff, as Wilbur put it, those in the running had eight weeks to decide on months, sign on the dotted line and then it would be out of their hands.

Those who had opted to stay hunkered down and considered their options. Until autumn's chilly winds forced the windows



shut, you could hear the conversations build into heated discussions, then, at most houses, boil into out-and-out battles. Those planning marriages were having second thoughts and those who were married, were checking out divorce lawyers.

Maggie's sister, who coached the girl's basketball team worried, "We'll never win the provincial cup with players coming and going."

"Forget it," Maggie said. "We won't be able to leave town anyhow after the schedule is in place." In the excitement that was part of the small print that folks forgot.

"It'll be like in Brigadoon," Maggie's mother said. "Everyone dancing and singing.

"That was a film." Maggie protested. "No amount of changing months is going to make this town sing.

"I know," her mother said crossly. "But when they made the movie they couldn't imagine the technology we have now."

"So?"

"Maybe there are singing inserts they can put in people's heads."

Finally, it was the big night. Everyone was as edgy as game show contestants. Maggie was putting the last touches on a family favourite—buffalo stew—when her son Terry threw open the kitchen door, "Mom. We're cut off."

"Muddy shoes," her mother shouted. "I just washed the floor."

"Forget mud," her daughter said, shoving her brother out of the way. She shook her I-pad at her mother. "We can't get on line. They've cut us off."

"Nonsense. Something's wrong with your I-pad."

The noise of a pounding human herd galloping down the street drowned their discussion. "They've put a barrier up outside town," Mr. Beanman shouted.

The die was cast. At the meeting that evening, there was a riot of discussion. "Why didn't you tell us?" they cried. The Mayor tried to field questions; he was on his own. The Company representative had excused himself on the grounds that he was making a presentation at lucky town Number Three.

Finally, the meeting hall door was locked and folks shuffled to their homes, Wilbur and Maggie hand in hand. After drinking their customary hot chocolate, they climbed into bed and made love, still not revealing if and how they had compromised.

The next morning, Lakeville was rewarded with its five minutes of fame. From Iceland to the Bahamas, people heard about the mysterious meteorite that had hit the town leaving nothing but a black hole.

The Prime Minister returned from his holiday in Crete to respond to the emergency. On a national broadcast, he made sorry noises and urged people not to go near the contaminated site. The leader was effusive in his thanks to their partner, The Concept Company, for volunteering to clear the area as part of their Healthy Earth Initiative. The media dropped the story after three days and the usual skeptics suggested alien involvement. ❖

THE PRICE OF OIL

by LIZ SAWYER

They had taken a vacation, sun and sand to replace the turmoil of the months following the death of the Commander of the Outworld Security and Intelligence Agency. Or, rather, the circumstances surrounding his death. They enjoyed three days before the message arrived, sending Ti Stuart and Ian Makanda, the newly appointed Commander and Vice-Commander of OSIA, back to work.

The computer's alarm caught Ian about to cook breakfast in their spacecraft's galley. He scanned the automatically decrypted message, then read it again, slowly. He returned to the galley, turned off the stove—he was a gourmet cook, and insisted on the old-fashioned equipment—emptied the pot of coffee, and prepared a new one. While it brewed, he used the computer to run some calculations and send a message. As soon as the coffee was ready, he poured a cup, and took it into the bedroom.

“Wake up, love, duty calls,” he sent through their mental bond.

Ti opened one emerald green eye as he activated the wall screen, the second as he sat on the bed next to her, and offered the cup. She scooted up, shoved her shoulder-length curly red hair away from her face with both hands, then brought them down to envelope Ian's around the cup. Her head

raised as his lowered.

“Come back to bed,” she murmured against his lips. Her hand lifted, caressed the full beard framing his sharp jaw, thumb rubbing next to his Roman nose and mustache, and beneath one of the sapphire blue eyes she could drown in.

“Like to, but—” He moved the cup closer.

Ti caught the aroma, inhaled deeply and let a smile play around her mouth, rounding the sharp cheekbones.

“Solatteria Blue. What's the catastrophe this time?” was asked only half-facetiously.

Ian's smile was for the question. The Blue was the rarest coffee in the galaxy, saved for special occasions.

“Read the message.” He shifted slightly as Ti's attention turned to the screen.

Her eyes widened, and she forgot the coffee. “One oil refinery destroyed, another threatened and...am I reading that right?” Incredulity filled her voice. “The first threat gave a day and time for destruction?”

Ian nodded, summarized the rest of the message. “The refinery was scoured by the local explosive ordnance team the day before, locked, and guarded. It exploded exactly as specified.”

“Where'd it happen? Spindletop.” Ti shook her head. “Not familiar. The next

threat's also given a date and time."

"I had the computer calculate the travel time between here and there. Next TOD's in four days." Her mental "*Huh?*" brought the explanation of "Time of destruction. We can arrive with a few hours to spare if we leave now. I've alerted the tower to send the pre-departure team. I also sent a message to Spindletop giving our estimated arrival. I'll start the departure checklist, you..."

