

Professionals
a short story by Keith Brooke

Foreword

I wrote the first two drafts of this story in March 1994 and then sent it to Eric Brown for a second opinion. As usual, he spotted a number of flaws and inconsistencies, which I did my best to put right when I revised the story a few weeks later. In April I sent the story to Interzone; in May they accepted it and the story appeared in the August issue. Initially, the story had the working title "What Makes You Cry?" That title came from a song by Scottish yob-folkies, The Proclaimers: a man singing belligerently to a departed lover. He knows she still loves him,

even if she can't or won't acknowledge it.

"Angel admit it, admit it ... your love for me didn't die. It's just sleeping, and it wakes every night to your weeping."

As with most of my stories, once the plot starts to develop it pretty soon departs from that original spark, and I ended up opting for the more direct title the story has now. Originally, I saw the story from River Brady's viewpoint, but I wanted to step back a bit, so I brought in Christian Taylor, a shabby private eye figure I first used in the story "Easy Never Pays", which later became an as yet unsold novel.

Christian's

a cynical bastard, but he has good reasons to be that way and I have a soft spot for him: I see him as a 1990s take on James Bond -- fast thinking and charming but full of hang-ups and character flaws.

The setting is one I've used in several stories: the Essex port where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. When I was younger, I used

to

be envious of other writers with exotic pasts: they'd seen the world,

or

they'd grown up in interesting times and places. I came from a

comfortably

middle class family, living in a very ordinary town and it took me a

long

time to realise what a rich source of material that background

contained.

Professionals

"She still loves me," said River Brady from across the room. Christian Taylor watched him carefully.

Brady was staring moodily out of a blank window. He was a powerfully built

man with gorgeous black hair all the way down to his knees and a mouth that seemed somehow wider than his face, but that meant nothing here.

"I'm

positive that my wife still loves me." He could control his image but

not

the wavering tone of his voice.

Christian raised his eyebrows. They were jet black today, to match his jacket. He had never been able to take VR seriously in a business

context:

he was unable to trust his perceptions, wary of manipulation. He

studied

River Brady closely, for what it was worth. It wasn't his place to

judge,

but the man was pathetic all the same.

"She just hides it effectively," explained Brady in his soft Toronto drawl. He turned now and leaned a shoulder against the wall. "I saw her in

town three days ago. She looked happy. It was a hell of an act. But when

she's on her own I'm positive that it's all very different. She was always

like that: a tremendous little actress. She constructs this brittle facade

about herself but when she's alone it gets her right here." He sank a hand

wrist-deep into his chest in the kind of melodramatic false-world display

that made Christian want to laugh in the man's face.

Instead, he tipped back in his fake seat and tried to make himself take Brady's domestic entanglements with at least a degree of seriousness.

He hated to think that he had sunk this far. A few years ago he'd been on

the fast track with the National Police and the future had looked fine.

Even after rivals had got him thrown out on a minor misdemeanour he'd been

able to continue with undercover freelancing: corporate work and a few unofficial jobs the Nationals didn't want on the record.

And now he was doing domestics.

"What exactly do you want me to do?" he asked. It was work, after all.

"Do

you want me to build a case against her? Do you want me to provide

answers

for anything she might have on you?"

Brady's chosen image showed nothing, but a protracted pause betrayed his

emotion. Eventually, he said, "I want you to trace her movements, find

out

who she sees, what she does, where she's living. I want you to construct

a

complete picture of her life and then I want you to help me draw up a proposal I can put to her through her solicitors. I want a planned reconciliation, a trial unseparation. I want her back, Mr Taylor, and I want you to show me how to achieve that goal. Can you help me?"

"Can you pay?"

Brady nodded.

"Then I'll need some information ... "

As Christian questioned Brady, he received onscreen a set of pictures along with copies of all the relevant documentation. All the time he struggled to find his way through the barrage of over-emotional pap for some insight into the situation, some way forward.

Brady's first contract with Ellen Rinotti had been written up seven years

ago, when they were both working on plans for a new dam in what was

then

still Nigeria. River Brady was chief structural engineer on the

project;

Ellen was something of a drifter, filling in for an account handler on paternity leave. They formalised their marriage only eight months later

-

positively rash in such conservative times - and they started sex three months after that. It was all in the contracts Brady copied to

Christian's

workbase, nothing too unusual.

