

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 4 Number 5

Page 1 – DISTANT SUBJECT by Brian Michael Riley. Mr. Riley writes that he is “also an illustrator and educator living in the San Francisco Bay area, other fiction of mine has appeared in the likes of Every Day Fiction, Deadman's Tome, Spaceports & Spidersilk, Massacre Magazine, and Gay Flash Fiction, as well as upcoming editions of Jitter, Edify Fiction and the literary journals Dissections and Adelaide.”

Page 14– THE END by Kayla Koster. Ms Koster is currently a Professional and Creative Writing major at Central Washington University. Many of Kayla’s works can be seen attached to her mother’s refrigerator, though she has yet to be officially published. (Ed Note: Update that resume!!)

Page 18 – WHY I LOVE YOU by Edward Turner. Mr. Turner writes, “I have been published at Bête Noire, K-Zine, Straylight Magazine, as well as several other places.”



# “DISTANT SUBJECT”

by BRIAN MICHAEL RILEY

Inspector Lawrence had a feeling the kid was a smoker— the drug paraphernalia found at that morning’s crime scene certainly pointed in that direction. So having borrowed Officer Garson’s cigarettes for this interrogation, Lawrence popped the pack open and offered one to the suspect.

“Namaste,” the kid said, carefully pinching a Kool out by its filter with his cuffed hands, the two way mirror looming behind him.

Everybody who’s hauled in gets a nickname, the more clever the better, and Nelson Hayes was aptly christened “Little Red”. The scrawny seventeen-year-old had locks of fiery orange hair that came down over his bowling pin shoulders from beneath a bandana that he wore like a backwards hood.

What’s more, the kid had been sprayed as if by a power washer in what was reportedly his grandmother’s blood.

Hence, Little Red.

“Can I double dip, fine sir?” the kid asked ironically.

“By all means,” the Inspector said, shaking another cigarette outward.

Little Red took it. Though difficult to move inside the shackles and chains, he was managing well enough. Emotionally the kid was a bit of a marvel— especially in

light of what he’d recently been through (though what that was *exactly* remained a big question mark, literally, in the Inspector’s book). That was the magic of amphetamines, Lawrence knew all too well. Synthetically induced displacement— and a lot of euphoria to boot.

Little Red was just zipping along in his own little world over there.

He set the first smoke between his sticky lips. The second went behind his ear after some maneuvering through the stiffened curls and gore. Then, holding his hands together and bowing his head to the Inspector he said, “Namaste squared.”

Inspector Lawrence gave a slight nod back. “You’re welcome,” he said, lighting the cigarette. “Is that the correct response?”

“Works for me, OG.”

“OG’. If that stands for Old Guy, I’m going home and turning you back over to the rookies.”

Little Red laughed, raising his joined arms in mock surrender. “Original Gangster, my fine sir! It means Original Gangster!”

“Now THAT I can live with.”

Lawrence set the cigarettes on the desk next to the directional microphone propped there. Not far from that was the particle mask he simply refused to wear for

this interview. The protective gown and latex gloves were hassles enough, thank you very much, all of it being at least two sizes too small. So, feeling awkwardly obese rather than endearingly teddy bear shaped (as the Mrs. insisted he was), the Inspector fingered through the arrest report, looking up now and again over his safety glasses. Except for the kid's face and hands, which he must have rinsed off himself prior to arrest, he was painted completely maroon. The blood had dried into deep, rusty clots, splitting where it was heaviest, dropping off in layered flakes onto the table and floor. Quickly eyeing its trajectory, Lawrence figured the fluid had hit the subject's upper torso in one massive burst.

A sudden eruption. Or getting doused from a vat.

The narrative report was an atrocity as far as the Inspector was concerned. Garson, the arresting officer, though competent enough in the day-to-day, had treated Hayes's statement as little more than a psychotic, drug-fueled rant, seemingly jumbling facts and timelines, balling it all into one big administrative clusterfuck. It was now Lawrence's job to untangle the mess— as usual. The bright side to all of this, and yes there always was a bright side, was that after this little powwow, the Inspector was done. Even this interrogation was a courtesy, Lawrence coming in while on a two-week vacation, accumulated time he'd be a fool not to have taken before his official retirement. A long, strange trip was coming to an end, punctuated, apparently, by this stranger than strange boy sitting in,

reportedly, Geraldine Hayes's blood.

"Comfortable?" Lawrence asked him.

Up until just recently Red had been a raving, inconsolable paranoid, convinced that the world – or something from *another* world – was out to get him.

"I'm relatively content," the kid told him.

"Well, I sure do appreciate your patience. I got here just as fast as I could," Lawrence said. "This station is full of some really dynamite cops, but it's ME you want to be talking to from here on out."

"So I hear. And what's so special about the big OG?"

The Inspector tapped his fingertip on the report. "Well this is my area of expertise, if you will."

"Involuntary grandmother slaughter?"

Lawrence cleared his throat. "This stuff you've been talkin'," he confirmed, flipping back and forth through the pages. "You're speakin' my language here, son."

"And what language is that?"

"That language that inspires most people you talk to to look back at you as if you got lobsters crawlin' outta your ears. That language."

"Shit, G, I'm used to that look. Ain't nothin' but a thang," said Little Red.

"So being cast off as looney, this is enjoyable for you."

"Listen, G, and hear me out." He dragged on his Kool, finding the right words. They were impressively sober. "I know who I am. Always have. I know what I saw. I know what I did. No one else gets it? Well, AIN'T NOTHING BUT A

THANG.”

The Inspector slid his hand onto the directional mic as casually as possible, covering the end with his thumb. “Well I ‘get it’ more than anyone around here cares to admit,” he said under his breath. “And more important than that— I BELIEVE YOU.”

