

Pithecanthropus Blues
a short story by Eric Brown

Foreword

"Pithecanthropus Blues" was one of those all too rare events in a writer's life - the story that arrives out of the blue almost fully formed. In my experience, most stories start as a small idea, and slowly grow over the weeks and months. Then they reach critical mass and must be written down. "Blues..." wasn't like that at all. It came to me in March 1988, and I wrote it in two days, left it a week and went through it to tidy up any loose ends. I've often wondered why its birth was so painless. Perhaps because it's a light, and light-hearted, tale, with no involved character studies, or because it's set in an already existing background (that of the nada-continuum locale of a few of my other tales), or... but if I could work it out scientifically, I'd have all my stories come out that way...

It sold to Maureen Porter's short-lived magazine, The Gate, the following year, but never appeared there. I had included it in the ms of my first collection, The Time-Lapsed Man and other stories, and my editor at Pan wanted "Pithecanthropus Blues" as an original in the collection, and I had to withdraw it from the magazine. Fortunately, Maureen understood the situation. The story finally appeared in the collection in 1990, and now, ten years later, makes only its second appearance.

Pithecanthropus Blues

24th May, 2060.

Proxmire Industrial Solar Satellite.

It began as a tickle in the backbrain, just like the first time. The cerebellum is a difficult place to scratch, and I was reduced to holding my head in my hands and yelling at the top of my voice. The neighbours on all five sides began complaining and I had to quit the cubby. I took the radial slide out to the arcing crystal membrane of the dome, darkened now in night-phase. I stepped onto the perimeter causeway and began walking. The tickle was a constant chatter now - no longer just tactile but audible. It was as if the two hemispheres of my head were conversing in tongues, or rather in grunts. Then I became aware of a very real presence in my head, of an identity taking over my brain. This was how it had happened before. Soon, I knew, I'd find myself elsewhere...

I passed the hatch of a slouch bar in the deck, raised like the conning tower of a submarine. Strobing lights and music throbbed out, along with the sound of voices and laughter. I wanted to climb down there and talk to people, to establish the reality of my identity through social contact. But I knew that would be a mistake. The last time this had happened, two nights ago, I had returned to my senses to find myself naked and chin deep in an H2O effluent conduit on the flipside of this solar spinning top. The last thing I wanted was to go under drunk.

I blacked out.

As before, I had the sensation of swimming in some neutral medium. I was in darkness and thrashing around and shouting for help. Gradually, with a sense of relief I suspected was ill-founded, I returned to consciousness. I felt the reassuring physical form of a human body assume substance around my shattered psyche. I almost whooped for joy - surely anything was better than the sensory deprivation I had just undergone. Then some vague recollection of my last experience made itself known to me. I opened my eyes, and I was no longer aboard the Sol orbital satellite.

Anyone born on Earth might have called this paradise. To me, conceived on Venus and a Spacer ever since, it was purgatory. The clear blue sky went on for ever without the reassuring confines of a dome, and on all sides

the land stretched away with nothing more substantial than scrub and sun-parched trees between me and the distant horizon. To someone accustomed to overcrowded orbital agglomerations, the sudden sense of infinity was overwhelming. My head spun with agoraphobia.

More disconcerting than the geographical dislocation, however, was the fact that I was no longer in my own body. Ridiculous as it may seem, the lean, hairless body of my former self was no more. In its place was the squat, hirsute frame of a being one step above the ape. My arms hung down to my bowed knees in a manner both negligent and thuggish. I was naked. I tried to protest, but all that came out was a plaintive scale of grunts. I had been this way before. Now I recognised the body by the parallel claw marks on its belly and the missing left big toe. That first... seizure... had lasted mere seconds before I was returned to my own body. I had retained but a hazy recollection of the interlude, the alien landscape and the even more alien body. I had managed to convince myself that the experience was the flashback effect of certain pharmaceutical substances partaken of during my time as an Engineman for the Canterbury Line. Which still might be the case... But I doubted it. There was something very real about the way I inhabited this proto-human form beneath the open, searing sun...

