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Dreaming Down-Under

BOOK TWO

Edited by JACK DANN and JANEEN WEBB

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WHAT PASSES FOR A PREFACE

HARLAN ELLISON

How do you do? Or, if I were trying to ingratiate myself as some overcompensating tourists do, I'd say, "G'day". But since it is not my intention to hold you long, here at the beginning of this most excellent book, I will merely state that which is never nakedly spoken: I am an intruder here, and this book is the least book that ever needed preface.

I am a Person from Porlock, an interloper, a figurehead and "loss leader" whose brief ramblings have been solicited, and are tolerated, only because I have known Jack Dann for more than thirty years, because we are close friends, because I was lucky enough to have been at the right spot at the right time in the late sixties when editing a book like *Dangerous Visions* made me appear to be some sort of firebrand, cutting-edge champion of the Bold New Word. Well, that was then, and as the saying goes, this is now ... and my pal Jack has found himself at the right spot, at the right moment; and I am the resonating shadow that serves the purpose of foreshadowing echo.

But, in absolute truth, this book needs a preface from me — or anyone — about as much as a fish needs a bicycle. As much as the ghost of Himmler needs forgiveness. As much as a cyclotron needs a sphincter. I love metaphors. I could go on for days. As much as the Sphinx needs a new pair of Nikes.

In June of 1983 I visited Australia for the first time. To say that I fell in love with the very scent and sight of the down-under would be to diminish to the point of disrespect what I found there. Not the least of which was my poor benighted tourist moment when, somewhere above Arkaroo Rock, all alone, I fell willing supplicant to the Dreamtime and would likely have died out there had not Terry Dowling and Kerrie Hanlon found me and led me back to my life and the prescient world.

Most of all, I found a new world of literature in Australia. I had been a great admirer and friend of A. Bertram Chandler, the towering forefather of all the young growlers you'll find in this book, and I was one of the first Americans to recognise that Peter Carey was probably going to be the next Aussie (after Patrick White) to win the Nobel Prize for Literature; but until I met Damien Broderick, Terry Dowling and Stephen Dedman and the late,

more than wonderful George Turner ... I had no idea of the depth of richness that existed in the pool of Australian fantasists.

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I wanted desperately to connect with all that, to be the one — as I had been in the '60s — to let the light of all that talent shine here in the States and in England, where the arrogant imperialism of the New York/London *apparat* breathed heavily with its own certain wisdom that nowhere else was magic realism written at their level. I wanted to be the one to amass those talents who created great dreams while bowing their heads in a ridiculous cultural cringe to the titans of Anglo-American sf; I wanted to gather them and house them in an exhaustive anthology, and smack the New York publishing smirk across its mouth with a book that would convince them the New Wave was the *tsunami* from down-under. I got a contract, and I started soliciting stories, and I found Lucy Sussex, Norman Talbot, Sean McMullen and others, and ...

Well, I stumbled. The book never happened. *Down Deep* it was called. And it never happened. I couldn't keep my promise to the excellent writers I had met and bought and marvelled at.

I have led a productive, terrific life, filled with great happenings and splendid deeds. There are few things I regret not having accomplished. Do I need to write the next sentence?

And now, it is a decade and a half later; and the promise that trembled in the work I read in Perth, Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide has exceeded even the most scintillant of my expectations. Dowling, Egan, McMullen and all the ones who have come rushing in after them, have created a superimposed pre-continuum of excellence that makes the weary, inbred, commercially-bloated output of most of what passes for modern American science-fantasy read like the drivel found on the backs of cereal boxes.

Jack and Janeen have found themselves at the right spot, at the right moment; and the result is this huge testament to the new order of things literary in this genre. They have edited the book I wanted to do.

And they seem to think that allowing me to jingle my cap and bells here in this corner is a fitting tribute to *Dangerous Visions*, to June of 1983 and January of 1996 when I came back to the aborted vision that would have been *Down Deep*. They think they honour me.

I hate them for it. I envy them more that I can say, I burn with shame at my failure, I grit my teeth in frustration at how powerful a collection they have put together, and the only thing that keeps me from killing the pair of them is that they are my long-term friends and I love them. But oh! how this hurts; and oh! how unnecessary is a preface, by me or anyone else.

Because the work, all this work, all this fresh, tough and brilliant work, all these stories, they need no California fantasist to shill for them. They speak for themselves. They have voices. Now, go away; and listen to them.

Harlan Ellison
Los Angeles
9 September 1998

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INTRODUCTION

BY JACK DANN AND JANEEN WEBB

Sometimes history repeats itself ...

In 1967 the American author and editor Harlan Ellison wrote: “What you hold in your hands is more than a book. If we are lucky, it is a revolution.

“This book ... the largest anthology of speculative fiction ever published of *all* original stories, and easily one of the largest of *any* kind, was constructed along specific lines of revolution. It was intended to shake things up. It was conceived out of a need for new horizons, new forms, new styles, new challenges in the literature of our times.”

That book was *Dangerous Visions*.

It was a lightning rod for the “New Wave” literary movement that was taking place in England and the United States in the late ‘60s. The “New Wave” was a movement toward literary experimentation in science fiction. Authors such as J.G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Thomas N. Disch, R.A. Lafferty, Samuel Delany, Sonya Dorman, Carol Emshwiller, Ursula K. Le Guin, Pamela Zoline, Roger Zelazny, Kate Wilhelm, Joanna Russ, Robert Silverberg, M. John Harrison, James Tiptree Jr, Josephine Saxton, Norman Spinrad, Michael Moorcock, and Harlan Ellison himself, opened up the genre to the literary tropes of “mainstream” literature, broke down the boundaries between science fiction and other forms of fiction and, perhaps most importantly, produced some of the finest work in the history of the genre.

It was a heady, exciting time. It was the new Zeitgeist, and science fiction would never be the same after that.

Fast forward to January 1996 ...

Your editors were the guests of a conference in Sydney, sponsored by Qantas Airlines and the Powerhouse Museum. Harlan Ellison was the featured guest. We were on a panel called “The Australian Renaissance”. The auditorium was packed with science fiction readers ... *and* with some of Australia’s most important writers — from multiple award winners such as Terry Dowling and Sean McMullen to hot “new” writers such as Sean

Williams. At one point in the panel discussion Harlan leaned over the speakers' table, pointed at the audience, and said, "Do you guys *understand* that this is the Golden Age of Australian science fiction? Do you realise that you're living it right now? This is it. And I'll be damned if I don't envy you!"

The effect was electric. We all felt that we were indeed participating in something new and exciting ... something that was filled with possibility.

And Harlan was right. We *are* in a Golden Age.

Or it damn well feels that way.

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There is a bit of history echoing in Harlan's words, a reference to a period in American science fiction that we fondly call ... the Golden Age. It began when the late John W. Campbell took over the editorship of *Astounding Stories* in 1937. Campbell wanted rigorously extrapolative and *literate* science fiction stories (not the stereotypical super-hero space opera that dominated the "pulp" of the '30s), and he developed new writers to write them, writers such as Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt, Robert Heinlein, Lester del Rey, Eric Frank Russell, Alfred Bester, Frederic Brown, Arthur C. Clarke — and the list goes on and on. This "Golden Age" continued right through the '40s, and what a time it was — the tropes and devices and conceptual "furniture" of modern science fiction were being created in the magazines; and the best stories contained "real" science, they were well plotted and well-written, and they were intellectually and emotionally thrilling.

They instilled the proverbial sense of wonder in the readers.

The stories in Harlan's anthology instilled that same sense of wonder for a new generation ... but many of those who had grown up with and loved the old *Astounding* stories scratched their heads in bemusement at what they considered the dangerous literary experimentation in *Dangerous Visions*. But *Dangerous Visions* wasn't just about literary experimentation; it was about showcasing the finest stories by the finest writers. It became the book to point to when someone asked you, "What is this New Wave business all about?"

Which brings us to the anthology you're holding in your hands ... and what's really going on in Australia.

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There's a long history that connects Australia with speculative fiction of one sort and another. Way back in 1726 Jonathan Swift extrapolated the geography of *Gulliver's Travels* from pirate captain William Dampier's 1697 bestseller, *A New Voyage Around the World*. Swift set the land of Lilliput in what we now call South Australia.

When the white settlers eventually came to what was, from their perspective, the most alien of continents, the idea of the lost race, the undiscovered civilization that surely *must* be out there somewhere, held a peculiar fascination. Australian authors populated the mysterious interior of the continent with everything from the lost tribes of Israel to the last of the Lemurians.

Once Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, the lost race stories amalgamated with new scientific romances, and Australia found itself host to any number of missing link stories such as the anonymous *An Account of a Race of Human Beings with Tails* (1873) and Austyn Granville's *The Fallen Race* (1892).

As scientific romances grew in popularity around the world, Australian writers added their voices to the growing genre, and some of the internationally common themes emerged here. A case in point is Robert Potter's 1892 Melbourne novel, *The Germ Growers*, which has the doubly dubious distinction of being the first story about "alien invasion", and also the prototype story of "germ warfare".

Less pessimistic Utopian models were also popular in early Australian works such as Joseph Fraser's *Melbourne and Mars: My Mysterious Life on Two Planets* (1889) and G. McIvor's *Neuroomia* (1894). Feminist speculations were also with us early on, with works such as Catherine Helen Spence's *Handfasted* (1879), Millie Finkelstein's *The Newest Woman: The Destined Monarch of the World* (1895), and Mary Anne Moore-Bentley's *A Woman of Mars, or Australia's Enfranchised Woman* (1901) leading the way to future worlds where women hold positions of power.

Mid-nineteenth century gold-rush Australia also began producing darker speculative writing in racist and xenophobic fictions that played on popular fears of "Asian invasion", in works such as the anonymous *The Battle of Mordialloc, or How We Lost Australia* (1888), "Sketcher" (William Lane)'s *White or Yellow? A Story of the Race War of A.D. 1908*, Kenneth

Mackay's *The Yellow Wave: A Romance of the Asiatic Invasion of Australia* (1895), "Rata" (Thomas Roydhouse)'s *The Coloured Conquest*, and C.H. Kirmess's *The Australian Crisis* (1909). This is a theme that spilled over into the twentieth century, in works such as A.J. Pullar's *Celestalia: A Fantasy A.D. 1975* (1933), Erle Cox's *Fool's Harvest* (1939), and John Hay's *The Invasion* (1968). Erle Cox further explored the vexed question of white racial dominance in his famous 1919/1925 novel, *Out of the Silence*.

There were also tough minded visions that depicted Australia as the future centre of the world, its young civilization surviving the inevitable collapse of the old Europe. Works such as Henry Crocker Marriot-Watson's *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, or The Witch's Cavern* (1890) explore this post-disaster theme, a theme that was to continue later this century in post-apocalyptic novels such as Nevil Shute's *On The Beach* (1957) — which became the first science fiction movie to be written, set and filmed in Australia.

Like any genre, speculative writing in Australia has had its ups and downs. The 1930s and 1940s were lean times, though we should not overlook works such as J.M. Walsh's *Vandals of the Void* (1931) or M. Barnard Eidershaw's important *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947), which was cut by the censor and not restored to full text until 1983. The 1950s saw renewed interest, with magazines like *Thrills Incorporated* (1950-52), *Future Science Fiction* and *Popular Science Fiction* (1953-55) and *Science-Fiction Monthly* (1955-56) publishing local authors: Anglo-Australian Norma Hemming for one. Australian authors like A. Bertram Chandler and Wynne Whiteford were now making it in the USA and UK magazines, and were joined in the 1960s by writers such as John Baxter, Damien Broderick, Lee Harding and Jack Wodhams. Yet the local market remained tiny, and the sense that overseas publication was essential to any serious career loomed large for Australian writers.

The 1970s saw the arrival of Paul Collins' *Void* magazine, which published local writers, and the emergence of more new science fiction writers, especially George Turner, who already had an established mainstream literary career. The growth accelerated through the 1980s, with the emergence of Terry Dowling and Greg Egan (who have both won major international awards), and into the 1990s with its impressive crop of new writers.

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After all this, why are we talking *now* about a Golden Age?

In the last few years there has been a yeasty literary foment going on in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres. A recognition of the sales potential of genre fiction by major publishers in Australia — and the introduction here of science fiction imprints such as HarperCollins' Voyager; the healthy vitality and competition of Australia's two major science fiction and fantasy magazines, *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*; the annual *Year's Best* edited by Jonathan Strahan and Jeremy Byrne; new professional awards such as the Aurealis Award and the Turner Award, as well as the well-established Ditmar Award (which is voted on by readers), have all combined to produce this foment. There are new and vigorous small presses right around the country: *Eidolon* and *Ticonderoga* in Perth, *Aphelion* in Adelaide, *MirrorDanse* and *Five Islands Press* in Sydney, *Sybylla Feminist Press* in Melbourne, *Desdichado* in Hobart, all are pushing the boundaries, adding to the mix by publishing a vast quirky range of speculative titles.

But even all of the above wouldn't be enough. We needed to smash the idea that we were isolated, too far away from the cultural meccas where the action was.

We needed to be "in the loop"; and thanks to the information revolution — that combination of the internet, e-mail, fax and phone — the distance has all but been eliminated. Many of the writers in this anthology now have US agents and publish regularly in the US, the UK, and Europe. Australian science fiction is appearing regularly in American "Best of the Year" collections and receiving serious international critical attention; it is being perceived as vital and interesting ... and more importantly, we've discovered that the "action" isn't always somewhere else. It's right here.

Although Australia's much discussed "cultural cringe" — the idea that the real culture, the real action, the "party" always has to be somewhere else — is still around, it's getting harder to find it in the genre. Australian writers have gone beyond the limiting notion that being "international" somehow meant not admitting to an Australian accent. They are e-mailing each other, discussing new ideas among themselves and with writers and critics in England and Europe and America, travelling to see each other, workshopping stories, going to conventions, collaborating, criticising, encouraging new writers, and revelling in the idea of being part of an exciting, expanding, extended literary community. And they are producing world class works whose Australian identity is neither parochial nor sentimental.

However the pundits try to describe it, everyone involved in this process can sense its energy. It *feels* like a revolution. There's *something* new and vibrant and exciting going on. Maybe it's a renaissance. Maybe it's just a confluence of talent in this English-speaking region of the world. Or maybe, as one editor said when Asimov and Clark and Pohl suddenly started producing some of their most vital and interesting work late in their careers ... maybe it's sunspots!

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Dreaming Down-Under was conceived to shake up the established thinking about the “shape” of contemporary writing in Australia: to open up — and redefine — the literary canon to include the non-mimetic side of our literature. Author and critic John Gardner was fond of reminding students that fiction is a “waking dream”; and this conception of the term “dreaming” has a special resonance for contemporary Australian writers, writers who share a landscape rich in tradition, rich in possibility. Writers who are exploring their landscapes of the mind in works that are imaginative, visionary, fanciful, extrapolative, extravagant, quixotic.

There has never been a collection of speculative fiction in Australia quite like this. This is a showcase of the very best contemporary “wild-side fiction” (those stories that have an edge of horror or fantasy, or could be categorised as magical realism) and the very best genre fiction — science fiction, fantasy, and horror. This book contains over 100,000 words of original fiction and another 10,000 words of notes by your editors and thoughts by the writers on their stories. And even with 110,000 words, there are *still* so many wonderful writers who for one reason or another are absent from these pages, writers such as Peter Goldsworthy, Greg Egan, Yvonne Rousseau, Richard Harland, Penelope Love, Sue Woolfe, Leanne Frahm, and the list could go on and on.

Dreaming Down-Under raised the bar for writers in Australia. We asked the best authors working in the field to write the story they wanted to be remembered for. We weren't willing to compromise ... to accept mediocre work from big name authors. In fact, three “name” authors actually rejected stories they had already sent to us — they didn't think the stories were quite good enough, and so they sent us new stories, which we bought!

Our only criterion was quality.

So this is it — a showcase of some of the very best work being done in Australia, a compendium of stories intended to produce in you that unique intellectual and visceral thrill we have always identified as “sense of wonder”; and if we’re lucky, this book will become the lightning rod for Australia’s Golden Age ... or renaissance ... or revolution ... or Zeitgeist.

Or perhaps it will just show off the sunspots!

As Harlan said about his volume some thirty years ago, “If it was done properly, it will provide these new horizons and styles and forms and challenges. If not, it is still one helluva good book full of entertaining stories.”

Lastly, this book is dedicated to the late George Turner, one of Australia’s finest authors, who thoroughly enjoyed being at the cutting edge of Australian writing, enjoyed the most rigorous of debates, enjoyed turning convention on its head.

George, this one’s for you!

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THE EVIL WITHIN

SARA DOUGLASS

Since the publication of *BattleAxe*, Book One of the Aurealis Award-winning *The Axis Trilogy* in 1995, Sara Douglass has become Australia's premier bestselling fantasy author.

She writes: "I was born in Penola, South Australia, raised in Adelaide by Methodist Ladies, condemned by apathy to the respectable profession of nursing, and escaped via the varied kindnesses of the Department of History at the University of Adelaide into the preferable world of writing."

Douglass is the author of *Enchanter* and *Starman* — which complete *The Axis Trilogy* — and *Sinner* and *Pilgrim*, the first two books of the *Wayfarer Redemption Trilogy*. She is also the author of *Threshold*, the young adult novel *Beyond the Hanging Wall*, and such nonfiction titles as *Images of the Educational Traveller in Early Modern England*. She currently lives in Bendigo, Victoria.

As Sara Douglass writes very little fiction at shorter lengths, we are very pleased to include this shivery Gothic story about medieval gargoyles, mendicants ... and the myriad manifestations of evil.

* * * *

This world, this wasteland, lies heavy with evil. Here writhe serpents, here sting pests, here rot grub worms, here raven wolves, here sin issues in glistening rivulets from the mouths of the dead. Here evil roams on the breath of wind and the dance of dust motes, here evil shrouds itself in the shadows of earth clods and the cavities of human bodies. Here live men and women, the sinful fruit of Adam's weak loins and Eve's vile womb. For her sin, they are condemned to this wasteland, to their toil in the dust, to their scratchings at the boil of plague and the bite of pest. Here, amid all this wretchedness, lies the seed of their salvation and the terror of their damnation: battle the evil without and conquer the sin within; succumb to the evil without, and suffer the worms of Hell for all eternity.

Here, this world, this wasteland.

* * * *

It was an age of gloom and despondency. The population of Europe lay decimated by the creeping pestilence, forests encroached upon untended fields, wolves ranged into villages, and the darkness crept down from the mountain slopes even at the crest of the noonday sun.

Night was an abomination, the haunt of demons and devils, incubi and sharp-toothed fairies, and black ravening dogs that had no place on God's earth. Screeches and howls wailed through the most tightly shuttered window, and the most carefully tended infant was vulnerable to forces unnameable.

Hell incarnate roamed abroad, and no pathway was safe, no barred home a haven.

Especially not from the evil within.

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His hands stiff with cold, Friar Arnaud Courtete wrapped his cloak a little more tightly about him and slowly raised his eyes into the wind. Before him a narrow trail wound upwards about the grey mountainside before disappearing into the uncertainty of low rain clouds.

Should he continue? The day was half gone already, and the village of Gebetz an afternoon's walk away. But Arques was already a day behind him, and Courtete had no wish to spend another night in the open.

Besides, he could not turn back. Bishop Fournier would not be pleased.

"Holy Virgin, guide my steps," Courtete mumbled, one hand fumbling at the cross about his neck, and then hefted his staff and stepped forward.

Although Fournier had no jurisdiction over Courtete's mendicant order, he was a powerful and influential bishop, and when he had asked Courtete to visit Gebetz, the friar had little option of refusal.

But Gebetz!

Courtete had been there several times in the past, but that had been years ago, and he'd been a young man, both his body and spirit strong. Now his age made his footsteps falter, and a lifetime of priestly asceticism

battling frail human need had left his spirit vulnerable.

Courtete hoped he had the faith to endure whatever he might find in Gebetz.

“The priest there is young,” Fournier had told Courtete.
“Inexperienced and idealistic. A fatal combination in these malignant days. I have heard Gebetz is troubled.”

“And if it is ‘troubled’?” Courtete had asked the bishop.

“Then send down the mountain to me for Guillaume Maury. I will send him. And his pack.”

Gebetz might only be a small and poor village, but it was strategically positioned, straddling the high trails of the northern Pyrenees. If Gebetz succumbed to godless forces, then the trails would be closed, no man would be able to drive his sheep into the rich summer pastures, nor any pilgrim wend his way to Santiago. The mountain passes would be lost to Christendom forever more.

It was the only reason Fournier was willing to even entertain the idea of letting Maury and his pack move so far from the cathedral.

Courtete shuddered, and hoped that Gebetz wasn't so besieged that it needed Maury and his creatures. Courtete wasn't sure what he feared more — evil in whatever form it took, or Maury and his fiendish spawn.

But was there any difference?

“Holy Virgin, Mother of God,” he whispered, “light my way, guide my feet, cradle my soul, save me, save me, save me ...”

As Courtete climbed further into the mountains, strange shapes danced in and out of the shadows of his wake. Some took the form of fish with the jointed legs of locusts, others were formed like creatures of the earth, but with perverted, elongated or scaled forms and the slaving jaws of nightmares. Still more creatures were vaguely man-like, save for odd horns, or extra limbs, or the half-lumped flesh of the graveyard.

All faded into the mist whenever Courtete spun about, his eyes wild.

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The dusk had gathered and Courtete's limbs were shaking with exhaustion and fear by the time he rounded the final bend into Gebetz. He stopped, his breath tight in his chest, and looked down from the trail to where the village nestled in the hollow formed by the convergence of three mountains.

It was still, silent.

Had darkness won, then?

Courtete gripped his staff tighter and fought the urge to run.

Run where? Night was falling, and he was in the mountains!

Above him a bell pealed, and Courtete cried out. He spun around, frantically looking about him, his staff falling from nerveless hands.

An icy wind whistled between the mountains, lifting his robe and cloak so that the coarse material wrapped itself about his head, obscuring his vision and stifling his breathing.

Courtete's hands scrabbled desperately until he freed his face, his eyes darting about to spot the demon that had attacked him.

Nothing. No-one.

Gebet lay still and silent.

Even the chimneys were smokeless.

Courtete's hand groped for his cross, and he steadied his breathing.

The bell pealed again, and this time Courtete heard a foreboding mumble follow it.

"Where are you?" he screamed, his hand now so tightly gripped about his cross its edges cut into his flesh. *"Come forth and face me!"*

Again the peal, much closer now, and a rumble of voice sounded with it.

"Who are you?" Courtete whispered this time, sure that demons slid down the mountain sides towards him, hidden by the gloom and mist.

A light flared some fifteen paces above him, and Courtete's eyes

jerked towards it.

The bell pealed again, frantic itself now, as if whoever — whatever — held it had succumbed to the jerking madness, and a rabble of voices rose in the mist.

“Lord God, Redeemer!”

“Bloodied Jesus!”

“Holy Virgin —”

“Save us! Save us! Save us!”

Courtete slowly let his breath out in relief. It was the villagers who were above him, and no doubt the young priest Bernard Planissole who wielded the bell.

“Holy Redeemer —”

“Crucified God —”

“Drive evil from our homes —”

“And from our fields —”

“And from the paths of the shepherds!”

The bell tolled again, far closer, and Courtete jumped yet again. Holy Mother, he thought, they are engaged in a Perambulation Against Evil!

Was it *this* bad?

Without warning a black figure jumped down from the mist onto the road before Courtete. It was a young, wild-eyed man, black-robed in the service of Christ. In one hand he carried a bell, in the other a spluttering, smoking torch.

He thrust both in Courtete’s face, the bell shrieking and bellowing.

“Get you gone!” the priest screamed. “In the name of God, and of the Son ... and ... and ...”

