

IMAGINE A LARGE-BREASTED WOMAN. . .

By Jeff Bredenberg

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GOSSAP THE ATTENDANT began the unpleasant task of disconnecting the waste tube from my rectum. He did it somewhat gently. Must be an important visitor here to see me, I decided.

He tilted my restraining trough until I stood nearly erect, and the white tile of the floor rocked into view. The motion set my arm and leg frames turning in squeaky-steel circles. In prison, you see, I am allowed to move my limbs in constricted patterns — even exercise. The appearance of mercy is still important occasionally, even in cases such as my own.

Gossap was whistling *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, which he's not bad at, except when he botches the piccolo trills. He released my neck brace with a metallic snap and eased the rubbery tongue tie out of my mouth. Then he sprang the locks on the pin-wheeling limb restraints — whack, whack, whack, whack.

My stomach turned as I leaned out of the trough. Standing had become such an unnatural orientation. The corners of the room seemed cushioned by randomly shifting hydraulic supports, I took a halting step, and Gossap was there tugging at my shoulder, eager that I get my “land legs” back.

“Who is it?” I asked. “Who’s the big-fuckin’-deal visitor?” My tongue was packed in peat moss, or so it sounded.

Gossap frowned— surely I was not so doped that I had forgotten the rules. He looked away and whistled the refrain again, ever more didactic. (“Be kind to your web-rooted friends...”)

I waddled toward the room’s plexiglass door, a thick slab of laser-dissipating material. I shuffled down the corridor to the processing room, where I surrendered my gown and allowed several federal employees to conduct their body search. One peered up my anus, where he found nothing but the bonding gel left behind by the waste tube. The motive was more humiliation than security — a rough reminder of whom I would answer to when my visit was done.

In the interview room sat a small, balding man with a round face. He wore spectacles — which, these days, meant either an arty affectation of the wealthy or a necessity of the lower class. Anyone with health insurance can afford ocular surgery.

The fellow wore a bow tie and a lived-in Harris tweed. His cheeks had that baby-smooth look of a permanent laser depilatory job. So.

“You got more than one of those white shirts, I’ll bet,” I said to him.

He did not stand. The little man motioned to an empty chair. He peeled the lid off of a styrofoam cup and set it in front of the chair he wanted me to take. Steaming black coffee.

“You don’t know me,” the man said. His eyes darted toward Gossap, who was locking the three of us into the room.

Oh, gawd. Things were getting complicated already — a terrifying prospect when your mind has been a bowl of inert jelly for six years. Just when I was starting to think I recognized this gentleman, he said that I would not. He clearly had intimidated the hospital staff, yet Gossap seemed to make him nervous.

I rolled my head in Gossap’s direction.

“They never leave me alone,” I said. “No telling what I’ll do, left unsupervised.”

The little man gave a knowing nod, a mannerism that sparked memories. I recalled the same man nodding knowingly to something I had said cons ago: in a restaurant. He speared a marinated artichoke in his salad bowl, and a small tear of juice blipped onto the tablecloth. And he was nodding — just like he was now. A decade back, maybe more.

“You’re an editor,” I said. “You bought a manuscript of mine once. We had lunch in here in Manhattan.”

The little man shook his head. Gossap was still over by the door, frowning now.

“Mack, you should drink your coffee,” my visitor said. “It’ll dear your head.”

I took a sip. It had a rancid chemical taste, reminiscent of bathroom tile cleaner. The editor bored into me with his stare, his eyes two half-inch bolts anchoring me to my seat and prohibiting me from reacting to the horrid taste.

“Delicious, no?” he murmured evenly.

“Mmmm,” I replied.

But he had told the truth about rearing my head. A sparkling sensation fizzed across my tongue, whirled down my esophagus, and erupted into my limbs like minuscule fireworks. Ah. Nice coffee.

“I imagine,” the editor said, “that you have been sedated for some time. They tend to use A2 mist here, I think.”

“None of that!” Gossap interrupted. “You may not discuss hospital, um, treatment techniques.”