Christian studied the legalese carefully, grateful for his basic police training in the elaborate hybrid language European law-firms used these days. He tried to find something to snag his interest, but he knew that when he started to get a thrill out of domestics he would be in serious trouble.

"So why did she go?" He had to ask, although he might have phrased it more

sensitively.

"I have a lot of work on at present," said Brady. He was employed by a Danish architectural consultancy now, based somewhere up in Essex.

"Deadlines, exacting requirements ... a great deal of pressure. I get absorbed. I neglect my social obligations."

Such obligations were written into the contract of marriage: if it came to

arbitration then Christian's client would have little room for manoeuvre.

Brady swished his fancifully long hair and said, "I don't claim to be without flaws, Mr Taylor: I admit that the blame must lie disproportionately in my own quarter. What I seek is another chance."

"Then you should be telling that to your wife," said Christian softly. But

he knew she was deflecting Brady's calls. For a moment he felt guilty.

"Are you coping all right?" he asked, feeling awkward; he was aware that

such a question was outside the parameters of his job.

Now Brady leaned forward aggressively. "If I could drink myself into oblivion then that is precisely where I would currently be," he said.

"But

I am on a three year contract with my employers which stipulates that I be

clean, so that option is beyond me." It had become a standard corporate practice to treat key employees with slow-release implants that made

abuse of alcohol and certain narcotics physically impossible, either inducing

a nauseous response or nullifying the action of the substances. "All I

have," continued Brady, spreading his hands to indicate the false room

in which they sat, "is this ersatz world with which to distract myself when

I am not immersed in my work. I cope, Mr Taylor, because I am a professional, but I want my wife back. I need her with me."

Christian peeled the VR mask away from his eyes and waited for his

sight to adjust to the dim light of his Earls Court flat. He looked around at the organised clutter in which he lived. He never let anybody in here:

it was private, his own small patch of territory. He pushed his hair back from his forehead and sighed. "Get me Sammy," he said and

instantaneously the blue on blue ident of the National Police pinged onto the flat

screen pasted to the wall before him.

When the synthetic voice queried him he told it, "Constable Samarjhit

Gai Khan. Extension 3645."

"Hold, please."

A lot of his work was like this: person to person. The days of hacking

into systems and lifting information were past, with data security so tight you had to be corporate before you could even consider it as an option. These days it was more a matter of who you knew than what you knew: what the French called piston.

He waited for a minute or so, and then a genial, dark face appeared on the

screen, with a dark blue false backdrop. "Sammy," he said. "How's it hanging?"

"Hey, Chris," said the face. "It's good, man, but listen: it's hectic round here. Hectic. I'm doing ten jobs at once, you know?" He flicked at

his beaded hair. "What're you wanting from me then, eh?"

Christian tried to look hurt, but it was no good; Sammy knew him too well.

They went back years together. "How about some information, then?" he said. "River Sean Brady, NM37068/4C1. Ellen Mae Rinotti, HL12829/3H0."

"No can do, Chris. You know what would happen if I was found putting your

private work through the system. I love you like a brother, Chris, but

no

way. Okay?"

Christian ignored him. "I'm heading up to Essex," he said. "So send it to

the car when you have it, right? Listen, I owe you one, Sammy."

"You owe me fucking hundreds," said his friend, before the blue on blue ident flashed up again and he was gone.

Christian set his workbase to trawling and filtering information from the

hundreds of franchised data stores that might hold something relevant

to

the case, then he called ahead to book himself a room at a Formule Une just outside Harwich.

As soon as his old two-seater VW had locked into its Trafficontrol convoy

on the A12, Christian projected one of Brady's video sequences of Ellen Rinotti head-up onto the windscreen. She was a tall woman with a

plaited

tail of black hair pulled down from the back of her head and laced into the front of her fisherman's jumper with a strand of silver wool. The jumper's hem dragged halfway down her bare thighs, swinging from side

to

side as she danced sinuously through a garden to a tune Christian had turned down. Instead, he asked the car to play him Stockhausen's Donnerstag aus Licht; for a time her movements and the music were so

out

of synch that they almost seemed in synch and the journey was soon

over.