"...secure everything. Move so I can get up."

Ian took the untouched cup, let his hand linger on hers before he stood. "The sacrifices I make for the job."

Ti grinned as he left the bedroom, then she was up, tossing jeans and a sweater onto her lithe body. She didn't bother with shoes, as her petite size—5'4" without the usual stilettos—didn't matter in private. What did matter at that moment was making sure everything was secure aboard the *Calypso*. A few loose items in the bedroom and bath waited until she finished her morning ablutions. She ignored the small gym, as they hadn't used it, and went into the lounge, eyes scanning as she walked through. All bottles and glasses were protected in the cabinet behind the bar; the bench was fastened to the piano bolted to the far bulkhead. She scooped several pillows off the bolted-down couch and chairs, and tossed them into an equally anchored chest, while a vid case went into a cabinet, the door locked behind it.

Stopping at the dual computer stations, the separation between lounge and galley, Ti

sent a message notifying OSIA headquarters of their destination. The message from Spindletop had bypassed HQ on a special frequency every Outworld leader had, but rarely used. She also made sure both chairs were locked in place.

Final stop was the galley, where she freshened the coffee cup Ian had left on the counter. After a deep drink, Ti secured the almost-never-empty coffee pot, returned the breakfast items to their compartments in the refrigerator, the pan to its cabinet, and made sure the stove was off. A final scan of the areas and, "*All secure,*" she told Ian.

"Dep team's arrived. Enjoy your coffee."

Ti grinned, took the cup, and sat at her computer. She'd use the time needed to get the *Calypso* ready for departure to start researching Spindletop.

A gentle movement of the craft startled Ti just as "*Strap in,*" came from Ian. She grabbed for the cup sitting on the desk, surprised to find it empty. A glance at the computer's clock told her nearly an hour had passed.

Moments later, "*We're cleared for priority departure,*" caused Ti to tighten her seat belt.

The take-off was, as always, smooth and fast, with Ian angling the craft sharply up, and out of the atmosphere. Five minutes later they were in hyperspace. Ian walked into the lounge-galley from the cockpit.

"What've you found out?"

Instead of answering, Ti just gazed at the tall—6'2"—leanly muscular man wearing jeans, and a tee shirt. She kept the thought of how lucky she was behind her personal mental shield.

Ian Makanda, gourmet cook, jazz pianist, and computer genius. A quiet man, he had twice saved her life, had killed more than once, and not just in hot blood. He stood as straight now as when he had been a Terran Fleet fighter pilot. The widow's peak of black hair had grown longer since his forced retirement from the Fleet, now just brushing his collar, and trimmed with silver at the temples. He was an empath and telepath, and they shared a mental bond.

A half-smile lifted one side of Ian's mouth as he stopped beside Ti, let a hand curve around her neck. With her hair in a ponytail, she didn't appear half as dangerous as he knew she was.

He had watched her kill two men barehanded, receive a serious knife slash to the arm, then prepare to take on a third man—him. He had discovered she was a telepath when he turned her over to the drug dealer she was trying to take down. Three years earlier. They had been together ever since.

"Well?" he asked.

She tilted her head so as to capture his hand as she looked up. "Just admiring the pilot."

The half-smile became a full one. "Got four days to discuss the message."

"To quote a certain someone, like to, but—" She lifted her head, continued speaking as Ian picked up her cup, walked into the galley, grabbed his cup, poured them both the rest of the Blue, and started another pot of coffee, regular this time. "Not much on Spindletop. It's a small desert system. Only export's the oil they sell to the Fleets and Earth. They also trade for grains,

meats, and special desert clothing. Terraforming didn't work, no one's sure why. The message said we'd be briefed on a possible reason for the threats when we arrived. I did find rumors of a new refining process, but there've been such rumors off and on for years."

Ti sat back, accepted the newly-filled cup, and savored a swallow as Ian sat at his station opposite her. "There's something about those threats. Why would someone be that...." She shook her head. "I don't know. Arrogant? Stupid?" She saw the expression on Ian's face, and lowered the cup. "What?"

"I'm not sure." Both words had stirred a memory. When it surfaced, he tried to push it back. "A possibility," he finally said, knowing that Ti needed the information even if it turned out to be irrelevant. "McBride." He referred to their assignment at the Edwards Terran Fleet Test Flight Facility on Earth two years earlier, when they had gone undercover to stop the sabotage of the Cobra, the Fleets' newest fighter. McBride had been one of the six saboteurs arrested. "I was hacking into the access codes, carefully because I expected at least passive alarms. There weren't any, either active or passive, and I remember thinking that the saboteur was either arrogant, or stupid, or both. McBride was both."