But the editor was far ahead of Gossap. He wanted me to know that the gut-souring chemical in the coffee was releasing me from the grip of A2 mist.

A veil was being lifted from my eyes. Suddenly the little man leaning into the marred table between us had a name — Angus Doggler. He had a taste for antique clothes, martinis, and rare filet mignon. These things had been absent from my mind for many foggy years.

“So then,” Angus Doggler said to me cheerfully. “Feeling up to it now, are we, Mack?”

“Up to what?” I asked.

“Up to what?” asked Gossap, who was fidgeting by the door.

A large circle of the door’s plexiglass glowed orange and melted into fiery rivulets that seared Gossap’s shoes. The attendant shrieked once, but a sickly crack-crack-crack tossed him to the floor, lifeless.

Someone — no, some people — had entered the room through the circle that had been burned through the door. They were blurred images, the sort of figures you glimpse out of the corner of your eye. They were a presence, although barely detectable, scuffling about the tile. And they had just killed Gossap.

Newly sure of my body, I stood. Doggler smirked at my confusion.

“I would like you to meet Iris and Cochran,” he said. “They are wearing FPJs, garments that help the user avoid detection. Optical and psychological illusions.”

“FPJs.?”

I heard ripping Velcro, and a man’s face appeared over Doggler’s shoulder — Cochran, I assumed. Another rip, and Iris was showing her face, too.

“Fluoro-Protective Jumpers,” Cochran said.

“Or, if you wish, Fuzzy Pajamas,” said Iris.

Gossap stared up at us from the corner of the room with large, round, dead eyes. His neck looked broken.

“I would like to understand,” I said.

“You will,” Doggler said in a near whisper. “But we have to get you out of here first. Iris, give us our FPJs. Cochran, get the photonic cannon out of the corridor and break it down — we shouldn’t need it again.”

“Out of here? We’re escaping?”

Iris handed me a wooly ball of fabric. A few inches from my face, its color swam with gray, green, and violet. Held at arm’s length, it was virtually invisible.

I found the arm holes and started to dress.

“What is it, Cochran? You seem disturbed,” said Doggler.

Cochran looked up from his work and pointed at the cup from which I had sipped the ghastly chemical. “You didn’t catch it, Mr. Doggler? He said the cup was styrofoam.”

“Ah,” said Doggler.

“And he called the door plexiglass,” Iris threw in.

“Goodness,” said Doggler.

The footies on my FPJs were a bit loose, intended to cover street shoes which I no longer owned. Iris helped me with the Velcro straps at my wrists.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“Styrofoam is a trademark,” Doggler said. “It’s capitalized, for one thing. And they don’t make coffee cups out of Styrofoam anyway. You should call it plastic foam — a generic term.”

“Okay, I get it. But who gives a shit?”

“The door,” Iris said, “is made of ferroplex, a completely different substance from Plexiglas. Which is spelled with a capital P and one S.”

“Doggler, who the fuck are these people.?”

Doggler was fastening the front of his suit, and he gave me an irritated glance.

“We have no time for chatter. We must hurry,” he said. He nodded toward his accomplices. “What kind of muscle did you think I could round up? Cochran and

Iris are copy editors.”

Dogglar pulled his face flap closed and disappeared like the Cheshire cat.

Dogglar took the lead, and we formed a hand-in-hand chain. Into a freight elevator, down to a delivery tunnel, through a series of building maintenance rooms that whined with high gray machinery. At a final, battered door we removed our FPJs. Cochran handed me a yellow T-shirt and matching drawstring trousers and slippers. I pulled them on, cursing his taste in clothing, and we stepped into a public subway corridor.

It was a workaday morning in underground New York. Wingtips and umbrellas, the aroma of perfume and piss.

“I’m supposed to be inconspicuous, I suppose, dressed up like a ninja banana,” I grumbled.

Iris was shaking out her hair, matted as it was from her suit hood. “It’s a popular outfit, actually,” she said, sounding defensive. So she had picked it out. “It’s not businesswear, but you’ll see them all over Greenwich Village.”