Lawrence just let that hang there a minute, watching its value rise in Red’s eyes.

“This is why I was called in, you see. I’m the *specialist* around here,” Lawrence assured him, lifting the report with a shake. “Been documenting cases like yours for the bulk of my career, son. It’s what I’ve come to *do*. You see, every organization such as ours, be it private, state, or government, we’ve got to devote a certain amount of energy, a certain amount of manpower to field the— how should I put it— more *extraordinary* cases we may be presented with now and again. This isn’t anything the public is aware of, mind you, this little branch of our operation here. This little team I’m a part of. Hell, a lot of guys around this place might even consider the work I do sort of an embarrassment. I don’t much care. All I know— at the end of the day,” the Inspector sat back, crossing his arms with certain pride. “I’m a damn good lookin’ man when I wear *BLACK*, if you catch my meaning.”

Nals didn’t.

Or did he.

“I’m better lookin’ than most *MEN*,” the Inspector really punched it. “When in *BLACK*.” Wink.

The kid’s face dropped, catching the meaning at last.

“Shut. The fuck. UP.”

The Inspector opened his arms and held them up, presenting himself. He suppressed a smile, though, as he watched the kid’s face lift with awe. It was the look the boy’s mother probably saw on him during that first mall trip to see Santa Claus once upon a time.

“Hoping maybe you can enlighten me on a few things— enlighten *US*. The team.” Lawrence winked again. “Help us fill in some blanks.”

Red was definitely intrigued by this, sitting up a little straighter. “No shit?”

“I shit you negative, Nelson,” the Inspector said, cringing. “I’m fairly damn confident you don’t want to go by ‘Nelson’.”

“Nals,” said Little Red. “If you’re *COOL* with that, G.”

Lawrence set the folder down and knocked on it with his knuckle. “Nals, my friend, I sit here before you cooler than a cucumber.”

Laughing a burst of cigarette smoke out his nose, Little Red-now-Nals nodded his head. This guy was alright. Corny, but alright.

“Just between you and me, how long have you been awake? Your pupils go on and on for days over there, son.”

“Only *SHEEP* sleep, G. Only sheep sleep.”

“Noted.”

Nals leaned forward over the table to give what he said next the heftiness he felt

it deserved, “And THAT’S how they do it, G. They start off by getting us to sleep.” Then he added, more humbly, “Maybe you knew this already.”

The Inspector had opened his notebook to a fresh page on which he now began with, ‘*THEY get us to sleep*’.

“Well, we’ve had our *suspensions* that this is what they do,” Lawrence confessed. “But only just that— we’ve only just suspected. Please, Nals. Fill in the blanks for the big OG.”

More than glad to be of service, Nals settled in, getting as comfortable as he was able to inside his suit of restraints. After taking an especially long pull on his Kool, he dropped his head back slowly, blowing the smoke out in an intense stream toward the ceiling.

“There I was in my spread in Gramgram’s basement,” he began with some dramatic flourish, “YouTubin’. Just caught in this SICK trail of digression, sidetracked for DAYS, dig? It always starts with me researching some song lyric or two-bit character actor I can’t quite put my finger on, and then half a day later I’m a pro on exfoliating mango worms from Central African housepets or mining tonsil stones from throats with an electrical Q-tip, this is what I’m talkin’ about. I mean, I get INTO my ‘Tubin, dig? But alla sudden the screen cuts out, the lights flicker, and I get mad-ass drowsy. Like BAM, I hit a wall, all hella dense. I’m falling asleep inside my Urbanears.”

Off of the Inspector’s bewildered look Nals says, “My headphones.”

“Ah,” Lawrence makes a note. ‘*Turban ears*.’

“They’re blastin’ full force but still I’m dozin’ off,” Nals said. “So...”

But then he stopped, as if knowing better.

Nals obviously wanted to divulge something, the Inspector could see it, and whatever it was had the kid’s eyes sparkling with deviant thrill. Lawrence quickly caught on, thanks in great part to what he knew had been confiscated from the crime scene earlier that morning:

Expired credit card, razor blade, clipped straw, severely scratched Xbox jewel case— all of it coated with powdery residue.

With a conspiratorial hunch forward, he said to Nals, “Tired like that, I bet you fixed yourself an *energy drink*.”

Nals bit his lip. This cop was too much. “The G knows what time it is.”

Lawrence gestured, “Please. Continue. The G implores you.”

“So, right, I take a big ol’ swig off an ENERGY DRINK— and then another one— and I’m like swiiiig— tearin’ through these bitches to the right and to the left, but I just can’t SNAP TO, G. Each hit— err, swig— lasts about a minute when it oughtta surge for days. One second my ticker’s in warp drive, the next I’m, like, doin’ the coma slide. This battle rages for a good hour, G. Me versus sleep. Sleep versus me.

“And what’s happening is THIS. Through my body— all the way through to my BONES— there’s this vibration, dig? A sensation. A SOUND WAVE.” He

shuddered as the memory moved through him. “It would hit— then sink in deep down. Like a tide comin’ in – and then pullin’ back out. And when it went out, it tried to, like, pull my CONSCIOUSNESS out with it. Like I was in a tug o’ war with the goddamn Sandman himself, G!”

“And who was the ultimate victor in this war, or need I ask?”

“Yo, that’d be me. Didn’t fall asleep. Took everythin’ I had, but weren’t nothin’ but a thang. You might say I’m a bit of a heavy weight in this here RE-gard.”

“We all have our own special skill set, I suppose.”

“Word.”

In his notebook, Lawrence wrote, ‘#grams ???’

Catching this, Nals answered, “Two Grams, OG. I call her Gram-GRAM— Gramgram— like that, see?”

Amending his note, Lawrence thanked him.