"Agreed, since he's serving a life sentence in a Terran prison. You also said he claimed he was working for TATT. Yes, I know." She raised a hand, forestalling Ian's protest. "You said it was crap, that the Terrans Against the Treaty wouldn't be satis-

fied with sabotage when they could blow things up, the bigger, the better. Like last year, when Torin claimed he was acting on behalf of TATT, then blew up the main Boeing plant producing the Cobras.” Ti had to stop while she blinked back the tears. Torin had been OSIA’s commander, had recruited Ti. “I knew Torin. He was no more a terrorist than I am, so why did he make such a claim? Terran Security said it was crap, and that wasn’t just to counter the fact that it happened on live, Earth-wide vids.” Ti leaned forward, her gaze holding Ian’s. “You included McBride’s claim in your report, with your belief it was crap. It wasn’t in Security’s summary, and it should’ve been. Even if everybody thought it was crap, it should’ve been investigated. It hasn’t. Now Spindletop. One refinery destroyed, a threat to destroy another. Sounds like TATT to me.” She sat back, drank some coffee.

“They were violent,” Ian agreed, “but the leaders were arrested fifty years ago. Any still alive are in prison. Most of their followers either died while resisting arrest, or are also in prison. This is an attempt by a few Terran fanatics to get the terms of the Treaty changed when it comes up for renewal in a few years, and that’s all.” He spoke harshly because he was no longer sure he was right.

“The Terran Uprising, 2114. It took Earth five years to recover from the ‘attempts by a few Terran fanatics’ to change things.” The words were softly spoken, but they struck Ian as hard as Ti had meant them to. She shifted, straightened in her

chair, her voice becoming brisk. “You could be right. After all, a lot of Terrans call the Treaty charity, and hate the Outworlds because of that. Maybe they’re claiming it’s all a plot by some Outworld fanatics to turn friendly Outworlds against Earth.” Ti shook her head, not needing to tell Ian just how few friends Earth really had among the Outworlds. “It could be a lot of things. One thing it isn’t is pirates. Trade ships, yes, but why would pirates destroy the source they prey on? That leaves who? You said ‘most’ of the followers were arrested. It’s been fifty years, time enough for them to recruit, reorganize, and reemerge.”

Ian knew Ti was right. He couldn’t close his mind to the possibility of TATT reemerging just because it seemed impossible. “It is unlikely to be pirates. At least, the pirates you and I are familiar with.”

Ti nodded agreement. As a Terran Fleet fighter pilot, Ian had flown against pirates for twenty-five years while she had investigated—“Damn!”

Ian raised an eyebrow.

“Stacey. She’d know about any new pirate activity. Let me draft a message, then we’ll drop out long enough to send it.”

Stacey Dana was head of The Source, a quasi-legal outfit that gathered and sold information about anything to anyone willing to pay. In a universe with computer technology that had been restricted until recently, and was still limited, The Source thrived. Stacey, and Ti were close friends.

“It could make us late to Spindletop,” Ian warned.

“I think it’s worth it.”

“Make it quick,” Ian said as he headed to the cockpit.

Five minutes later, he took the craft out of hyperspace for the seconds Ti needed to send the message from her computer. The hyperspace computer told Ian their arrival at Spindletop had been delayed by four hours, but they would still arrive before the second threat’s TOD.

During the next four days, they researched Spindletop, TATT, and pirates. Their findings were reviewed over Ian’s lasagna supper the night before their arrival at Spindletop.

“Pirate attacks are up throughout the Orion Spur,” Ti began, after savoring several bites. “Mostly against small systems whose economies are heavily dependent on trade. A couple have been so badly hurt they’ve had to get loans from the Swiss Bank until they recover. But no attacks against the systems themselves, just the trade ships.”

“TATT’s leaders are still in prison,” Ian said after a sip of wine. “Their families, those who were identified anyway, are being monitored by Terran Security. Some just disappeared. Most probably changed their names. I managed to trace a few.” He shook his head. “Some people have no imagination. For instance, Lucas Johns became John Lucas. Last heard of on Mariah VII.”

Ti’s fork stopped halfway to her mouth. She carefully lowered it back to the plate while keeping her gaze on Ian. “Home to one of the most fanatical pirate groups around. That is not good.” She sensed reticence in Ian’s mind. “You have something worse.”

Ian returned his fork to his plate. “Maybe. Just found it this afternoon, can’t confirm it yet. But—I started wondering, and accessed the records at Alcatraz.”

The ancient Earth prison had been reopened specifically to house the leaders of TATT. Security had been increased to such a degree that it was rumored to include an electronic net encircling the island underwater fifty yards off-shore, and a force field covering the island itself. True or not, access was only through one very narrow corridor, and strictly enforced, as one tourist boat had discovered moments before it exploded, killing 175 people.

Terran Security had not apologized. “An escape?”

Ian shook his head. “A cessation of entries. Each inmate’s record is detailed down to the time they go to sleep, and the time they wake up. What they eat at meals.” He gave Ti a quick cynical smile. “Even the times they use the john.” The smile disappeared. “Four died there. Dates, times of death, causes, everything recorded. There are six where the record just stops. Same date, same time.” He picked up his wine glass, kept his gaze on it. “If it were me, I’d’ve continued the entries, varying them a bit, then kill them off. Different dates, different reasons, anything but the abrupt stops. Then again, the on-line security was pretty good. I guess no one anticipated the use of Oseeah’s command codes.” He swallowed some wine, replaced the glass on the table, and smiled at Ti. “Which I only needed for the last wall.”