He spent the next three days collating information, talking to acquaintances of the couple, pursuing Ellen Rinotti through the aimless jumble of her life. He came up with little, certainly nothing that suggested a formula for reconciliation that could be agreed by both parties.

Sammy had given him Ellen's current address, along with a screenful of financial information which told him that she was still receiving occasional sums of money in addition to the temporary support order her solicitors had won from her husband. She even had a criminal record

from

her early teens when she'd been booked twice for morality offences in

her

native Florence. He wondered if River Brady was aware that his wife had once been an under-age hooker. Probably not, from the picture he had painted of her when he hired Christian; her offences had been committed fifteen years before they had even met.

On his fourth morning in Harwich Christian took one of the town's little

electric citicars down to the seafront. Alone in a strange and somewhat shabby town, he struggled not to feel strange and somewhat shabby himself.

He wondered where all his resilience had gone, his stubborn independence.

He took an outside table at a Turkish coffee shop that overlooked the dirty waters of Dovercourt Bay and tried to get his thoughts together.

A short distance out a couple of jetsurfers skidded aimlessly about in the foam.

He ordered an espresso and while he waited he pulled a screen from his pocket, unfolded it and pressed it to the table. Everything was here:

all the pictures, all the information he had gathered. He skimmed the headlines, touched one lightly with a finger and the screen filled with

a still picture of Ellen walking through Deane Mall; he'd taken that one himself, the previous day.

All he had to go on were two inconsistencies. The first was the extra money she was somehow earning. He wondered for a moment if she was on

the game again, but all the time he had followed her there had been nothing to

suggest she had returned to her old ways; she just didn't look like a professional any more. Besides, her only convictions dated back over twenty years.

She filled her days at the beach, or in town, or more often back in her flat by the docks in old Harwich. She seemed to be doing no more than treading water until she found something to do with her life again.

The second inconsistency was in the information River Brady had given him.

Back in the former Nigeria, when they were both working on the dam project, they had separated. It had only lasted for a couple of weeks,

but Brady had been specific in asserting that they had never split up before.

But several years had passed since then and the separation had been early

in their relationship, before they'd even been legally married.

Christian couldn't help thinking that his lack of progress was lending significance

to the most minor of matters.

He knew that River Brady was one of the best in his field: whenever his contract came free a number of firms were keen to sign him up. His one theory was that maybe Brady's firm had paid Ellen to leave him. A

number of people had told him that the boundary between art and the cutting edge

of engineering was a fuzzy one - perhaps Brady's employers were hoping to

somehow get the best out of him, that he would sublimate his grief into the creative side of his profession. Brady himself had said that he was

currently immersed in his work.

Christian took a sip from his espresso and grimaced at the sudden bitterness and heat.

Earlier this morning he'd called the London office of the bank that handled Ellen Rinotti's affairs. He had been putting this call off for

the

last three days.

After two synthetic receptionists tried to stall him a dark-haired woman

with an angular face appeared onscreen. "Carole," he said. "I meant to call." He always thought she looked as if her features had been drawn

on

with pencil and ruler, they were so geometric.

She said nothing.

"I need some help," he told her. "Information. I'm on a case." The look in

her eyes hurt. "Ellen Mae Rinotti, HL12829/3H0. She has irregular sums coming into her account. I need to know more."

Eventually, Carole said, "You know I can't do that."

"I know," he said, and risked a smile.

The screen went blank.

Another fruitless day, but all the same another day's fees for Brady to pay.

Christian Taylor sat in his motel room removing the make-up from his face

with a succession of moisturising wipes. All around him Ellen Rinotti danced across the walls, her fisherman's jumper dragging across bare thighs. He had always taken her flirting looks at the camera as those of

a

wife to her husband, but now he saw in those eyes, those moistly parted lips, the whore that she had once been.