Nals took the second cigarette down and lit it with what remained of the first. The bloody tip popped surprisingly, sending an ember zigzagging through the room. The hot copper smell gave Lawrence’s stomach a turn. It had been in turmoil since breakfast, getting too old and sensitive for the fast food getting shoved into it morning after morning, year after year. But tomorrow morning, Lawrence mused, breakfast in bed, compliments of the Mrs.

Meanwhile he searched under the ill-fitting protective gown for the roll of antacid he never left home without. “These

vibrations,” Lawrence asked. “These sound waves of sleep. They stopped at this point?”

Looking up from his boot under which he ground the dead butt, Nals continued. “Never exactly just quit. They never totally quit. They just sort of settled in, down low, like the feeling of a hum. An engine, just idling. Because that’s what it was, G, this is what I’m figurin’— it’s a MACHINE they use to put us to sleep, with an ENGINE. But I BEAT the worst of it, G. I stayed UP. And now I hardly gotta explain why my face was in flames at this point. My eyes all burned out. How I needed hella cold water from Gramgram’s kitchen sink.

“So I go upstairs, all cautious not to make too much of a racket with her sleeping just one room over and all, and I put my head under the water for a couple-two-three secs. Then, when I come up for air, I see it through the window...”

Nals stopped.

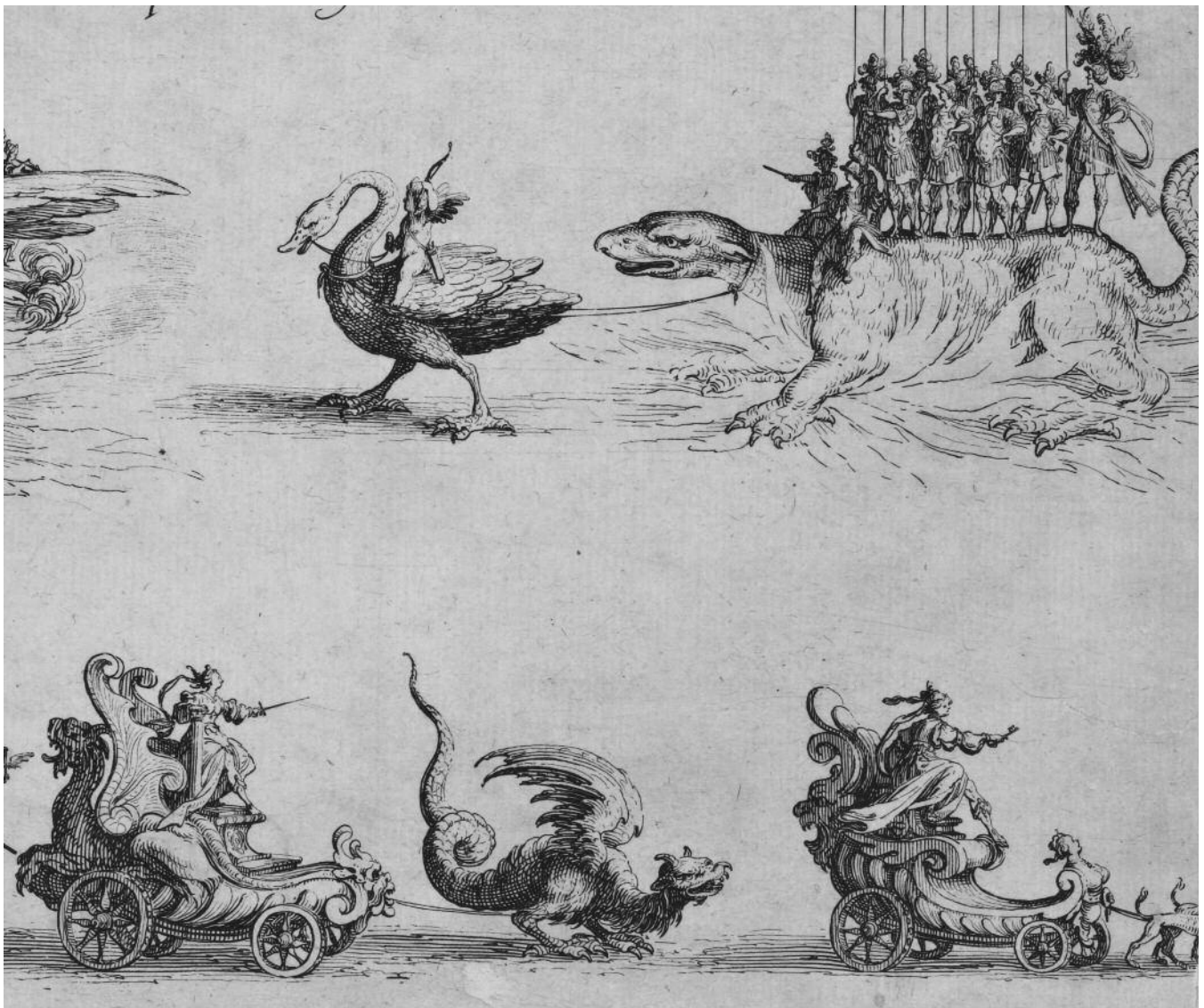
The Inspector lifted an eyebrow to him.

“Here come them lobsters, G,” the kid said somewhat warily.

“Sure, sure. It’s alright, son, let ‘em on out.”

“Shit, I know what this sounds like, G. I know what ALL of it sounds like. I mean, there I was all hopped up on ENERGY DRINKS, fer Chrissakes...”

The Inspector set his pen down and closed the notebook on it. He set a hand of splayed fingertips across the cover and said empathetically, “What it sounds like to me is that maybe, just perhaps, your mind had been expanded. That’s why we did it, you know, back in the day. The junk and the



tabs and the joints and the haze. We did it to open us up. Shit, Nals, to tell you the truth, I'd much rather hear the facts from a fella who has an open mind. Impaired, my ass! What if you were finally seeing things as they really are? As they are *meant* to be seen." He poked at the report again. "That's what this is make no mistake. A fella who has *seen*."