For the first time I became aware that I was not alone. A hundred metres ahead of me was a small band of short, trotting creatures; it was some minutes before I realised that I - or rather the body that I inhabited - was one of their number. There was something about their diminutive stature, their hairiness and the way they almost skulked across the plain, that leant them the aspect of animals. One of their number turned, grunted and gestured at me to hurry; and there was something at once reassuring in the familiarity of the human gesture, and frightening in the fact that this identified me unmistakably as one of them...

Warily, I began shambling in pursuit. The absence of the big toe gave me a wild, swaying gait. I approached the band but kept my distance. They jogged across the plain with the stealth of the hunters I assumed they were. They carried rocks and lengths of wood in such a fashion as to suggest they had discovered their application as weapons. I alone was unarmed.

After what I judged to be about ten minutes we came to a gorge or rift in the land. Here the flat, scorched plain came to an abrupt end, and fell away in a deep, steep-sided valley. A river bisected the valley bottom, and the land on either side was lush and green.

The creatures - I could not bring myself to call them men, though the evidence was mounting that they were indeed just that - crouched on the lip of the escarpment in attitudes of wariness. They took cover behind sparse trees and infrequent boulders, peered into the valley and from time to time pointed.

As I scanned the valley bottom I made out the subject of their interest. Beside the river, in a green meadow of knee-high grass, a group of figures - as humanlike as my compatriots - lay about or sat watching the water. They too were naked, small and hairy. I tried, and failed, to find in them some difference, some evidence that they were somehow less human than my band, to excuse what I sensed was about to happen.

At a gesture from our leader - a tall creature with a monstrous, flattened face - the band charged en masse down the steep incline, yelling and waving their clubs.

And I lost consciousness.

I experienced the familiar sensation of being afloat in darkness, of struggling towards some unseen point of safety. One by one I felt my senses return - and last of all my sight. I was in my own body again, but naked, and wading waist-deep in the freezing waters of an effluent conduit. Par for the course, this; last time, I had managed to creep back to my cubby without being seen, and I endeavoured to do so again. I waded from the wide steel trough and ran naked through the darkened industrial

sector of Sol City, fear and dread pounding in my head like migraine.

26th May, 2060.

Proxmire Industrial Solar Satellite.

The day following the 'seizure' I skipped work - I just couldn't bring myself to leave the cubby. I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling, six inches above my nose. Eventually I could stand no more - there was something about just lying and waiting for the first hint of backbrain tickle that was more horrific than the actual experience. The following shift I went to work. I thought that the familiar routine of the job might take my mind off what had happened to me. But I thought wrong.

I worked as a coffin-engineer for Sol Funeral Services Inc - and while I'd rather have worked on bigships or shuttles, coffins were easy and the money was good. I did a six hour shift each 'day'. The first three hours I spent in the control room, a cosy bleb that adhered to the turning collar of the station and provided a constant view of Sol burning outside. From here I loaded coffins into the breach by remote control and, with the service over and the mourners gathered by the viewscreen, I pressed the button that sent the jet-powered coffins on graceful trajectories towards the big fire. Once out of sight, the coffin ejected its passenger into the sun and turned for home. The second half of my shift I spent repairing and servicing the coffins I'd sent out earlier, tuning the jets, spraying the casks with new coats of silver paint burned off on each run, and in general readying the coffins for their next trip.

That 'morning' I sent three casks on their way, and in the 'afternoon' I tinkered around with them in the service bay. I usually took pride in my work, enjoyed the manual labour of replacing faulty jets and test firing the coffins on a quick orbit of the satellite - but today my heart wasn't in the job. Visions of my time among the proto-humans returned to me, and I could concentrate on nothing for fear of that first, insidious tickle that would prefigure another seizure.

I was considering whether to check off sick when Anton, my boss, gave me the excuse to leave. His thin, high voice summoned me to the Chapel of Rest. "Hey Chester, boy. Get yourself down here and take a look at this..." Now Anton is sick - it's a combination, I suppose, of being reared in the subterranean hives of Ganymede and spending half a lifetime in the business of death. From time to time he'd summon me to the nether regions of the complex to show me what he considered a particularly interesting corpse.