“And by the Virgin, Planissole!” Courtete said, recovering his own

clerical composure and the authority of his age in the presence of the young priest's panic. "Can you not see that I walk in Christ's footsteps, too?"

And he held forth the small cross from his neck.

Planissole abruptly stopped yelling, although he still tolled the bell. He stared at Courtete, wet black hair plastered across his forehead, green eyes startling in a white face, the flesh of his cheeks trembling, a sodden robe clinging to a thin body.

"I am Friar Arnaud Courtete," Courtete said, extending his hand. "Here to aid you and strengthen God's word in this sorrowful place."

Other figures now stepped out of the undergrowth and mist to stand behind Planissole. Without exception they were stark-eyed and gaunt-cheeked, their faces contorted with the trials of sleepless nights, their clothes clinging damply to bodies shaking with fear, the pale skin of their faces and hands smudged with grime and fatigue, their mouths still moving with invocation and prayer, although no sound issued forth.

Save us, save us, save us!

"Planissole," Courtete said as evenly as he could manage, "will you tell me what is wrong?"

Planissole stared, then dropped the bell, put his hands to his face, and began to keen, a thin wail of fear that echoed about the mountains.

The bell rolled over the edge of the trail and bounced down the side of the hill, jangling and clamouring, until it landed in a small gutter that ran beside a row of houses.

There it lay half submerged in grey-streaked sewage, its tongue finally silenced.

Planissole led Courtete through the village, the villagers trailing behind them in a muttering, jittery crowd. Planissole's eyes never ceased to move right and left as they walked, and Courtete found his heart thudding violently every time the breeze billowed the mist about them. Yet he maintained an outward composure, for surely Planissole and his flock were close to a fateful panic. Finally they drew close to the great stone church that stood at the far end of the village. There was nothing beyond the church, save a trail that led yet further into the uncertainty of the mist and

mountains.

Planissole saw Courtete study the trail. "No-one has come down that trail for the past week," he said. "And yet there must still be shepherds and pilgrims trapped in the mountains. Dead. Or worse."

Courtete turned from the trail to Father Planissole, but thought it wisest to say nothing, and after a moment the priest led him inside the church.

It was a large, substantial and well-appointed church, catering for the transient population of shepherds and pilgrims as well as villagers. A beautifully carved rood screen separated altar from nave, and carvings of the saints, apostles and of the vices and virtues adorned the sixteen pillars supporting the roof. The windows were small, but beautifully blocked with stained glass, and the walls and roof had been plastered and then painted with stories of the bible.

The smell of roasting pig was entirely out of character.

Planissole's thin face assumed an expression of fretful guilt as he saw Courtete stare at the pig spitted above a fire towards the rear of the nave.

"Forgive our insult to our Lord and the Saints," Planissole said, "but for the past eight days and nights the entire population of the village has lived in this church. It is better protected against the foes of the night. Of necessity we must cook in here as well."

Courtete graced the man with a smile, and waved a vague absolution for the sacrilege.

The villagers had crowded in behind the two priests, and Planissole and Courtete stepped to one side to give them room. Some sank down to rest on piles of bedding heaped amid scattered baskets behind the pillars, several women moved to the fire, setting prepared pots of food among the coals, and the rest grouped about the two priests.

"It is too dangerous to live beyond these sanctified walls?" Courtete asked.

Planissole nodded. "Will you sit?" He waved to the warmth of the fire and they settled down, the villagers spread in a respectful circle about them. "Let me tell you our story."

Even as he took breath to speak, grating noises came from the roof, and an unearthly wailing from beyond the walls.

“Night has fallen,” said a woman some paces away, and she hurriedly crossed herself.

“*Evil* has fallen,” Planissole said softly, and then he began his tale.

* * * *

It was far worse than Courtete had feared. The corruption had struck four weeks previously, growing progressively stronger with each night and feeding off the fear and helplessness of the villagers.

The village dogs had been the first to sense the demonic onslaught.

“They fled one night,” Planissole said to Courtete. The priest had calmed now the church doors were safely bolted, and Courtete realised that he spoke very well for a simple parish priest. Too well, perhaps. Almost bespeaking an education beyond that of most mountain clerics.

“After the Sabbath sunset the dogs began howling,” Planissole continued, not realising Courtete’s interest in him, “then they ran into the streets, growling and screaming and speaking in strange —”

“*Speaking?*” Courtete said.

“Speaking,” Planissole repeated softly. “They spoke in a language I have never heard before, but which I now believe to be the tongue of Lucifer’s minions. After the passage of the first part of the night they massed and fled into the night... into the mountains.”

“Up the trail that extends beyond this church?” Courtete asked, and Planissole nodded.

“From that night on we have been visited by terror. Great winds that have lifted the roofs of houses and torn the babes from their mother’s arms. Food has rotted within an hour of being cooked, and worms have wriggled from bread freshly baked and broken. Great...” Planissole took a deep breath, and forced himself to continue. “Two days ago great cracks appeared in the fields, and from them periodically has issued the sulphurous stench of Hell.”

“Mother Mary of Jesus!” Courtete cried, “say it is not so!”

“The rents in the earth have deepened, and now they snake close to the village. Out of them crawl abominations.”

“Father,” one of the village women said, “our priest relates only the truth, and only a part of what we have had to endure. Look at us!” She swept an arm about the assembled gathering. “We fear to venture out at night — ‘twould be madness to even think of it! — and during the day we walk the streets and field with our elbows tucked tight against our bodies lest we bump the ghosts who throng about!”

A middle-aged man, his clothes hanging about his thin frame all patched and worn, his face weather-beaten, his eyes dull, now stepped forth and spoke. “And yet what this village endures is paradise compared to the inferno that burns within the mountain passes.”

“And you are?” Courtete asked.

“My name is Jaques. I am a shepherd. I wander the mountain trails with my sheep, searching for sweet pasture and a dry place to lay down at night. But ... forgive me, Father ... I cannot speak of it.”

“Jaques, and several other shepherds struggled out of the mountains nine nights ago,” Planissole said. “They were wild with fear. They said that a great dark shape that shrieked and wailed ate their sheep, and while it was so occupied, they fled. They’d run for three days and two nights, not stopping, not daring to.”

“And no-one else has come down from the mountains?” Courtete said, thinking that the dogs had fled *into* the mountains. Was that where the evil was concentrated? *What had they gone to meet?*

“Only one man,” Planissole said, and indicated a curly black-haired young man wrapped in a dark cloak sitting against one of the pillars. “A pilgrim. Winding his way home from Saint James of Santiago de Compostella. He arrived five nights ago. Maybe the Saint protected him through the mountains, for none have followed him out.”

Courtete stared at the man, who nodded politely. He was reasonably well-dressed, but not ostentatiously. A staff and pilgrim’s srip lay on the floor next to him, and Courtete noticed that there were several badges on the shoulders of the man’s cloak. He’d been travelling a while to have collected so many pilgrim badges, and Courtete thought he was probably

the son of a merchant or minor nobleman, on pilgrimage to atone for some youthful escapade.

Courtete looked about at the fear-worn faces of the villagers, and listened to the howlings and rappings outside.

“Wait here,” he said, laying a hand on Planissole’s shoulder, and he rose and walked with heavy heart to a small window in the back wall of the nave that normally framed the deformed faces of lepers too contagious to be allowed inside for mass.

Now the glass revealed something more horrible even than the contagion of leprosy.

A creature, half donkey, half man, was careering in and out of the thickening mist. Part of one malformed limb had been eaten away.

As frightful as that creature was, to one side something else caught Courtete’s attention, and he pressed his face closer to the glass.

A black imp with thin shoulders, grotesque pot belly, and overly-large hands and feet squatted on the ground, chewing on the stolen flesh.

It looked up from its meal and saw Courtete staring. Its mouth opened in a silent laugh, its shoulders and belly wobbling, and it held out a long-ringed hand in invitation.

Come join me, priest. We could have fun, you and I.

And then it dropped its hand to its swollen genitals and rubbed energetically, its face glazing over in lust.

Courtete tried to drag his eyes away, but found it impossible.

The imp’s movements grew more vigorous, as did the whispered words of invitation in Courtete’s mind, and it was only when the imp succumbed so entirely to its lust that its eyes rolled up and it collapsed in a quivering heap on the ground that Courtete could break free from the window.

The friar took a moment to steady his mind and his own physical trembling before he rejoined Planissole and the villagers.

“Bishop Fournier sent me here to help you,” Courtete whispered, then

cleared his throat and managed to speak more strongly. "He will spare no effort to contain this evil, and then to drive it back."

"I *have* tried everything!" Planissole said. "Every prayer that has ever been —"

"Hush, my son," Courtete said. "There is yet one more thing we can do —"

"No!" Planissole cried, and the villagers shifted and mumbled. "No!"

"My son, I am sorry, but I must. I have *seen* what... what scurries outside. At first light I will send a man with a letter for Bishop Fournier. He will send Maury ... and his pack."

"No," Planissole said yet again, but his voice was very quiet now and his eyes resigned. "Is there no other way?"

"Evil is rampant," Courtete said, "and it must be driven back by the strongest of means."

* * * *

The church was spacious, and there was bedding room for all the villagers, but bedding itself was at a premium, and Courtete shared Planissole's blankets behind the altar. Although both blankets and Planissole were warm, and Courtete's limbs and eyes weary from the journey to Gebetz, the scrapings on the roof and the scratchings at the windows and doors kept the friar awake with black memories of the imp's energetic hand.

Neither could Planissole sleep. "I have heard of Maury," he whispered, feeling Courtete fidget under the blanket.

"You have not seen him, or them?"

"No. I was educated much farther north, and took my orders at the great cathedral of Notre Dame."

"Ah, you are of the Parisian Planissole family, then?" No wonder the priest spoke so well! Courtete wondered what one of the aristocratic Planissoles was doing in this God-forsaken parish.

"Yes. I..."

Courtete's mouth thinned. A sin, then. No doubt the anonymity of the night would prompt Planissole to confess to whatever had condemned him to Gebetz, and Courtete did not know that he was in a mood to listen to a sinner's babbling.

"I became affectionate towards another novice, Father."

Courtete took a horrified breath, for the lust of one man for another was among the most appalling of sins. How was it that one man could lay the hands of lust upon another man? And force himself into another man's body? Unasked, repulsive images filled Courtete's mind, and he drew himself as far away from Planissole's body as he could. "No doubt the bishop found you rutting beneath the kitchen stairs."

"May God forgive my lusting," Planissole whispered.

Courtete wished he had chosen to spend the dark hours on his knees before the altar, and not behind it, twisted in a blanket with Planissole. "In forty-five temptation-ridden years / have befouled neither my body nor my vows of chastity, Planissole," he said. "God will exact penance as he chooses, you may be sure of that."

Courtete hesitated, then spoke again, his hatred of sodomites forcing the words from his mouth.

"Considering your own sin, Planissole, I find it hard to believe you regard Maury with such abhorrence."

Planissole rolled away and stood up. "I have loved my fellow man," he said quietly, "not coupled with one of the hound-bitches of Hell."

And he walked away into the darkness.

The next day Courtete sent the fittest of the village men down the mountain with a message for Bishop Fournier.

* * * *

It took five days for Maury to arrive. In those five days the situation at Gebetz slid from the desperate to the abysmal. No-one now dared leave the precincts of sanctified ground; the entire population of the village, as well as those transients who had sought shelter with them, was confined to the church, churchyard and adjoining graveyard. Beyond these boundaries blackened and blistered imps scurried, even during daylight hours. The

legions of the dead blocked the streets, choking the gutters with their rotting effusions. The tumults of Hell wailed up through the great rents in the earth which now reached almost to the church itself, and at night immense gouts of fire speared into the night.

Evil reigned.

It would take the infernal to combat this depth of wickedness, thought Courtete as he stood in the churchyard looking down into the village. Prayers to God were useless in the face of this onslaught.

Planissole joined Courtete silently, and the friar glanced at him. Had Planissole's sin attracted this evil? But surely not even the most lascivious of sodomies could attract *this* much horror ... could it?

Courtete returned his gaze to the streets, watching as a horned and turtle-backed demon seized a skeletal wraith and forced it to the ground for a momentary and brutal rape. Both creatures scuttled into the shadows as soon as it was done, but the vision had spread a stain across Courtete's mind and soul, and he wondered if even Maury could remove it.

Or if, perchance, he would add to it.

How *could* a man couple with a creature as foul as that imp had been?

There was a commotion in the street, and Courtete's gaze sharpened. The horned demon, so recently the aggressor, was now jumping from shadow to shadow, screaming as if God himself was after him.

"Oh Lord save us!" Planissole cried, and grabbed Courtete's sleeve. "Look!"

A creature the size of a large calf was bounding down the street. It was horned and bearded, and great yellow fangs hung from its gaping jaws. It had the paws of a dog, the tail of a lion, and the ears of a donkey, but its twisted and grotesque naked body was horrifyingly human-like.

It was female, for thin breasts swung almost to the ground.

With a shriek the she-thing pounced on the demon, pinning it to the ground, and tearing its head off with a single snap of her jaws.

Then she raised her head and stared at the two priests. She half snarled, half laughed, and bounded back into the village, looking to feed once again.

Another appeared momentarily in the doorway of the village tavern, a male-thing this time, his snake-like head buried in the belly of a yellow-scaled sprite, his talons scrabbling at the wooden doorposts, his body — as horribly human-like as the last — writhing in an agony of satisfaction.

The sprite whimpered, and dissolved, and its killer tipped back his head and howled.

Abruptly Planissole turned to one side, doubled over, and vomited. He coughed, and then straightened, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand.

“Maury’s get,” he said tonelessly.

“Aye,” Courtete said. “The gargoyles.”

As his gargoyles chased demons in and out of the houses and snapped at the heads of imps peering over the edges of chasms, Maury himself scampered down the street towards the church, apparently unconcerned about the hellish battles surrounding him. He was a twisted, wizened old man who leaned heavily on a staff, but he had merry brown eyes and a mouth almost permanently gaping in a scraggle-toothed grin.

Maury found much in life to amuse him.

He stopped before the two priests, and peered at them. “Fournier said you had a plague of evil,” he said. “But I had not thought you would lay such a good table for my pets.”

“Is it done?” Planissole asked.

Maury howled with laughter. “Done? *Done?* Good Father? It will take a week at least to ‘do’ this village. But what have *you* done to attract such wretchedness? Eh? Depravity this dark does not congregate for no reason.”

Again Courtete’s mind filled with the memory of the imp tugging gleefully at its genitals, and to his horror the friar realised that it roused in him more than just disgust. Appalled, Courtete lost his equilibrium.

“And of depravity you would know much, wouldn’t you, Maury?” he said.

Dismayed and frightened by Courtete’s attack — had not the friar invited Maury himself? — Planissole laid a restraining hand on Courtete’s arm, but the friar paid it no heed. “For have you not an *intimate* acquaintance with depravity?”

Maury’s grin faded, and he snapped his fingers. From the window of the nearest house a gargoyle leaped to the ground and scurried over, fawning at his feet. Maury scratched the man-thing’s head, but did not take his eyes from Courtete, and he understood many things.

“They are my beloveds, priest, and they will save you and yours! Do not think to condemn what you yourself —”

“Your sons and daughters do you proud,” Planissole interrupted, stumbling over his words in his haste to soothe, “and for their service we may forgive the sin of their mother.”

Maury’s grin slowly stretched out across his face again as he looked at Planissole. “The sin of their mother, priest? She was no sin to me. She kept me warm at night, and she did not overburden me with useless chatter. And,” he switched his eyes back to Courtete, “she were more willing than any *woman*, more accommodating than any *wife*, and the litters she has dropped have proved more useful to true believers of God than any *priest!*”

“Besides,” Maury’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial level, holding Courtete’s eyes, “*someone* had to couple with her, and I volunteered to save good priests the embarrassment!”

He ran an over-plump and moist tongue slowly around his lips, as if remembering his nights of abandon, and one hand scratched absently at his crotch.

Courtete’s face flamed.

Maury chuckled. “Keep the villagers within the church, priests. I can keep my pets from disturbing them there.”

“But —” Courtete began.

“They’ll hunt down *any* evil, friar. Including the evil that these good souls harbour within them. Can you claim that any here are free of sin, free of evil? Are they not all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve?”

Maury paused, then whispered, “Are *you* not a son of Eve, friar?”

Courtete dropped his eyes and did not reply.

“And while you huddle within the church, good priests, think about what attracted this evil to Gebetz. See how these chasms reach for the church. Something here is as a beacon to it. Find it. Destroy it.”

And with that he was gone.

Back to his misbegotten children.

For two days and nights Maury led them in an ecstatic hunt through the village and its enveloping clouds of sulphurous gases, hunting out the demons, imps and sprites that continually spilled out from the rents in the earth. During that time Planissole kept his flock within the church, only allowing people out four by four to use the hastily dug communal privy pit under the alder by the graveyard. During the day the villagers huddled as close to the altar as they could get, speaking in whispers, their round, fearful eyes drifting to the bolted doors every so often.

At night they were silent, and slept in protective heaps that made Courtete shake his head and mutter prayers over them lest individuals’ lusts overcame their need for salvation.

Who knew what wanton communion took place among those twisted bodies?

The five or six shepherds sat by themselves several paces to the west of the altar, and the lone pilgrim, the bravest of all of them, spent his days wandering the church, studying the fine carvings and inscriptions that littered the walls.

Courtete found himself curious about the man, and yet in that curiosity, somewhat unnerved by the man’s lack of perceptible fear.

At dusk of the third day after Maury’s arrival, Courtete wandered over to the pilgrim as he stood by a narrow window in the eastern transept. The window was of rose glass held in lead, but even so Courtete could see the occasional dark shapes cavort outside — whether demons, imps or

gargoyles, or even possibly Maury, Courtete did not know.

“Are you not afraid?” he asked the pilgrim.

The pilgrim slowly turned his eyes towards Courtete.

They were the most vivid blue Courtete had ever seen in a man.

“Afraid? In God’s house? No, good friar. We are all safe within these walls.”

There was a faint thump and then a scrabbling on the roof, but both men ignored it.

“Your faith is strong and lively,” Courtete said, and watched the man smile cynically. “May I ask your name, and your origin?”

“My name is Malak. I come from the east, and I travel west.”

Courtete opened his mouth to ask for more specifics, but was halted by the expression in Malak’s eyes. The man had no desire to be further interrogated, and Courtete wondered what he had to hide.

And what an unusual name! It jarred at something in Courtete’s mind, but he could not place it.

“Have you seen the gargoyles before?” he asked. There were several cathedral packs in the east and north of France, and some in the German princedoms and northern Italian states, but if Malak had come from yet further east, this might be the first time he’d encountered them.

“Not this close,” Malak said, and he tightened his cloak about him.

Courtete raised his eyebrows. He was afraid, then! “They are unsettling creatures,” he prompted.

“I find it strange,” Malak said softly, “that men of God fight evil with creatures that are birthed of evil and abomination.”

The rooftop scrabbling came again, but more distant now.

“Good sometimes fails to —”

“Which Pope was it,” Malak said, now facing Courtete again, “that

decided that a mating between a man and a hound-bitch of Hell would produce a creature capable of fighting back the vilest of infamies, the darkest of Lucifer's creatures?"

"I don't know who —"

"And what kind of man *willingly* consents to plant his seed in a creature so hideous I find it difficult to imagine he could even contemplate the act of generation, let alone perform it."

There was a horribly uncomfortable quiet as each man stared at the other, each knowing the other's mind was consumed by visions of the loathsome coupling.

"Some men have a taste for such things," Courtete said and, despite himself, glanced out the rose-coloured glass as if he might again spot the imp engaged in its infernal fondling.

Malak laughed softly, as if he could read Courtete's innermost fears. "And where," he said, so softly Courtete had to lean closer to hear him, "does the Church find the hound-bitches of Hell for men to couple with in the first instance?"

Courtete was silent a long time before he finally, reluctantly, replied. "In some places on God's earth the borderlands between this world and the Hellish regions under Lucifer's sway are narrow indeed. Sometimes it is possible to capture one of the Prince of Darkness' hounds."

"Aye," Malak said, "in some places the borders between this world and Hell *are* almost indefinable, indeed." He paused. "*Have* you taken a good look down those chasms outside, my friend? Do you *want* to? Might you see something down there you might *desire*?"

And with that he was gone.

Appalled that Malak could so accuse him, Courtete would have gone after the pilgrim, but just as he took his first step a horrible wailing rose from outside.

"Oh! Oh! Oh, my pretty! Oh my lovely! What do you there! Come down! Come down!"

* * * *

Courtete opened the door, Planissole at his shoulder, to see Maury standing several yards away, staring at the roof. The pack of gargoyles sat yet further distant, under the low hanging eaves of a nearby house.

They were ignoring the imps that peeked at them from a nearby window, looking instead between Maury and the church roof.

“Something is wrong,” Courtete murmured, and eased out the door. Planissole checked that the villagers were safely grouped about the altar, then followed, closing the door behind him.

The two priests moved to Maury, then followed his gaze upwards.

There was a gargoyle precariously balanced on the spine of the steep roof, the remains of a long-snouted imp under its claws.

It didn't look happy.

It whined, and twisted about slightly, scrabbling with its feet as it almost overbalanced. From where it sat, there was at least a twenty-pace drop.

Maury wailed.

“What is the gargoyle doing up there?” Courtete asked.

Maury twisted his hands to and fro. “She chased the imp up there ... up *that!*”

He pointed to a rough ladder that leaned against the wall of the nave, near where it angled out into the eastern transept.

“*Who put that there?*” he shouted, and turned to Planissole, his face twisting in fury.

Planissole backed away a step. “Several weeks ago one of the villagers was engaged in relaying the slate of the roof. When the evil gathered, and everyone fled inside the church, he must have left the ladder there. But I don't understand why —”

“They *loathe* heights!” Maury said, now looking back to his gargoyle. She was still now, tense. “What if she falls?”

Planissole looked at Courtete, but the friar's face was working with what was probably disgust as he stared at the she-creature on the roof, and so the young priest gathered his courage and addressed the gargoyle keeper. "Maury, surely you can tempt her down? Speak to her soft words of reassurance? If she climbed the ladder in the first place, then —"

"What if she falls?" Maury wailed again. "How could I bear to lose her?"

And without further ado he hurried over to the ladder and began to climb it himself. "My lovely," he called, his voice soothing. "My beautiful ... come here to me ... come ... yes, my pet, yes ... come ..."

Maury reached the top of the ladder and held out his hands to the gargoyle. "Come, my pretty, come!"

The gargoyle, reassured by the closeness of her father, slowly inched her way down the roof.

"Maury!" Planissole called. "Be careful! That ladder is —"

The gargoyle's paws slipped in the slimy residual muck of the imp. She screamed, twisted, fell on her flank, and began to slide down the roof.

Straight towards Maury.

He leaned yet further forward, thinking to break her fall with his arms, but the gargoyle was large, as heavy as a mastiff, and when she crashed into him the ladder tipped back and both Maury and the gargoyle sailed into space.

The ladder teetered, then slapped back to rest against the high guttering.

Courtete and Planissole stared, appalled. It seemed to them that the twisted forms of the gargoyle and Maury hung in space for several heartbeats, then both crashed the fifteen paces to the ground.

They landed in thick mud. There was a momentary stillness, then movement as the gargoyle struggled to her feet and limped away a few feet.

Planissole took one step forward, but Courtete grabbed his arm and hauled him back.

“Maury’s dead!” he hissed. “See how still his form lies?”

“But —”

“We’ve got to get back inside. But move slowly, Planissole. Slowly.”

“But we’ve got to see if —”

“By the Holy Virgin, Planissole! Maury’s *dead!* Don’t you understand? He was the *only* one who could control those gargoyles!”

Planissole’s eyes slid towards the pack of gargoyles by the house. They were shifting anxiously, their eyes moving between the body of Maury and the two priests.

One of them lifted its head towards the priests, and snarled.