"Ok ok! So if I went and said something like UFO..."

"I'd go and say something like BFD."  
Nals frowned quizzically.

"Big Fuckin' Deal."

They laughed, Lawrence hoping that any wall still left between them was now completely dissolved. He resumed with his notes, beginning a new page with enthusiastic, collegiate letters reading *UFO*. "Just another day at the office," he shrugged.

Still Nals waited but now it was different. Trust may have no longer been the issue— but it was the density of the memory itself weighing on him. He looked at the Inspector with the jitters of a child

from a diving board.

Lawrence nodded with encouragement. "Go ahead, son. Tell me about the UFO."

Nals jumped in.

"There's a strip of woods between Gramgram's backyard and Quail Road. And with the streetlight you can always see through to the cars and whatnots drivin' by. Well G, check this. Some massively enormous, silverish MOUND is comin' down Quail— I can see it through the trees— just sorta slidin' along. And dig, this bitch is like a TANK, right? A big ol' metal DOME."

"It's a vehicle," Lawrence confirmed.

"Word. A *UDO— Unidentified DRIVING Object*, feel me? Goin' all of, like, two miles an hour, this thing, and as it passes under the streetlights on Quail, it almost whacks 'em— THAT'S how tall this thing is!"

"About twenty feet high, twenty-five."

"Bingo. It was mongo." Getting into it now the kid went to stand but his trappings yanked him back down. "It was hella big in size, a total snail shell on roids. It was metal but, yo, at the same time it's all chock fulla clouds, dig? Deep and purple and special effects like smoke, all swirlin' round and round under the streetlights. But no windows, G, no tires, no treads. And so there I am at the sink with my thumb up my ass, hella ooglin' this tank and its otherworldly swankocity."

"Well, sure. Hell of a sight," said the Inspector, wide eyed. "First contact and all."

"So I go haulin' tail out the back door

into the yard, following the monster shell's direction as it kept goin' along Quail, curvin' round the house. I stayed hidden behind the trees runnin' between Gram's and the street, winding up crouched behind the killer oak up at the corner of her yard, where Quail hits Partridge. There's a stop sign stuck there on it."

"I'm familiar, yes."

"So from on the other side of that I watched the cloudy tank not just come to a complete stop, G, but start flashin' with little bright red lights— at the bottom, in the corner— like a blinker — 'cuz, ya know, it was makin' a turn."

"And avoiding a pretty hefty ticket at that."

"Fuckin' word! And then, oh, turn it did, G, takin' a sharp right onto Partridge— the street that runs in front of Gramgram's house— and then STOPS. Just stops. In the middle of the street. And I'm lookin' and it's sittin' and my eyes start buggin' out. Because now while it's sittin' there, it starts shiftin', right? Lettin' out its clouds. Purple comes blowin' out. Then orange. And red. And the tank, it's fadin' away, like inside a storm of crazy milk! It turns completely into smoke. Right there in the middle of the street, G, this honkin' ball of snakin' smoke trails. And I'm watchin' and it's snakin'. And then there's shadows now inside."

The kid's eyes grew large.

Lawrence found himself just as entranced. He slid back from the edge of his seat, slightly embarrassed.

"Shadows," the Inspector stated.



“People shadows. Inside the clouds.”

“Is this the ‘They?’”

“This be them.”

“And here they come.”

“They come walkin’ out.” With his eyes directed downward Nals was watching Them again. “Exactly like we’ve seen in just about every drawing ever. All the movies and the games, their faces looked just the same way. They were gray, G, and short, with mad almond eyes. Total cliché. Smooth skin. They were Grays.”

Lawrence started sketching. Upside down egg and two sideways eggs inside. “They were tall.”

“No, they were short. They were punks.”

“Punk rockers?”

“No, they were, like, kids.”

“And how’d you know?”

“It’s what they were, dressed like us. Well not US, I mean me, teenagers, they were kids. Like teenager versions of ‘em. From all through time, like all the decades, all the crazes or whatnots. Wearin’ jeans and some of ‘em, jean jackets, a few with their pants hangin’ down off their little asses. They were punks, they were hoods. The girls were all made up slutty, a few of ‘em, hoop earrings and heels. Those dresses with poodles on ‘em.”

“Living poodles?”

“Naw, ironed on. And they wore, like, wigs on their heads, you could tell they were bogus. All slicked back on the dudes—and on the chicks, ponytails with ribbons. Then some of ‘em they got SHADES on, or nerd glasses, with the tape. And they got

textbooks and backpacks. They’re goin’ to SCHOOL these here Grays. And as they’re all filin’ out, I start catchin’ what’s in their hands, cuz there’s shiny stuff that they’re holdin’. Like tools. Science class INSTRUMENTS. Real harrowin’ lookin’ shit.”

“‘Instruments.’ For instance?”

“Damn, G, you haven’t seen ‘em?”

“I may have— I may NOT have. Where we are now may be one of those big blank spots I mentioned earlier.” As if to punctuate his point, he turned to a blank page. “Feel free to fill ‘er in, son.”

This inspired in Nals a new gusto, the idea he was a pioneer in this specialist’s material. Not noticing his second cigarette had burned down to a charred and hollowed butt, he dove deeper into his recollections, the nub teetering zealously in the corner of his lips.