I took the down-chute to the Chapel of Rest and found him in the preparations room. Sickly organ music played. Anton stood beside an open cask, garbed in the black cloak and top hat of the Morticians' Guild. He looked up when I entered. He frowned. "You look ill, Chester. Is something bothering you?" He gave me the swift appraisal usually reserved for sizing up a new corpse.

"I'm fine," I lied. "What is it, Anton?"

He gestured towards the cask. "Not a pretty sight, Chester."

Anton had an aptitude for the understatement. The body, that of a man in his fifties, had met a violent end. I clutched the edge of the cask for support.

"What... what happened to him?"

"In my opinion," Anton said, "he was eaten alive." He pointed to the thigh bone. "Observe the teeth marks. Much of his entrails are missing - ditto a large proportion of his brain..."

I managed a feeble chuckle. "Eaten? On Sol station?"

Anton looked at me. "And why not? For the past week the bigship Hanumati has been docked here, refuelling before its run to the Out-there. Haven't you noticed all the boosted-animals in the bars and night clubs? Obviously one of these, a boosted leopard or tiger, suffered a computer malfunction and reverted to type. I always said that augmentation was unnatural. And now look..." He gestured again at the body.

I refrained from doing so. "I don't feel so well," I said, and slipped to the floor in a cold faint.

When I came to my senses, Anton was slapping my face back and forth with a clammy hand. "I thought you looked rather pale, Chester. Take the day off. And a word of advice - see a medic."

I took my leave of the funeral parlour and wandered home in a daze. Sight of the corpse had served to focus my mind on the fact of my own mortality - and on my singular predicament. In the cubby, I lay tossing and turning in a torment of indecision. If I did take Anton's advice and consulted a medic, then my worst fears might be confirmed. On the other hand, there was always the chance that my 'seizures' had a perfectly innocent psychological explanation. A trip to the medic might put my mind at

ease...

I decided to make an appointment first thing in the morning.

27th May, 2060.

Proxmire Industrial Solar Satellite.

The clinic was the tallest building on the satellite. It stood at the exact centre of the residential hemisphere like a giant spindle. Dr Lassiter's penthouse consulting surgery was a great glass bauble that hung metres below the apex of the dome and commanded a three-hundred-and-sixty degree view of the surrounding city.

Lassiter himself was a tall, dignified man in his late nineties. He sat between the wings of a large v-desk and joined his fingertips before his long nose. He turned from the screen on his desk and regarded me.

Already I had been thoroughly examined and questioned by a Robodoc, and I had expected to be diagnosed by the same. The fact that the Robo' had seen fit to refer me to a human medic - and a top specialist at that - suggested that something was very wrong indeed.

I quaked.

"I see that you have been suffering seizures as you call them, Mr Carnegie," Lassiter said softly. The man had a honeyed larynx. "Perhaps you would care to explain the nature of these seizures...?"

I did my best to describe the physical symptoms of my displacement, the terrible sense of disorientation I experienced as a result.

"And you've suffered these on two previous occasions now?"

I nodded.

"Tell me, for how long did the first attack last?"

I shrugged. "A matter of seconds."

"And the following attack?"

"About one hour."

Dr Lassiter nodded. "I see." He murmured into a microphone and regarded the ceiling.

"Can you recall if, preceding these attacks, you heard noises in your head?"

"Yes - a tickle at first, and then... grunts. Then I black out and come round again... elsewhere, in a different body."

Dr Lassiter nodded sympathetically.

He glanced at the screen on his desk. "I see that you worked as an Engineman. How long were you in this employment, Mr Carnegie, and when did you leave?"

"Ten years," I answered promptly. "And I left six months ago. I was made redundant when the all the Lines decided it was more profitable to employ boosted-animals instead of Enginemen." I shrugged. "Does it matter?"

The Doctor chose to ignore me and murmured again into the microphone.