He lowered his head and scrubbed his face with a soft towel. When he looked up a message was dancing across the walls. "Yup," he said, acknowledging it, and Ellen Rinotti was replaced by the massively

enlarged

face of Carole Sayers. She was calling from a public booth, not daring

to

speak from work. The time marker told Christian the message had been recorded ten minutes ago, avoiding the awkwardness of conversation.

"Christian," she said. "It's Carole."

He smiled. He'd never known anybody like Carole for stating the obvious.

The recording continued, oblivious.

"You know I can't keep doing this kind of thing. You have to promise not

to keep doing this." She paused, as if waiting for him to acquiesce,

and

he stared at the faint fan of straight lines spreading up from the

bridge

of her nose. "Those payments you asked after - why not look into the Sociotronics Encounters Group? Rinotti has an account with them, with

sums

coming in and out all the time. Okay Christian? Will you call?" She

faded

from the wall, and Ellen Rinotti was glancing back across her shoulder

at

him once again.

He cut her off sharply, asked the room for a VR mask and a drawer slid smoothly open at the side of his bed.

In the small un-room he opened into he flicked through a catalogue until he came to encounter groups, located SEG and touched one of its panels. A new room opened up around him, sun streaming in through an open doorway. He went outside and looked around. SEG had put him on a tropical atoll, the sky and sea complementary shades of deep blue. He looked down and saw his bare toes curling and uncurling in sharp white sand. He didn't feel a thing. He heard voices and turned away from the gently breaking waves. A tall fire burned in a clearing, surrounded by a cluster of grass huts. A number of people sat or stood or ran about like children. Some were clothed, others wore nothing, but most fell somewhere in between. All were young, slim, fit, with skin and hair colours ranging right across the spectrum. A small message flashed persistently in the corner of Christian's vision, warning him that he was not equipped to enjoy the full experience offered in this encounter scenario. It advised a full body stocking for total interaction, a genital glove at the very least. He'd heard all about these encounter groups - sex at its absolute safest, the only physical interaction being between the participant's body and his or her interactive suit. Someone beckoned to him to come closer and join in but he stayed where he was on the beach; the lack of complications attracted him, but at the same time he felt vaguely repelled. He studied the partying figures and wondered which one might be Ellen Rinotti. All the time she spent alone in her flat - when Christian had assumed she was brooding over the break-up of her marriage - all that time she had been out here in this ersatz world getting paid to lead lonely men through fake sexual encounters. Another woman waved to him but he'd seen enough. He raised a hand to point homeward but then he paused. He'd seen someone, over in the doorway of one of the huts, getting it on with a silver-haired girl with fish-scales all over her naked body. The man flicked long black hair away from his face. It was River Brady.

Build Odense had an office complex on the site of the old golf club, about a kilometre from Parkeston Quay. A burst of development had taken place here over the last few years as a number of continental firms had cashed in on the area's Région Désavantagée status. The gates wouldn't let Christian pass until he told them to check with River Brady. They opened and he drove through, then relaxed as Control

took over and parked his car at the rear of the main building.
Brady kept him waiting twenty minutes, but Christian didn't care: the
man
was paying for Christian's time to be wasted like this. Finally, he was
shown into a wide office, split up in the current fashion with paper
screens and tall, jagged plants.
Brady was a small man, dapper in three-piece suit and silk tie. His
round
features and thinning mousy hair were nothing like those he adopted in
VR.
He sat on a cane mat on the floor, his bare feet tucked up into the
lotus
position, an array of screens and papers spread out around him. He
glanced
up at Christian and gestured at a chair. "Unexpected," he said. "You
have
something to offer?" His watered-down accent was more pronounced in the
flesh.
"Nothing concrete," said Christian, as the chair settled beneath him.
"I've been gathering information, building up pictures. I think that
pretty soon I'm going to have to meet with your wife in order to
determine
her negotiating position."
"Something is bothering you, Mr Taylor. You didn't come here simply to
inform me that you haven't made much progress."
"I saw you yesterday," said Christian, cautiously. "Or rather, I saw
your
VR image. At one of the SEG encounter groups."
Brady seemed unconcerned. "I told you," he said. "It's my only escape.
So
what?"
"Your wife uses the same group."
Brady's facade faltered for a moment. Either he was a good actor or he
had
been genuinely unaware. Finally, he said, "I didn't know. Jeez. She
always
did like to spend time under the hood ... it just never occurred to me
that
our paths might cross like this and me not even notice. Jesus."
Christian sighed; Brady seemed sincere. There was no reason why he
should
have recognised Ellen: anonymity could be bought for the price of an
image
makeover - some people took a different look every trip. He decided not
to
inform Brady of just what his wife had been doing in VR, of how she was
supplementing her income. "You have to appreciate how irregular it
looked
when I found out," he said.
Brady peered up at him, nodding. "Of course," he said. "Hell, I was
wrong
when I accused you of not making any progress: you've confirmed a great
deal."
Christian waited for him to continue.
"Like I said: she still loves me. When I saw her in town and she seemed
happy it was all an act. Her only escape is exactly the same as mine:
this
sanitised world of fantasy, hidden behind the mask."
He really seemed to believe that. The man was clutching at every last
straw in his efforts to prove that the breakdown of his marriage was