Two flights of steps led us up into a honking, grit-gray morning.

Dogglar made for a store-front coffee shop, and the copy editors and I followed.

“We can see each other now,” Iris pointed out. “You have no need to hold my hand.”

“Sorry,” I said, releasing her. “It’s been a while since I’ve done a sidewalk.”

We found a remote table. Dogglar visited the counter and returned with a tray bearing four styrofoam-dammit cups of coffee.

“I’m going to need money,” I said.

Dogglar’s eyebrows rose as he stirred his coffee.

“What for?” asked Iris.

“Key West,” I said. “I can disappear there, I think.”

Iris snorted.

Dogglar shrugged. “Hold on now,” he told his sidekicks. “Mack is free to go. I’ll even kick in for shuttle fare and some pocket money. If it’s Key West he

wants.”

“What about Roland T. Price, then?” asked Cochran.

Until that moment I had entertained a vision of sailboats, sunsets, and negligible clothing. The image evaporated. I stared at Cochran’s pocked face. There was something theatrical about this conversation — the three of them had already plotted the course of our dialogue.

“Okay,” I said. The very name already had me fuming. “What is it.@ What about Roland T. Price.?”

Dogglar slurped at his coffee. “I suppose there are publishing magnates that you have had more respect for in the past...”

Iris giggled, and Dogglar dealt her an angry frown.

“...but Price is tightening the noose,” Dogglar continued, “especially in New York. Already he controls half of the book publishing houses, and separate subsidiaries of his are now making a run at Blackstone & Sons and our very own Stanton Little, Inc. If he succeeds, that’ll be it — he’ll have all the majors. The whole monopoly board, for Christ’s sake.”

“Roland T. Price only recognizes one kind of novel,” I murmured. “Narrow little feel-good stories that have been hashed and rehashed for the last century.”

“He thinks of himself as a purist,” Dogglar said.

“No — he’s a puke-ist.”

Cochran was alert. “Not a word,” he declared.

“Nope,” agreed Iris. “Puke-ist. Not a word at all. Besides, he’s been quite successful from a financial standpoint.”

“Otherwise he wouldn’t have his Wall Street backing,” threw in Cochran. I tried the coffee. It was the real thing this time.

“So you broke into the prison-hospital,” I said, “killed my attendant and freed me just so I could hear the morning business report?”

“Mack, I think you saw this publishing disaster coming longer than any of us,” Dogglar said. Behind those absurd spectacles his eyes were shifting conspiratorially. “And you took the hardest hit. Christ — ten years’ rehabilitative treatment for — what did they call it.?”

“Criminally undisciplined literature,” I said. “Thou shalt not mix genres. Thou shalt not end a story with characters in despair. Thou shalt not employ surrealistic ___”

“You are the antithesis of Roland T. Price,” Iris interrupted. “That’s why we freed you.”

“We need a bit of out-of-house editing done,” Cochran added. “And you’re the right man for the job.”

“Basically,” said Doggler, dabbing a napkin at his mustache, “we want you to kill Mr. Roland T. Price.”

I gulped at the coffee and felt the fluid scald its way down to my gut, which was now roiling with the tension of fury held in check. My chest was expanding with the pressure. The flimsy yellow T-shirt Iris had chosen grew taut around my biceps.

A gnarled man, barely four feet tall, had been waiting tables nearby. His jaw dropped and he showered a customer in cappuccino as he watched my shirt snap and rip into little yellow tendrils.

“Doggler, do you know this gnome?” I asked, pointing to the terrified waiter.

Doggler seemed amused by my transformation, and I made a mental note never to drink a cup of his coffee again. The gnome skittered behind the counter.

“You know what I’m after!” I bellowed, vaulting easily over the bagel display case. I grabbed the ancient creature by the beard and lifted him three inches from the linoleum. His feet pumped in vain. He gagged.

“A frightful blade,” I prompted him, “the sight of which would freeze the heart of a polar bear.”