“These things were all needles and cables and clamps with round teeth. And I’m no DOPE, G— this was SURGERY gear they were totin’. Anal probes, that’s the runnin’ joke with these clowns, right? And yo, they were headed to our HOUSES with this stuff. All the haciendas on the block. Out of the smoke they just kept pourin’, all these hipsters and thugs and whatnots. Sock hoppers, cool daddios. Little gangstas. Just pourin’ out in packs— this cloud’s basically a CLOWN CAR of ‘em. All headed to the houses in the hood, not a care in the world cuz everyone’s ASLEEP.”

“Ah, the sleep machine.”

“It’s how I figure it, G. Cuz there ain’t

a peep all around. The world was, like, dead. Not even crickets makin' sounds. And I'm like, yo, my GRAM! My Gramgram's inside! So hella quick I peel off the oak and haul ASS round the house. I mean, I'm not even thinkin', G. I mean, we're talkin' about my Gram."

"Gramgram. Two Grams."

"She's worth a hundred grams, G. A hundred G's, word? This lady, what she is to me. The way she's always just hooked me straight UP."

And having waited for this moment, the Inspector watched the grandson closely. He needed to see what Geraldine was to Nals. He had to catch the answer in the kid's eyes. Making damn sure not to miss it, if offered, Lawrence pushed his plastic glasses down.

"Good woman?" he cued him.

"G, what? The hella BEST."

And there came the truth. He loved Gramgram and that was a fact. More than telling was the way the kid's face went remarkably flush, warming for the first time that morning to a hue at least close to the burned brown coat of her blood wrapped around him.

"Across the kitchen doorway is her room, when her door's open you can see in. At night she keeps it shut though, not that I'm noisy, no— well, I'm just sayin'. I'm about halfway through the kitchen and I hear the FRONT door now, down the hall. Their shadows comin' in off the porch, reachin' 'cross the walls. Thing is, between the kitchen and Gram's door is the hall they're COMIN' down. Do you get it? You

get the map I'm layin' down here?"

"Don't worry about what I got, son— what YOU got is a hell of a predicament there."

"Right? To get to her door I was gonna have to cross that hall. So, dig, I don't know what to do. Hella quick I jump in the fuckin' pantry. I close the door all nice and easy til there's just, like, a crack to watch out of. And lemme tell ya, they oughtta be thankin' Cha-roist for that sleep machine, cuz they make hella racket walkin' around with those instruments. Ninjas they are NOT.

"Then I watch the first one of these little fucks get to Gram's door. It's a nerdy one, goddamn high-waters on, pocket protector, the whole bit. And it wraps its, like, FIFTY foot fingers round the doorknob, opens it, then STROLLS right the hell in. Then they ALL go in, G. I'm countin' two, three, four, seven, fuckin' ten, they just keep filin' in with their backpacks and books on a rope, the science fair gear, all of it!

"Then it had to be not even a minute before these MAD ass lights and hella crazy SOUNDS start poundin' outta Gram's room. Electric shocks and drills and, like, a bubble machine, too. Like so much wacky mayhem, Willy WONKA be gettin' wood."

"And meanwhile you're positioned in the pantry."

"For just another couple-two-three secs. The lights sort of level off then, to a slow kind of strobe. And the sounds got more tamed like— like oxygen goin', yo. Then, G, I don't know WHERE I get the balls all'a

sudden, right? Well, yea I do, it's Gramgram, gotta love 'er. I come out of the pantry and go tiptoein' cross the linoleum—to the counter— for the knife.”

The Inspector raised his head. “Knife.”

“Honkin' ass mamba jamba, all serrated, from the wood block. Gotta go in with SOMETHIN', G, and that's about all Gramgram's got.”

The Inspector watched Nals as he saw it all again. Though they were looking at each other, the kid's eyes were focused on oblivion, seeing in its far-off distance that bedroom door as he approached it.

“Aw, G,” he said, swallowing hard.

“Go ahead, son. I'm right here with you, one hundred percent.” He gave an atta-boy frown. “You and me against them lobsters.”

Again, Nals went in.

“The door's mostly open, more than half, I just peek inside. There's her lamp, from near her bed, just floatin' round the room. Her hairbrush. Little mirror. All her shoes. Filled with helium in the air. And the Grays, they're all sittin' Indian style, all their textbooks and their notebooks, five-subject binders opened up, all of it floatin'. And there's DOZENS of 'em, G. Hella more than walked into that room. Shit, the room ITSELF is bigger than it ought to be. Like a whole other BUILDING all'a sudden. It's a class, G. A science classroom. A goddamn SCHOOL for all I can tell.”

“And Gramgram?”

“On the bed, G, still lyin' there all asleep. But the sheet's down and her gown's up and her belly button's in

between. And you gotta tell me how they do it, G, cuz I still ain't got a clue— but my Gram's insides, pulled up outta her, sprung up through the air. But she ain't sliced into, not a cut, G, her whole body's hella clean. But her GUTS, they're all spread out, G, sprung up everywhere. The room is just this DIORAMA of Gramgram's guts. And the Grays, yo, all in their hip threads, they're situated here and there. Studyin' her intestines, takin' notes about her lungs, drawin' charts around her stomach, and takin' a multiple choice test up near her heart. And that heart, it's still beatin', G, and her lungs are breathin', too. There's shapes movin' through her pipes, like digestin' foods thru her tubes.”

“And the blood, Nals.”

“Ain't no blood, G.”

“Come again?”

“Not a drop. It's raw and clean. It wasn't gory, not like you'd think, all horror movie and all screams. It was sedate, yo, hella tame. Just them doin' tests on Gramgram and her layin' there all fast asleep.

“And somehow I wound up in there, G. I'm just standin' by her bed. And I'm lookin' down at her. And I'm smellin' her and I know how that sounds hella creeper, but I mean, like, the talcum powder or whatnot, those weird ass grandma creams. The cotton in the pillows, on the cold side when you sleep. Grandparents, they're total trips, right?”

“They are that, indeed.”