Ti returned the smile, lifted her wine

glass, and saluted Ian in appreciation of his simple statement. The smile disappeared as she sipped her wine, and considered his words. “Six TATT leaders unaccounted for. They could be dead under circumstances nobody wants investigated. They could’ve been transferred.” She stopped when Ian shook his head.

“No new inmates, individually or in any grouping, into any Terran prison during the six months before or after the cessation,” he told her. “Same for any prison in the Sol System or on any planet even remotely friendly to Earth.”

“Their families?”

“Traced three. Everyone’s where they’re supposed to be. The others had already dropped out of sight.”

“Stace told me once she hadn’t had any luck getting anyone onto Mariah VII. I wonder if she’d be willing to try again. I’ll send a message soon’s we get to Spindletop.”

Spindletop’s Chief of Police, Naomi Jackson, and the Chief of Refinery Security, Michael Chambers, met them at the spaceport.

“Competent, but nervous,” was what Ti’s limited empathy sensed from each of them.

“Nervousness is normal, given the circumstances. But there’s something else about Chambers. He’s worried about something,” Ian added, knowing Ti relied on the strength of his empathy when they met strangers, especially in situations like this one.

“Cut it close,” Jackson said after the introductions, “but on the right side. We’ll go to Midessa, that’s the targeted refinery,

brief you on everything when we get there. Skimmer’s over here. By the way,” she gave Ti and Ian a wry grin, “welcome to Spindletop.”

She led them to the police skimmer, made sure they were settled, Ti in front with her, and Ian and Chambers behind them. Notifying Tower, she took the skimmer airborne.

“The refinery’s half an hour from here,” Jackson said once they were in the air lanes, and she had given the autopilot their destination. She then unlatched her seat, and swiveled so she was facing Ti. “Closer than the others, but not close enough to endanger the town. We’ve got—”

“Dispatch to Chief,” came over the comm. “Explosions at Midessa. Some emergency equipment already on scene, waiting



for the evac and shut down, more responding.”

“Heading straight there. Keep me advised,” Jackson ordered as she swung the seat around, latched it, accelerated, and activated the skimmer’s lights and sirens, all in one seemingly continuous movement.

“Evac?” Ti asked.

“TOD was 4:00 p.m. It’s only,” Jackson glanced at the in-dash display, “1:30. There was a full shift working til two, when we were going to evacuate. Nearly 500 people.” Her voice turned defensive. “With Powell gone, we have to make up the shortfall, so Midessa’s been running around the clock. Always personnel in there, including triple security. Since Powell blew up exactly as scheduled, it was decided it would be safe enough. They were all told to keep their eyes open.”

“Chambers is angry,” Ian told Ti.

“Something else, maybe—no, can’t get it. Too much emotion from him, and Jackson’s adding to it.”

“It’s okay,” Ti replied, knowing how difficult it still was for Ian to open himself to others’ emotions. “Nothing to be done now, anyway. Let’s see what happens after we arrive.”

What happened after they reached the Disaster Command Post, saw the destruction, and got confirmation of the mounting casualty figures, was that Chambers led them to an out-of-the-way spot, and confirmed Ian’s empathy.

“I know who it is. At least, I think I do,” Chambers began, his voice full of controlled anger. “Up to Powell, I thought Adams just wanted to take my slot when I

retired. When I found him in Powell’s main processor after the bomb squad’d been through, he was doing what I was; the place was my responsibility, and I just wanted to double check. We left together, and he was with me ‘til it exploded. Something about his reaction bothered me, so I dug into his background.”

Chambers shifted his gaze from Jackson to Ti and Ian. “He’s been part of security for five years, bright, dependable. I promoted him when my assistant was killed in a skimmer accident a year ago. I didn’t find anything. I had no grounds, no *proof!*” Chambers stopped, took a deep breath before continuing. His head raised, eyes looking past them at the flames rising from the ruins.

“He’s been all over Midessa since the threat. I followed him, tried not to make it obvious I suspected him, hoped he’d slip up. He was supposed to stay here while I went to the port. Commander here says he left just after I did.”

Jackson relieved Chambers, then ordered a quiet search for Adams, and his skimmer. She, Ti, and Ian started for Adams’ residence, when Dispatch again interrupted their plans.