Planissole took a step back, then one more, then turned and ran. Courtete cursed, and bolted after him. Behind him he heard the pack of gargoyles raise their voices in a shrieking clamour.

“*Lord save me!*” he screamed and, now only a breath behind Planissole, ducked inside the church, slamming the door behind him.

Planissole threw down the heavy bolt. “We’re safe!”

“We’re *trapped!*” Courtete said. “What is to prevent those gargoyles attacking us now?”

“But we are not the evil.”

Suddenly there was a scream outside, and something heavy thundered against the door.

Planissole leaped back, his hand fumbling at his cross.

A murmuring rose among the villagers, still grouped about the altar, then one cried out as a shadow flashed across one of the windows.

There was a howling outside, and numerous claws scratching at the door.

“Why us,” one of the village women cried, “when the village still swarms with fiends?”

Malak, the pilgrim, strode forth from the group. His face was taut with anger, and his eyes shone very, very bright.

He stopped just before the two priests. “Do something!” he said. “You are responsible for all our safety! Was it not enough to be surrounded by the minions of Hell? Why now are we attacked by those meant to save us?”

“You would do better,” Courtete said, “to go back to the villagers and employ whatever spiritual insight you have acquired as a pilgrim to lead them in a prayer of salvation. Planissole and I will join you shortly.”

Malak stared at him, then wheeled about and rejoined the villagers. He shot Courtete and Planissole a dark look, then laid his hand on the shoulder of a man and lowered his head in prayer.

The growlings and scratchings outside grew worse, more frantic. A dreadful musty odour penetrated the door; it reminded Courtete of the smell of desiccated corpses in cathedral tombs.

“Why hunt *us*?” Planissole cried.

Courtete stepped close to Planissole, and spoke quietly. “Listen to me. We are all sinners, all born of Eve. We all harbour evil within. Even you, Planissole, have freely confessed to ... sordidness.”

Planissole flinched, but spoke with angry voice. “Do you say there is no hope? Should we open the door and let the gargoyles feed at will?”

“*Listen* to me! Maury said that something acted as a beacon to attract this evil to Gebetz. *What*, Planissole? What is there in this village that would attract this much evil?”

Planissole was silent.

“If we can find this evil, and turn the gargoyles’ minds to it, then we may yet be saved. *What*, Planissole? *What*?”

The young man shook his head. “What village sin could attract this much retribution? There has been no great sin committed here. No murders. No invocations to the Prince of Darkness. Nothing but the daily

sins of ordinary men and women.”

“No incest? How can you know what goes on in the crowded beds of the village houses? I know peasants.” Courtete’s voice thickened with disgust. “Entire families share the one precious bed. Fathers huddle with daughters, mothers with sons. Flesh is weak, Planissole, and temptation strong. Who knows what happens when a man stretches out his hand in the night and encounters the breast of his daughter, a woman the manhood of her son. No doubt —”

“Your mind is consumed with the temptations of the flesh, is it not, Courtete?” Planissole said flatly. “You accuse all around you of impurity, yet of what do *you* dream at night? The saints? Or of the humping blankets of peasant beds? Do you yearn to lift the corners of those blankets to watch, Courtete? *Do you?*”

Planissole turned away momentarily, taking a deep breath to calm his anger. What is the greater sin, he thought. The sin of the flesh committed yet confessed, or the sins of the mind not admitted? “My parishioners sin no more than those in Arques, Courtete, no more than those in Toulouse or Orleans or Paris itself. I have no reason to put forward for this all-consuming evil that has attacked *us*.”

“What? Are you sure that *you* have not sullied the innocence of a shepherd boy, Planissole? Are you *certain* you have not engaged in an ‘affection’ with one of those young dark-eyed boys? Or were the sheep more compliant, perhaps?”

Planissole grabbed the front of Courtete’s robe. “I do not think it *me* lusting for the sheep, Brother Courtete!”

Courtete blanched, and trembled. “Lucifer himself must be guiding our tongues, Planissole. Fighting between ourselves will not aid us, nor the villagers. My son, I suggest we lead these poor souls in prayer, and hope that the Lord hears our entreaties.”

Planissole jerked his head in assent — and some residual disgust — and let go Courtete’s robe. “You speak sense, Brother. ‘Tis the Lord God only who can forgive sin.”

He walked over to the villagers, and gathered them for prayer. Courtete joined him, and together they led the assembly in a prayer for salvation even as the gargoyles renewed their attack on the church doors.

“From those that reareth wars, from those that maketh tempests, from those that maketh debate between neighbours and manslaughter therewith, from those that stoketh fires, and those that bloweth down houses, steeples and trees —”

“Free and defend us, O Lord!”

“From the stratagems and snares of the devil —”

“Free and defend us, O Lord!”

“From the onslaught of malignant fiends —”

“Free and defend us, O Lord!”

“From ourselves —”

“Free and defend us, O Lord!”

As the response faded, Courtete opened his mouth to begin a litany against hopelessness, when Malak laughed loudly.

His eyes were still angry.

“Do you think to drive back such as assaults this church with such pitiful words, priest?”

“It is all we have, my son.”

Malak’s mouth twisted. “It is the evil within that makes the gargoyles attack, Courtete. Perhaps *your* evil. How many of these women have you lusted after, Courtete? And how many of the boys, Planissole?”

He turned and addressed the villagers. “Perhaps we should just throw the *priests* to the gargoyles! Prayer will not save us! Well, what say you? Shall we throw those tainted creatures outside the tainted minds of these priests?”

“Be still, Malak!” Courtete roared, and at the name he spoke Planissole went white with shock. “Can you claim to be free of sin yourself?”

But Malak did not answer him. He was staring at Planissole, and his teeth bared in a cold smile.

“You know my name, do you not, priest?”

Planissole slowly sunk to his knees, his face now rigid with dread. He opened his mouth, but no sound came forth.

Courtete stared at Malak, then at Planissole. “My friend,” he said gently, “what is it?”

“Malak,” Planissole whispered harshly, “is an ancient word for angel.”

He threw himself to the stone flagging, prostrating himself before the angel.

“Save us! Save us!”

Malak the angel stepped back and laughed. “Nay, not !!”

Courtete fought down the cold terror within — had the angel seen the visions of the imp that filled his mind? — and addressed the angel as calmly as he could. “What do you here? Why do your immortal feet tread this earth?”

“I come bearing word from God, to all sinners on earth.”

“And that word is ...?”

“The word is being acted out about you, Courtete. Sin inundates this wasteland, and grows worse each day. The evil within, within you,” the angel pointed at Courtete, “and within you,” his finger stabbed towards Planissole still face down on the flagging, “and within all of you,” the accusing finger swept over the huddled, frightened villagers, “has grown so great that Lucifer’s legions have surged out of Hell to greet it! God’s wrath increases with each imp that scampers into the light of day, and He has grown of the mind that He should abandon you to your fate.”

“No!” Courtete cried, and also fell to his knees. “Say it is not so! What must we do? How can we save ourselves?”

The angel stepped forward and grabbed Courtete’s hair, twisting his face up. “Are you prepared to throw yourself to the gargoyles, Courtete? Will you sacrifice yourself for these villagers as Christ sacrificed himself for

mankind? And you, Planissole? Will you also let the gargoyles tear you apart as Christ endured the spear and nails for your sakes?"

Both Courtete and Planissole were silent. Then, "If it will save these good folk, then, yes, I will so offer myself," Planissole said, rising to his knees.

His voice was almost joyous.

After a momentary hesitation, Courtete also spoke. "And I."

"Then spend the night in prayer," the angel said, "in the hope that God will accept your souls. At dawn I will open those doors and you will step forth to assuage the anger of the gargoyles."

* * * *

The interior of the church was shadowed, the only light cast by the flickering candles on the altar.

No-one slept.

The villagers and shepherds were now at the rear of the nave, seated stiff and frightened against the back wall, as far from the angel as they could get.

He, for his part, sat cross-legged in the very centre of the nave, staring towards where the folded rood screen revealed the altar.

There knelt the two priests, their backs to the angel, deep in prayer.

Or so it seemed.

"Something is not as it should be," Courtete murmured.

"Be joyful, brother. We will save the villagers with our deaths."

"No, no. It is not a lack of acceptance that makes me so uneasy. There is *something* not right."

Planissole decided not to reply, and the silence deepened between them.

Eventually Courtete whispered again. "If he is God's messenger, then

why does he linger *here*?”

Planissole was silent.

“Should the angel not be out, spreading God’s message? Is that not his mission?”

Planissole began murmuring the Pater Noster, but Courtete knew he was listening.

“Planissole, the angel is as afraid of those gargoyles as we are. He has stayed within this church because he is terrified of them!”

Planissole continued murmuring, but the words of the prayer were broken now. Faltering.

“No angel should fear a gargoyle,” Courtete continued. “Not unless he ... unless he ...”

Planissole breathed in sharply. “Unless he is a *fallen* angel!”

“Angels can sin as much — greater! — than man! Is not Lucifer himself a fallen angel? And does not Lucifer gather to him all angels who have fallen from grace?”

“He is the beacon which has attracted the evil to Gebetz! Our plight worsened significantly after he arrived.” Planissole paused. “Perhaps ... perhaps Lucifer has thought to open Hell about us here so that the angel may join him. Thus the rents in the earth, the sulphurous odours!”

“Aye. Perhaps the angel thinks to escape to the nearest chasm while the gargoyles are occupied with us.”

Planissole grinned in the dark. “I have an idea. One to rid us of angel, gargoyles *and* evil.”

Outside the gargoyles paced back and forth, occasionally scratching at the wooden doors, occasionally howling and screaming their frustration.

They wanted the evil within.

* * * *

At dawn the angel rose and walked over to the two priests still bowed in

prayer. He laid a hand each on their shoulders.

“It is time.”

The two men rose stiffly to their feet. Planissole looked ashen and sweaty, his eyes frightened.

“I ... I...” he stumbled. “My bowels ... I am sorry.”

And he rushed towards some stairs that wound up to a store room built among the roof beams. Beneath the staircase was a small closet with a pot set up for the effluent of mortals; few now wished to venture out to the open privy under the alder.

The angel hissed in frustration.

“He is young,” Courtete said, “and scared. It is to be expected.”

The angel looked at Courtete. The man’s face was calm and relaxed.

“You should, perhaps, exhibit more fear yourself, friar. Too soon you will be torn —” The angel stopped, then cried out in anger. “See! He thinks to escape!”

Instead of stepping inside the small closet, Planissole had leaped onto the stairs and was now climbing rapidly.

“Fool!” Courtete cried enthusiastically: “Accept your fate!”

And he sprinted towards the stairs.

The angel screamed in fury, the unearthly sound echoing about the church, and then he, too, ran for the stairs that now both priests were climbing as fast as they could.

The stairs twisted in a tight, narrow circular fashion, and when the angel reached their base all he could see was the climbing feet of Courtete high above.

Planissole was nowhere to be seen.

The angel’s hands tightened into talons as he grabbed hold of the railings, and he bounded up the stairs three at a time, howling as he climbed.

His face twisted and contorted into that of a bearded demon, his back humped into grotesque lumps, and his clothes burst from him.

Courtete turned as he heard the angel step onto the platform behind him, and almost screamed.

All semblance of the man had gone. The angel had now assumed the form of a multi-armed, pot-bellied, toad-skinned creature.

It snarled, flecks of yellow foam splattering about.

Courtete swallowed, and flung his hand towards the open window. "He's climbed out onto the roof!"

The angel-demon scurried over to the window and looked out, twisting to view the slope of the roof above. "Where?" it growled.

"He ... he..." Courtete found it almost impossible to force the words out. "He has climbed over the spine of the roof. Perhaps he hopes to escape down the ladder on the other side."

The angel-demon hissed, then, its claws scrabbling furiously for purchase, lifted itself out of the window and onto the roof.

Courtete heard its feet thudding as it climbed.

"*Lord save us!*" he screamed, and slammed the shutters of the window shut.

In an instant Planissole leaped out of his hiding place behind a set of hessian-wrapped bells and helped his fellow priest bolt the window closed.

"Are you sure there is no other way he can get down from the roof?" Courtete gasped.

"No! No... *listen!*"

Something horrible was jabbering on the roof above them. It whispered and shrieked and scampered, and the priests could hear the promise of Hell in its voice.

"Quick!" Courtete said. "We have no time to waste!"

And as fast as they had climbed the stairs, they hurried down.

Once back to the church floor they did not waste a glance at the villagers still huddled in a silent mass, but ran to the door. Courtete put his ear to the wood and listened intently.

“Nothing,” he whispered. “Silence.”

Then something screamed high above them, and one of the village women wailed.

Courtete and Planissole shared a look, then unbolted the door, hurriedly crossed themselves, and stepped outside.

The space before the church was empty.

There were no gargoyles to be seen.

As one, both men turned towards the ladder.

It was swarming with gargoyles. Already the first was clambering onto the roof, another at its tail. As the men watched, the final gargoyle on the ground climbed onto the first rungs of the ladder.

“Sweet Jesu,” Planissole whispered. “Climb! Climb!”

Above, the angel-demon shrieked and gibbered. The men could hear it scrambling about agilely enough, but now four or five gargoyles were creeping their careful way towards it. Not long, and they would have it trapped.

Courtete made as if to move forward, but Planissole held him back with a cautionary hand. “Wait... wait... *now!*”

They darted forward as the final gargoyle made its way onto the roof, seized the ladder in shaking hands, and pulled it backwards until it toppled to the ground.

“Done!” Courtete yelled. “*Done!*”

The gargoyles took no notice, but the angel-demon — now clinging to the cross that rose from the centre of the roof above the nave — began to rain curses down upon them.

“May demons eviscerate you for this! May imps violate your mothers! May you be cursed to the pits of Hell for... *ah!*”

A gargoyle bit down on one of its arms, and then another sank its teeth deep into its belly, and another its neck.

The angel-demon screamed and tried to tear itself free, but the gargoyles tore deeper.

An arm came free, black blood spraying across the roof.

What was left of the angel-demon tried to curl into a ball to protect its belly — but it was too late, green-grey entrails already spilled about its knees, and the creature slipped in its own mess and was instantly covered by the pack of gargoyles.

The priests watched silently as the gargoyles tore the evil thing apart.

And then ... silence.

Nothing. The gargoyles crouched to the slate, as if suddenly realising where they were. The wind dropped. No howls. No shrieks.

Planissole looked back into the village.

Houses still leaned helter skelter into great cracks in the earth, but now no sulphurous fumes rose skyward. No blackened imps' heads poked above the edges of the fissures.

Lucifer had closed the gates of Hell, his disciple destroyed.

“Praise the Lord the evil was strong enough to tempt those gargoyles to the roof,” Courtete said.

One of the creatures glanced down ... and growled.

“Praise God the evil *above* was the greater temptation,” Planissole said.

* * * *

Six months later Courtete returned to the village of Gebetz. The sky was lightly clouded, but sun fell on the village, and at the top of the mountain track Courtete stopped and leaned on his staff, astonished.

It seemed that this place did not know the meaning of evil, let alone be a site that had nurtured such horror only a half year earlier. Carefully tended fields spread up the mountains, and where the slope grew too steep for cropping, there flourished sweet pastures.

Within the village itself the houses had been repaired; all stood straight and even. The streets were paved, and flowers grew in window boxes.

People wandered the streets, gossiping or bargaining at the produce stalls, their eyes free of anything save laughter and good cheer.

Courtete looked to the church, and his wonder grew.

It lay swathed in sunshine amid emerald lawns. The doors were flung wide open so that God's goodness and mercy might spill down upon the village.

Crouched about the roof were the immobile shapes of the gargoyles.

Courtete slowly descended into the village, passing a few words here and there with villagers who remembered him.

When he approached the church, Planissole stepped forth and hurried down the slope to meet him.

"My friend! It is good to see you again!" he cried.

Then Planissole's face grew serious. "What did Bishop Fournier say? Was he angry?"

"Nay, Planissole. Do not fret. Fournier was naturally somewhat upset at the loss of the pack, but they were useless without Maury to control them. Tell me, do they give you any trouble?"

"None. At night we sometimes hear them move about, but mostly they crouch at the extremities of the roof, as they are now. In fact, no-one has seen or heard them move for several weeks."

"And the evil?"

"None. No evil dares approach Gebetz now the gargoyles stand sentinel upon the church roof. Even the mountain trails are clear."

Courtete raised his eyes to the roof again, thinking about what he would say to Fournier when he returned to Arques. What a God-given answer to dealing with the problem of evil *and* the perennial problem of coping with the fractious packs of gargoyles! Fournier had ordered another pack from the gargoyle breeding groves of the Black Forest — but why not simply station them on the roof of the cathedral and send their keeper packing?

After all, what God-fearing man could trust someone who *enjoyed* fornicating with a hound-bitch from Hell? Courtete shuddered, and tried unsuccessfully to force the visions of unnatural intercourse from his mind.

“One day,” he said quietly to Planissole, “every church roof in Christendom shall bristle with such as these.”

“And that,” the younger priest replied, “should leave us to devour our sheep in complete freedom, should it not, Courtete?”

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I’ve always been intrigued by the idea of writing a story based on the world as medieval people perceived, and literally *saw*, it. To them evil was a very real and tangible entity. Demons roamed forests and the high mountain passes, and angels walked among them as messengers (or worse) of God. Thus “The Evil Within”. It explores the medieval concept of evil, the flawed and sorry souls the Church enlisted in its continual battle against the minions of Hell, and the intriguing origins of some of the more bizarre examples of medieval church decoration. The location and some of the characters of “The Evil Within” were inspired by the good fourteenth-century heretics of the village of Montailou, and especially by that lovable, horrible, ambitious charmer, Pierre Clergue — the one person in history I would have loved to have met.

— Sara Douglass

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* * * *

THE SOLDIER IN THE MACHINE

RUSSELL BLACKFORD

Although Russell Blackford's fiction appears infrequently, he has maintained a reputation as one of Australia's significant writers of fantasy and science fiction. His first published story, "The Load on Her Mind" appeared in *Westerly* in 1982. Since then, he has published one novel, *The Tempting of the Witch King*, and several short stories. Among the latter, "Glass Reptile Breakout" is frequently cited as an early example of Australian cyberpunk writing, and one of the best stories of its kind. In 1997 "The Sword of God" won the Aurealis Award for best Australian fantasy story and the Ditmar Award for short fiction.

Russell is an internationally known critic of science fiction and fantasy, and has also published in other fields relating to literature, philosophy and the law. He holds a BA with first class honours and a PhD from the University of Newcastle, as well as an LLB with first class honours from the University of Melbourne. He has enjoyed a distinguished career in academe, public administration, and labour relations.

His criticism appears in standard science fiction reference works, such as *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and *Magill's Guide to Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*; in Australian, US, and British journals; and in several collections of critical articles. He has twice won the prestigious William Atheling Junior Award for criticism or review.

Russell was a member of the editorial collective of *Australian Science Fiction Review: Second Series*, an acclaimed forum for discussion of science fiction, which won a Ditmar Award in 1991. He was a principal in the small press *Ebony Books* and an organiser of the academic track for the 1985 World Science Fiction Convention, for which he co-edited the proceedings volume *Contrary Modes* (with Jenny Blackford, Lucy Sussex, and Norman Talbot). He also co-edited a state-of-the-art collection of fantasy and science fiction stories, *Urban Fantasies* (with David King).

In the jittery, *noir*, cyberpunk story that follows, you might just begin to feel that you're hallucinating instead of reading. Don't adjust your set ... Blackford is firmly in control.

* * * *

Honey Fantasia is a honey: she plays loud and wild and pretty in a miracle band, and Rhino will work for her any time.

Rhino is conspicuous — he flaunts it. You could never camouflage him in brand-new pastel Reeboks and a fresh white printed T-shirt and pass him off as a harmless Aussie tourist, first time in Bangkok on Qantas Airlines. But here he is, all the same, with that honey by his side. Others try not to stare at him, but, out of the corner of one beady eye, he catches a young blonde mother with a little kid, boy or girl, with eyes as blue as the sky over Darwin this August and long yellow hair in a pony-tail. Mother there is crouching down to the kid's level, telling it something, and glancing his way. "Don't go near the *big man!*"

He paces and frets, sleepless, anxious, around the airport's baggage carousel, waiting for fat suitcases the same dull hardware grey as his implant trademark. Honey Fantasia yawns.

Rhino is accustomed to towering over clients and he *does*, even with Fantasia. But she's tall: 185 centimetres of her slims up to his two-metres-plus-implant. She's long and strong and slippery with masses of burnt orange ultra-soft "hair", genetically engineered stuff based on alpacas or something, implanted into her scalp (she's been re-engineered to grow no natural hair anywhere on her body). The "hair" — what else do you call it? — spills down her back, down to her thighs, over a loose-sleeved cotton dress the colour of dark grass stains, which reaches bare ankles. She slings a chamois leather bag to hold her multitude of plastic cards and her chunky Finnish laser shades. Her hands and pretty sandalled feet, her broad face, horse rider's shoulders — real muscle thickness layered over delicate bones: deltoids in a motion of runnels and waves — are oiled softly, tanned deeply. Brow and cheekbones feed wells of wide dark eyes. A double implanted row of diamond chips makes needle tracks in her left cheek like parallel duelling scars. For eyebrows she has little surgically-grafted white feathers. Below them are long black implanted lashes.

Rhino and this fine gal client have brought nothing to disturb Customs on this leg of the trip. They just want out of here.

Suitcases turn up. He steps forward. "Excuse me." None of the bunch crowded about the luggage carousel want to go near him or his client — they shrink aside. He hooks one big plastic oyster suitcase by its black

handle, then the other, swings both in one callused hand, lifts them high over the heads of other passengers, waits for Fantasia to step in his wake, powers towards Customs. Not yet crowded; first flight in. Finds the green arrows, brushes through the Nothing To Declare passage — and out.

Where they're waiting.

You can't disguise Rhino any more than you can Honey Fantasia. Two metres in his scuffed leather Nikes, plus the grey horn implant arching up out of the top of his forehead, he's two-hundred kilos of beef and steroids, a walking megalith. Skin a pale controlled tan, despite the ferocious sunshine Fantasia's inflicted on him all August. He's exhibited blur fighting wherever it's legal or tolerated throughout the Pacific rim; he's been a ghetto courier in cities all over South-East Asia and the States; he's had work as standover muscle in Vegas, on the Gold Coast, in Bangkok and the sprawl of KL. He's totally clean and legal, with an international passport.

And he's one helluva bodyguard. He could slam a shrivel of *paparazzi* straight through a pressboard door; better, he *looks* like he could. So he flaunts it. Rhino's head is permanently depilated, leaving only his twenty centimetres of vat-grown rhino horn. He wears a huge black T-shirt with the sleeves ripped out. Red lettering splashes it diagonally on front and back: RHINOSAURUS. Wide, chrome-studded wristbands and leather collar; feathery drop earrings that match Fantasia's eyebrows. When you hire Rhino, you're not looking for some fancy operative to cover you from the background; you want conspicuous muscle; you're telling the world, "Get out of the goddamn way!"

That's what Fantasia has been saying to all the world through the big, bad Territory and on a working holiday across Java. They've driven like mad mothers everywhere between Uluru and Darwin, Fantasia's sandals on the dash, Fantasia squeezing plasticized data dots into the sound system — miracle band music — popping them out just as quickly, trying something else. They've swum tropical beaches beneath cloudless August skies. Carved into fatty white crocodile steaks in the Kakadu. Scoffed Bintang beers together at the Lava Bar up on the volcano edge at Mount Bromo, seeing who could get drunker. Driven in the backs of tour-guided people movers from Yogya to Malang to Bromo and back, then north to Jakarta, dodging the kings of the road: Mercedes diesel tour buses as long and ugly as Boeing 797s, thundering the roads, scattering underpowered motor-cycles, pedal-powered becaks, crowded people movers and occasional flashy red government sedans with sinister tinted screens. Fantasia has played with local miracle bands out of the teeming Javanese cities. Now Thailand, Bangkok — miracle city.