not

irretrievable. Christian recalled his first, hasty assessment of River Brady, and he saw no reason to alter it now. The man was pathetic. He remembered his pet theory that Build Odense might be paying Ellen to leave, in order to somehow extract the best from her husband. "How's

your

work?" he asked, aware that there was no way he could make the question sound casual.

Brady's expression cleared. "You want to see?" he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he tossed a VR mask across to Christian and

said,

"Come take a look."

Seconds later they stood together in a blank room. Brady glanced at a sheet of paper, touched a panel on it and a new room opened up around them. They stepped towards a door and suddenly the room was replaced by

an

enormous hollow space. "Don't be disorientated," said Brady.

Christian fought back a wave of vertigo, feeling certain that Brady had intended him to feel this way: he could have warned him first, if he'd really wanted to be sympathetic.

Brady waved a hand and an enormous platform drifted towards them. After

a

few seconds Christian recognised it as a power station: a vast deck of wave turbines, topped by rigging for a windfarm. With no regard for verisimilitude the construction was coloured garishly in yellows,

oranges,

reds, blues and greens, bright patterns sometimes flashing across the structure, informing the expert eye of stresses, weaknesses and god

knows

what else. These stations were built in the estuary and towed out into

the

North Sea; one of Christian's searches had told him that Brady was

working

on a new platform for Build Odense.

Side by side they walked across the rainbow-coloured deck. Although Christian knew next to nothing about this kind of thing, the whole structure looked to have the simple, clean lines of good design.

They stopped in the centre of the platform. The scale was unclear but Christian knew that this was going to be one of the biggest power

stations

in the North Sea. "It looks impressive," he said blandly.

Brady turned on him.

"Impressive?" he said, shaking his head slowly. The platform was rising and falling gently, and now Christian saw through the bright patterning that it was made up of thousands of interlocking hexagonal plates,

maybe

five metres across, with flexible linkages so that ripples now flowed sequentially across the entire surface, making the gaudy colours flash

and

zigzag in apparent chaos.

"Impressive?" repeated Brady.

The ripples were becoming more pronounced now, so that it was a

struggle

for Christian to remain upright.

"We are in the middle of the North Sea," said Brady, as the

disturbances

grew all around him. "One of the most extreme seas on the entire globe.

All that supports us is a cobweb of carbon filaments, spun diamond

struts,

state of the art technologies ... The surface presentation may impress

you
but that's all artifice. Let me tell you, Mr Taylor: it doesn't work!
It
doesn't fucking work!"
Suddenly Brady grabbed Christian's hand and they flew up above the
platform an instant before there was an enormous groaning sound and a
deep
crack spread across the surface. Now there were two platforms,
hammering
against each other, individual plates tearing free and being thrown up
in
the air to come smashing down again into the growing chaos.
They watched in silence as the fledgling power station ripped itself
apart.
Back in the first ersatz room Brady turned to Christian and said
softly,
"I can't work like this. I'm going out of my mind. I'm nothing without
my
Ellen."
They peeled masks and stared at each other. They were in the real world
now, yet Christian felt perversely that he had been closer to the
genuine
River Brady amid all the fakery of his VR design room. Now, it seemed
that
there was little more to say.
"Do I have your permission to meet your wife?" asked Christian.
River Brady shrugged. "Whatever you feel is necessary. I think you know
what it means to me."
Christian climbed out of his chair and left the office.