“Permian Security just acknowledged the alert,” Dispatch advised. “Adams left there about ten minutes ago. Told Chief Watson he wanted to check the place himself, make sure it was okay. He spent about half an hour, mostly in the main processing unit, by himself. He told the Chief it looked fine, and he was going on to Drake. Chief wants to know if he should send his people

in, search the place, and Drake's Chief wants to know if he should take Adams when he arrives or—

"Tell Drake to do nothing! We're enroute!" Only the terseness of Jackson's words betrayed her anger. "Tell Permian's Chief to empty the place and secure the unit, nothing more! Alert Lt. Williams, have him deploy EOD to Permian, and meet us at the hanger." She slewed the skimmer into a tight curve—

"Adams is Assistant Chief of Refinery Security," Ian reminded Ti, "so, since all four of us should be at Midessa, his checking Permian is reasonable. If he isn't aware Chambers suspected him, he'd set explosives at Permian, do the same at Drake, and get the hell off planet before blowing them both. If we beat him to Drake, and he sees us, he could suicide in, setting off Permian using a dead man's switch." Ian's colloquial name for a specific type of remote control make Ti shiver. "That's what I'd do. In fact, I wonder if he used a remote for Midessa. He could've been monitoring Tower traffic, knew we'd arrived. His own form of welcome. Something else I'd've done. If he's allowed to land, he'd have the remote for Permian with him, could still set it off before he's taken. Might save Drake, but—"

"Sometimes I hate your practicality. Run Adams' background. Anything related to TATT. Start figuring out how to jam his transmissions, and take control of his skimmer. And check out that skimmer accident."

Ian touched his wristband, connected to their ship, activated the mini holo-keyboard and holo-stylus, and began working.

—straightened the skimmer, accelerated,

and hit the siren. "Drake's two hours from here," Jackson stated. "just over three from Permian. We can get there first, take him as he lands." She activated the autopilot, then released her seat to swing around and face them both.

"No," Ti disagreed, also unlatching and turning her seat. "We need to take him before he gets close to Drake. We also need to take him without giving him a chance to remotely set off any explosives he might've left at Permian. Ian'll handle that.

"Who's Lt. Williams, and what's at this hanger we're headed for?"

Jackson recognized Ti's question as a polite way to avoid questions that would not be answered, as well as a diversion from the technology that had only recently become available to everyone.

"Williams commands the Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Tactical Weapons Teams. After the threats started, he had the strike transport out, TWT training almost daily, EOD searching for everything from nitro to nukes. Got to be a joke after awhile, 'specially when nothing happened. Then the threat to Powell arrived. After the place blew, Williams swore EOD had scoured it." Jackson sighed. "The plan today had been to evacuate Midessa a couple hours before the deadline, and have EOD go again. Maybe they'll get lucky at Permian."

Reaching the spaceport's restricted area, Ti and Ian followed Jackson aboard a large transport, and into what could only be the operations room. Several people were gathered around a table with a hologram of a

refinery shimmering in its center. One of the men straightened, walked over, glanced at Ti and Ian, and spoke to Jackson.

“We can leave immediately. I have some preliminary plans to take down Adams and—”

“Lieutenant Williams.” Ti’s words were very quietly spoken. “The President requested OSIA investigate the sabotage. That means I am in command. Let me make one thing very clear. I want Adams alive. If it becomes necessary, shoot to wound only.”

Williams turned to Jackson, then, when his superior did not speak, back to Ti. “Yes, ma’am,” he snapped.

“Order a course and speed that puts us ahead of Adams, but keeps us outside his radar range.”

That had been more than an hour earlier.

Ti had stayed out of everyone’s way, watching the oft-practiced routine turning

into efficient action. Now, she looked one last time out the viewport at the smoke on the horizon, then turned, their bond sending her gaze directly to Ian. He was seated at a computer terminal, blue eyes darting between the holo-board and -screen where his coding appeared. He suddenly raised a hand, swiped it across a line onscreen, his mouth tightening in irritation, then bent his head back to the board. She knew a frown had appeared, his jaw tightened. He was trying to find a way to jam the transmissions of the skimmer they were following. A routine hack job for Ian, except this time he not only had to do it without alerting the pilot of that skimmer, he also had to be able to take over the controls if Adams refused to land.

They needed both before the skimmer got too close to the Drake refinery. They couldn’t risk Adams suiciding into that refinery and, using Ian’s worse-case scenario,



setting off via a remote trigger the explosives they had to assume he'd planted earlier at the Permian refinery.

Ti sent Ian a mental caress, then turned to where Chief Jackson sat on a nearby bench, leaning back against the transport's bulkhead, eyes closed. Jackson's face seemed to have more lines than a few hours earlier, her brown hair a few more gray strands. Ti sympathized, knowing the past year had seen her own red curls deepen to auburn, her green eyes acquire their own lines, and wished there was some other way to get the information she needed. But there wasn't, so She strode across the room.

"Why?" Ti asked as she sat next to Jackson.

"Huh?" Jackson jerked, eyes blinking before settling on Ti. "I'm sorry, what ...?"

"Spindletop's not that big, so why are you being targeted?"

"Never did get that briefing that would've answered your questions." Jackson lifted a coffee cup from the holder on the table beside her, sipped, then cradled the cup between her hands. "It's not the oil itself, but how it's produced. Our scientists finally found a faster, cheaper way to process crude oil. Yes, I know, there've been rumors before, but this really works. Problem is, it only works here. Something indigenous to the planet. Same reason terraforming didn't work. I'm no scientist. What I've been told, refining takes several different steps. The new process eliminates some of those steps, saving time and money, and still produces exceptionally pure oil, not only what the Terran Fleets need, but Earth itself."