His eyes bulged. His throat rattled. He pointed a palsied finger toward the cash register. There, a six-foot scabbard had been bolted to the underside of the counter. I tossed the wretch against the burnished-chrome FreezeLock doors and gave the haft of the sword a mighty tug.

The blade rang like a gong, and the entire restaurant fell silent, mesmerized by the bone-jarring tone. Its intricate jewel inlay threw myriad rainbows about the walls and ceiling.

The gnome righted himself wearily. “Keeps the crackheads at bay,” he said, almost apologetic. “It’s called the Dirge — sings of death.”

I rounded the counter, knelt at Doggler’s chair and kissed his right knuckle.

“I had hoped you might be discreet,” Doggler said, smirking.

“Does not seem to be possible,” I replied.

I pulled Iris up from her chair. “I have not a moment to waste,” I told her. “So as soon as you’re ready, we have to ran.”

“What do you mean — ready?” she asked.

I gestured vaguely at her attire— prim little white blouse, corduroy vest and matching trousers. She was undeniably a beautiful woman, but her proportions were modest at best.

“This role,” I said, “requires a large-breasted woman in a leather loincloth swinging a sword.”

“I forgot to eat my Wheaties this morning okay? You’ll just have to, um, use your imagination.”

We hit the sidewalk, leaving Doggler and Cochran to deal with the bill. I fell into a loping ran, taking several feet in each stride, and found that Iris was keeping up nicely. The crowd parted for us obediently— a wall of jaded faces that could no longer be shocked by any form of attire but had the good sense to stand aside for a semi-nude man with a sword.

At the end of the second block, Iris and I ground to a halt. A bum had stepped in our way, hand out, mumbling something about the Moroccan Conflict. He stank of rotting meat.

“I need five dollars!” he declared.

“I got no wallet,” I said, “and I got no time. Have to get up to 53rd Street right away.”

“Ah,” the bum said, consciousness suddenly gleaming in his eyes.

“There be monsters!”

“I know,” I said.

When we rounded the corner at 53rd, we found the street empty. Eddies of dust and a few old news faxes pinwheeled across the concrete canyon. Behind us, the Avenue of the Americas growled along, overpopulated as ever. Before us, ghost town.

A gust of wind struck, and my sword, the Dirge, moaned its low song.

Iris pointed to a black granite edifice with three revolving doors. “Price has his headquarters on the fourteenth floor, I think.”

We each took a revolving door and entered the lobby simultaneously. Inside, back by the elevators, were a dozen huge men in trench coats. No, not men. Dragons. They stood fourteen feet high and milled about in their trench coats, dragging their scaly tails along the polished marble. They gave us little regard at first, smoking large cigars and grunting casually among themselves in what I took to be dragon language.

“Bad move,” whispered Iris. “We’ll find another way in.”

I whirled the Dirge in a circle over my head, and the gleaming blade began to moan.

“Stand back,” I told Iris. “I will mow a swath through their ranks and we will mount the stairs. If this is all he can muster in defense, Roland T. Price is as good as headless.”

The dragons ceased their conversational grunting. They regarded us in silence and tapped on their cigars. A thick dusting of ash had accumulated on the marble, crisscrossed by tail marks.

A bloated-looking dragon stepped forward. His eyes were bloodshot, his face puffy and pale, and his nostrils throbbed.

The Dirge hummed Hoooon, hoooon, hoooon as I lunged forward.

The dragon’s blast sounded like a shotgun. Suddenly the room was blinding white and Iris and I were summer saulting backward through the glass of the entryway.

I came to spread-eagled on the asphalt outside. Iris was picking a large shard of glass out of my left shoulder. Blood flowed from the wound.

“Do you think they’ll come after us?” she asked.

I shrugged, and with that motion felt the gash starting to burn. For the moment, the dragons were staying put.

I stood slowly and looked for other damage. My last shreds of clothing had been scorched away, save for the yellow slippers, but my newly sterolic body seemed otherwise intact. the Dirge, having smacked against the far curb, was nicked and blackened — looking like an overused fireplace tool.