* * * *

Driver: a little Thai in a short-sleeved floral shirt, greens and yellows, and cheap black trousers. The other guy: mean, slick Caucasian bozo, mid-twenties, eyes nearly level with Rhino's. Hawk face, evenly tanned, darker than Fantasia's, as if his skin has absorbed quantities of mahogany shoe polish. Hair cut brutally short, flat-topped, coifed with the fuzzy neatness of a gay bouncer's. He looks hungry and honed, springy and sharp like razor ribbon. That'll do for a handle. Razor Ribbon is dolled up in a somber grey suit, a Zegna-Pointman job nestling his broad shoulders, snaking narrow hips — brilliant white shirt, gold cufflinks, spit-and-polish black brogues, red St Laurent tie. "Mr Rhino," he says. Like Fantasia's not there. American accent, West coast, Rhino guesses. Razor Ribbon extends a plate-sized bony hand.

Rhino sets down his bags, takes the hand, measures the strength in it. Astonishing strength.

"I'm Paul," says Razor Ribbon as they part grips. No suggestion of a surname. "This is Darling." The driver smiles and bows, hands pressed: *wai* gesture. "That's not his real name, but it's close and he likes it, thinks it's a bit of a joke, don't you, Darling?"

There's an unpleasant element in this banter. Rhino presses slabs of hands, bows to Darling. "*Sawat-dii.*" To Paul: "I'm pleased to meet you. Do you have rooms? We're stuffed from the flight. And we've been driving like fuckers these last three weeks. And I don't fit into jumbo jets easily." He looks Paul up and down: maybe half Rhino's total bulk — still a big boy. "Guess you'd know something about that, too."

"Don't know who designs the things." Paul relaxes slightly. "Maybe Snow White and the seven dwarfs."

"Maybe." Rhino steps aside, lets Fantasia come forward. "This," he says, "is Ms Fantasia."

"Delighted to meet you ... again," Paul says. He smiles at Fantasia like an old lover. She smiles but does not move. He switches off the smile. "Come on. We've got a hotel for you. You can shower in your rooms and get some sleep. We'll have you there by nine." It's just past 8 a.m. local time. "The Colonel wants to talk with you both this afternoon."

"Hope she doesn't expect too much sense out of me." But, under his

exhaustion, Rhino is curious, ready to go, full of questions. Like who *the Colonel* is for a start — except that she's already paid ten thousand megayen into one of Rhino's AMEX digital cash lines. More into Fantasia's discretionary trust accounts. Gestures of good faith.

Paul looks at him quizzically. "Here, let me take Ms Fantasia's suitcase." Rhino slides it over. "Right. We're taking you to the New Intercontinental. Have you stayed there before? No? You'll like it."

He swings the bag Rhino's given him like it weighs nothing.

Rubber tracks slide them on smooth rollers through the giant clean international terminal already filling with departing passengers. Paul keeps his voice down, seems to talk into his suit lapels. "You know why you're here?"

Fantasia must know better than him. She's silent. So is Rhino.

"The Colonel is not quite what you think, Rhino." Paul has dropped the *Mr.* "And she's got a contract to fulfill. There's deals we've made here, components that have to be flown elsewhere, big trouble if we try to leave Bangkok, where the military police who run the city are friendly to us. *Capisce?* We have work to do this afternoon to help you understand just how dangerous our competitors can be to you." Smiles like a jaguar. Very white teeth. "We need lots of beauty and lots of brawn. Got it?" He turns the smile on Fantasia. "Ms Fantasia can provide some of the beauty."

She shrugs. Oiled deltoids make pretty ripples under her skin.

The rollers slide them past repetitive placards sponsored by International Service Clubs, smiling Asian faces exhorting them to solve problems through truth and consideration. All very well if you're raising credit for the local school library, thinks Rhino. Wouldn't work in my line.

* * * *

Flashy white turbo-charged limo, extended version — Darling guns it into the city. Rhino takes over an entire bench in the back. Fantasia takes off her sandals, flexes her toes, bends and worries at chipped green toenail polish, leans back and sighs. Paul lounges in front, leaves them alone.

With a measure of room to stretch at last, Rhino can finally start to doze. Dopily, he half-registers as they pass scum-filled canals, brilliant

green fields, enter Bangkok's maniac streets where ancient, clapped out vehicles menace each other for the roadway like holo movie dinosaurs, pulling stunts of cunning and brinkmanship. Darling jabs viciously into traffic chaos, honking the horn.

They drive by narrow side streets crowded with pedlars. The morning sky is a dirty glare: colours are bright enough — and Rhino dons wrap-around German goggles — but the sun itself is not visible. He's dozed off by the time they reach the hotel, where Darling opens his door, touches his shoulder diffidently. "Mr Rhino" — turns away — "Ms Fantasia."

Fantasia's wearing her laser shades. She steps from the car carrying her sandals in one hand, shakes orange hair.

Paul gets baggage for them, checks them into the hotel, Rhino and Fantasia digging out tired passports for the smiling clerk. Formalities: explanations of the hotel's multiple restaurants, baggage to the porter, keys, directions.

Their rooms are in another building entirely (this place is built on one helluva scale); Rhino completely takes up one of his room's *big* beds. Honey Fantasia is next door. She can't come to too much harm in a place like this. Forget the client for a while. Rhino doesn't bother to remove clothes. Sleeps like a baby.

* * * *

Wakes leaping from the bed, fists clenched.

But it's only the telephone. Startled into clarity, he finds he's not alone. How did she get here? She's already answered the phone, cut out its conference facility; she's talking into a handset, and he can't hear the speaker at the other end. Video screen tuned dead. She puts down the handset, shrugs prettily. "That was Paul." She's a songbird! "He says the Colonel wants to talk with you and Ms Fantasia at four this afternoon. Better get ready, Sir. I call Ms Fantasia, too. Now you're here, I look after you, Mr Rhino. I look after you very well, Sir."

Manhattan accent over Thai; she's lived in the States. Dainty Thai-Indian, fraction Rhino's size. She'd come to Fantasia's shoulders. Moist eyes like orgasms.

Hired sex-girl.

Perfect oval face, very dark skin, blue-black hair cut in a classic French bob, she's all dressed up in pinks: footless lurex tights; short-sleeved silk jacket, embroidered in green and blue and yellow floral swirls, and beautifully lined; little shiny pink slippers. Glistening emerald-scales the size of postage stamps are implanted each side of her face between eye-corners and temples. She oozes charm, discretion, Eastern personal courtesy — antithesis of Bangkok's traffic manners.

"How about I go back to sleep?" He sits back on his bed.

"No, you must wake up, Mr Rhino. You cannot disappoint Paul and the Colonel."

"Wait on. Who are you, anyway?" He's met everyone on his current client list except Ice Ninja and the Colonel. This cutey's not there on any print-out.

"I'm Sunandra. I look after you, Sir."

"So you said."

She laughs at that. God help him, she's beautiful, almost too beautiful, probably the creation of some surgical sculptor — not just the implants. "We stay together all the time. So I hope you like me, Mr Rhino."

She can't mean all the time: he's likely to be in capital-D danger at some point — let that pass. "Tell me," he says, "about the Colonel."

She sits on the other bed, legs crossed under her. He watches the V-line of her jacket where it exposes brown throat, plunges between the fullness of her breasts; helplessly he imagines skin colour under the jacket. Same colour all over? Undoubtedly. What's going on? He knows nothing about the people in this hotel. His agent has dealt with intermediaries of intermediaries in setting up this whole trip, furtive street couriers with the capacity to deliver on promises of walloping digital cash transactions.

All he knows about the Colonel is that she's some kind of dropout from a multinational security contractor to the global telecommunications companies. She's hustling big, scoring local contacts and contracts. She has some kind of components deal to deliver on. She's looking for some unsophisticated muscle (why?). And she has dangerous competitors.

"Well," she says, "Paul wanted me to prepare you. The Colonel's *different*, Sir."

“Sir? You’ll have to cut that out.” Rhino laughs. “We’re all *different*, Sunandra. You. Me. Paul. Honey Fantasia. Look at us.”

Sunandra won’t be denied. “You know what an upload is, Mr Rhino?” she says in her songbird voice.

He thinks of money. “Sure.”

“Nanoware text intelligence analogue, Mr Rhino.” The terminology surprises him only because it comes from her.

“The Colonel’s a brain-program? Well, I can handle that.” But he needs *a lot* more information. “Are you going to tell me all about it? From the beginning, eh?”

“Of course I cannot, Mr Rhino. But we have some components that the Colonel needs delivered to a colleague with Offnet Polisearch Laboratory. Not a firm you would have heard of, Sir.”

But that’s not true. He’s done courier work for Offnet Polisearch before: radical tech security consultants — operate out of a technology enclave in South Australia. Polisearch has links in half a dozen technopoles in Japan and Korea, in Yogya, KL ... in Bangkok.

Sunandra uncrosses her legs, lowers slippered feet to the floor. “Our competitors may not know the place of delivery, but they watch our movements very carefully. The Colonel hopes you will help us deliver on our obligations, Mr Rhino. The authorities in Bangkok are friendly to us. Not so elsewhere. Soon you talk to Paul and the Colonel. Ms Fantasia already knows something about this. While you are here we have many ... many *plausible*” — she pronounces it like an unfamiliar word — “things for you to do. Ms Fantasia also. I look after you especially, Mr Rhino, while you look after her. Okay?”

What else is there to say? He also stands, stretches and looks down at her — she seems to be standing on some lower slope. “And you’ve all got me this exhibition? The blur fight?”

“Correct, Mr Rhino. You are Rhinosaurus, blur fighting professional. There is big promoter in Bangkok. You fight Ice Ninja from Sapporo in one week. His promoter puts up good money to fight you. Makes him your client, too.” Good money, aching legs and a few bruises. “We will tell you everything else when you need to know.” He doesn’t like her choice of

words. “But the Colonel must explain, herself. You must not worry. The Colonel said I have to look after you, and I will.”

His mood is worsening. “I hope it isn’t too goddamn onerous.”

She’s downcast. “I do not mean it that way, Mr Rhino.”

Looks her over again. He notices her fingers for the first time: third finger and the pinkie on her left hand — nails are emerald-scale implants, like her eyes, but long, and squared off, like chisels. They’ll be razor sharp. He’s seen it before on flickdancers in KL. She’s a dancer, then. Songbird. Flickdancer. “Yeah, sorry, Sunandra. Most people don’t like me much. I scare them. That’s the idea, I guess. But I don’t want you to be scared.”

She reaches to take his hand. “I never get scared,” she says matter-of-factly. He looks her over incredulously. “And, Mr Rhino, you seem such a gentle man.”

* * * *

She bullies him; makes him undress and shower. Though it’s a cavernous shower unit, he hardly fits. Sunandra dries him, businesslike, with the hotel’s huge fluffy towels, commands him to lie on his groaning bed, applies massage, sitting astride him like riding a horse. There’s nothing sexual about it, just pure relief for stiffened neck, aching shoulders, fatigued hocks. Bossed unmercifully by this flower of a girl, he finds he likes it. When she’s finished, he lies on his back, great fleshy tub of a body pink, shiny, flopping relaxed.

“Okay,” he says at last. “Take me to your leader, Sunandra.”

“You must now get dressed. Let us see...” Shamelessly, she rummages through his suitcase, gets clean clothes together for him — camo duds, a sleeveless shirt that would do her for a tent, knitted of leather straps, sea green and deep red.

He takes her proffered hand as they descend the elevator: she drags him out-doors, where the 90-degree heat, the humidity, the glare fasten on him at once. She’s already handing over his German shades. Sunandra leads him past a fountain and pond, where two cranes with clipped wings stalk gracefully — avian Tai-Chi — then past a running track and a free-form swimming pool, by an acre of lily ponds, through dark crannies and arbors. “Where are we going?” he says.

“The driving range.”

He'd believe anything about this place; some grounds it's got. Acres and acres. “*Vroom-vroom* or *thwackum*?”

She laughs at him looking up from the bottom of his sternum. “In fact they have got both,” she says.

“But this time I meant *thwackum*, Mr Rhino. Later on you can do your motoring practice or game of golf.”

* * * *

The driving range is in full use. They all seem to know each other. Thais and Westerners, dressed for a casual afternoon at the practice tee and maybe a round in the evening. There's matte grey equipment around them which Rhino recognizes as holo gear, mounted cameras, God knows how many megayen of the stuff, all installed so the New Intercontinental's clientele can analyse the mechanics of backswing, wrist placement, follow-through. Paul dominates the group, towering, like the heroic lead on a holo set — he's relaxed into a yellow knitted golfshirt, crisp brown trousers, teak-coloured Akubra hat. The outfit exaggerates his broad shoulders, snake hips. He hits nine-iron pitch shots with authority, high and hard, golf balls lobbing with real backbite.

Honey Fantasia has not arrived yet.

Sunandra introduces Rhino to the others. Americans, Aussies, Thais, but somehow all the same, all slightly false in bright casual dress. Heavily painted girls with nosejobs, implants for hair: fur, feathers, iridescent mops of plastic wire. They remind him of failed holo starlets or glamour gal ring attendants at the blur fights. Slim jumpy guys — stomachless, hipless — with high veins on wiry arms. There's a sense of deliberate hunger here. Rhino wonders what weapons they are all concealing. Telco security cowboys.

Fantasia turns up. She nods to Paul. “Thanks for the directions.” She looks sporty in her way, jaunty: she's wearing loose grass-coloured jeans, matching plain canvas runners, baseball cap, plastic bangles all the way up her right arm to the elbow. Orange hair streams from under the cap. Her upper body is covered by a short-sleeved yellow nylon jacket, several sizes too big for her — more Rhino's size. Those bulky laser shades with their gunmetal frames dominate her face, covering the white feathers of her brows.

The holo unit showers with congealing light, forms the image of a tall, middle-aged woman in khaki uniform. Steel grey hair combed back over ears, collar-length, slope of her prominent nose almost vertical. Tough lady, nothing butch about her, but no little softnesses or affectations. The Colonel, then, Vocal-Aural-Visual interface software patching in to the hotel's holo set-up.

"My current ... lifestyle does not encourage a taste in pleasantries, Ms Fantasia, Rhino," says the Colonel. Good lip-synch on the animation. The synthesized voice through speakers is brisk but flattened, with the vowels programmed for something close to Carolina softness. "You are welcome. I'll get to business. But, first, an illustration. I hope this interests you."

"Go ahead," says Fantasia. Rhino watches the animation, its colours just too close to the primaries, its shapes a fraction geometric, but close to some presumed reality.

"Very well. It's simple. Rhino, I want you to hit a golf ball. Do you know how to play golf?"

"I've played."

"Take a driver. Sunandra will tee up for you. Don't try to hit straight; aim somewhere to the right or left, wherever you like. Go on."

Suspiciously, expecting some trick, Rhino obeys. He waggles the club, lifts it around his chest in a short backswing, forgets about the holo for a moment. Clumsily, but still with great force, Rhino strikes at his golf ball, sends it in a savage uncontrolled hook down the left of the driving range. A couple of seconds later Paul hits a drive, lands the ball within a centimetre of where Rhino's landed. It bounces, and rolls after Rhino's ball so that they come to rest a metre apart.

"Try again," the Colonel says blandly. "By the way, we could have made our point with a roulette wheel, or with dice throws, but we thought you would prefer something more physical." Rhino looks over at the smug holo.

Sunandra tees his ball. Irritated, Rhino thrashes at it. There's a double *crack!* as Paul drives simultaneously with him this time. The two golf balls land just to right of centre of the range, almost collide, but bounce in randomly different directions.

“Better, Paul,” says the Colonel. “Again, Rhino.”

What the heck? Rhino thwacks a beauty, but this time Paul actually hits his ball a split second *earlier* than Rhino hits his. They land close together right in the middle of the range. Again, they both drive simultaneously, Rhino mishitting the top of the ball. *Both* balls hit hard into the ground, roll for one hundred metres, actually collide and ricochet apart.

“Enough,” says the Colonel. “Paul could do this all day and not get tired.”

Light’s dawning. “He’s deliberately matching ...?” says Rhino. “But that’s impossible —”

“He’d have to be able to know exactly how you’re going to hit the ball the instant *before* you hit it, correct?” Rhino is speechless. “Honey Fantasia, Rhinosaurus,” the Colonel says expansively, “meet the face of the future. SACID operative. Specified Anomalous Capabilities (Intelligence Design). Outcome of decades of research.”

“I don’t think I want to know about this,” Rhino says slowly.

“You do, mister. You do. My former employers have worked with the FBI, USSS, the global telcos, a number of semi-secret university-controlled corporations for longer than I’ve been alive, gene-engineering to develop Paul and his breed. You’ll find the breed doing corporate security work throughout the States, Western Europe, Japan, places like Australia. There’s a major market for the technology here in Thailand. I’m happy to fill it. Unfortunately, setting up my own firm in competition with ex-colleagues has not been easy. Outside of Bangkok I am not popular with those in the same business. Even establishing this operation involved a few small tactical hardships like an uploading and a body-death.” She lets it sink in. “Outsmarting the competitors is not always a simple matter.

“Rhino, Honey Fantasia will be staying in Bangkok when you leave. She already knows the bad news. You and Sunandra need to deliver certain components to a research company in South Australia associated with us. You Will Not Go There Directly.” The Colonel emphasizes the words of the last sentence, one word at a time. “I want you to imagine Paul in a fire fight.” Rhino is paying attention — no cobwebs left in his mind by now. “The physical augmentation is secondary. It’s his *mind*. He evades *before* you shoot; he corrects *before* you evade. He makes you look like a dinosaur. Sorry.” The subtle geometric of an animation smile.

“No hard feelings, Colonel.”

“Rhino,” she says, intense now, “I am a SACID. A couple of generations earlier than Paul, but still a SACID. One thing I and my competitors can’t yet do is get the SACID mind to upload with its full capabilities into a form running on digital neurons. The physical material of the brain is too important. But we’re close. We have ideas. We want to do more research. We have components that are promising. And there’s other research we need to do. You’ve seen Paul’s capability. It’s the only one we can consistently engineer for: superinstantaneous cognition. To talk about *precognition* would be an exaggeration. But there’s lots of new research ... My group started off by studying flickdancers. You’ve seen flickdancers in this very city cutting themselves as they dance, healing themselves —”

“I’ve seen it *everywhere*,” he says. A worldwide musical phenomenon, the miracle band musicians and the flickdancers. Rhino has one of each here: Honey Fantasia, Sunandra. The craze they manifest is nowhere more extreme than right here in Bangkok. What is he supposed to do about it?

“Rhino, how do you think you would fare if you had to go up against SACID operatives?”

But she’s already answered that question. Rhino realizes too sharply what he’s up against if he has to act as a courier with bastards like Paul on his tail. A guy like that — or a woman like the Colonel — would be unbeatable in a fire fight. Not just that. How could you ever nail one — feet, fists? And Paul, at least, looks like the kind who could stack up roofing tiles — and *smash!* You could never avoid those hands. “Like a dinosaur, I suppose,” he says. “Look, I don’t get this. Paul’s here. What am I supposed to add to the operation? Looks?”

“Variety!... Stay with Sunandra. Fantasia, you know what to do. From now on, Paul is your bodyguard. You’ll stay in Bangkok until we judge it’s safe to leave.”

Honey Fantasia shrugs. “Sure, keep it coming.” They must be feeding that discretionary trust of hers. Bangkok is not Rhino’s idea of a place to stay under siege.

“The authorities will see a moderately famous miracle muso on tour and holidays with a large well-documented bodyguard. They will see her stay in Bangkok for a time, appropriately guarded, while the large

bodyguard leaves with a pretty Thai flickdancer. You should not expect any official trouble. The trouble will come from our competitors.”

That’s more than enough.

“Sunandra knows what you need to do,” says the Colonel. “You know our financial terms. You don’t know too much to back out ... quite ... Don’t expect to learn too much more.” She pauses. “You’ve already made some cash for your trouble. I should add that you’ve already become a target for our competitors as soon as you leave Bangkok. Guilt by association. You backing out or you staying in, mister?”

Paul tees up another ball, swings through it with a bullet-like crack, driving it high and sweet. Rhino is not sure that he likes doing anything that involves pushing along the evolution of this breed. But what’s the choice? “In,” he says. One word. He looks at Honey Fantasia, almost pleading with her. What have you got me into, gal? Nothing looks back through the opaque-lensed laser shades.

* * * *

It’s like he’s slurped down too much coffee: hollow tired, but nerves jangling. He paces the floor of his room. Fidgets with anything, the waistband of his pants, the hotel’s services listing — anything. Reads the menu for room service. He wants to be able to sleep, knows he’ll be awake all night.

“We have work to do soon, Mr Rhino,” says Sunandra. “You must try to enjoy yourself.”

“Doing what?” He sits on the edge of his bed.

Sunandra sits beside him. Takes one hand in both of her tiny ones. Talks to him, soothing, smoothing, crooning, guides him back through the coiled and poisonous intricacies of their situation.

Tells him: the Colonel was working on a government contract in Sao Paulo when she saw the opportunity to start up some competition for her employer. She arranged to *die*. Uploaded secretly, merging her brain’s wetware with a nanoware text, switched off the wetware, arranged a plausible accident for her body — one involving a military concussion rifle, leaving no sign of any recent work on her brain. Transferred herself and a massive line of digital cash to associates in Bangkok, several steps ahead of what had already become the competition. Arranged for the original

nanoware text in Brazil to be wiped clean. Gathered supporters; bought in software, hardware mobiles, interface junk; made Bangkok military police contacts, heavy and necessary. Other contacts with government telco people. She was starting to build an operation. She kept her nanoware matrix off the nets. When she did have to interface with them, she had layers and layers of counter-intrusive firewalls and guard dogs to hide behind, always paranoid.

She's still slowly building contacts outside of Thailand, Honey Fantasia among them. Research corporations. Rhino.

He's broody, and Sunandra takes him down to the hotel's seafood restaurant, which is wake-up-and-take-notice good — she makes him try the local fish, crab, a satay. He puts away a couple of litres of Tiger beer, two bottles of imported Australian pinot noir. Sunandra drinks and twinkles, seems to sing to him.

After dinner, she orders a cab to Sukhumvit Road. Takes him to a vast dance hall, styled *Soi Angel*, where international miracle bands play. "Honey Fantasia plays here tonight, Mr Rhino." He knows.

The hall is all mirrors and holos, reflecting endlessly, top and bottom, sides. Smoke twists in thinning scarves and catches the random bursts of laser lights. Here are Bangkok's fish people, the local sharks and roe, mingling with tourists, boys and girls, from all over mainland Asia, Japan, Australia, the States. Near naked to show off radical body implants: fins, fur, feathers, spines ... and anything marine — fins and flippers, teeth from whales, crocodile scales, dorsal sails ... Wildest are the professional flickdancers — caged in platforms drifting about on wires high over the dance floor — and their emulators in the crowd, lean hungry shark boys, the little *roe*, bare-breasted teenage girls.

When the miracle bands play, Bio-Feed music, synthesizers hooked up to state-of-the-art EEG receptors, these crowds are hysterical with a religious lunacy that brings out crazy effects in the right people — the sort of people the Colonel is interested in, the potential SACID gene stock — provided they *believe*. There are supposed to be explanations: enhanced mental field effects from the unnatural contortions of playing music with your brain, interacting with other minds in the room, them interacting with each other. The music has its own mystique, like any music, but the really weird stuff is from the fields of minds cuddling up in bizarre unnatural ways, not the musical notes themselves.

The music has its own, and Sunandra has caught it. She drags Rhino

onto the dance floor. Above them, a male flickdancer mutilates himself systematically, carves unbleeding patterns into his chest with a triangle-bladed knife.