"Okay. So, you announced the process, and the threats started."

"Huh-un," came with a headshake as Jackson swallowed more coffee. "First came offers to help us convert the refineries, loan us money, materiel, whatever we needed, in exchange for partnerships. And the Terrans!" Jackson's voice held the usual scorn of Outworlders when speaking of Earth. "Practically told us to name our own price. Threats started after we turned them down. Security was increased, but we didn't think anyone would really do anything. Like you said, we're so *small*! Then came the threat not only specifying the Powell refinery's main processing unit, but giving a date and time! Now, I ask you!" She shot a cynical smile to Ti. "Still, couldn't be too careful, so we closed it down the day before, searched it thoroughly, locked it, posted guards, and it still exploded. Right. On. Time." Jackson shook her head, frustration in her voice, and on her face. "Powell had been the only fully converted refinery. Midessa was about half through the change-over. We couldn't convert them all at once, couldn't afford all four off-line at the same time. Contrary to popular belief, we're not a rich planet. What food grows in a desert? Oceans are full of fish, but we need more than that, so we trade oil to Ceres for grain, Kyrille for meat, Kydosa for specially treated cloth. Losing two refineries means losing half our income. If we lose the rest...."

"I understand."

"As it is, we'll have to borrow to rebuild. I understand Earth's already sent an offer to help us get a loan through the Swiss Bank.

I'll tell you this." Jackson's voice became firm. "With or without Earth's help, we will rebuild! So here's your question back. Why?"

Ti shook her head. Something about Jackson's answer rang a vague bell. Something she had read, something—

"*Damn Chambers anyway!*" Jackson spit out, drawing Ti's attention back to her. "If he hadn't been so concerned with *proof*, none of this might've happened."

Ti agreed. But it had, and now they were chasing a probable saboteur who might have a remote control, and might be ready to suicide into a refinery to destroy the last of Spindletop's economy, and even if they stopped him, he might not have any answers, and if he did, they might not be what she needed—She took a deep breath, slowly released it as she relaxed the fists her hands had formed. She needed to relax, and remember; something relating to what Jackson had said—A movement from across the room drew her eyes.

Ian swiveled his chair around, faced Ti and Jackson, and nodded. He waited until they, and Williams, joined him. "Just one problem. As soon as the jamming's activated, he'll know. I've tried, can't find a way around it. Otherwise, I can take control anytime, providing he hasn't fiddled with the controls on his end. I included contingencies based on what I'd do in his place, but"

"Understood." Ti's terse verbal acknowledgement was expanded upon mentally, not in words, but with a warm confidence. "Now, we need—" she broke off as Ian's

wristband buzzed. He glanced at a blinking red light, then at Ti.

"The information checks out," was said strictly for the benefit of Jackson and Williams, as only family, and a few close friends, knew they both were telepathic, let alone bonded.

Ti nodded. "Lieutenant, if we go to max speed now, how long to overtake Adams?"

Williams toggled a comm on the desk next to him, and asked the pilot that question. "Eleven minutes," came back.

Ti leaned over, spoke into the comm. "Do it, Captain." She switched the comm off. "Ian, as soon as we're close enough, start the jam, and take control." Ti added mentally, "*I'll give you as much warning as I can.*"

They got within a mile of Adams' skimmer before they heard the echo of his passive radar. It appeared to everyone that Ian activated the jam at the very first nanosecond of the echo reverberating in the transport, and they marveled at his fast reflexes.

It hadn't been just fast reflexes, but Ti, using one of her talents to mentally scan for Adams. She sensed his mind a split-second before Adams' radar warned him of the transport's approach. Ian, through their bond, knew, and activated the jam. Both of them hoped that her warning had been enough to prevent any signal going back to Permian, because, at this distance, Ti couldn't actually take over his mind.

Maybe it had, Ti thought, because Adams increased speed, and began zigzagging as the transport narrowed the distance. At least, no call came in from Dispatch. Yet.

After Jackson called twice for Adams to land and received no reply, Ian spoke.

“Taking control now.”

The skimmer suddenly dropped towards the ground, just as suddenly veered to the left. It then soared up several hundred feet before suddenly stopping, then moved in a series of jerks and twists.

“Fighting me,” Ian tossed out, both hands flying over the holo-board. “Bastard’s good.”

“Williams, send a couple shots near him, close enough to let him know we’re serious,” Ti ordered.

Williams issued the order. Moments later, a laser shot out from the transport, then a second struck the skimmer’s tail as it zagged instead of zigged.

Ian managed to override Adams, and bring the skimmer down in a semi-controlled glide, but the sand wasn’t all that yielding.

Ti was out of the transport before it completely stopped. Ian, Jackson, and Williams were on her heels, an armed squad on theirs.

“Everyone, stay back!” Ti ordered as she scrambled towards the skimmer, cursing the 3” heeled boots designed for meeting VIPs, not running in sand.