I waited until he finished, then cleared my throat. "Do you know what's wrong with me, Dr Lassiter? Am I imagining all this, or-"

"I'm afraid that your imagination has nothing to do with this, Mr Carnegie. And yes, I do know what is wrong with you..."

I waited.

"You are suffering from the rare and particularly unpleasant syndrome of

Ancestral Persona Exchange..."

I mouthed the last three words like an idiot, then echoed:

"Unpleasant...?"

"Ancestral Persona Exchange strikes one in every eight hundred million people, Mr Carnegie. Stated simply, you find yourself in the body of a far distant ancestor, in your case a proto-human from prehistoric Earth - and he, for the period of these attacks, finds himself inhabiting your body. Very disconcerting for both of you, I don't doubt..."

I gestured feebly. "But there is a cure? You can do something for me?"

Dr Lassiter glanced at his buttressed fingers. "I'm sorry..."

"You mean - you can't prevent this? At any time of day I'm likely to find myself in the body of this prehistoric ancestor, without warning, and there's nothing you can do to...?"

I stopped, there.

Dr Lassiter was regarding me with sad eyes.

"I'm afraid it's somewhat more serious than that, Mr Carnegie. Soon, on the occasion of your fifth attack - if you go the way of the other cases we have observed - you will remain forever in the body of your proto-human ancestor." He lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry, Mr Carnegie..."

He murmured that he would refer me to a therapist, and that she would be in touch soon. He expressed his sympathies with such professionalism that I knew they had been offered many, many times before. I took the down-chute to the street and wandered home like a zombie.

Ancestral Persona Exchange...

"Oh, my God..." I cried.

I was going APE.

That night, the inevitable happened. The backbrain tickle began as I lay in my bunk, pondering my fate. Too afraid to move, I closed my eyes and tried not to scream. The cerebellum itch became unbearable. Next, I thought, the grunts - then I find myself in the dark, neutral medium of non-being an instant before the transfer. But I was wrong. In place of the grunts I sensed the apeman attempt to articulate - he shaped his grunts into the semblance of latter-day English. Where am? he thought-asked. Who you? I sensed his confusion and felt pity for him.

But before I could question him as to how it was that he had managed to communicate with me in my own tongue, I slipped into utter blackness and struck out blindly for the safety of physical reality - even if it was in this case the reality of a million years ago.

I sensed myself settle into the apeman's body - and then I knew how he had managed to question me, for I was doing the same thing now. I had a limited understanding of the grunt-language used by these people. I was aware that the apeman's name was Gna, and that among this band of proto-humans he was regarded as something special - exactly why, though, I did not know. To some vestige of Gna still lingering in his own head I asked: Who are you people? Where are we? But before he could frame a reply he passed into my own body uptime and I came to my senses in his.

I opened my eyes and found myself seated in the shade of a tree some way from the main body of the tribe. Many of them were stretched out asleep and snoring; others attended to their partner's nit population. A few youngsters chased around in play, for all the world like baby chimpanzees. A huge red sun hung above the treetops, and something that I had experienced only once before moved in from the west - a wind. This one was hot and discomfoting, like a blast of heat from a furnace. Evidently we had eaten; my hands were bloody and my belly full. My gaze fell to my body and I had to admit that I was a hideous specimen - even by prehistoric standards. I was four-feet-nothing of fat hairy ape - and I stank. I teetered on the verge of slumber and pondered my misfortune.

Dr Lassiter had told me that, on the occasion of my fifth transference, I would remain here... stranded for good! I tried to look on the bright side and work out the advantages of living in this prehistoric era. But as far

as I could see there were none. In fact, of all the possible times in Earth's past to which I might have found myself transported, this one had to be the most hellish. The environment was totally alien to me; the citizens of this time little better than animals - and of all my ancestors I had had the mischance to find as my exchange partner, fate had deposited me in the overweight body of a geriatric cripple.