On the stage, musicians prance and posture; leading them, Honey Fantasia. She's almost a different creature, now — miracle muso — though a creature Rhino knows well.

Fantasia's Wires, the spidery black crown of EEG headgear jacked into her scalp under the hairline, are tangled in messed orange implanted hair; below them, long pins of coherent red light emitted from her laser shades slowly trace the hall. She's wearing nothing but a seaweed-coloured wrap-around skirt that falls to mid-thigh and a kind of rope net the colour of her implanted hair, the mesh wide enough to let her head and arms through. Stomach muscles harden and twist like gnarled wood. Fantasia's breasts are tipped with ultrasoft fur a millimetre long, the same burnt orange colour as the mane of hair on her head. As she dances she undoes the knot at the side of her skirt, removes it in a swift gesture, letting it fall to the floor, kicking it away, revealing a Y of the same soft implanted stuff, rising between her legs and branching around her waist; seen from the front and at this distance, she is wearing a kind of skimpy fur bikini. Serpent tattoos with fiery mouths coil her legs; their eyes are deeply-implanted chips of emerald like those on Sunandra's face. She's glorious.

Thick, voiceless curtains of sound, wild, improvised, at times almost atonal, billow out around the core of a heavy rock beat. Sunandra is smiling fixedly in the direction of Honey Fantasia, the little scale-jewels at her eyes glistening; she's sweating, and she pulls off her silk jacket. God! Her brown nipples are puckered hard. Looks Rhino in the eye, dances flailingly from the neck down, never, never moves her eyes. He's picking up on things in her head, weird, sexy, undefinable things. Miracle dancer.

And then she does it. Flick. Sunandra rips upwards, then down again, between her breasts with those razor jewels on her left hand, opening herself, peeling back skin over sternum, down the stomach to her tights, like parting the teeth of a red zipper on a sexy jumpsuit. No blood flows; within moments the skin is knitting back. And, despite himself, despite everything, incorrectly, inappropriately, even incoherently, Rhino is turned on ...

Later, in the hotel room, Sunandra uses massage. She takes off her clothes and is all over him, hands, breasts, hot mouth. Rhino on his back, that hot wet mouth finds him; she's kneeling, straddling one of his tree-trunk legs, rubbing her fur, rubbing her wetness against him, while her tongue

swirls and flicks. His eyes are squeezed shut against a pleasure that hurts and hurts.

Until she's riding him, her legs split apart like a ballerina's; she's balancing with one hand on his chest, the other holding his knuckles at her crotch. And she starts trembling, another harmonic to her movement. "Now, Mr Rhino, now!" she says. Their minds are locked together, wordless, but there's a bewildering, joyous feedback of lust and ecstasy. Yet this is no dance floor. Who is she?

His eyes are closed, but he still sees her, sees her seeing him. "I race you, Mr Rhino." Starts to spasm. Together. Each of them. YES. YES. YES.

* * * *

Sunandra is up before him. She's found a pink silk dressing gown. Brings breakfast from the room waiter, plates stacked with pineapple, papaya, local ham and bacon, little brown sausages, fried egg beaten with onions. She throws off the dressing gown, gets into bed. They scoop together into the good local food.

Make love with the same desperation as last night.

Then, it's a day with nothing to do. They spend it with Paul and Honey Fantasia by the lukewarm swimming pool, basking in the sunshine, sharking warm water. Sunandra and Honey Fantasia wear demure one-piece swimming costumes out of deference to local custom (this is a business hotel, not the *Soi Angel*). They seem to get along. Sunandra tries out the mechanics of the laser shades, though it's too bright to gain any effect; they need darkness and smoke. Turns out that she's also been engineered to play with Honey Fantasia's Wires.

They spend the afternoon with the women jacked into sets of Wires. Fantasia produces a set of receivers for Rhino to listen to. They fit his ears bulkily like old-fashioned headphones. But Fantasia can broadcast into them instead of into stage amps and make music straight to his ears. It's just the same to her. Sunandra has some rudimentary skills, but she's a dancer, not a miracle muso. Still, she seems to learn fast. Paul ignores it all. He swims up and down the pool, a magnificent athlete at home in the water. Rhino didn't see him at the *Soi Angel*, but he must have been there. He seems to think it's his duty — duty! — to stay close to Honey Fantasia.

That night they cruise back to the *Soi Angel*. They've started a

routine. Long lazy days and hot nights. Sunandra makes love to him twice before they go to sleep. At 2 am they grope for each other in the dark and she rolls on top of him; they fuck half in their sleep.

By day they swim, play games with the Wires. Paul challenges Honey Fantasia to a round of golf. She takes him up on it even though he's obviously unbeatable. Rhino and Sunandra splash in the pool. The Colonel is sending plenty of cash their way for their trouble. Sunandra is getting better with the Wires all the time. By night they follow Honey Fantasia's band and the other miracle bands, dance late.

Then, one morning: "Tonight is your exhibition of blur fighting, Mr Rhino."

"I know, Sunandra."

"Blur fight professionals use drugs for advantage, isn't it, Mr Rhino. I think we give you more advantage."

Rhino lowers his fork and chews his breakfast more slowly. Swallows. "What sort of advantage?"

"Better drug, Sir. You will see."

Like everyone who has been in blur fighting, Rhino has a catheter inserted in the big vein of his left thigh. The catheter contains a miniaturized sensor complex to monitor body signs, feed data to a microchip. This controls the valve on a sac implanted safely within Rhino's stomach wall, determining the rate of infusion of a specialized drug mix. It's a fiery cocktail of pseudo-adrenaline and inhibition killers. There are rules in blur fighting, but participants often forget them, too high on the drug cocktail.

"We have developed a specialized nootropic drug. You see? A crude paracognitive enhancer, Mr Rhino. It will work on you, I think. It will work on any flickdancer, on a SACID operative, on anyone with the latent anomalous capabilities. I have spent past days testing you for it."

How many surprises do they have? And surprises within surprises. One thing at a time. He scoops a pile of crisp bacon, and munches. "I'm no SACID operative, Sunandra. Are you going to turn me into a flickdancer?"

"Absolutely, Mr Rhino." She kisses him on the cheek. "We are still trying to find out how it works, but it does work. It will take at least some of the golfing edge off competition." She smiles at him; her little hands dart

suddenly, almost faster than he can follow, snatches a crinkled rasher of bacon from his plate. “*Thwackum, yes?*” Gobbles the bacon like a fowl with a worm.

Then, as suddenly, she slaps right fist into stiffly flattened palm. Rhino raises his eyebrows, goes on eating.

* * * *

Today, Sunandra wants to hustle him around the city, keep him busy with sights, trips to strange bars and clubs, a walk around the tall stupas of Wat Pho, a wander through the leafy niches of the New Intercontinental’s vast grounds, a wild spin on the hotel’s automobile driving range.

Then the evening. Thais love professional fights. There’s a crowd of eighty thousand: it overflows and washes through a giant domed indoor stadium. Rhinosaurus battles Ice Ninja. Overhead holo reflects the action — from the auditorium’s back seats, the antagonists are no more than bizarre microbes. Paul is sitting in the front row. Somehow, Honey Fantasia has a night off and is there too, close to Sunandra, the two of them playing with the Wires and giggling together.

After ten minutes, Rhino is flushed and out of wind, but he’s been canny: Ice Ninja is angry, frustrated. Tall Japanese, moves like a strutting crane — white implanted hair falls past his shoulders, coarse, nasty stuff, not like Honey Fantasia’s. He’s white-skinned, wears white wrestling trunks, fights barefoot. He’s noisy.

Neither is hurt much; that’s not the idea. But Ice Ninja is out of control, hyped up on inhibition killers, pupils dilated. The nootropic doesn’t seem to be doing much — Rhino can’t predict moves in advance like he’d hoped. But his reflexes seem preternaturally fast, his thoughts like crystals.

While Rhino’s thinking about it, Ice Ninja catches him: Rhino lumbering off the ropes one moment, then *spear-hand!*, no attempt to fake it.

Rhino’s world screams, shears. Red. And yellow star-sparks feeding his brain.

Bastard.

Down on his back. Shoulders pinned. Blindly, he throws Ice Ninja away, stumbles to feet and grabs the surprised Ninja across forehead,

huge thumbs pressing. Fakes his move, like he's supposed to — no use killing the man — headbutts outstretched thumbs, once, twice ... Ice Ninja falls and spreads the canvas. Pain is a rusty bolt sticking through Rhino's throat. Maybe Ice Ninja has doubts about his own armour class. So Rhino makes sure, drops across him, point-of-elbow first ... takes most of the weight on himself, shoulderblade hitting the canvas an instant before the blow. But he delivers Ice Ninja just a little more force than he's supposed to — and much less than the bastard deserves. The crowd is roaring. Ice Ninja has to accept the three count.

Afterwards, Rhino scoops Sunandra, and they get the hell out via an alley exit, taxi back to the hotel, make love, minds and bodies glowing white hot. Rhino's done his approved business in Bangkok. With Honey Fantasia safely in Paul's hands, Rhino is a government-recognized tourist.

* * * *

They've taken over the private heated swimming pool at the Tiger Club. Honey Fantasia and Sunandra are both Wired, but evidently not playing the miracle music into each other's ears at the moment. They can hold a conversation. "I'm actually going to miss you two when you leave Bangkok," Honey Fantasia says. "It's been a *time*, Rhino. And I'm glad I met you, Su." Su?

"Mr Rhino, Ms Fantasia and I teach each other. You too. Watch."

Nothing happens. Nothing that he can see or hear. But the two gals are both Wired and, right now, he isn't: no headphones. Sunandra is evidently making music because Fantasia stands beside the pool and starts to dance. Hey! Sunandra is getting good. They're jamming. So far, so good. Fantasia looks great dancing in only her long, long implanted hair and the implanted "bikini", which basically conceals nothing up this close, even if it gives the impression of a kind of skimpy swimsuit from up on stage. Her eyes are closed beneath feather-brows. Sunandra steps up close to her as she puts out one brown, strong arm. In a razor flash, Sunandra has flicked out and cut her, not a deep cut or long, but a real cut along the inside of Fantasia's forearm. In another flash, Sunandra has cut her own right arm. They watch each other, Fantasia daring to open eyes, still evidently jamming — and the cuts don't bleed. Honey Fantasia is turning into a flickdancer.

"The Colonel knew what she was doing when getting us all together, Mr Rhino."

Honey Fantasia's cut heals up nearly as quickly as Sunandra's. "Rhino, you ought to try it," she says.

"I've had my share of pain lately."

They're doing a private gig. Sunandra picks up the laser shades beside Fantasia's oversized pool towel, starts to mess around with them, getting the pinpoint beams going faintly around this low-lit space, looking for airborne particles to light up. "You like them, Su? They're yours. I'll find another pair. Hey, why don't you put the headphones on Rhino?" Fantasia's shouting a little, now, obviously deafened by phantom music. "This is pretty cool to listen in on."

"Nup." He decides to take a belly flop into the pool, hitting it with his two hundred kilos. When he surfaces, gulping for his breath, they're slightly splashed but unfazed. Rhino gives up.

... And that night at the *Soi Angel*, as Honey Fantasia plays miracle music, Sunandra dances with him, looks up at him with her moist orgasm-eyes, and says, "Now!" She carves only shallowly, but moves with breathtaking speed, slicing straight up his right biceps muscle like an emerald flash. For a moment he's shocked, but somehow she holds him with her mind, and panic washes away. The cut is a superposition of states: wound and healing. It won't bleed, but doesn't close up. Gently, she strokes it with her soft palm. It seems to be getting better. "You must take me home, Mr Rhino."

* * * *

At last the time has come to leave Bangkok. As usual, Sunandra seems to know the schedule. An ultimate destination in South Australia, sure. "But we go very slowly, Mr Rhino. We do stages. Okay? First stop, New York City. I have friends there, lots of friends. I can take cover in the States for months. Then we will think about the rest of the trip."

Paul is still strong. They shake hands. "Look after the little girl, big guy."

But it takes Honey Fantasia to surprise him: when she kisses him goodbye it's full on the lips, her tongue in his mouth, and right in front of Sunandra, who then seems to get a kiss almost as friendly.

Darling drives them out to the airport, gunning the limo, hunching the wheel like a smiling maniac.

* * * *

Touchdown La Guardia Airport. Rhino has slept through much of the long flight in his two first-class seats. Sunandra has been restless.

They step out of the 797. Smiles for flight attendants. At least until they get through Immigration and Customs, they're safe enough. As cabin baggage, Rhino carries a soft grey Qantas bag with personal belongings and a shiny black plastic attaché case which Sunandra knows how to open and he doesn't. There's no visible trace of any catch. She's confident they'll get through Customs. They're wild-looking mothers flying in from a place like Bangkok, but Customs officials leave Rhino alone: he travels a lot, their computers know him. His clients are usually beyond the law if not beyond reproach.

Sunandra is Wired and wearing Honey Fantasia's laser shades. Rhino sports headphones behind his curving horn and lets her play soothing music into them with her mind; he needs it, but he's got it. The catheter in his thigh must be monitoring body signs, but it shouldn't find too much wrong yet.

Poking out of Customs, they look around carefully. They have rooms arranged at a dive in Times Square. They'll get an airport bus into Manhattan.

It goes wrong from the start. There's a uniformed driver bearing a handwritten sign: RHINOSAURUS. The guy isn't supposed to be there. He steps up to them. "Mr Rhino, it must be you," he says, grinning furiously under a moustache. So ... he's only about 180 centimetres, looks harmless enough. At first. But Rhino is hitting into overdrive. The catheter in his thigh starts to zing. He's a lot closer to the drug now than the first time with Ice Ninja.

The paracognitive enhancer edges in like he's dropped acid: heightened *awareness* of colours, shapes, textures, of individual sounds and layers of sound in the airport noise-wash. But drugs like acid create an uncontrolled sensory overload — wide eyes bugging the flowers — a passive, voluntary acceptance of the Universe's plenty and bliss; that's the farthest thing from what Rhino feels — senses sharp as a cat's, mind clear and clean.

This driver is shockingly, tangibly dangerous, high-strung but controlled. Something about the way he moves cries out Paul's inhuman

strength. And there's the same underlying body structure, facial bones as Paul's. There's been gene-splicing along the way: superficially, the driver is a different racial type as well as being maybe fifteen centimetres shorter than Paul — Spanish-Amerindian, very swarthy, black-haired, comic-book moustache. An ingratiating smile that seems to fit but would look incongruous on Paul. Rhino registers it all at once. Sunandra is still Wired, still playing him music, trying to calm him. She gives no outward sign that anything is wrong, but something's subtly different about the music or her body language; he knows that she knows.

"I'm parked illegally, Sir," the driver says. "Can you hurry, please? Let me take your bag."

Rhino hands over their one suitcase. They're travelling lighter than he did with Honey Fantasia. This guy is now encumbered. There are two of them to one of him. Rhino is twice his size. They could jump him. Bad idea. He'll be bristling with concealed weapons, hoping to avoid using them in the open but prepared to. And Rhino sees enough with the paracognitive to know he doesn't see enough. This guy is much too fast for him.

"Times Square, driver," Sunandra says. She gives him the address. Cool.

Nothing is said until they reach the car, another stretch limo — royal blue Mercedes with a purple tinge to the windows. The driver insists upon placing all their luggage in the limo's huge trunk. Reluctantly, Rhino parts with the smart attaché case. In the rear passenger compartment there are another two guys who look just like the driver. They nod to Rhino and Sunandra, supremely confident. Sit opposite as they all drive in to Manhattan, carry no obvious weapons. One says: "Please remove the laser shades, Ms. Something could go wrong and they could blind somebody." Sunandra hands them over. Courteously, he takes them, says, "Thank you." Places them carefully in a top pocket.

They all wear beautifully starched Extropez shirts, bright white under navy blue sports jackets.

"Perhaps I should see that headgear as well. I guess you could communicate with each other, or even with allies, wearing something like that. One-way traffic at least. That wouldn't be appropriate. You, too, Sir. Don't move. Let me take it." He reaches over for Sunandra's Wires. She's playing full-on miracle music, not as good as Honey Fantasia yet, but enough to alter Rhino's consciousness. She's a songbird. He's a flickdancer. But then the music stops. "You, too, Sir. Pass the

headphones.”

The man folds up all the Wires. They fit neatly enough in a square jacket side pocket, the right-hand one.

Soon, the Empire State’s transmission tower scrapes clouds like an art deco cathedral spire. The driver stops at a nondescript office block on Fifth Avenue. The bozo looking after Honey Fantasia’s laser shades says, “Executive apartments. We have a suite on the 21st floor. Come on. This will be better than your room in Times Square.”

The two men in the back get out, leaving the driver. Luggage still in the trunk. They check in for two rooms, a double suite for Rhino and Sunandra, a twin room for themselves. Arrange for someone to go and get luggage. “It’s with our driver.”

Walk to the elevator.

Rhino is an attack-robot; he tenses.

But there’s a frightened screaming deep in Rhino’s ears, agonizingly loud — and he collapses, holding his head. How did she do it? They’re not Wired. People turn; a bullet already fired, out of nowhere, strikes right through his horn implant; AND SUNANDRA FLYING. All slow motion; all at once. Always already happened. Somehow, Sunandra has hurt one attacker and stolen from him a slim long-bladed knife. While everything else moves more slowly than ever, she is a blur. Outside, car horns honking; the building’s electronically-controlled doors are open and the limo driver seems to come through in one motion, propelled like a crossbow bolt and strikes Rhino down even though Rhino’s body had *already* dodged to the left! Sunandra is fighting their third captor, neither seeming able to get the better of it, or even to land a blow.

There’s an all-at-once massacre about him, more bullets fired, and he’s been hit. His own assailant flows away as Rhino swings at him, and he’s already struck Rhino before Rhino realizes his body has already unsuccessfully dodged — *knife-hand! spear-hand!*, then a spinning high kick. For the kill!... For a moment Rhino blacks out. They’re both after Sunandra. Lucidity washes his veins. Sunandra!

One attacker has already fired, but *already* already Rhino has dodged. It’s taking time. Police sirens in the neighbourhood. *It’s taking time*. The three SACID operatives have given up and are running back to

the car. They still have all the luggage from Bangkok in the limo's trunk. And time to kill. Sunandra throws down the knife.

In the other hand she has something else: the Wires; she's retrieved them. Rhino is bleeding, but nothing vital seems to have been hit. One bullet hit his horn — fixable. One seems to have passed right through a massive steroidal thigh muscle.

Sunandra is Wired. She concentrates. The city booms and shudders.

* * * *

She has good, hidden friends on Times Square. Sunandra must arrange ID for herself and Rhino, a trustworthy surgical sculptor, replacement cash cards and some very fast and hairy credit transfers, some interface junk — two micro-decks, a tricky modem card. There is an encrypted and coded message to go to Bangkok and one for Adelaide. All her possessions in the States — and Rhino's — were destroyed in the limo.

The paracognitive drug was successful — more so on Sunandra herself than on Rhino, but with him, too, in the end. Her link with Rhino worked even better. The miracle music itself has nothing *logical* to do with the anomalous capabilities of a flickdancer or a miracle muso. The mental contortions of a muso trained to be Wired have everything to do with it, unnatural mental fields. In the end, she could reach directly into Rhino's mind, music or no music; as long as she *pretended* the Wires were there, she gave Rhino what he really needed and responded to.

Not so for reaching out and talking to mere dumb electronic components, the brute physical world. For that she actually needed the Wires. Needed them to send electrical impulses to a shiny black attaché case she had known she must give away to the competition, an attaché case full of powerful remote-activated amps and lined with a vibration-sensitive plastique, disguised to the eyes of airport security equipment.

Eye-witness reports told of the limousine's brakes slamming on and its passengers attempting to flee the car an instant *before* it blew into noisy smithereens. But only an instant. Superinstantaneous cognition. Not real precognition.

So far, the New York Police Department has nothing on her and Mr Rhino. They are exotic victims of bomb-happy terrorists who managed to blow themselves up, exotic victims and no more, at least until the further

investigation which must connect the explosion to a very clever attaché case full of dumb electronics. And the attaché case to her and Mr Rhino. She must get out of New York while she is still a step ahead of both the competition and the cops. There are expensive and crucial vatware components — simplified wetware texts of the Colonel — implanted within Sunandra's brain; she has a tortuous route to deliver them to her contacts at Offnet Polisearch Laboratory in its high-tech arcology outside of Adelaide. Meanwhile, she is winning.

“Home free, Mr Rhino!” she says. Close enough to the truth. Somehow she must find a way to deliver him safely back to Bangkok; he will miss her, she knows, but Honey Fantasia will look after him. For herself, she must arrange for extensive body resculpting ... soon: a complete disappearance and change of identity.

For now, light-footed, she runs up the street, turns, skipping backwards down the pavement and calling out to Rhino: “Home free!”

She lets hustlers, shoppers, a startled traffic cop, tourists dodge out of her way. She attracts lascivious glances, knowing glances, freaky glances, but there is no-one here on Times Square uncool enough even to glance twice.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Sunandra and Rhino haunted my consciousness for several years before I could write the definitive version of their tale. Indeed, I'm not done yet: I'm working on a series of stories inspired by them (*Singularity Shadow*), including a novel (*Flickdancer*) based loosely on “The Soldier in the Machine”. Ah, vaulting ambition ...

Anything I said about how I came to write “Soldier” would be a horrible over-simplification. While the characters and the relationship of Sunandra and Rhino percolated in my mind, innumerable other considerations had time to impinge on the story. Some will need to be teased out more fully in other works — for example, the deeper significances, moral or philosophical, of postulated technologies such as personality uploading.

More immediately, I returned, in “Soldier”, to the ambience of “Glass

Reptile Breakout”, with its culture of body morphing, and extreme lifestyles, captured succinctly in the image of flickdancing. I wished to take that story a step further, and to create a sub-text that would challenge my readers while the action entertained them. “Soldier” is also influenced by my visits to Thailand, Indonesia, and the US, and by my meditations, for what they are worth, on the possibility that the human mind possesses physically anomalous powers.

On the latter subject, I am a sceptic: to convince me, it will take much more dramatic evidence than the parapsychologists have yet made available. Accordingly, I tend to think that stories such as “Soldier” must be treated as a species of high-tech fantasy. And yet, I have nothing against the fantasy genre. One of my impulses was to create an adventure story about anomalous psychic capabilities with something of the same rigour and internal consistency as the best fantasy stories display in their handling of magical phenomena. Whether I’ve succeeded in that particular ambition, others must judge.

— *Russell Blackford*

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MATILDA TOLD SUCH DREADFUL LIES

LUCY SUSSEX

Lucy Sussex was born in New Zealand in 1957, and works as a researcher and also as a freelance author and editor. She has published widely, writing anything from reviews and literary criticism to horror and detective stories. In 1994 she was a judge for the international Tiptree Award, which honours speculative fiction exploring notions of gender. She has edited four anthologies, which include *The Lottery*, *The Patternmaker* and *She's Fantastical*, which was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. She also has produced scholarly bibliographies and editions, chiefly of nineteenth-century literature. Some of her short fiction has been collected in *My Lady Tongue & Other Tales*. She has written two young adult novels, *Deersnake* and *Black Ice*. Her first adult novel, *The Scarlet Rider*, won the Ditmar Award and was shortlisted for the Kelly Award.

The story that follows is very old, and very new ... and uniquely Australian.

* * * *

What's that you've got in your lap? I know you're doing more than contemplating the billabong, sitting there with your back against the big river gum and your straw hat bent over what, since you're one of the womenfolk, I'd say was a mirror — except no mirror goes tap tap tap. Seen a lot of new things I have, mostly recently, yet what you're playing with has me mystified. But not for long, I reckon.