Nals smiled and for that instant he was a little boy again. Little Nelson Hayes again.



Grandson of Geraldine Hayes, 19 Partridge Way. The thought touched the Inspector's heart. What a case.

A fine last case.

"Meanwhile," Lawrence said, catching himself, shaking free of that gentle place they had slipped into.

But the kid stayed calm. He was comfortable there. He'd found peace. "I fell asleep."

The Inspector turned a page. "You fell asleep."

"And I woke up down on my cot. It's real early, hella early, I hear the birds goin' tweet. And yo, I knew I wasn't dreamin', I'm no dope, G. My shoes, they're on my feet. And then upstairs, I go upstairs, I check the sun, it's comin' out. And the pantry, it's wide open. So I close it, that's what I'm about. But then, to turn around, from the pantry, turn around..."

What was Nals avoiding, Lawrence wondered, though he knew, at least in part. Nals' eyes had become fixed on that void again, and the approaching bedroom door.

"She doesn't answer when I knock and I'm, like, 'Gramgram, what's the haps? You among the living?' It's what we say. And her hearin' ain't all that. So I open it and I half expect to feel Them, or a trace of 'em, maybe warm, like on the knob. And she's just layin' there, there's my Gramgram, she's zonked out, nothin's wrong. To make sure, make sure she's breathin', I watch her chest move, then I look down. And there's a snap popped, in her nightgown, at her stomach and, yo, major chills. And I'm like, 'Gramgram!' Fuckin' 'Gramgram!' And

she's still sleepin'. Like she's on pills.

"So I get closer to her stomach and that snap that's undone, popped. And I'm lookin', and I'm starin', and it's still early, so the light, it's tricky— just somethin's OFF. Her belly button, I'm all zoned IN on it. She got an outie and it's funny cuz it IS a button, like a doorbell, you know, all perfect and whatnot and just— actually just hella bogus, really. Just sort of PLASTIC I'm thinkin'. And like a creeper, I even have to touch the thing. I just do. And it's hard. And I gotta see for sure, and yep, it IS like plastic. And I push down. And it goes CLICK! And I'm like all hella whaaa! And when I let go, G, it pops back up, G, and I let go, and why did I let go, G, because just like that it BLOWS OPEN, G!"

And even though he knows he has nowhere to go, Nals tries, he has to try. He fights against his chains, suddenly frantic.

"Aw, the BLOOD, G! The fucking BLOOD! And it's blowin' all over the room and I'm covered and I'm screamin', 'Gramgram!' And she won't stop fuckin' BLEEDIN'. And it's because of those GRAYS, yo! Those PUNKS, G! They took her APART! They took her APART— and then left her with some sort of cheap-ass PLUG in her gut! They were just KIDS, G! Fuckin' KIDS!"

Nals refused to sit in the chair and he writhed against its arms and back, straining with all his might against his cuffs, their metal cutting into his skin.

"Let me go, G. Get me outta here."

By now Lawrence had jumped to his

feet and backed against the wall. As he slowly slid towards the door, he gestured at the mirror, a look of grave disappointment on his face. The kid caught this, of course.

“What is THAT? You believe me, G, right? I mean, I filled in your fucking BLANKS. You brought me THROUGH it! We went through it TOGETHER!”

The Inspector said nothing until the door sprang open, the office boys coming in to take their suspect back out.

“It was the knife,” Lawrence told the officers as they closed in around the kid. “From the wooden block on the counter. He used the knife.”

Nals froze in disbelief. Horror.

“NO! What are you TALKING about, G! The KNIFE?”

Inspector Lawrence dodged out of the room. Not only was the scene making him ill, that relentless morning breakfast was finally demanding his full attention. It wanted out of him. He hurried down the hall, thankful for the honest reason to get out of there as quickly as possible, the pleas of Nals “Little Red” Hayes grasping desperately at his heels as he went.

“Kids these days,” he grumbled with a burp.

And even after a whole floor, staircase and corridor was stretched between them, the Inspector couldn’t fully separate himself from the screams. Taking care of business in his favorite stall, more than once he could have sworn he heard the kid’s voice echoing off the bathroom tiles, all the lingo and slang bouncing around his brain, causing his stomach to churn more

severely with every word, every turn of phrase. Holding his great belly as if to show it he cared, Lawrence applied pressure to this spot and that, promising a better diet was starting in the morning. With thoughts of surgery and tools, belly buttons and plugs, the Inspector slid a finger into his own fat swallowed navel. Musing over how long it must have been since he had even seen the thing, let alone touched it, he was suddenly taken aback by the hardness he felt inside.

“Go easy, G,” he urged himself, his fingertip feeling the button out.

And a button it was, a plug, set deep into his belly— and with surprisingly little effort, the plastic button with a *CLICK* was pushed in. ❖

# “THE END”

by KAYLA KOSTER

Edd laid beneath a tattered blue tarp. Her muscles ached from another night spent on concrete. She shifted onto her back, peering through a gash in the top of the tent. The sky was still ashen. She threw her blankets aside; the loose ends swept dust into the air. She shoved her feet into the boots she had grown too big for, and rolled up the blankets, and dismantling her shelter. She heard a rustle outside. Edd grabbed her bat on her way out. She turned back to her tent, relieved to find a cat rummaging in an old paper bag.