I was philosophising thus in the sultry dawn of planet Earth when I was visited by a member of the opposite sex. She squatted before me and bared her fangs in what might have been an amorous smile. She had teeth like tombstones, bad breath and dugs that drooped to her knees. She grunted at me, and I knew that this was the prehistoric equivalent of a pick-up. She turned on all fours and presented herself, and the prospect did not appeal. I realised, then, that this might be the fateful encounter that produced the genetic line that would culminate, in the year 2030, in the birth on Venus of one Chester Carnegie. Perhaps, if I abstained, I might never be born. All the more reason for chastity, I thought. I grunted that I had migraine. The female became angry - but I was saved her wrath by a cry from across the clearing, and my partner-who-almost-was scampered off. The tribe had gathered and were staring at the setting sun. As the fiery ball touched the rim of the horizon, the tribe prostrated themselves on the ground in obvious obeisance. I stared, amazed. Sun worshippers, yet! Minutes later, as the sun disappeared and pulled night in its wake, I was further amazed when each member of the tribe approached me, genuflected and deposited at my feet some small gift or token: clubs of wood, nuts and berries, gobbets of meat and small rodents. They retreated across the clearing and watched me as I regarded the offerings. I went through the limited knowledge of this era I had picked up from Gna in the transfer, but came up with nothing that might explain this.

I was cautiously sorting through the revolting oddments and wondering how to respond - the tribe was still watching me intently - when I was saved by the familiar sensation of approaching oblivion. Seconds later I blacked out and returned to my own time.

28th May, 2060.

Proxmire Industrial Solar Satellite.

As this was my penultimate day in civilised times I decided to give work a miss. Besides which, I had influenza. I had come to my senses the night before in the industrial sector - wet, freezing, and, as always, stark naked. Only the late hour prevented my being seen as I sprinted like a madman back to the cubby-stack.

I remained in my cubby all day and attempted to reconcile myself to my fate. I made a printout of the daily newsheet, but the current events only made me aware of what I was leaving. There had been another murder on the satellite; the authorities had tagged every boosted lion, tiger and panther who had left the bigships at the dock. On Earth, food riots had erupted in America, again. Titan and Europa were at war in a dispute of spatial territory...

And, in cubby 101, Chester Carnegie was slowly going APE.

Towards midnight the screen above the hatch bleeped and I accepted the call. A panda-faced girl peered out. "Chester Carnegie?" she asked. "The guy who's going APE?"

"Who the hell are you?" I yelled.

"Your therapist," she smiled. "Hincty Little-O'fay."

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" On the fur of her forehead I made out her serial number, and as she turned her big panda head I saw the microphone implant at the back of her neck. She was a call-girl.

"No joke, Chester. You want to find out why you're going APE?"

"You know?" I exclaimed.

"Meet me in the Carotid Fix slouchbar in fifteen minutes," she said. "I'll be a dolphin."

I was there in ten.

The Carotid Fix slouch serviced the spaceport quarter, a mixed bar with one wall looking out across the system. Aliens, humans and boosted-animals drank together or got their fixes alone and jugularwise. A bigship Captain sat cross-legged on the floor, discussing Einstein-Fernandez physics with a tiger and a slow loris. Mood music bubbled, Martian tablas and Lyran waterpipes. I found an elevated booth and five minutes later Hincty Little-O'fay strode in.

She was the most beautiful dolphin I'd ever seen.

Her body was human-female and well-proportioned, but from the neck up she was pure bottle-nose. She slipped into the seat across from me. "I'll change if you prefer," she said. "Some human customers like fauna,

though."

She touched the back of her head and the dolphin disappeared. She was a cute white kid, maybe twenty. "Of course, I can be anything you want. Subdermal laser fibre-optic capillaries. You like?"

"Just what the hell kind of therapist are you?" I asked.

She tossed her head. "I was hired by the Canterbury Line when Dr Lassiter informed them you were going APE-

"The Canterbury Line? I don't see...?" I was confused, to say the least. Why would my old employees hire a call-girl to act as my therapist? "You said you knew why I'm going APE...?"

The cyborg barman hovered over to us and Hincty Little-O'fay ordered a cyberpunch - a Gibson with helium. The goldfish bowl before her bubbled from the bottom up. She sucked through a straw, nodding and making big eyes to halt my impatience.