I can see it's got keys on it like a button accordion — now that brings back the memories. *Da-dum-de-da-dum ...*

You stopped just then, didn't you, thinking your ears were playing tricks. I'm good at mimicry, that's how I learned to talk, from the various visitors. I can do all sorts of voices, from parrot to chainsaw to what I'm speaking now, Old Bush Bloke. Once heard, and I store it away, like the snatch of button accordion you just heard, playing *the song*. That's from the night a mob as called themselves the Communist Folkclub of Brisbane held

a bushdance here. Commemorating the centenary of the song, you see, by having a knees-up where it all started, beside the bloody billabong.

I could have told them a few things about the song, like how the poet chappie sat, not there, where you are, but two trees along. Wore white like you do, and a big hat, but without flowers on it, being a fella. He had a little notebook and a pencil and he just sat there swatting away the blowies and scribbling. Whistled while he worked, too. Took me some time to figure out what he was up to, till I did my old trick and wormed my way into the back of his head, letting the thoughts run over and around me until they made sense.

Trying to fit words to the tune, he was. He had a story in mind, but he couldn't get the words to suit. So I thought I'd give him a helping hand. Course, some things got lost in the translation, but he got his song down in the end. Did all right with it, too, seeing as it ended up as the unofficial national anthem. Now and then I think I shoulda had a share in the royalties, but then I've not exactly got a use for money.

Still, that damn song's brought me extra visitors, like the commie folkies and their centenary. And now you, with your hat and your ... excuse me, the curiosity's just killing me, to hear that tap tap tap and not know what you're up to. Ah, that's better. Hmm. Thought so. In the storytelling game, are you? Just like the poet chappie.

I like a good yarn, though it's not something I encounter often. For a while the number of stories I heard could be counted on a double bunch of dactyls. No, I don't mean fingers — I'm not one of your speciesists, could hardly be, given the circumstances. These days when I think back the line between paw and claw, digit and hand, seems a bit blurred. Ask me about the missing link, and I'd say something like: well, it's not that easy to pinpoint. But I do remember the first yarnspinner, like it was only yesterday.

Being of the stationary kind of persuasion, I usually have to wait until the tale, or rather its teller, comes to me. So that meant I didn't know about stories for ... oh ... must have been millennia, and I mean thousands of years, mate. Not that I was bored, given the visitors. Sometimes it seemed that you could blink and they'd be gone forever: goodbye diprotodon, procoptodon, thylacine. Ever followed a roo's tracks, or seen from the mud around a waterhole who's come a-drinking? I had quite a visitor's book, though it was only temporary. Cast of thousands, no plot, unless it was who ate who. Yep, that was something you could certainly read from the footprints, until the next rain came and washed it all away.

First time I saw one of the storytelling mob, he chased an old man emu through the billabong, catching it in the claggy dry season mud at the shallow end. Well, that wasn't unusual, nor was the rock he used to dispatch the emu, though I have to say it made a rotten axe. He dragged the carcass onto dry land quickly, showing a proper regard — not like some have — for the local water supply. Up on the bank he lit a fire and singed off the feathers. The meat was just starting to cook when the rest of his band — missus, littlies, coupla greyhairs, caught up with him.

Their eyes just bulged at the food, and that's when he started, singing out at the top of his voice, wagging his backside like an emu, miming axe blows. Had me flummoxed at first, till I thought of dingos dozing in the sunlight with their paws twitching and mouths salivating, dreaming about the chase. Yet he was awake, not asleep and telling a story about Emu and Mr Great Big Hero Hunter. Since he hadn't got the audience there for his big kill, except me, and I don't count, he was letting them know what happened. And embellishing it too, I could tell — he made that little barney go on for thrice the time it actually did.

Liar, liar your pants are on fire, I could have said, not that I knew what pants were, because he wasn't wearing *any*. Indeed I wouldn't see any nether garments, as the parson chappies would say, for thousands of years. In that time I got to hear a lot of stories, though. Emu and Hunter went through a few changes over the centuries, all sorts of stuff about totems mixed up in it, also ancestors ... because it became the Hunters' family history. Lost count of the number of descendants he had, but they kept telling the story. They'd visit once or twice a year, have a good party with lots of dancing and bush tucker, and yarn to each other in the firelight.

Other stories they told were Kookaburra and the three sexy sisters, Greedy old Auntie who became a fruitbat, and bit by bit I thought I got the hang of this storytelling business. It had a beginning, middle and end, and also a moral. Don't eat someone else's tucker, don't go fornicating with your grandma, or something terrible will happen. It may sound old-fashioned, but then I am. Old-fashioned and unashamed of it. You notice I used the word *fornicate*, instead of the modern equivalent...

Well, like I said, I thought I'd got the hang of yarnspinning, but then along came another mob of storytellers and moved the bloody goalposts. It happened on a peaceful kind of day: sunny, warm and so still the gumleaves hardly stirred from sunrise to sunset. Just like today, in fact, and if you'll look around you'll see the scene of the crime's hardly changed. I don't care for change much. That was why what happened came as such a surprise.

One moment there I was, minding my own business and next half a doz of the Hunter family came haring across the plain, as if they were closing in on a big roo. When they got nearer, I saw from the look on their faces that something was badly wrong. What's eating you, I thought, though a better phrasing might have been: what's gunna eat you? I wondered if the thylacoleo, our local attempt at a lion, had made a comeback, especially since I could hear something coming, big and noisy.

It went: thud-ker-thump, thud-ker-thump. I could see the Hunters wanted to run, but they were utterly bushwhacked. Through the trees I saw something bigger than the local fauna had been for — oh, for several eons. It was misshapen too, with two heads, one a bit like the Hunters, but the colour of a ghost gum, the other long-faced, with flaring nostrils and great staring eyes. The creature stopped under the paperbark, and blow me down if it didn't split itself down the middle, Ghostgum leaping off Longface, like a littlee from off ma's back. At the sight all the Hunters threw themselves into the water, there being nowhere else to hide but under the overhanging banks. But they didn't stand a chance, for Ghostgum lifted what looked to me like your standard digging stick and pulled thunder out of the air.

It deafened me, and the Hunters, who were swimming and wading into the billabong as fast as they could, they stopped with each peal of thunder, one by one. Happened so fast there wasn't a damn thing I could do, not even when I saw the red blood seeping into the water. Longface put its head down and ate grass, not interested; and that told me just who was the herbivore, who the carnivore. Ghostgum, on the other hand, he cuddled his stick, spearthrower, whatever, and smiled at the bodies floating in my billabong.

Pleased with himself he was, I could tell that, despite the contents of his mind being largely alien to me. I read snatches of his story, though none of it made sense for a good long while: something about him and a lot of other ghostgums on this big canoe, a few of them chiefs with thunderkilling sticks and bright red ochre all over them, but the most locked below, tied together and feeling pretty sorry for themselves too. He sat there in the darkness running through his memories, mostly one of a dead ghostgum girl, her throat cut. That was why he was travelling over the water, being *transported*, and he was pleased about that too, the alternative being him hanging neck first from a big bare tree.

It was a nasty place, that mind of his, and it all got too much for me — the crowding of the ghostgum faces, more than all the Hunters I'd seen

over the millennia, the words I'd never heard before, the sense that things were changing in my nice quiet billabong, which was now dyed red with blood. I got out quick and just let Ghostgum ride away, on Longface, whom he called Horse. He called himself an Englishman, an Explorer, though when I understood more of his thoughts, I knew he was only an explorer's servant, hired to do the dirty work. Which meant, slaughtering the Hunter people, just because they had a bit of spirit in them and weren't going to be walked over...

Now, I'm the contemplative type, not a big hero. I let bygones be bygones, arrange things my own quiet way, which means no showing off, no getting physical if I can help it. But I had to do something, the fish and tadpoles were already gagging on the blood, and I knew the usual mob of roos, etc. would show up for drinkies at sunset. No way was I going to let the local water supply stay polluted. So I just rolled up the Hunters in a sheet of paperbark and pushed them through the clay bottom of the billabong and deep into the rock shelf below, which was ammonite era. Completely confused the geological record, not that anybody's ever going to make a scientific paper out of it. They'd have to get past me first.

It's a pleasant spot, the billabong, just the place for a village, but you'll notice that nobody's ever done more than camp here, temporarily. Wonder why? See, I don't mind the occasional company, but no way am I gunna be in anyone's backyard. Sure the idea entered the various visitors' minds, but I just reached in and nipped it in the bud. Just like I got rid of the ghostgum's tucker, those bloody great wallopers of cattle, and worse, those stupid woolly sheep, with their hard hooves crumbling the banks and muddying the water. It was dead easy, all I had to do was take the idea of the slaughterhouse from out of the ghostgum's minds, put it into those herbivore brains, and then watch the stampede.

After a while I got used to the new mob of visitors, who weren't all bad. Once I got to understand them, I found they had some interesting stories, quite my sort of thing. They believed in beginnings and ends, and morals too — that's why their evildoers were punished by being chained up and shipped to the other side of the world. Convicts, that was what my first ghostgum had been, and I saw a few like him, though none with such a nasty little history. Others came visiting, squatters, gold prospectors and drovers, though in the case of the latter, they tended to find themselves chasing a trail of dust and dags across the plain.

There was a governess from one local station, whose head was full of tales about love and romance, and the overseer from the next station, who thought a lot about a lass with quite a history, *Fanny Hill* by name. They

used to ride out for trysts here, and told each other stories, so to speak. Then they didn't show for quite a while, and when they did they had half a dozen steps and stairs, come to get christened and watch ma and pa get married. See, a parson chappie had trekked out to this district, which was back of beyond those days, and found himself work for a week.

Up on the far bank, that space I keep clear in case the visitors feel like a spot of dancing, he set up his travelling altar and font. The latter was for the ghostgum littlies, and a bunch of the Hunters, the women in floral smocks, the men in *nether garments* and calico shirts, come to be baptized too. Wasn't their idea, they weren't keen on Christianity except for the bit about "Thou Shalt Not Commit Murder!". But they cheered up mightily when they realized that some things didn't change at this particular waterhole. See, when the parson got carried away with his casting out of the baptismal demons and actually sloshed holy water into the billabong, the Hunters danced for joy, because at the end I was still bloody there. The parson reckoned it was conversion enthusiasm; I just had a good old laugh. Then, while I had a chance, I picked his mind about the big black storybook he carried. It had some interesting yarns in it...

Now, I'd had bit parts in some of the Hunters' stories, which is why they kept visiting. Still do, the last time being only last month, with several lawyer chappies in tow. Figure they must be planning a land claim, which is fine, so long as they don't get the idea they own this place. I suppose that's maybe what brought you here, though you've got the song in your head, I can tell by the rhythm of your tap, tap tap. One catchy little ditty, innit? Whitefellas' dreaming, that's what the Hunters reckon, but they know there's more to the story than what the poet wrote down in his little book. Like the swagman, f'r instance.

Now I've seen swaggies over the years, and never a one's been what you might call jolly. Jolly skinny, maybe, and jolly down at heel, but never cheerful. Life's hard for roving farmworkers, which is the polite way of putting it, the impolite way being tramp. That summer was tough for everything in the district: heatwave, dry, and all sorts of trouble among the ghostgums, that I never quite worked out, except that it had to do with sheep. Jumbuck, that's the word the poet used, though nobody says that now. Funny how the name came about, from the Hunters mishearing "*Jump Up!*" and thinking it was the proper noun. Knowing the way drovers swear, it's lucky we didn't have flocks of *fornicators* all over the place.

Anyway, early one evening I got a visitor, creeping through the trees, a big heavy swag near bending him double. When he dropped the load I

saw he was a skinny old fella, bald as an egg on top, with a long stringy grey beard. He had a way of looking around, as if someone were after him, and I knew why. That bag of his smelt of someone else's tucker.

He got his breath back, and then he unrolled the swag, to reveal a mass of dusty curls. Dead sheep, but not any old hunk of mutton, because the kink and thickness of that wool said pedigree merino. Madman, I thought, or too starved to care, or both. He got out a big knife, and started carving up the carcass like a butcher. The blowies of course made a beeline, but he just stopped, dug a deep hole and buried the innards, being tidy, or covering his tracks. The hide he hung over a bough, for drying later. Then he started a small fire, banking it up so it got hot enough for a roast. He was so peckish by this stage that he was fair drooling.

Some galahs up in the treetops were having a squawking match, so he didn't hear, like I did, the sounds of a party of three or four on horseback, coming up quietly. He was just sitting there, staring into his fire, and I caught the topmost thoughts in his mind. They were mostly about roast lamb, but there was other stuff, recent too, about a couple of young lovers lying dead and bloody in a paddock. Been to a bushdance, they had, going home happy as lizards until they met this jolly swaggie. He grinned at the memory, and I started to get an odd feeling about him. The word's at the back of your mind, if you don't mind I'll borrow it. Yep, *déjà vu*.

I got distracted from what he was thinking then, because the next lot of visitors were nearing, as close to tiptoe as a horse can get. There was tracking going on, the sort of thing the Hunters do better than anyone else, but it wasn't a roo hunt, more a manhunt. That must have been one prize jumbuck, I thought, and sat back to witness the music, not that any of us knew the song then. The horses stopped for a while and there was a bit of whispering. Then they CHAAARGED!

It wasn't true that the squatter rode up on his thoroughbred — I reckon that was just the poet putting himself in the story. He did get it right about the three police, for what came galloping through the trees were two young constables, both new chums, and a black tracker, one of the Hunter family. The old swaggie jumped like he'd been shot, which he hadn't, it being damn hard to hit anything from a speeding horse. He let out a screech, as though he'd just seen one of the parson's demons. See, the jumbuck was weighing on his conscience, as were the lovers lying dead in the paddock, and a lot of other bad stuff too.

The swaggie had no place to run, as the coppers were coming hard and fast, so he threw himself into the billabong. As he hit water I caught a

thought of his, that maybe this wasn't a good idea, because he was starting to remember the place. I got the picture then, clear in his mind, of young Ghostgum when he was clean-shaven and had a full head of hair, aiming with his shotgun at the black bodies splashing away from him. Fifty years ago, it had been, and now there came more evil memories, the lass back in England with her cut throat, and a whole bunch of others, all of them unable to fight for their lives.

As I said before, I think a story should have a beginning, middle and end. I like a moral too, and this filthy coward never had a proper one made of him, because transportation only gave him more places to get away with murder. Also, it had been a long time since I'd been in a story. So, when he surfaced he found me, getting physical just for him, which meant large as life and twice as ugly. He got such a shock he went and p-ed himself, and because he'd polluted my billabong *again*, I spat the dummy. I just grabbed him in my jaws and drowned him in the mud at the bottom of the waterhole. Then I threw the body twenty or so feet up in the air, and it came crashing down in front of the coppers.

I can do the police in different voices: the Irish bloke said "*Uisge-each*", the Scots bloke said "*Kelpie*"; all translations for what the black tracker thought, but didn't say, because you don't talk about some things with the uninitiated. As they'd good and got the point, I disappeared into the water, making it look as if it was boiling, just for effect. Oh, I know I was showing off, but it only happens once in a blue moon, orright? They exchanged glances, and then, because they had evidence of sheep-stealing and the culprit had been banged to rights, against the ground in fact, they made the most of the opportunity. Gathering up the remains of jumbuck and swagman, they loaded them onto the spare horse, and skedaddled.

Course, back at the station questions might have been asked, about the guilty party's broken bones, from the fall, and his drowning in a waterhole the locals knew was only a foot deep during the dry season. But he was just helping with police enquiries, you see. I reckon that if I hadn't interfered, they'd have had the pleasure of beating confessions out of him to decades of unsolved homicides. Ah, but then all those books saying whodunnit, fictions the lot of them, would never have been written. Nor the song, because the poet didn't want to write about a murderer, he wanted a working class hero, even if it was a swaggie. He was slightly commie at the time, but soon got over it.

I knew the black tracker wouldn't talk, so it must have been one of the others, over a few beers in a shanty, maybe. Coupla years later the poet

heard a wisp or shred of the story, and showed up one day on his thoroughbred, seeking inspi-bloody-ration. He thought he'd write a nice little song about a haunted billabong. Course it wasn't haunted, except by yours truly, but I just couldn't seem to get that through his head.

You've gone all quiet now, no more tap tap tap. Well, just then I went quiet myself, as you do when the silence of this place gets to you, and you just want to listen. Oh, tap tapping again, are we? I've got the feel of your thoughts now, I know that what you've got there is a new-fangled notebook, a machine for storytelling. Mind if I sneak a look over your shoulder, see through your eyes a mo? I do like a good yarn.

Well, blow me down, if all those lines and squiggles there aren't your story, but *mine*. And all the time there I was thinking I was talking to myself as usual, with nobody listening. Psychic, are you? Part Hunter? Gotta say one thing, you're good at taking dictation, much better than the poet. That's word perfect, faithful. Good as your other little stories, that you write in this notebook? It's only my second attempt...

What you're gunna do with it, though, now you've got the real story behind the ballad? A yarn's made for spinning to others, you know. Think you got a sure little earner there, good as "Waltzing Matilda", by Mr A.B. Paterson and A.N. Other? Like I said before, it's not as if I've got any use for money, bunyips don't, on the whole. So take it and good luck to you.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

The lyrics to most nationalistic songs usually don't bear close examination; and "Waltzing Matilda" has a plot as well. My old literary gossip Daisy Rose (pseud.) and I started picking holes in it one day, making comments like "Whoever heard of anyone drowning in a billabong?", or "Why send three coppers to arrest a sheep-thief?" and "Why didn't they just drag him out and arrest him?". Conclusion: the bunyip did it. Hence this story.

— *Lucy Sussex*

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UNBORN AGAIN

CHRIS LAWSON

Chris Lawson writes: "I grew up with pet crocodiles in Papua New Guinea. I now live in Melbourne with my wife Andrea. We have a pet cat, which is far less exotic than a crocodile, but more relaxing to have on your lap. While studying medicine, I earned extra money as a computer programmer, and I have worked as a medical practitioner and as a consultant to the pharmaceutical industry. I continued my tumble down the food chain when I took up writing."

The story that follows will make you uncomfortable ... will make you wonder ... might even call you out to action. It's about pragmatism and pain and the nightmares of John Stuart Mill.

* * * *

Take lamb's brains fresh from the butcher's block and soak them in icy water. Starting from the underside, peel off all the arteries under running water, add lemon and salt, and boil in water. Once boiled, dry the brains, quarter them, and marinate them for ten minutes. Serve them with steamed custard and Tabasco sauce.

The delicacy of the dish is exquisite, and I can easily digest two portions. Eating is more than a necessity; sometimes it is a pleasure; now it is a duty.

The brains slide down like oysters. I love the texture and the tang of the sauce. The pinot noir is a touch dry, but not enough to tarnish the flavour of the brains. Good wine is virtually unaffordable in Hong Kong nowadays.

The marinade is an old family secret, but I don't want it to die with me, so here it is: ginger, spring onion, rice wine, sesame oil, and oyster sauce. And my own variation: a dash of pituitary extract.

* * * *

"In here." The nurse shows the way into the room. The walls are antiseptic white. The bed is made with clinical precision. Sitting in a chair is the room's sole occupant: a woman in her mid-forties who rocks and drools like a

demented centenarian.

“Ignore it,” says the nurse. “She always does that when a visitor comes. She’s perfectly able to hold one end of a conversation during the day. She only becomes confused at night.”

Stepping into the room is a small man in a brown suit. His tie is knotted too tightly, and the purple paisley teardrops clash with the khaki suit so gratingly that his colleagues have been known to grind their teeth down to the gums. His hair has somehow defied the short cut and fallen into disarray.

“She has Alzheimer’s?” the brown-suited man asks the nurse.

“Something like that,” the nurse says. “If you need anything, just hit the buzzer there.”

The nurse leaves, and the brown-suited man finds himself standing, briefcase in hand, in front of this woman. Her face and skin look young, but she sways in time as she hums an unrecognisable tune.

“Dr Dejerine? I’m from the Customs Department.”

Dejerine smacks her lips and fixes the visitor with an unfriendly stare. “You look like a cheap detective.”

“I suppose I am. My name is Gerald Numis.”

“I won’t remember that, you know. Not by tomorrow.”

Numis nods. “I’ll give you a business card. How’s your long-term memory?”

“Better than my short-term memory, I’m disappointed to say. I didn’t expect it to be this way. I can quote verbatim the monograph I wrote twenty years ago.”

“What was it?”

“It’s called *Utilitarian Neurology*.” Dejerine looks at Numis as if that should mean something.

“What’s it about?”

Dejerine laughs. "I don't know. Maybe, if you're interested, you could look it up and then you can tell *me* what it means."

Numis coughs. "Do you remember what prions are?"

Dejerine nods. "Of course I do."

"There was an outbreak of Lethe disease in Hong Kong last year. Two people have already died and another five are infected. It's unprecedented — a prion disease that was once confined to the Papuan highlands, and a disease that has virtually disappeared with the decline of ritual cannibalism. The Chinese health ministry was terrified that they had a new, virulent form, so they posted the amino acid sequence on the internet. It corresponds to a rare variation that was registered to your lab."

"What a remarkable coincidence," says Dejerine.

Numis continues. "Coincidence? Lethe disease has never been known to jump a thousand miles overseas to a non-cannibal culture, and no-one can suggest a natural vector for this unprecedented event. And there's the matter of ten missing vials from your lab. And the visas. You visited Hong Kong twice five years ago, which just happens to be the incubation period of Lethe disease. The coincidences are piling up."

"A close shave with Occam's razor," she says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Occam's razor. Very good for shaving." She laughs.

Numis thinks for a moment. This woman is blatantly demented, or an exceptional actor; either way he doubts that charges will ever be laid. The Director of Public Prosecutions will probably let her rot in this room. If the Chinese police see her, they will lose interest in extradition. Numis concludes that the whole visit will be a waste of his efforts. However, he has a job to do and he believes in procedure.

"Did I mention the visas?" Numis asks.

"No," says Dejerine, and smiles crookedly.

Numis knows he mentioned the visas. He knows her short-term memory is not *that* badly affected. He decides this woman is not nearly as demented as she makes out. He wonders how much of her disability is

from disease and how much is a sham.

“Dr Dejerine, I have to caution you that transporting a biohazard without customs approval is a serious offence. You may request legal advice before answering any further questions.”

“So convict me. It’s just a change of prison.”

“Are you declining legal counsel?”

“Did you know that *prison* is just *prion* with an S?” She giggles at her own joke.

“Dr Dejerine, are you declining legal counsel?” he asks again.

“Yeah, sure.” Dejerine nods in agreement.

Numis places a tape recorder on the bed and taps the record button. “This is a taped recording of an interview with Dr Claudia Dejerine. Present are Dr Dejerine and Mr Gerald Numis, Senior Customs Investigator, Biomedical Division.” He checks his watch. “The time is 2:47 pm on the 19th of March. Tell me what happened, Dr Dejerine. In your own words.”

Dejerine says, “I wrote it down somewhere so I could explain it when someone like you came along. Now where did I put it?” She rummages in her bedside drawer and withdraws a foolscap notebook, bound in leather. “Here it is.”

Numis opens the pages. They are handwritten. The scrawl is cramped and careless, the work of an author unconcerned with appearance.

“Dr Dejerine has just given me a handwritten document,” he says for the benefit of his tape recorder. Numis sits down to read; the recorder recognises silence and switches to standby.

* * * *

My name is Claudia Dejerine and I was once Professor of Pathology. The other things you need to know about me are that I had a friend called Leon Shy-Drager; I cook as well as any *cordons bleu* chef; and I speak to John Stuart Mill in my dreams. It’s not so strange. They say one of the US Presidents’ wives used to seek advice from an imaginary Eleanor Roosevelt.

My father died when I was a girl. I remember him sitting me on his lap in his study and pointing out all his favourite books. On the desk he kept two antique portraits of serious-looking men.

“Two great minds,” my father said. “Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the Fathers of Utilitarianism. They wrote about morals. They said the best outcome is the one that gives the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Life’s not as simple as that, you know, but their ideas were magnificent.”