Iris had lost a good bit of hair in the blast, and patches of her blouse had burned away. Here and there the brush of her corduroy still smoldered.

“C’mon, c’mon,” she said. “We’ll duck into this store across the street. I have an idea.”

The store was a Radio Shack. There didn’t seem to be any customers, but the lights were on and the guy behind the counter was gawking toward the street, wondering what the explosion was all about.

“Splendid idea, Iris. What am I supposed to say in there? ‘Hi. I’m an oversized naked man with a sword and yellow slippers. I’ve just escaped from an institution for crimes against literature. I’m bleeding and pissed off. Mind if I look around?’”

“Precisely,” Iris said, tagging me on a newly massive pectoral. “If anyone objects to your presence, I’m sure they wouldn’t be so rude as to say anything.”

Iris took me straight to the row of padded booths at the back of the store. The clerk looked worried.

“Sir, you’re bleeding,” he said.

I held the Dirge aloft. “And I’m pissed off.”

Iris popped the black matt cover on one of the booths and pushed me into the plush seat. She flipped through the plastic-wrapped headsets hanging in the wall display until she found an elaborate model that was inlaid with swirling holograms. In rapid and methodical movements, she tore away the plastic, shook out the tangle of wiring and jabbed two electrode needles into my forearms. She taped the needles into place.

“Here’s the control board,” Iris said hurriedly. “You work the joystick like so, and these keys at the same time— think of it as a standard keyboard that was left out in the sun.”

“You want me to go after Price in the net, don’t you?” I objected. “Pour my brain into some electronic gladiator’s arena — see if I can hunt down the little pig on the financial strata while he’s immersed in his takeover bids? Hah! I may have a few synapses misfiring, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to fry my whole brain. Gimme my sword back — I like my odds better with the dragons.”

Iris kicked at the Dirge and it clattered to the floor.

“Uh, ma’am?” said the clerk. He was sweating. “If he’s going to buy that

Jupiter rig, I'll be needing his name and address for our computer files."

"This is just a test drive, thanks," Iris replied. Then to me: "Don't worry. The entire her's been converted from electronics to photonies in the last ten years — thousands of times more efficient. Accidental brain rub is virtually unheard of. Someone'd have to attack you directly — and pretty savagely at that — to do you any damage."

"Comforting."

Iris set the opaque goggles over my eyes and prepared to seal me into the blackness of the booth. I felt her fingers on my cheek.

"Mack," she said gently. "Before you go, um, I want you to know —"

"Yes?"

"Well, it's somersault."

"Huh ?"

"You said summersault earlier," she explained. "But somersault is preferred. And the Moroccan Conflict? Well, it was never a declared war, so you wouldn't capitalize the C, really. And now that I think of it, we'll have to look up sterolic —"

I reached out blindly, found the inner handle to the booth door, and pulled it closed.

The photonic strata went blipping past my frame of vision, a huge spinning card file. Grab one, and you plunge headlong into that particular simulated milieu where a segment of the computing world carries out its daily life. Transportation. The sciences. Writing. Finances. Graphics. Ah, there went publishing. There were several dozen strata, I guessed, repeating every few seconds. They were not labeled by any visible script. Rather you just knew, intuitively, that that strata was publishing. Maybe it was the faint odor of polished wingtips.

I grabbed publishing its next time around, and felt my pixilated body pour into it.

I was hurling through a pinwheeling galaxy, tearing past wisps of star formations and dust clouds. At the distant core was hellish darkness, an object so massive and dense that no light could escape from it. It consumed stars by the score, little pinpricks vanishing into its maw.

That, I knew, would be Roland T. Price. The black hole of publishing.

I fell toward the blackness, accelerating. The stars seared my face with every close pass. Faster. They lashed and scoured my skin. Then there was nothingness — a black, rubbery nothingness.

A pleasant forest appeared. I was standing amid the pine needles, naked but for yellow slippers. A squat man in a seersucker suit stepped from behind a broad redwood. He had a weak chin and heavy circles under his eyes.

“I seem to be paralyzed,” I grunted through immobile teeth.