The crash into a sand dune had crumpled the cockpit, broken out the wind-screen, and trapped Adams in his seat. Ti did a fast mental scan, found his injuries weren’t fatal. She stood inches from the skimmer, studying Adams as she caught her breath.

“Who’re you working for?” she finally

asked.

Adams remained silent.

“Okay.” Ti straightened. “I’m a telepath, so we can do this so that you remain sane. Or not.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Adam’s demeanor remained calm, his words confident. “There’d be such a protest—”

“From whom?” Ti interrupted. “Not from you, you’ll have no mind left. From the citizens of this planet, whose economy you’ve crippled, whose husbands, wives, sons, and daughters you’ve killed? Chambers is already talking, and when what he says gets out, and it will if I have to contact every reporter in this sector, no one will give a damn about you. Besides,” she leaned closer, “you see any witnesses here?”

“You don’t have the gu—” Adams jerked, stiffened, mouth still open, eyes staring at nothing.

The information Ti ripped from Adams’ mind ensured that all explosives at Permian were found, and defused.

Ian watched as Ti, returning to their ship after briefing Spindletop’s president, walked to the bar, poured herself a glass of Scotch, and swallowed half of it. Then he walked over, took the glass from her hand, put it on the bar, and wrapped her in his arms. The top of her head rested snugly under his chin as her arms encircled his waist, hugged him close.

“You did what you had to do,” he murmured.

Ti held onto Ian, let his warmth, love, and understanding soak into her soul. She

finally raised her head, reached up and let a hand caress his face. "So. What've you got?"

Ian's face was somber as he pulled back just enough to look at Ti. "Some of the names you got from Adams are descendants of the original TATT leaders, and not at all shy about hiding their beliefs in Terran superiority. I've sent alerts to the police in the systems Adams knew about, but they're probably long gone. If they're back in the Sol System, never find 'em."

Ti nodded. "So TATT's back in business destroying... Business." She recalled Jackson's statement about Earth's offer of a loan, and frowned. "Why would Earth offer to help rebuild if TATT's behind the destruction?"

"Help rebuild?" Ian's confusion showed in his voice.

"Jackson said that Earth's offered to help Spindletop get a loan to rebuild. When I talked to the President, she said she'd probably have to accept. But why, if TATT—shit! I need to check something!" Ti pulled away from Ian, almost ran to her computer station, and began talking to the AI.

Ian caught a few words about other systems attacked, loans from Earth, payoff dates, and began to understand.

Ti finally leaned back in her chair, surprised to see a sandwich and cup of coffee on her desk. She raised her head, saw Ian seated at his own computer opposite her.

"Figured it out?" she asked before taking a bite of the sandwich.

"Think so." He fleshed-out the abbreviated questions and answers from Ti and the AI. "Spindletop's not the first system

attacked, but all the others just had their trade transports hijacked. We figured increased pirate attacks, but several times the transports were actually destroyed. That's not something pirates normally do, since zero cargo means zero credits. Most of those systems had to take Earth's offers of loans until they could rebuild their trade." Ian shook his head. "Trade is a hellava thing to base your entire economy on, but that's what most of the Outworlds use, have since the Uprising cut off the cash from Earth. When the pirates disrupt one system's economy, the ripples spread to the economies of all the systems doing business with the original system. So, what's Earth going to use to pressure the Outworlds?"

"Payoff dates on all those loans are after the vote on the Treaty renewal. Except, there's a clause. Repayment in full on demand by the lender. Can't pay, default, and lose everything." She bit sharply, almost viciously, into the sandwich.

"Unless you vote with Earth to make the changes to the Treaty they want." Ian's voice hardened. "Earth doesn't have enough support now, but the vote's not for six years. Plenty of time to damage enough Outworlds so they're facing economic ruin, offer loans, then demand repayment, and if they refuse, sic pirates on them."

Ti swallowed as she shook her head. "It's a valid premise, but, thinking about it more, I don't see how it would work. First, why would pirates cooperate with TATT? Even if they do, the Outworlds would just do what they do now, call on the Fleets for protection. Earth couldn't stop the Fleets

from responding. They're supposedly neutral, and, besides, there are so many Outworlders aboard at least two of the carriers that they'd mutiny if anything like that was tried. Have to check, but I'd bet most of the other carriers and the destroyers also have an abundance of Outworld citizens." She eyed Ian, who thought a moment, then slowly nodded agreement. "Second, the Fleet pilots would eliminate a lot of the pirates. Where would TATT get more fight-

technical parts, equipment not usually found on personal ships."

It took Ti a moment before she remembered.

Almost a year ago, they had been on assignment to Detalas, trying to find missing weapons-grade diamonds. It hadn't taken long to discover the missing diamonds were connected to the sabotage of the Cobras the year before. During the investigation, a contact had told them that



ers, let alone more pilots?"

"George Simons."

Ti frowned. "Who's he?"