"Yeah," she squeaked, smiling at me. "You were once an Engineman for the Canterbury Line, right? Well, a few months ago they discovered that a number of their Enginemen were going APE. They found out why, and started drafting in boosted-animals to do the work instead."

"So why am I...?"

She pulled a face. "Well... hate to be the one to tell you this, Chester - but the Line kept a lot from you Enginemen. Like when you put yourself in those thingy-tanks to flux-

"Sensory-deprivation-

"Yeah, sen-dep tanks - to flux, to mind-push the bigships through the nada-continuum... Well, while you were in there on a three month stint, it wasn't technically you who were mind-pushing the bigship-

"Then who?"

"You see-" Hincty gestured with spread fingers, "when you tanked yourself, the ship's computer interfaced with your neo-cortex, accessed your DNA and brought forward one of your Pithecanthropan ancestors from the Pleistocene Period to inhabit your head and mind-push the 'boats. Apparently, these little ape guys were closer to the-" She screwed her face up and peered at something written on the palm of her hand. "Sorry, Chester - you're my first patient, see. They were closer to the Essential Elemental Quiddity of the Primal Cosmic Null-state of the Nada-Continuum..." She squinted at me. "That make any sense to you, Chester?"

"I think I get the gist," I answered. "Pithecanthropus man can mind-push bigships better than us humans."

"Yeah." Hincty shrugged. "Guess that's what it boils down to. So for the three months you were tanked, you inhabited some basement of your subconscious while this apeman did the work. Now... in quite a large percentage of Enginemen, something went wrong on a cellular level. Many of you underwent terminal Ancestral Persona Exchange."

"So that's why six months ago all the human Enginemen were made redundant and the boosted-animals got the jobs?"

"That's why, Chester." She looked relieved that she'd managed to get to the end of the explanation.

"You said I was your first patient?" I asked. "Just what kind of therapy can you give me that might help my condition?"

She glanced around the bar, wrinkled her nose at the music. "Not here, Chester. How would you like to come back to my place?"

Before I had time to reply she pulled me from the Carotid Fix and along the perimeter walkway. She owned an expensive cluster of bubble rooms barnacled to the inner curve of the dome. She took me by the hand and led me through to the bedroom. She opaqued the walls for privacy, stepped from her wrap and put her arms around my neck. "I can be any race or colour you like," she breathed into my ear as she lowered me to the bed. "Just speak your instructions into my occipital microphone."

I felt like asking her if she could transform herself into a Pithecanthropus - after all, I'd have to get used to it. But, somehow, the thought did not appeal. I'd have the rest of my life to sample the dubious pleasures of proto-human love-making.

"So this is the Line's idea of therapy," I said. "A sop? A few hours of ecstasy to compensate for a life-time of hell..."

Hincty Little-O'fay was unzipping my overalls. "Not at all, silly. You see, I can cure you, Chester."

"Huh? You can?"

She whispered how.

Three hours later, as Hincty slumbered gently beside me, I felt the first twinges of the transfer in my head. I rolled from the bed, dressed quietly and left.

I was going APE for the very last time.

My trans-temporal dialogue with the apeman Gna was extended on this occasion. The familiar thought-grunts became a definite presence, and in the darkness of my head arrived the question: Where-is-this?

The good old twenty-first century, Gna, I replied.

I-don't-like.

Can't say that I'm too enamoured of the Pleistocene Period, either.

Huh?

Just hang on in there, boy. With any luck this'll be the last time we pass this way. Au revoir!

I opened my eyes and found myself on a scorched African plain. I was among the merry band of hunters again, trotting towards the gorge. We came to the escarpment and dropped into postures of surveillance. Down below, though further along the valley bottom this time, an other tribe of proto-humans disported themselves beside the river. On a signal from our leader we charged. I contrived to trip and allow the others to pass me, then hung back and witnessed the slaughter from a safe distance. The valley people stood little chance against this armed and ferocious onslaught. They looked up, seemed frozen for a second, then scattered. The halt and lame were dispatched first, and then a couple of youngsters caught unawares waist-high in the river. The carnage was over in seconds. The survivors scurried whimpering along the valley and out of sight, and my tribe assumed the immemorial attitudes of triumph; they beat their chests and yi-yipped at the tops of their lungs.