“I know,” replied Roland T. Price— the photonic representation of him, anyway. “You should have stuck with the dragons. They had instructions to keep you amused all day. But this intrusion is an abominable waste of my time. We will finish quickly.”

He bared two long fangs and crunched toward me across the digitized pine needles. The needle-like teeth glistened with simulated saliva. Price stroked at my frozen neck, stood on tiptoe and prepared to bite. I wondered how it would all end for my body — encased in a booth in that Radio Shack. Would it just slump over dead? Would it loll about brainless, needing a feed tube to subsist?

A great thrashing out in the forest broke Price’s concentration, and I felt warmth returning to my muscles. Price waved an index finger in the air and shouted incomprehensible orders to, I assumed, the technological wizards who guarded his flanks in this photonic world.

The thrashing neared, and towering digitized trees were crashing to the forest floor, as if a mammoth scythe were sweeping its way toward us —thraaack, thraaack, thraaack.

A giantess appeared, stomping through the underbrush,

Price bolted, a blur of seersucker. The giantess was faster. In one quick whoosh of her sword she had sliced through his knees. In a dozen more chops she had dismembered Roland T. Price. Blood sopped the pine needles.

The image of the forest faded for a second, then returned to full presence. The tree bark and the edges of the leaves seemed to struggle to hold their definition. I imagined Price’s financial empire imploding and wondered if I should retreat.

The giantess turned from her savage work to face me. She wore a leather loincloth that did little to conceal her rippling musculature. A chain mail halter held her large, rolling breasts aloft.

“You’d best finish him off,” she said in a familiar voice. I studied her face — the gently rounded nose, the delicately sweeping eyebrows, the long black ringlets of

hair. Iris.

I glanced at the carnage.

“How many pieces do you have to chop a guy into?” I asked.

“He appeared to you in vampire form, no? You’d best treat him accordingly — and be quick about it.”

Iris was correct. Price’s body parts were writhing about the forest floor. The torso already had reassembled itself and was sidling up to the left arm for reattachment.

I ran along the path of ruined forest until I found a suitably splintered stump. With a kick I freed a yard-long piece of pointed timber. Then I returned to the struggling torso of Roland T. Price and rammed the stake through its heart.

The forest vanished, and a corporate-looking meeting room materialized around me. There were five uniformed police officers in the room. A hospital attendant was strapping me to a gurney. Several chairs were overturned, and what appeared to have been a crystal water pitcher had been smashed against the far wall.

Roland T. Price was propped in one corner, his dead eyes staring at me. A piece of broken chair leg protruded from his chest.

Angus Doggler was talking to one of the cops, bobbing that balding little head against his bow tie. “Mr. Price was here for some, uh, financial negotiations,” Doggler was saying. “We had just taken our seats when this maniac burst in and attacked him.”

“And you’ve never seen him before — the suspect, I mean?” the policeman asked.

“His face looks familiar,” Doggler said. “Maybe a writer from way back. He must have been following Price — that’s all I can think of.”

The attendant rolled me into the hall. Iris was there, feigning shock over the murder, I guessed. Still wearing that prim little blouse and corduroy suit. Her hair had been cut short to hide the dragon damage.

“I liked you better with big tits,” I told her.

“Sorry about that, ma’am,” said the attendant, rolling me toward the elevator. “Where he escaped from, he don’t see many female types.”

“You’d best show some respect,” Iris said as I wheeled by. “Next time, a

copy editor might not pull your chestnuts out of the fire.”

The elevator doors closed.

“Doesn’t,” I said to the attendant. “Where he escaped from, he doesn’t see many females.”

“Writers,” the attendant said derisively. He wouldn’t look at me —stared at the numbered lights counting down.

“Copy editors,” I replied.

The chime rang as we hit the lobby.

“You wouldn’t mind dropping me in Key West, would you?” I asked the attendant.

“Maybe next time, pal.”

* * * *

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“Imagine a Large-Breasted Woman. . .” is clearly the product of a man who has spent his life having his words edited.