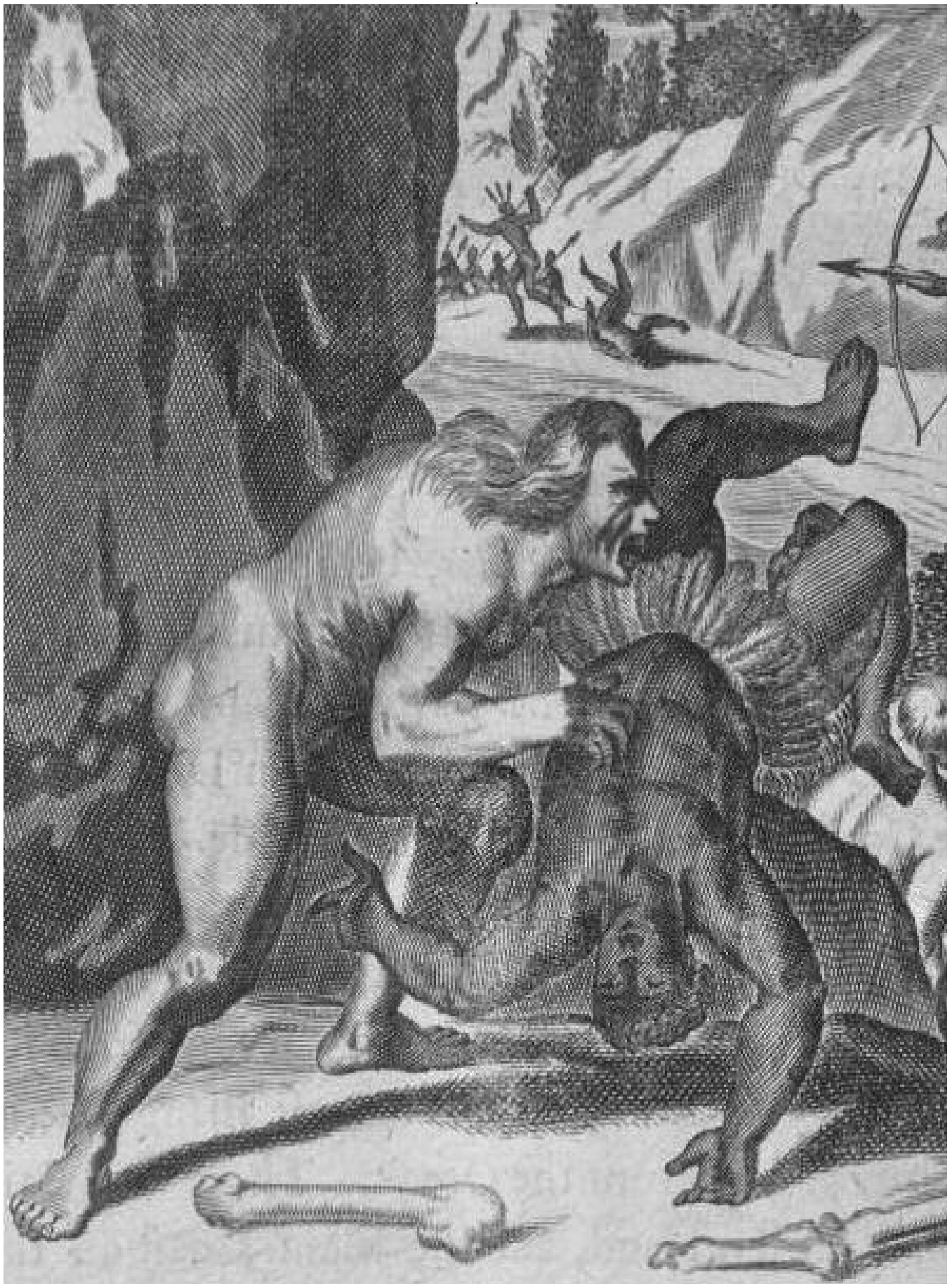
Edd looked at her weapon, and back toward the cat. The familiar pains splintered in her gut. *Fresh meat, it's been weeks.* She stalked closer. Gripping her bat tighter, she raised it above her head to smash the prey. The cat ripped through the paper. Its yellow eyes caught her. She slammed the bat down. The wood bounced off the concrete as the cat raced across the lot and out of sight. She gritted her teeth. *Another day without food,* Edd left the bat on the ground and skulked back to her shelter. She untied the tarp and shook off the dust. After folding it up she tied it on her pack with the blankets. Edd took the map out of the side pocket and wrapped a scarf over her nose and mouth to keep out the dust. She remembered her discarded weapon. She

was ready to move.

The wind died down and she could see the horizon. An abundance of dust covered it all. It was important not to breathe in the dust, but she knew the fallout radiation was inevitable. She tried to ignore the sores.

After reviewing her location she headed east, walking in the direction of the muddled sun. She always went east. Picking a single direction meant she would not travel in a circle. Edd had made this mistake. She walked until the blisters on her feet stung. Ahead she could see what looked like a small town, unfolding the map, she traced her trail. “Edenville,” she read. Edd continued into town, listening for signs of life. She withdrew her bat as she walked down the road.

Little houses lined the streets. Once white, they were now pained fawn by the dust. She walked through the gate of a picket fence and up to a blue door on one of the houses. *Should I knock?* She shook the knob, *Locked.* She rammed the back of her bat into the window and unlocked the door from inside. The house was clean, empty other than the white sheet covered couch in the main room. She walked to the kitchen and checked the cabinets, “nothing?” she sighed.





Edd retreated to the main room and pulled the sheet off the couch. She sat and removed her boots to inspect the blisters, tearing strips from the sheet to wrap her feet. Careful not to disturb the wraps, she put her boots back on. Edd grabbed the map again, along with a black marker. She marked Edenville with an X, as she had done with the last eight towns.

She sat back in the couch and rested her eyes. Edd debated changing course. It had been nearly a month without food. She was running out of time. Daylight waned and she resolved to spend her night in the comfort of the couch. Her gut would not let her sleep any longer. The house was now steeped in darkness. Soon she was back on the road, walking east and Edenville was out of sight.