We were joined minutes later by the non-combatants of the tribe. Some fifty in all, we gathered around in a rough circle while two males slit the carcasses with stone cutting instruments and removed the heads. These were passed around the tribe and, through a hole stove in the cranium, the brains were scooped and slurped. I declined my share and passed the head to the next apeman. Then the lights were distributed, the choice tidbits going to the warriors and the children. The feast began in earnest only when the limbs were severed and apportioned. I managed to refuse all offers without arousing suspicion - my fellows were too bothered about getting their share to worry about me.

Later, the repast over and only a pile of picked-clean bones scattered like jackstraws to indicate the fact of the carnage, the apemen stretched out in the grass, belched and scratched themselves and slumbered.

I found a tree at some remove from the crowd, sat and gave thanks that

this was my last visit to this barbaric age. The prospect of salvation made the fact of what had happened just about tolerable: certainly the thought of a life-time among these people would drive me mad.

At sunset the tribe roused themselves and, in single file, walked into the river and waded chest-high downstream. As the sun disappeared below the distant horizon, they submerged themselves in what was obviously a post-prandial rite of purification.

I stared at the ceremony with sudden and sickening realisation, followed by nausea, and I thought of Gna, in my body in the twenty-first century, and the hideous murders he had committed in the name of survival and tradition.

I had been in this time for many hours - certainly the longest period I had endured in the Pleistocene - when I was visited by the apewoman with designs on me. She swiped at my crotch in play and breathed the reek of dead flesh over me. I thought of Hincty Little-O'fay, still a million years unborn, and blessed her, my saviour.

The apewoman wrestled me to the ground, straddled me and bounced, gibbering with delight - and I was saved further indignity by the darkness that came down rapidly and carried me away. Goodbye, Pleistocene! I yelled-grunted to my ancestors. Hello twenty-first century!

29th May, 2060.

Proxmire Industrial Solar Satellite.

I shivered in my cubby for hours, naked and freezing from Gna's last purification dip in the effluent conduit. I felt bloated and ill from the last meal my body had taken. What action, I wondered, might the authorities take if they discovered that 'I' was the phantom cannibal of the Proxmire satellite? I was grateful that the police were concentrating their attention on the boosted-animals. With luck, I'd remain undiscovered for a while longer. I had only matter of hours to go before I met Hincty Little-O'fay for the final part of my cure.

Perhaps I should have felt a modicum of guilt at the grisly ends that the innocent citizens had met - but I didn't. After all, technically I had nothing to do with their deaths, even if my body was physically involved. Gna had done the deeds, and he was only acting out his inherited and environmental imperatives for survival. If anyone was to blame it was the people at the Canterbury Line for summoning forth my cannibal ancestor in the first place.

At noon I left the cubby and took the radial slide to Hincty's bubble pad. My arrival before the diamond hatch alerted sensors which activated a blast of jazz throughout the domes. I waited. Hincty didn't answer. I stepped back and peered into the transparent rooms above me - but there was no sign of the kooky little call-girl. Perhaps I'd made a mistake, and we'd arranged to meet at the Carotid Fix slouchbar instead. I took the walkway to the spaceport quarter.

There was no sign of her in the slouch, either. I found an empty booth and ordered a drink. I'd give her one hour, then return to her place. I was jumpy. Last night Hincty had explained the final part of the cure - and I didn't like the sound of it one bit. She'd finally convinced me that this was the only way I could be saved, and I'd agreed to go along with her scheme. It was either that - or spend the rest of my time impersonating Gna.

One hour later I was still alone, and more than a little drunk. I was climbing from the booth when I became aware of an insistent itch in my head...

Gna, coming through again!

"Apollo!" I yelled at the top of my voice.

I ran from the bar like a madman.

"Hincty!" I cried.