Someone was waiting for him in the passenger seat of his car: a tall
blond
man in an anonymous green suit with an ID panel on the lapel. Company
Security. Christian could smell it from the other side of the car park.
He
slid into the driver's seat and thumbed the ignition so the car would
know
it was him.
"It will not take you anywhere until I grant permission," said the man
in
immaculate second-language English. Someone else with a talent for
stating
the bloody obvious.
"What do you want?" asked Christian brusquely. They were both
professionals, there was no need to skirt around the real business.
"I represent Build Odense," said the man. "We are concerned at the drop
in
performance of one of our key employees. We wish him to be more settled
in
his work."
"You're threatening me?"
The man smiled, dipping his head slightly as he did so. "I hope not,"
he
said. "I hope we will be able to reward you well for enabling our
employee
to improve his performance. Please understand how important an issue
this
has become for my company. Not only do we have our current contractual
obligations to Powergen to fulfil: the time is approaching for
companies

such as ours to tender for the various phases of the second Channel Link.

Our employee's skills would be a key part of any such bid. You must see why we are so concerned."

"You want him to be happy," said Christian.

The man nodded, then pushed his door open and climbed out, dropping his business card on the empty seat. As soon as the door swung shut, the company's parking control system cut in and Christian's car backed out of

its space and headed for the road.

His head starting to buzz, he took the wheel and said, "Give me Messiaen's

Turangalila." Thinking music. It was all starting to slot together.

He found her on the second level of Deane Mall, a sprawling shopping centre built on the infill between Harwich, Parkeston and the throughway.

It was one of her favourite haunts. She would spend hours of the day idly

browsing at Bloggs or HN, or meeting up with friends for drinks and leisure shopping.

She was at a booth in Boots when he spotted her, staring at various versions of herself on the widescreen, each demonstrating a particular cosmetic alteration available from the in-store surgeon.

He waited nearby, no need to hurry. After a time she showed that she knew

he was there, but she lingered for another ten minutes before turning

to

him.

"There are other booths," she said. He had expected traces of an Italian

accent but instead her voice was undistinguished home counties.

"I was waiting for you, not the screen," said Christian. "I know a lot about you. I want to talk. Okay? Business."

She shrugged, sure of herself. "Buy me coffee," she said, and led the way

up to a sitting area on the mezzanine.

"I'm working for your husband," he told her, as they waited for the pot of

Lapsang Ellen had decided they would share.

"I guessed. Such a romantic. Terribly boring, but romantic nonetheless."

Christian looked away, through the greenery to the thronged main thoroughfare. Every time he looked at Ellen Rinotti he saw superimposed

an

image of her dancing out of time to Stockhausen in an over-sized fisherman's jumper.

"Who's paying you?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Not really." Those irregular top-up payments: she wasn't a whore in the

SEG - there were enough people giving it away in there to make that unfeasible - it was just the route they'd chosen through which to channel

her payments. A rival company had paid her off in order to sabotage Build

Odense's chances for the Channel Link contracts. It was that simple.

He should have seen it sooner. Harwich was a company town, full of the employees of rival firms, yet all the time Christian had been following her Ellen Rinotti had scrupulously avoided contact with anyone from

these

other companies. If she so clearly didn't want a connection to be made then such a connection had to be there.

"Why?" he asked her.

the

She smiled sweetly, and said, "I'm a professional, darling. I work for

highest bidder. Pay me enough and even you could have me."

He looked away again, uncomfortable. "How were they so certain it would work?" he asked.

"They took precautions," she said, leaning towards him. "Come here and I'll show you."

round

Cautiously he leaned closer and then, without warning, she reached

clashing,

to the back of his head and forced her mouth against his, teeth

tongue sliding in, withdrawing. She pulled away and he stared at her, vision blurring. He shifted awkwardly in his seat and couldn't tear his eyes from her vicious smile. He felt as if the blood in his veins was fizzing, as if he was about to explode.