Light climbed the horizon. *Morning already?* As Edd continued she realized it was not yet morning. The light was artificial. She checked the map but this spot was empty. As she approached the light she drew her bat and stayed low. A tall wooden fence surrounded the area. She peered through the boards. She was shocked to see green, a color long lost to dust clouds. Within the light she saw two large buildings made of glass and a small cabin nearby. Her stomach pulled her closer. She walked south.

The fence had a gate near the cabin. A rope hung over the gate. She held it in her palm, *a bell?* She pulled the rope. The bell rang. An old man emerged from the cabin and hobbled with his cane to the entrance. He opened a slat on the door and adjusted

his glasses. He studied her.

“Hello,” she remembered.

“Hello,” he echoed, “what can I do ya for?”

“Well, my name is Edd— ”

“Nice to meet ya Edd, I’m Jasper.”

“Yes, nice to meet you.” she continued, “You see, I was just traveling and I saw the lights—I don’t mean to bother you, sir, but I haven’t eaten in—well I’ve lost count, and I was wondering if you had anything to spare.”

The old man looked back at the glass houses and thought for a moment. “Well, I suppose.”

Edd beamed.

“No weapons!” Jasper hollered as he walked back to the cabin, “leave your weapons out there while I grab the key.”

“Thank you,” she yelled back. She set her bat against the fence. She would not need it inside. The old man walked back, rattling the keys. Jasper opened the large lock on the gate and undid the latch. He welcomed her in.

“Thank you,” she repeated as she walked through the gate.

He nodded. “I don’t get many visitors out here anymore,” he explained while relocking the gate.

He walked toward the cabin, “follow me.” She could see now that the glass houses were filled with greenery. The yard was dusty, with patches of grass sprouting. The light that brought her here was from greenhouses. Only the fireplace glowed from within the cabin. The porch steps creaked as she followed Jasper inside.

“I’ve got some soup, will that do?” He asked looking back at her. She nodded. The cabin was quaint: a stool in front the fire, the table and chair, and an empty bookshelf. Jasper scooped her a large bowl from the pot hanging in the flames and placed it on the small table in front of a chair. He grabbed a loaf of bread from the cupboard and ripped off a piece.

Edd sat down and examined the spoon. She could not remember the last time she used a spoon. The soup was full of vegetables. She devoured her meal before it cooled.

“The soup’s better with meat” he picked up the empty bowl.

“It was delicious.”

“But it would be better with meat, the next batch will be better.” Jasper sliced potatoes and put them in a fresh pot.

“Next batch?” Her eyelids were heavy.

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to have any though.” Edd’s head bobbed as consciousness left her body. She fell to the floor and her eyes shut. ❖

# “WHY I LOVE YOU”

by EDWARD TURNER

The thing was flat, almost perfectly flat. It looked just like a sheet of snot hanging on the wall. It made me sick to even look at it.

It oozed and moved slightly as though it were taking breaths.

I wanted to kill the damn thing, laser it up or chop it into pieces with my ax. We were standing on Interstellar Station 9 seeking repairs, and there was no murder permitted on the station, no matter how much you hated another species. Even if your own species was at war with opposing, there was no murder. I haven't a clue though how you could even wage war with such a disgusting thing.

Damn, maybe I could be sneaky about it.

My wife stood next to me and I was getting awful tired of her too. Three months alone in a nearly disabled ship could make you hate anyone. Their good side would disappear and all that would remain would be the peculiar annoyances that everyone had. I was so tired of her.

Between her and the snot, I was quite startled when I heard a voice from behind me. A robot stood there, “Good evening sir, Vertos-66 at your service, how may I help you?”

Sinda and I turned towards the

machine, long arms, giant white head. The thing was near perfect white, it almost hurt the eyes to look at it in the bright lights of the station.

Sinda spoke first, “We need repairs. Our Calre-9 from Benthos ran a little low and when we tried to forcefully inject it, we created a small explosion. The hull ruptured. We would like the hull repaired and as much Calre-9 as you are able to fit into our tanks.”

The Vertos responded, “Yes, yes, we have Calre-9 as well as Calre-10 and Calre-11.”

Sinda rolled her eyes at the robot, and I said, “Just the Calre-9 please, and have the hull repaired as quickly as possible.” All repair stations try to upsell anything from Benthos, one of the slimiest civilizations known to man. Also, one of the few with the massive intelligence to create fuel for faster-than-light drives.

The machine said, “Of course, we will get started immediately.”

As he turned, Sinda grabbed him and asked, “Is there any food here which humans have the ability to eat?”

The machine clicked a few times and no doubt was scanning that fat head. It said, “Of course, we have a large variety of carbon-based food on Level-6, just past the

Duran Tubes.”

Sinda said, “Great, let’s go eat.”

I looked over at the flat snotty alien again, leaning against the wall, or crawling along the wall, who the hell knew. I shook my head, “For one thing, I don’t have much of an appetite, for another, I don’t think we can go near the Doran Tubes.”

She took a deep breath, the Doran Tubes were full of the Glabolan Worms, the smelliest species in the galaxy, three-foot-long worms with tiny disgusting hands that smells like someone ate a bunch of rancid meat and then crapped it out all over the place. Station bastards didn’t have to put our food so close to their tubes.

She laughed, “I am starving, so I am going to let off one of those Flower Bombs, screw them, maybe they’ll go deeper into the tubes to get away from the good smell.”

I stared at her for a moment and I remembered why I married her. She was the only human in the galaxy who hated aliens as much as I did.

The Flower Bombs are scent bombs that we bought for when we met with disgusting aliens, they changed the scent for a good half hour, no matter how bad it was.

We headed down the corridor towards the Doran Tubes and she said something, something which made me fall in love with her all over again, “On the way out we are going to kill that hanging sheet of snot over there.”

“God, I love you,” I said. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**