I sprinted back to her pad and rapped on the hatch. She still wasn't home. And I could feel Gna, assuming identity in my head. There was only one

thing for it - I would have to go through with the 'cure' without Hincty's help.

I took a down-chute to the flipside, sprinted along the walkway towards the glowing neon that proclaimed: Sol Funeral Services Inc. Anton was powdering a corpse when I flew through.

"Chester, where've you been?" he cried after me. "You're fired!"

"I resign!" I yelled over my shoulder as I pushed through the swing door to the despatch parlour.

Gna began grunting.

There was a coffin in the breach, like a torpedo ready to be fired. I swarmed up the ladder to the control room, pressed buttons and flipped switches in a frenzy, then dived back into the parlour. Anton came through the swing door, then stopped. "Chester? What the hell!"

"Bye, Anton," I said, diving aboard the coffin. "I'll explain everything, in time..." I pulled the lid shut and held on as the ram punched the coffin into the chute and the jets caught and fired. The coffin rattled like a toboggan as it shot from the breach. Through the faceplate I could see the Proxmire Satellite moving slowly astern, and Anton's puzzled face watching me go.

My scalp prickled with the heat of the sun.

Chester? Gna thought-grunted at me.

Hi there, old man, I replied.

What-you-doing?

It's the only way I can stop myself going back to your time, Gna. I have to kill myself. Hincty was going to help me die, but...

Huh?

The coffin hurtled towards the sun.

You see, Hincty Little-O'fay is having my baby. She took a... hmm... sperm sample last night, and by now she'll be impregnated-Chester...?

It's quite simple, I explained. The Canterbury Line hired Hincty and arranged it all. They owed it to me. When my baby is born, the technicians of the Line will utilize the same technique they used to bring you forward when I was in flux, and install my persona - my genetic identity - in the baby. I'll have a new life in a new body in my own time. O, happy days! Chester...

There was something about his tone...

I could feel the casing of the cask begin to heat up. I sweated. Through the faceplate I watched a sunspot flare.

Hincty-Little-O'fay? he asked. Small-white-hairless-female?

That's her, Gna.

She-followed-you-from-her-place, he told me.

She-wanted-us-do-it-again-to-make-sure.

And? I asked.

And... I-ate-her-Chester.

No!

I hardly had time to register the terrible fact that I was leaving my own time for ever, then I felt myself falling, blanking out. The coffin opened up; the body of Chester Carnegie was ejected head first into the sun, and I slipped into brief oblivion.

Circa One Million B.C.

Somewhere in Africa.

Of course, I'd rather be growing up in the twenty-first century as Hincty Little-O'fay's child - but even life in the Pleistocene Period is preferable to death. Poor Hincty... And poor Gna. He was the one who introduced sun worship to these people, by the way, so there was something ironical in the means of his end. As he mind-pushed bigships from star to star, he developed a reverence for the burning balls of fire that were his destination - and on his return to his own time he conceived a simple form of sun theology.

I am the High Priest of these people...

Already I have revolutionised their lifestyle. I've invented fire, the wheel, sartorial decency and crop plantation - next I'm working on their morals. I'm trying to dissuade cannibalism and promote good neighbourliness.

But I need help - I can't do it all alone. And besides, the conversation around here is limited. I need someone with whom I can chew the fat over old times.

That's why for the past five years I've been spending all my spare time chiselling these stone tablets with the account of my arrival here. There must be other ex-Enginemen who went APE before the Line discovered how we might be saved. I'm leaving these tablets at various places far and wide on my travels - and what I suggest is that we get together to improve the lot of both our Pithecanthropan friends and ourselves while we're at it. I belong to the tribe with the grass skirts and the wheel-barrows. We summer by the Great Pachyderm Lake in the shadow of the two peaks. Drop by any time. I'm known as Gna - but if you come in shouting, "Chester!" you'll find me.

I'm the ugly little brute with the missing big toe and six kids on my heels all day...

© Eric Brown 1990, 2000

This story appeared in Eric's collection The Time-Lapsed Man and other stories.