"One of the names you got from Adams. He's the president of ShipShape. It's a salvage and restoration company, Terran based, but with a good Outworlder rep. Mostly luxury personal vessels. Lately though, rumor has it he's been doing a lot of specialty refits." Ian's voice sharpened. "Small individual craft requiring lots of

obsolete Fleet fighter shells were missing. The information at first seemed unrelated, then Ian, with his Fleet background, made a possible connection. He now restated it, only this time as a certainty.

"ShipShape's reconditioning the missing fighter shells with the new Cobra tech, including the new weapons systems, using the missing diamonds. The weapons might also be put into what the pirates are using now, along with some, if not all, of the new

tech. The Fleets get called in, the pilots see the old Starfires, don't expect the Cobra tech, the new lasers. Who's got the advantage then?"

"Okay, that takes care of the fighters. What about the pilots?"

Ian reached for his coffee cup, drank deeply before continuing. "Again, I got to wondering. The search I did after Detalas, for all personnel who left the Fleet after our investigation at Edwards? I didn't subdivide it. Did this time. Just started, but so far I've found a dozen test pilots that decided to go civilian instead of accepting reassignment. That's not unusual, test flying is more exciting than going back to regular flight duties. Most of the pilots who quit were Terran." He saw Ti breathe deeply, give an understanding nod. "When I saw that, I expanded the search. Reenlistments throughout the Fleets are down, but only among Terrans."

"I'd really appreciate it if you stopped wondering!" Ti retorted as she stood, grabbed her plate and both their cups and walked into the galley. "So, you've got the pilots, and fighters. But the Fleet fighter pilots are still better. They've got Talons, against obsolete Starfires, and when the Cobras are finally released—Oh, hell." Ti very carefully put the dishes on the counter, then turned, her face white. "The Cobras are the most technologically advanced in software, hardware, and weapons systems, in decades. Suppose, just suppose, the main Boeing plant blown up a year ago wasn't."

"Wasn't?" Ian was perplexed. "Wasn't what, the main—" Then he understood. "It happened on Earth, at night, at a place that

was only partially seen on-screen. Terran reporters said it was the main Boeing plant. No one was allowed to get close. There are three support plants, now working around the clock, but together they can produce only a fraction of the main plant's output. If the main plant's still in business and has been for a year—" It took him only a moment. "Simons' specialty refits are decoys."

"Use them against the Outworlds, forcing the leaders to call on the Fleets for assistance, then, bring out the Cobras. They'll destroy the Fleets' Talons, maybe damage the carriers, and destroyers...."

"They might, and not just because of the new tech," Ian said. He turned to his computer, did some quick keyboarding—he preferred to work with his hands rather than use the AI—and stared at the screen a moment. "Something you need to see."

Ti walked over, saw pictures of a Talon, front, side and overhead views. "Okay. So?"

Ian brought up another set of pictures, front, side and overhead views.

"Another Talon. So what—" And then she saw it. "It's a Cobra. Nearly identical, except—"

Ian used the keyboard again, and the pictures appeared side by side, with the differences shaded. There weren't many. "Let the Talons begin fighting pirates, then the Cobras show up. There's just enough similarity for a Fleet pilot to think they're Talons. Moving at combat speeds—"

"We have to find those Cobras. And the decoys. How many techs among those Terrans who left the Fleet and where are

they now?"

"I'll have to check the latest search results." He started to turn back to the keyboard.

"In a minute." Ti came around from behind him, perched on the edge of the desk facing him. "You had something else about Simons." She had caught it in his mind, just a brief feeling of wondering if he should say anything or not.

Ian waited a moment before speaking. "He's acquired quite a few silent partners over the last four, five years, resulting in quite an increase in his operating capital. I've just started tracing them, and so far, all the names have some connection to TATT. Except one. Frank Rotiya."

"Frank—General Rotiya?" Shocked surprise was on Ti's face. "The Commander of Terran Security?"

"A very large contributor."

"I know he doesn't like The Treaty, but he's got more reason than most people to hate TATT."

Ian knew the reason, but not as personally as Ti.

Two people had been largely responsible both for the compromises that had resulted in the Treaty and for the reluctant

acceptance by Earth, her Sol System allies, and the Outworlds: Jonathan Rotiya and Stephen Stuart. The bomb at the signing of the treaty had killed Rotiya's father. Ti's father had had only moderate injuries. TATT had claimed responsibility.

"I'm surprised he let you take this assignment." Ian saw the flush on Ti's face. "You didn't tell him? He is your immediate superior."

"He's my superior on paper only!" Ti snapped. "The Treaty may've put Oseeah under his direct control, but we're two independent agencies, and he knows it! Damn it, Ian! If he's involved, then Terran Security's involved. Everyone in Oseeah will have to be briefed, and we'll never prove it. He'll have covered himself six ways from Sunday."

"So we dig seven ways from Monday. We're just as motivated as TATT. More. Besides, if Rotiya's made this personal, then he's already screwed."

Ti plopped onto Ian's lap, her arms encircling his neck. "Should've left me in that alley."

Ian's arms encircled Ti, pulled her close as he finished their catchphrase. "What, and missed all the fun?" ❖

END TRANSMISSION