After Dad’s funeral, I asked Mum what “Tootilitism” was, and she pointed out Dad’s copies of *On Liberty* and *System of Logic*, and held back tears.

“You can read them when you’re older,” she said.

Dad had been tall and gaunt, like Mill. His build was imposing and I remember it clearly, but his face started to blur in my memory. His lanky frame and my strong association of Dad with the antique portraits sculpted an image for me. Over the years, the image I had of my father merged into that of John Stuart Mill. Dad was in the grave, but *On Liberty* was on the shelf any time I liked, so even his words started to merge. Eventually the figure who visited me in my dreams became indistinguishable from the portrait on Dad’s desk. Over the years, the works of John Stuart Mill consumed the memory of my father.

* * * *

By my thirty-ninth birthday, my hands shook more than the young Elvis Presley. I did my best to keep the shakes from public view, but my tremor was too coarse to hide. My hands were safe at rest, but when I tried to use them they would turn stiff as lead and shudder just like a learner driver bunny-hopping a car. Cooking became impossible.

I knew the diagnosis before my doctor gave it to me: Parkinson’s disease. Deep in my brain, the *substantia nigra* was rotting away.

Leon Shy-Drager, my friend, also had Parkinson’s, but at the more reasonable age of fifty eight. For him, though, age was no excuse for complacency. He wanted every chance, regardless of legality.

Leon was no stranger to breaking the law. He frequently downloaded illegal research from the black net, and used the work of unethical

researchers to design his own studies. Ethics committees vetted his work of course, but none of his “ethical” work would have been possible without the black research. I have always wondered exactly how well informed the ethics committees were. Surely they must have been aware that much of Leon’s work bore an uncanny resemblance to the more infamous examples of illegal research that leaked out of the black net. Leon always laughed when I brought it up.

“Of course they know,” he used to say. “But it’s a waste when good research goes unpublished. I make black research respectable for the mainstream journals.”

It was a sort of laundering process. “Money, like research, is just another avatar of information. Casinos launder cash. I launder science.”

He flew to Hong Kong, where he auctioned his life insurance for a nigral implant. It is illegal for any Australian citizen to procure one, even if the operation is performed overseas. This law — guilty even if committed on foreign soil — applies to only two other felonies: war crimes and paedophile sex.

Of course Leon told no-one about the procedure, but suspicion could not be contained. He flew out of the country on long-service leave and returned three months later with a marked improvement in motor skills. Some thought it a miracle. Most knew better.

Leon was a brave man. When he saw my hands shaking, he knew that I was falling off the same cliff that nearly claimed him. With enormous courage, he took me aside and risked jail by telling me what he had done. He told me every detail about the operation, even the petty ones. He gave me a contact number.

Leon never asked me to keep our conversation to myself, never begged me to stay away from the police. He trusted my friendship.

“I can’t do this,” I told him.

“You have to look after yourself. No-one else will.” When I looked away he said, “Think about it at least.”

I thought about it.

John Stuart Mill used to appear in my dreams every month or so, but he came more often during crises of conscience. That week he spoke to

me every night.

I would dream of a study lined with leather journals. Book dust sparkled in the candlelight. On the other side of a titanic oak desk sat Mill, age-whitened sideburns spilling over his coat and collar. He never wore shirtsleeves. Even in dreams, he would not allow himself such informality.

Every night for a week, he would lean on the desk and say, “The foetuses are dying anyway. You know that. It’s silly to fret over the use of a by-product. You can implant those brains and heal people, or you can throw the foetus in the bin. It makes no difference to the foetus.”

“But it’s illegal in Australia!” I objected.

He smiled at me. “Illegal, eh? I have always maintained that Law and Morality are at best dancing partners, and clumsy ones at that. For every deft step, a hundred toes are trampled.”

Ever so slowly, the ghost of John Stuart Mill whittled away my objections, one moral sliver a day.

* * * *

Numis puts down the book and stretches his arms. He cannot believe his luck. This demented woman wrote down all the incriminating evidence he would need to fire the prosecutor’s engine. Numis is not aware that the law insists the defendant must be mentally fit to stand trial, even if the crimes were committed in a lucid state of mind. Numis is not a lawyer. He is familiar only with the Customs Act.

He looks over at Dejerine. She is rocking back and forward, staring out the window, still entranced by a view that has remained exactly the same for the last hour. A prison sentence is out of the question, but perhaps a conviction could act as a deterrent to others. He returns to the book.

* * * *

The clinic was called The Lucky Cat Hotel: “Lucky Cat” to appeal to superstitious millionaires, “Hotel” to conceal its purpose. My room had a million-dollar view over Kowloon Harbour, but unlike a hotel room it had a nurse’s buzzer and a medical dataport.

The hotel is ignored by the Chinese authorities, who find it a useful

way of bringing hard currency to mainland China in exchange for thousands of recycled foetus brains. I find it hard to imagine the Hong Kong of twenty years ago, when the ultra-capitalist port was an unwelcome barnacle on the hull of communist China. Now the old British colony is too moneyed to shut down, and China's bicycling masses give way to retired Maoists in Mercedes.

The "Hotel" reeked of pine and ammonia. The hospital must have spent a sizeable portion of its operating budget on disinfectant, which banished the spice and sweat and humidity that had nearly overwhelmed me when I first arrived in Hong Kong. In a melancholy mood, I got to thinking that all this sterility was driving away life itself. I thought life was more than happy children and sunny parks. Life was bacteria and fungi and virions. What the hell was I doing here? Then I looked down at my rolling hands and remembered what it was like to cut sushi from a slab of tuna meat. When Dr Tang came to talk, I signed all the consent forms.

Dr Tang took care of me. He explained the procedure, told me the graft had an eighty percent success rate, and assured me that all foetal tissue came from abortions that were to be performed anyway. Then I waited for a donor to match my immune markers. I only waited two days. Leon had waited three weeks.

The operation was seamless. I can't see the scar at all. Dr Tang drilled a needle through my skull into the *substantia nigra*, and injected a bolus of fresh young brain cells. Within a few weeks, the new brain cells had differentiated into nigral tissue, and my tremors waned dramatically.

I could use my hands again. People could read my handwriting. At last I could cook the way I had always loved cooking: with exquisite precision.

* * * *

Now Numis holds a written confession that Dejerine had bought an illegal graft; but her journal has not answered his main question: what did she do with the Lethe prions? Did she sell it to China as a biological weapon? Was it a trade — a weapon for a cure?

The sun has moved noticeably, but she still stares out the same window and her only movement is a gentle rocking, as if she is impatient for *something*. Numis cannot imagine what she could be waiting for. The next mealtime? The evening games shows on cable? A more entertaining visitor?

* * * *

The results of the surgery were stunning. I felt my dexterity renewed. The Parkinson's was a fading memory, just a sepia photograph of a long-dead disease. My hands did exactly what I asked of them. Tremors only affected my fingers when I was tired, and they were barely discernible even then.

When we met, Leon smiled at me and never said a word. I tried to thank him but he always cut me off. He did not want to hear the words. My improved health was enough for him. He knew I was grateful without being told, and for a while I really was grateful.

Then, just as I was adapting to my wonderful new hands, the pain started.

At first it only happened in my sleep. I woke curled up with pain and in a pall of sweat. I recalled dreaming about bright lights and a deep pain that I could not name. As soon as I awoke, the sensations disappeared, but the memory remained.

After a few nights waking at three am, I was exhausted.

Then the pains started during the day.

If I drifted off or daydreamed, I would be startled by the pain. Every day it seemed worse. It was a deep ache in the pit of my stomach, but I can describe it no better than that. I asked Leon about it, and he ran through a medical checklist of "character of pain": burning, i stabbing, shooting, electric, crushing, bloating. None of the words were adequate. The pain was too ill-defined to label. Leon said abdominal pain could be from the gut, the heart, the liver, the pancreas, the kidneys, the uterus, the abdominal lymph nodes, the lower surface of the lungs, the hips, or even from the psyche.

"Well, that sure narrows it down," I said. "I suppose that rules out maybe five percent of my body."

"I forgot about the spine. It could be nerve root irritation too."

"Thanks, Leon. You're a hypochondriac's best friend."

Leon looked worried. "None of this happened to me," he said. "I can't figure out what's causing it. You really should check it out with your doctor."

“Yeah, right. What should I tell her about the implant?”

Leon shrugged.

By the third month the pain was hitting me at any time of day, even when I was alert and concentrating. Once it hit me while I was overtaking a truck and I doubled up with pain, unable even to care about driving the car safely. I slid off to the other side of the road and hit the brakes just in time to stop myself scooting into the freeway barrier.

After that I took taxis everywhere.

Once the pain hit me while I was walking along the street. I fell to the pavement and then had to hide my embarrassment when a flock of Samaritans came to help me. I laughed the pain off. “Sometimes I just faint,” I said. I was not very convincing, but what was a bystander to think? They let me go on my way.

After that I rarely went out in public.

The pain even caught me once while I was preparing a Japanese meal. The sashimi knife sliced through my hand like warm butter. I needed twenty stitches and a tendon repair.

After that I stopped cooking.

I stowed away all the sharp objects in the house. I bought a personal medical alarm. Soon my life was so restricted that I began to wish I could turn back the clock. Parkinson’s was paradise in comparison.

Sometimes the pain came unaccompanied. Other times my field of vision would fill with strange patterns of light. I looked up a medical textbook. It could have been a migraine prodrome, but that would be more like shooting stars or blind spots, not at all like my strange visions. One possibility matched: temporal lobe epilepsy, which causes bizarre hallucinations. Sufferers can smell burning rubber, or sense objects shrinking around them, or experience extreme *déjà vu*; sometimes they even think they are walking in a forest only to wake up tied to a hospital bed. However, temporal lobe epilepsy could explain just about *any* symptom, and I would need a brain scan to investigate it. I was terrified of a scan showing the evidence of my illegal surgery.

Leon caught up with me at one of my rare appearances at work. He

had been worried, and my feeble attempts at reassuring him only made him more concerned.

“I think I have an answer,” he said. “Meet me tonight in my lab.”

“You’ve got a solution?”

“Just meet me.” His eyes looked away as he spoke. He was avoiding the question. So he had an answer, but not a solution. He had gone before I could ask why he made the distinction.

That night, at his lab, Leon showed me a maze. “I used this as a post-grad. It has sentimental value. I used it to replicate a classic experiment.”

“How does this help me, Leon?”

He looked at me sternly. “I’ll get to that.” He waved his hands over the maze. “It’s an unusual design because it’s made for *Planaria* flatworms. I’d put a worm at one end of the maze, food at another, and let the worm go. After a few hundred trials they would get pretty quick at doing the maze.

“I took all these trained worms and threw them in a blender. Worm puree. Then I fed the remains to another bunch of flatworms. Worms aren’t fussy, you see.”

“I guess not.”

“The amazing thing was, the new worms did the maze quickly. They were faster than a control group fed on a puree of *untrained* worms. They were also faster than a group of worms fed on the remains of worms trained in a *different* maze.”

“You were a Worm Runner?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. I even had a couple of articles in *The Worm Runner’s Digest*.”

“I had no idea you were that old!”

“Hey! The *Digest* only stopped publishing in 1979.”

I laughed. “I wasn’t even born.”

He coughed.

“Besides,” I asked, “wasn’t the research shown to be flawed?”

“Not exactly. It was equivocal.”

“Equivocal. You mean equivocal, equivocal? Or equivocal, there’s lots of black data in support that’s too politically sensitive to publish?”

“It means memory might be transferred in tissue from other animals’ brains.”

I laughed. “Leon, I never took you for a New Age mystic. Are you trying to tell me I’m remembering life as a foetus?”

He looked at me but said nothing. He was waiting for me to figure something out.

“Seriously, Leon. You’re not trying to tell me I’m having foetal flashbacks? Like I’m unborn again?”

“No,” he said. I was missing the point. “I had an implant too, but I’ve had none of your symptoms. Foetal brain tissue is probably too undifferentiated and too unstimulated to have any real memories in it.”

“So, if we both got foetal tissue, why is it only me with the pains?”

“It’s possible you didn’t get foetal tissue,” he said, and I felt a cold shiver as he spoke. “It had to be reasonably undifferentiated to work as a nigral implant, but already has memories.”

Then he was quiet again, damn him, waiting for the realisation to hit me. I cocked my head and tried to work out what he was getting at. His face gave away nothing.

The penny dropped. From a skyscraper.

“Like an infant?” I asked.

Leon nodded.

“Jesus. Why would they put infantile tissue in, when they could have used foetal tissue?”

Leon grimaced. "You haven't heard of the Dying Rooms? If they can recycle aborted foetal tissue, why not tissue from killed infants?"

I did not want to hear any more. "Why tell me this, Leon? It's a disgusting thought."

"It's better to know, isn't it?"

Not always, Leon, not always. I remember at your funeral wondering if knowledge had killed you, too. If you had never cracked the ISIS-24 trial code, the netrunners might have left you alone.

* * * *

I dreamed that night that I was visited by the ghost of John Stuart Mill, or possibly my father. He was dressed in his formal suit. He spoke to me, his voice cold with certainty. By candlelight he tried to comfort me. He said, "There is no need for despair."

Fine for him to say! He could not share my feelings.

I told him, "I spent the day in the library reading about the Dying Rooms. In parts of rural China, baby girls are called 'maggots in the rice'. Under the one-child policy, no-one wants to squander their one chance at parenthood on a girl, so many babies are abandoned by their parents. The unwanted baby girls are brought to a room. There are up to twenty in a room at once. They are tied to chairs and left to starve. I can attest that they are too young to understand. Their pain is diffuse and undefined but the pain is real. The child whose memories I took suffered terribly."

John Stuart Mill said the infant would have died anyway: the Chinese have a one-child policy; boys are highly prized; therefore some parents will choose only to have boys; since antenatal testing and sperm selection is still unavailable in most of China, this inevitably leads some parents to abandon their daughters. Not many parents choose this option, but in a population over a billion, there will always be enough to keep the rooms filled.

I said, "And the Hong Kong clinics make enormous profits from those daughters. Those profits could be used to enable education campaigns to improve the status of girl children, or for sperm screening, or even for early antenatal testing. The profits could be turned to fix the problem rather than perpetuate it."

Mill was silent in thought a while, then said, “But *you* are not responsible for the situation in China. The killings would happen regardless. So it is no sin to benefit from it.”

“I *paid* for it. I helped finance the system.”

“No, those children would die anyway. Their pain is regrettable, but it is not your responsibility.”

“I *feel* responsible. I have eaten a child’s pain, and it is poison.”

He pondered again. His jaw clenched and relaxed as he chewed through his consternation, which made his sideburns wriggle up and down. His mind worked furiously at the problem. In his eyes I saw his certainty crack. No matter how he tried to shift and pivot, he was pinned on a moral spike; the same spike he had taught me, in his books, to use as a compass point. His face turned stony, then he stood up. His jacket creaked with age and dust fell from the sleeves.

He said, “Your pain is outside my theory.”

That night, in the moonlight of my dreaming, the ghost of John Stuart Mill hanged himself in the parlour, neatly. It had never occurred to me that ghosts could die.

The next evening, I dreamed again of his study, but he was gone. An empty noose swung gently from the rafters. In Mill’s place there was a dark, moist presence. I could feel it but never see it. It never moved but I could feel it watching me. A ghost of a ghost.

Once, and only once, the shadow spoke.

It said, “You know what to do.”

* * * *

Pathologists and food have an ancient marriage. Tuberculous pus is called *caseation*, from the Latin for cheese; horse blood is cooked to make *chocolate* agar; right heart failure causes *nutmeg* liver; diabetes mellitus means *honey* urine; people suffer *cucumber* gallbladder. Strawberries are particular favourites, leading to *strawberry* haemangiomas or, in Kawasaki’s disease, *strawberry* tongue. Well-differentiated lymphomas have a

raisin-like appearance. Squeamish? Consider *miliary* tuberculosis, which causes *sago* spleen. Autoimmune heart inflammation leads to *bread-and-butter* pericarditis; glomerulonephritis makes *cola* urine. If you have a truly strong constitution, you might consider *Swiss cheese* uterus, stomach acid acting on blood to make *coffee-grounds* vomitus, or my personal favourite: the post-mortem blood clot which separates, like boiled stock, into *chicken fat* and *redcurrant jelly*.

In ancient times, if you couldn't eat it, it wasn't pathology. I have merely carried on the relationship in a more palatable fashion.

I told Dr Tang how wonderful my implant was because I could cook again. It was so lovely to breathe in "coriander, and to taste garlic and lemongrass on my fingers. For the first time in months I could make proper *masala dosai*. I told him how grateful I was, and would he accept if I prepared a feast for him and his surgical colleagues next time I was in Hong Kong? He did not hesitate.

In Hong Kong I cooked one of my specialties: the lamb's brains. I soaked the brains in the Lethe prions I had stolen from the lab. Despite the change of recipe, they still tasted delicious. I served it up to Dr Tang and a few of his staff. I insisted on seconds for the tissue broker who had sold me the implant.

My guests loved it. They devoured every morsel.

Trojan *hors-d'oeuvres*, I call them. Just my little joke.

* * * *

Numis at last understands the purpose of the book. It is not, as he first suspected, a confession nor a request for absolution. It is a document designed to incriminate Dr Tang and the Lucky Cat Hotel, and the entire gulag of the death rooms. She has left a trail, hoping to be caught. She had already passed judgement on herself and executed her own sentence. It had such a glowing irony that she was unlikely to be punished further by the constabulary of Australia or China.

Mobilising Western nations against human rights abuses in trading partners has long been like rousing a snail to anger. Perhaps her revelations will move the great nations to outrage, maybe even China itself. Cynic that he is, Numis thinks any outrage will not come from the use of dead children to earn money. Rather, he imagines the statesmen and

power-brokers of the world choking on their breakfast as they read in the morning papers that their brain implants came from murdered girls.

What Numis does not realise is that Dr Leon Shy-Drager never existed. It is a code name, but she has lost the key in the Lethe. Dr Shy-Drager has a real-life analogue, dead three years now, but there are insufficient details in the text to make a positive identification. Dr Dejerine took great pains to protect her friend's memory from recrimination. Sadly, even the good memories will have to be carried by others. Her own memory is crumbling. She has a recurring image of a bearded man laughing, but she can no longer put a name to the face. She recalls a funeral, but no longer knows who died or why she wept.

Numis stands and tucks the book under his arm and picks up his tape recorder. Dejerine is still looking out her window. Only the shadows have moved.

"Thank you for your cooperation," he says gently. She does not hear him.

"Dr Dejerine? Hello?"

She whips around, startled. "Who the hell are you?" she screeches.

"Gerald Numis. Er ... Customs Investigator."

"Get the hell out, whoever you are!"

"I just wanted to say ..."

Dejerine starts screaming "Help! Help! Help!" with mechanical regularity.

Numis rushes out of the room, book safely tucked away in his jacket. The nurse who introduced him chuckles as he bolts for the exit.

"Don't fret, Mr Numis. At least she's not crying 'Rape!' like she did with her last visitor."

The doors slide open and he rushes into the carpark. He never thought asphalt and petrol fumes could be so reassuring. As Numis fiddles for his car keys, he can hear the faint "Help! Help! Help!" It reminds him of a distant car alarm. At this distance he feels no social obligation to help. He turns and looks back at the window to Dejerine's room and wonders now

whether she was acting after all. Realising that he will never know, he shrugs and blips the car.

Under his breath he mutters, “Mad old cow.” As he drives away, the image of rotting brains haunts him.

Back in her room, Dejerine is comforted by the nurse, whom she recognises.

“It’s okay. He’s gone now. He’s gone,” the nurse whispers in her ear.

Dejerine stops screaming and the tears roll down her cheek. “I was so scared! What did he want?”

“He just came to fix something. He’s gone now.” It is easier to lie than explain.

She settles, and turns back to the window. The nurse leaves, pleased to have calmed her before she disturbs another resident. Sometimes one resident’s distress can trigger another’s, and then another’s, in a screaming domino effect.

Dejerine looks out at the dusky light. Her eyes see a shape move in the distance. The image on her retina is as keen as a sashimi knife, but her disease reduces the crisp image to a cognitive blob drifting across her cortex. It could be a car leaving the grounds. Then the scene is still. She rocks back and forward again, soothed by the abstract clouds that filter through to consciousness. She tries to remember why she is impatient in this purgatory. She is bathing in the Lethe and her memory is slowly washing away in its waters. She feels cleaner every day.

As the sky darkens and the stars appear, she recalls what it is she so desperately awaits:

The fall of night.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Why did I write this story? I was brainstorming titles for another story altogether and the title came to me — “Unborn Again”. I had no idea what it meant, but it sounded good. The title made me think of the foetal implants

used for Parkinson's disease, and the story concept was born. From there the plot and characters arose. But I had a problem: I could not believe that foetal brain tissue would be sufficiently differentiated to carry coherent memories. It's a bit much for me to ask the reader to suspend disbelief when I couldn't do it myself.

After a few weeks soaking in my unconscious, the solution struck me: what if the tissue was not foetal? What if it came from neonates? From there I researched the Chinese Dying Rooms and learned that the truth was much worse than my imagination had allowed. Now I had a setting (partly in Hong Kong under Beijing) and a moral core (a *reductio ad absurdum* of utilitarianism). All that time I thought the story had been rotting, it had been composting.

So it is with some embarrassment that I confess "Unborn Again" was not inspired by moral outrage, but because I thought up a snappy title.

Where did the rest of the story come from? I can't really say. Thousands of bits of information; things I've read or seen; people I've spoken to; ideas that intrigued me ... neural implants and prion diseases, the handover of Hong Kong; internet censorship and research ethics; cuisine (the brains are based on a real recipe); pathology nomenclature; molecular theories of memory; philosophy and ethics; a few puns and inside jokes (Shy-Drager and Dejerine-Stotts are rare neurological diseases) ... all of these ingredients were thrown into the story. Probably no more than a handful of people have the right collection of trivia in their heads to have thought up this particular story. Likewise, I could never have conceived of most of my favourite stories, such as "Flowers For Algernon" or "Fondly Fahrenheit". The experiences and readings necessary to write those stories are outside my light-cone ... which is precisely why I read.

For the record, "Unborn Again" is *not* anti-abortion; nor, you may be surprised to read, is it anti-utilitarian. There's not enough room here to give a thorough explanation and I leave it to the inquiring reader to examine John Stuart Mill's philosophy, its triumphs and its limitations.

* * * *

China has a venerable tradition of oxymorons, from the People's Liberation Army to the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute; the latter is responsible for orphans and disabled children. The Institute "cares" for many children, mostly girls. The orphanages are tough for all their wards, but those who are ill or require exceptional care — and sometimes those who are naughty or "just not good looking" — are marked for *jiudi jkjue*, or "Summary

Resolution”, a new entry in the Thesaurus of Euphemisms.

The existence of the Dying Rooms is denied by China, but their practices are documented by the United Nations, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch/Asia.

Thanks to One World Online for their excellent Web resource. You can find them at <http://www.oneworld.org> for superb coverage of international issues with a human rights angle.

Brian Woods, the journalist who covered the story, helped set up The Dying Rooms Trust, 68 Thames Road, London W4 3RE, United Kingdom.

Amnesty International can be found on the Web at <http://www.amnesty.org>.

Human Rights Watch can be contacted at 485 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6104, USA.

— *Chris Lawson*

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THE LATEST DREAM I EVER DREAMED

NORMAN TALBOT

Norman Talbot was born in Gislingham, England and emigrated to Australia in 1963. He has published nine books of poetry and appeared in many anthologies. He founded the small press Nimrod Productions, which is currently publishing a series of critical monographs on science fiction writers. He has taken early retirement from the University of Newcastle, where he was an Associate Professor, to become a full-time writer. His first novel has just been submitted to the tender mercies of its potential publisher.