"With some couples," she said, "I believe it is an affair of the intellect. With others love takes its purest form." She smiled again.

"But

between Riv and me I can assure you it is purely physical."

He couldn't bear her to be so near, yet when, seconds later, she stood, smoothed her clothes and walked lazily away he felt as if she was

tearing

the flesh from his body.

aphrodisiac,

Some kind of implant in her mouth, he realised. Some kind of

something powerful. And addictive.

had

Christian watched her go, trembling slightly, as hooked as River Brady

ever been.

car

It was all he could do to stumble up to the parking deck and tell his

his

to take him back to the motel. He couldn't get that cruel bitch out of

mind. She danced in front of his vision even when he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his fists grinding into the sockets.

Later, he managed to call the anonymous security agent at Build Odense.

"I

have the answer to your problem," he said. Every word was a struggle,

but

gradually he found that the sheer effort of concentration helped

distract

him from what Ellen Rinotti had done to him. He took a swig from his bottle of grappa and continued, "Get Brady back with his wife and his performance will improve."

The man nodded indulgently. "You have a proposal?"

a

"Pay the bitch and she'll do whatever you want," said Christian. "She's

screwed

pro. She's got him chemically addicted to her - that's why he's so

up at the moment. In the long-term he'll have to be detoxified and then

he'll be the first to kick her out ... " But if Ellen's employers had

done

their work properly such a detoxification would never work - she would have a grip on River Brady for as long as she chose.

"But in the short term you advise a financial fix, yes?"

Christian nodded.

"It will be arranged. We are grateful, Mr Taylor. Rest assured that you will be rewarded." The wall blanked and Christian was left with his phantom images of the woman who had implanted herself into his desires.

He spent three days holed up in his room, trying to forget the bitch.

But

he couldn't do it. She was in his every thought, always the star of

those

dreams he managed to recall. If he watched TV or listened to music it

was

always Ellen Rinotti's face he saw, or her voice he heard.

For much of the time he did what River Brady had been contractually

unable

to do: he drank himself into oblivion.

And then, on the fourth morning he woke to find that he had succeeded:

the

obsession had died as he slept. In his relief he rushed around the

room,

packing his few possessions then, in the doorway, he suddenly stopped.

He went back into the room and shut the door. "VR," he said, and the drawer slid obediently open.

In the first false room he asked for the whereabouts of River Brady.

Almost immediately a door appeared in what had been a blank wall. He

pushed through and wasn't surprised to find himself on the beach; it

was

the weekend - everyone had to have their days of leisure.

The grass hut village wasn't there today. For all Christian knew this could be a different island altogether: there was nothing particularly distinctive about the white sand, the blue sky and sea. It was a very sterile environment, now that he came to think of it.

He found River Brady sitting on a rocky promontory, staring out to sea.

Dreaming of power stations or Channel Links, perhaps. Brady turned and waited for Christian to clamber up to join him; the system would have alerted him to Christian's visit as soon as it had been initiated.

"You knew what she was doing, didn't you?" said Christian.

River Brady gave his wide-mouthed smile but said nothing. He stared

past

Christian, as if searching for something.

"You're still hooked on her, you realise that? That's why you were so desperate to have her back. It was a drug, that's all it was."

"Are you still hooked on me, Mr Taylor?" The voice came from beyond

Brady.

Christian stretched up and saw the silver-haired woman standing

ankle-deep

in the waves, water running down her scaly body.

They were silent for a long time, Ellen Rinotti combing the tangles

from

her hair, River Brady staring at the waves. Christian wondered how many times the pair of them had pulled this lucrative trick before - how

many

'separations' had gone unrecorded. He knew Brady had worked for at

least

seven different companies in his career-to-date.

Without a word he climbed down the rocks and began to walk back along

the

beach, leaving the two of them together on the promontory. He felt

drained. He thought of Carole and knew he should call her. He glanced

back

one more time, then raised a hand and pointed for home.

© Keith Brooke 1994,1998

This story was first published in Interzone 86 (August 1994), and was listed by Gardner Dozois as an Honourable Mention in 1995's Year's Best Science Fiction.