Here is a deadly fever-dream of a story that works as satire and as a completely realised future; like Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, it is cheerfully unnerving and joyfully experimental.

* * * *

"Dream, you Gondwanian dole-blotcher bankrupt, dream!"

I'd had the training. Looked like Dreamteam had picked me to be the one picked up.

"Moderate your language and give our friend one more shot, Lieutenant Doctor."

Shot? One millisec of Hypnovec, as they say. Designed to make your unconscious get up on its little stage and sing all its greatest hits.

"Shot or half-jolt, Madam Surgeon? He's had a full shot this am. And he's very old."

"Hit double-top, Lieutenant Doctor. The shot. Doesn't much matter if there's impairment, where he's going. Once we've stripped down his dream." Pause. "Confucius said, 'Forgive the young their errors, but an old man who still knows nothing deserves no pity'."

Hit, shot, jolt. Such violent words for so gentle a techne.

“Impairment” sounds much more restful. InterMed also calls Hypnovec “White Light”. Nearest they get to poetry. And what’s he mean, “very old”?

All that training. And when it counts I can’t remember a thing. Except that the Visreal the Dreamteam taught me with had a red square, top left, the Gondwana branch-and-sword emblem centred, and EVENTUALITY FOUR under it. But what did it teach me? Let’s hope it taught me well!

“Stand by, InterMed Six. Highlight all anomalies, no matter how trivial. Remember, Team, observe, record, analyse, but do not respond. The unconscious we investigate holds the calling-cards of Gondwanian subversion groups, their virtual coordinates, the works. The dream will contain them; all we have to do is identify them. Unconscious minds are sumps for memory seepage. Keep clear, keep calm.”

“Yes, Madam Surgeon. Stand by all. Vids A OK. All systems receiving, Ma’am.”

White Light. From everywhere. So I dreamed.

I dreamed I was visiting a grave. Even in the dream I was concerned, because I wasn’t sure whose grave it was. My mother’s? But she drowned at McMurdo. My father’s, maybe. But it wasn’t where my father is buried in my waking life, and I was not as I am. That is to say, I was a variant, an alternative version. Oh, and young.

In my dream I had thick, short, weathered hands, calloused and knobby at the joints. My nose when I squinted at it was coarse, quite big, open-pored. There was tangled hair, very unwashed, under the back of my cap, and I had a hack-cough. My clothing was wrong too: big loose-woven sweater (home-made?), khaki shapeless coat tied at the waist with string. A mack, grating on the sweater. Not much under that, because the sweater scratched my shoulders. Chaplin trousers, were there drawers underneath? Something. And boots.

The boots I could see properly. Black, heavy hobnails, the insteps creased and cracked by daily all-weather work, but they’d been greased faithfully. Goosegrease! Imagine when there were geese, so many that people boiled them down for grease! No, that’s silly ... Farmer’s-boy boots, laced up through twenty four little brass eyelets, and the laces tied twice round the ankles.

When I looked down at them I knew where they were standing. England, years before the Multi-Nat War. A rutted cart-track along a headland, with rain spitting out of low cloud. Winter ploughland. No hedges and a thin wind. Farther off, a bare oak, some elms. Extinct in waking life, of course. Like these clothes. And this place would be all built over. Elms might even have been extinct before De-fol. Long before our Counter-Meteorology came in.

“Madam Surgeon! That’s the second reference to the McMurdo Incident! I was in the Macquarie Island assault squad when the Gondwanian Counter-Meteorology hit us —”

“No doubt that experience will increase your alertness in this investigation, Sergeant.”

“Everything went mad, Ma’am! It was —”

“I’d prefer it remained ‘unspeakable’, Sergeant.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

But when I moved, took a step forward, everything altered. Completely. A vivid green-meadow landscape, dog-roses and whitethorn in the hedges, English birds singing: a robin, a chaffinch — take more than those four years of hiding out in the Nullarbor caverns to wipe out their songs! Light sky-blue sky. Sun. And a way off there were big leafy elms with a rookery, a few birds wheeling around and calling, old brick walls glowing warm under them. The grey block downhill, with mist round it, was a flint church-tower. East Anglia. Know it anywhere. Born there.

“Landscape” was right: somehow more like a picture than a place. I was still in my scarecrow get-up, stamping along a footpath, hedge on one side, cowless meadow on the other. Big mushrooms; so it was horseless, not cowless. The graveyard was down there ahead, and at every step the landscape unfolded slickly round me. Filmic.

When I stopped to try to see the place better, I was back on the cart-track. A cut to mud-ruts and long puddles can’t tell you much, so I got moving again, and the English May-time meadow rolled sedately downhill towards the church. The boneyard was calling.

“This is not authentic dreaming, Madam Surgeon. Too much organisation, no dumping.”

“Check the system, Lieutenant Doctor. REM?”

“EEGs read dream-state, Ma’am, well over into the black — I mean the eidetic, sorry Ma’am.”

“Oneirographic range?”

“Systole 7.7, diastole 16.1. Dream-state, but SDG reads irregular clonic break-ups across the Bion cells. That’s what’s inhibiting the near-memory dump. Bankrupting nuisance.”

“Watch that language, Lieutenant. Cryptocyte frequency, Intern?”

“Low but increasing, Madam Surgeon. Some heavy mapping, typical Gondwanian indulgence in ecological patterning.”

“The mapping is presbyopic memory, Intern. Childhood, or some such rubbish. Concentrate on recent ‘cytes. All-body functionality, Sergeant?”

“Dream-state, Madam Surgeon, Lieutenant Doctor. Conspicuous ciliary flex. But there’s too much temporo-spatial consistency —”

“Ever seen a sleep-walker, Sergeant? No, keep at it. It’s anomalies we’re looking for. What if their head-peelers have developed protected dreaming, Sergeant? With no dump?”

“Wouldn’t they go mad if they couldn’t dump, Ma’am?”

“How would you tell if a Gondwanian was mad? Carry on, Lieutenant Doctor.”

“Ma’am.”

The graveyard was wide, the graves flat slabs in long soaking green grass. Not a single headstone or footstone standing anywhere. Don’t know how big it was, but very big. A round, low, yellow sun was veiled and softened by the mist, and the long grass was hung with hundreds of dewdrops refracting little glories of light. Trim-edged, raked gravel paths looped in a vast tangle of intersections and dead ends: a maze. The rules were obvious: stay on the paths. And as soon as I realised that, I saw, at the centre, a Lady.

Ha! The snobbish archaic trivia a dream dredges out of you! This Lady! Like an old Multi-Nat cigarette-ad, she was. Striding, or pacing anyway. Big red-checked hunting jacket, thick woolly collar turned up in the morning sunlight. Gleaming hair, not any particular shade of fair, flopped casually over an orange headband. Keen bony face with an imperious chin. Her eyes would be grey, alert, impatient.

That jacket said she'd been up at dawn with the guns, and wasn't her Daddy proud of her! Brought down ten brace with twenty cartridges, eh? And her admirers, her suitors, awed: Lionel deucedly impressed anyway, Godfrey thoroughly dazzled, and Nigel more, well, disconcerted. Blast them all.

"Anomaly, Doctor: too many characters for dream."

"Madam Surgeon?"

"No, I think merely a spread of assorted names, Sergeant. But odd, certainly. Code for identifiable subversives?"

As soon as I stepped through the lichgate, the radiant mist cut off everything except green grass, grey graves, gold gravel, and the central Lady. Did she throw me a distant glance? Probably not.

She wasn't going anywhere, just prowling — I assumed waiting for me. If a path-curve brought me near she grew brighter, larger, but she could not possibly be any clearer. You know that terrible wrong-end-of-the-telescope sight, when guilt or a quarrel makes you feel miles away from someone inches away? Like when Deborah told me she'd virtualled into the Shakahachi Brigade screening Fujisan, and I said I wouldn't let her join ... Let her! Damn fool... Yeah. All blood under the bridge. Well, the Lady was as clear as that. In morning sunlight.

She glanced at me on my closest path, then down at my boots. Unsurprised. Mildly, coolly displeased. And yes, her eyes were grey. Under her big jacket her skirt must have been very short: I could only see knee-length socks and sensible shoes, as they called them at one time, in another country. A Lady from *True Romances*, fresh from drawing the coverts. You'd never think she'd spent all night keeping Lionel, Godfrey and Nigel on the respectable side of the oaken panels of her chamber. Or shagging them rigid inside, for all I know. Blast their square-jawed, pipe-clamping young-Lord-of-the-Manor grins.

I couldn't help the noise of my boots. She was so much more gravel-trained; made no more noise than those breakfast-cereals they had before the War. I hated my gravel-grinding, and when her lips framed a contemptuous halfsmile I hated it more. She said nothing. What could I say? The rules were obvious. Keep off the grass. The path twisted back away.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but what is this Gondo suspect drivelling on about? Is there info for us in this at all?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant Doctor, I will decide what constitutes information. If this is dreaming, it clearly has a new coding system. What will that tell us, Sergeant?"

"That they're onto ... That our analysts won't be able ... That they're reduced to ..."

"All sound thinking, Sergeant, but trivial. The one important thing it can tell us is the format of this new code-system — if we can de-program it ... Lieutenant Doctor, I want to splice in another team on this one. Call O/C NARCOtics and NARRatology Sector, Metro-Sanyo Quadrant."

"NARCONARR, Ma'am?"

"You don't approve, Doctor?"

"Bunch of X-filing whistle-blowing weirdos, Ma'am!"

"True. Get them. Do it now, Doctor."

"Ma'am."

She carried one glove in her other, gloved hand, and the most she would do was make one gesture with it, roundabout to her right. No, no Ariadne she! She wasn't solving the paths for me, merely minimising the amount of time she had to listen to my boots. I did my best to follow the gesture, awkward and sweat-soaked in those damn clothes. The sun had got hotter, the mist wetter, and the gold-gravel paths more tortuous. "Torturous", Deborah used to say.

More sensibly, I kept stopping. Shrewd, eh? Useful, in that hot graveyard, to get the cold winter of the cart-track into my lungs, and time to

think. At times the writhe of a path took me away from her, but she was openly watching me now. She couldn't know that when I stopped, flushed and sweaty, I was somewhere else.

There, between the brimming cart-ruts, were lines of moon-shapes, full of cloudy water. Goddess-worship? Some of us used it, but it wasn't that effective: nightmares and such take their toll, but not quickly. No! Hoofprints! From the feet of shod horses, way back. Then I was ashamed of the myself that was stumbling along those jinky, dinky paths, obediently keep-off-the-grassing, on the way to inevitable rebuff by the aristocratic, aloof contempt of that Lady. *By-True-Romances-out-of-Country-Life*: that's how the old horse-breeders would have put it — though that might be for racing-horses.

So I turned right-angles on my hob-nailed heel, and marched straight across the wriggling paths, the dewsoaked grass, the flat, unobtrusive, humble graves of insufficiently rude forefathers. The goosegrease on my boots was just as good against scintillating storybook dewdrops as against the long muddy ruts of deserted cart-tracks.

She should have glared, affronted, but she ignored me. Not convincing. When I got to her she stopped, looked away ... No, she was giving me her best side, treating me like the camera-bank in a damn Multi-V Reactive. Offering me the profile she had been saving for Lionel, Godfrey, Nigel. Oh, she didn't turn as if to greet Lionel as he strode, riding-boots gleaming, up the parterre for an on-set proposal, or to lift a brave, tender hand as Godfrey and Nigel motored up to Town to join the Foreign Legion. She knew I was there, though.

"Ma'am, excuse me. This isn't a real dream; it's a whatsit, a 'story'. Like those books he dreamed the titles of, True Romance and Country Lives. Info where every hit is untrue. Not even he thinks it's true! The Gondos have 'libraries', stores with hundreds of books in, printed on paper. Real tree-paper. Cost millions. When we took Washington ..."

"Thank you, Leftenant Doctor. I know about books. Comment, NARCONARR?"

"Provisional comment only. This is the Maud-plot, perhaps with what is called a 'happy ending'. The focaliser, a resentful dole-blotching lout, allegorises the Gondwanians, the Lady the Companies."

"But why, NARCONARR?"

"It is a story he tells himself, so that he can be happy surrendering to us."

"I see."

"Well, my man?" Her voice was crisp. Tart. Or acid. Acidulous. I should have realised that when I stopped I'd be back on the cart-track again. To hear what she was saying I had to sort of shift from foot to foot. Must have looked to her like the village idiot, embarrassed and out-classed. Couldn't be helped.

"Milady?"

"Do you suppose that by stamping over the maze you have 'solved' it?"

"Don't think I've hurt nuth'n, Milady. D'you hev a look." And I gestured back to my footsteps through the grass, distinct in the pristine brightness. Forty yards of big heavy bootmarks drawn furrow-straight over green, grey and gold, each one dark with the broken ichor of dewdrops.

"Nuth'n I c'n see, leastwise." I tried to keep my tone obsequious — or at least so rural in its component sounds that my delight would be undetectable. I may have smiled, just for a moment, but probably she was still profiling away, thinking how late the non-existent Lionel was, so it didn't matter. She'd been trained from birth to not notice the peasantry, after all.

"The Maze is for the noble-hearted only, the gentleman of true-bred spirit. Back to your plough! Shall the Quest Itself be shamed by your invasion of it?"

Oh, very scornful. And perfectly enunciated too. Belatedly and shamefaced, I removed my cap, ground my loud boot into disapproving gravel. But as I looked down to hide my smirks I tried to see if she was acting too. Was she? And if so, did she realise I was? Hadn't she heard Nigel was in Tijuana, acting in gay porn-films, and Godfrey giving interrogation classes to the Mandalay police? Oh, and poor old Lionel in the cellar of a Hull marina, with sinkers in his pockets and bags of white crystals up his arse?

"Are you getting this, NARCONARR? Waking-life overlap, surely. Have the Gondwanians got into our drug trade?"

“Getting it, InterMed. Checking also double focalisation convention (rare or v.rare). Extradiegetic locative signifiers identified. Each involves InterMed action: well-known defeats. Initial query: is extradiegesis designed to algebrise the audience-expectations of your own InterMed units?”

“Us, NARCONARR? For Corp’s sake, we’re only recording this crap!”

On the cart-track the rain was considerably heavier. I’d rather have been wearing my cap. The term Quest seemed to hint at those codifications of narrative so popular before Third War. Did she know other terms in the code?

“Is that it, NARCONARR? That code system, could that be the new way to splice info?”

“Not unreasonable, Madam Surgeon. But it’s more complex than that. She may be the one testing him, you see. If he now seeks to test her knowledge of the ‘code’, and if she therefore promotes him to a higher social function, we’ll know you were right. Such subtleties are typical of Gondwanian decadence.”

“Nothing’s ever open-body operations with them, it seems, Leftenant Doctor.”

“Ma’am.”

“Oi’m sorry, Milady. Oi din’t arsk t’be put intu no Quest.” I stepped closer.

“Naturally not. One does not issue an advertisement. However, and irrespective of whatever your Call may have implied — or have omitted to imply — one has grave doubts as to your eligibility.” Not narratologically sophisticated, but she knows something that might structure this dream.

“Yes’m.” Too much like a slave in an Archaeo-Reactive? Certainly her eye darted my way, then off again. Suspicion at last? I was never an actor.

“To take one small but apposite example,” she straightened her already upright back, “your dialect is barbarous. Can you not at least attempt to enunciate your words clearly?”

“Oi’d loike to, Milady, but” ... I wanted to try a modulation upwards, just to see how scornfully she would condescend to such crawling ambition, but knew I lacked the expertise. “I awriddy looked arter that, the fust time I dreamed thisyer dream.”

“Really?” She laughed, more uneasily, a Lady of the Manor confronted by a rudeness she is almost sure is deliberate, but as to whose meaning she is not at all clear. “Should you not rather say that you have dreamed yourself to be a gentleman, but that now the dream has vanished, leaving you — what you are?”

Then she erred, thus truncating the test-conversation. “And now you wonder if this cemetery, obviously both Maze and Entry to the Underworld, might not also be Wilderness? Are you not tempted to ask me, bold hero, whether I am a Virgin?”

And she added, presumably to herself but in that pitched-forward, highly audible whinny common to the country aristocracy of whenever in England she came from, “What a jumped-up boor it is!”

“No,” I said to the rain — but she could hear me. “Your term, Milady, is both ill-chosen and inapposite. It is ill-chosen, in that the Suffolk term ‘bor’ (in some enclaves ‘boorer’ or even ‘booiy’) is a term of respect, related to the Dutch ‘Boer’ and German ‘Bauer’, and the common compound ‘neighbour’. It is inapposite because, while you have been consistently dismissive and contemptuous towards me, I have remained respectful, even deferential to you — as far as my acting talents allow.”

“What?”

“Madam Surgeon! I’ve got a screenful of cryptocytes, a regular bearish dump!”

“At last! De-program in order of assimilation. Sergeant, run her verifications.”

“They’re all registering high-stress emotional colour, Ma’am, but I’m not getting correlatives!”

“Sergeant?”

“None of them check yet, Ma’am. But it seems like...”

“Seems, Sergeant?”

“Sorry, Madam Surgeon.”

What came next? I was at too sudden an advantage. At random I quoted, “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh”. Fairly appropriate, for a dream. She swallowed (rather loudly and not at all like a dream) and muttered “*Jane Eyre*” to the vanishing Lionel.

Then she stepped close, very close, to me. A light breeze stirred, and the mist was almost gone. A blackbird was singing, then a robin, answered by another. I put my right arm round her and kissed her cold cheek.

She sighed. Yes, really. Then she muttered something (“Very well”? “Lionel, farewell”? “Oh, hell”? Certainly not “At last, my own!”) and kissed me hard on the lips. Then she slipped my left hand inside her coat and onto her right breast. It was erect, cold and lovely: she wasn’t wearing anything under that big woolly-on-the-inside coat. I swayed — rather than go back to the cart-track — and she leaned her whole weight into my chest. A sturdy Lady.

“Go on, go on!”

“Ma’am?”

“Why doesn’t he go on? Bankruptcy, but that Lady Chatterley stuff gets to me! My first, you know, was with a Senior W.O. when I was in Officer Training ...”

“Sergeant! It’s Sergeant Barry, Ma’am! He’s fallen!”

“Mm.”

“Are you all right, Madam Surgeon?”

“Oh. Oh. That’s so nice ...”

“NARCONARR! This dole-blotcher dream has had ... had an effect on my CO. And my Senior Sergeant has totally lost it. I need a Plot whatsis —”

“Summary, Lieutenant? Reprise? Narrative Redirection?”

“That last, NARCONARR. Urgent.”

“Would a cemetery focus be acceptable, Lieutenant? Touch of *Night Thoughts?*”

“Anything! This is bottom-line urgent! My Sergeant’s in some sort of fit!”

“Narrative Redirection highcast, all channels. Stand by, Lieutenant. Stand by all.”

“I’m supposed to weep and sigh full sore.”

“Skip it. I’m not the sort of knight-at-arms who’d believe his own dream.” Then I remembered. “This is EVENTUALITY FOUR. What do I do?” The dream juddered.

“Great shareholder! Save! Save! It’s an analytics trap, a virus. The Gondos’ve activated the graveyard in his dream! All the graves are opening! NARCONARR!”

“A pierced-frame effect, designed to trivialise the romantic-tableau genre —”

“The Surgeon’s kissing the Sergeant, NARCONARR! She’s pressing her burning lips to his! And, er, he’s responding ... That is, he’s — oh shareholder! He’s got these gleaming fangs, he’s biting her throat, he’s drinking her blood ... I see it all now, Intern. The Sergeant is the Undead One! He comes out of his grave each night, to feast on the vital fluids of Commissioned Officers...”

“Sir?”

“No, no, Lieutenant, you’ve merely contracted an old horror trope! Get out of that audit-damned dream at once: it’s carrying a Gondwanian hyper-virus. Severely contagious!”

“Intern, my love, come to my arms! Let me protect you. Madam Surgeon hath become the willing and helpless prey of that monster from beyond the grave, but you I’ll protect, to the last drop of my blood!”

“Arrgh!”

“Ah Intern darling! What big teeth you have!”

“Leftenant Doctor? Hello? NARCONARR here ... Leftenant, reactivate the screens at once. Leftenant! Oh stocktake, the Gondos have got them all. The whole team. Horrible way to go: trapped in a loop of stereotyped endings.”

* * * *

“I think you’re doing it ... You are the Man of My Dreams.”

“In point of fact, Lady, you’re in mine. Will you excuse me for a moment’s Address to the Audience?”

“NARCONARR scholars, this transmission is about to close. You are advised that Dreamteam’s hyperviral nanocomplex, code-name ‘Stockchar’, is spreading through your system now. It is programmed to develop new series of non-predictable evolutionary changes at every narrative node: within a year and a day NARCONARR will be narratologically dysfunctional.

“Only Dreamteam can provide the nanocomplex closure you will need. Dreamteam seriously advises that, to ensure your own survival, you encourage the Companies to the conference table before the witching hour, Halloween next. Transmission closes.

“Now, where were we? The First Kiss node, I believe?”

* * * *

AFTERWORD

One of my favourite poems is “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, but remember, the title is quoting from a male nightmare that blames the girl. The poem doesn’t...

This SF story appropriates one level of Keats’s poem, in a context where merciless Corporate Medical Espionage teams raid dreams to scavenge secrets from the material dumped in them. Probably this version of a “theatre of war” started with my first reading of Brian Aldiss’s *Barefoot in the Head* stories.

— *Norman Talbot*

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* * * *

THE TRUTH ABOUT WEENA

DAVID J. LAKE

David (John) Lake was born in India, March 26, 1929, and till the age of sixteen was brought up in that country, apart from short holidays in England. After 1945, he completed his education in England, reading English at Trinity College, Cambridge, then teaching school in England until 1959. In 1959-1967 he was teaching mostly in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, India), then got a lectureship at Queensland University, Brisbane, where he has been based ever since. He became an Australian citizen in 1975. He retired from his teaching job as Associate Professor in 1994, but has been engaged in research since — editing Wells's novels *The First Men in the Moon* and *The Invisible Man* for Oxford University Press's World's Classics series. These were the first scholarly annotated editions of those novels. Lake is currently at work on a short handbook on *The Time Machine*, to be titled *Darwin and Doom* for Nimrod Publications.

Lake grew up with a strong interest in science, and has never felt any split between science and literature. In his youth he loved Shakespeare, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells equally. But it was only when he reached Australia that he seriously got into creative writing — first with a volume of poems entitled *Hornpipes and Funerals: Forty-Two Poems and Six Odes of Horace*, then with science fiction and fantasy novels, of which his own favorites are *The Gods of Xuma* and *The Changelings of Chaan*. The latter, set up in a country rather like Thailand, has several autobiographical touches — it is a fantasy on the kind of childhood he would have liked to have had. His other novels include *Walkers on the Sky*, *The Right Hand of Dextra*, *The Wildings of Westron*, *The Fourth Hemisphere*, *The Man Who Loved Morlocks: A Sequel to the Time Machine as Narrated by the Time Traveller*, *The Ring of Truth*, and *Warlords of Xuma*. He has also written two young adult novels: *The Changelings of Chaan* and *West of the Moon: A Fantasy Novel*. His critical books are *John Milton: Paradise Lost*, *Greek Tragedy* and *The Canon of Thomas Middleton's Plays: Internal Evidence for the Major Problems of Authorship*.

Lake has written very few short stories, and we are proud to have “The Truth About Weena” in this collection. Here is the author at the very top of his form ... and we'd wager that Wells would have loved this rigorous philosophical *homage*.

* * * *

“The Time Traveller (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) was expounding a recondite matter to us.”

That was how I began my famous story of the Time Machine; the foundation of my success as an author — and of much else beside. That story figured largely, around 1900, in the movement of Household Socialism, and all that *that* led to. The tale was laughed at, praised, used in serious social and political argument — yet by most people was treated as nothing but a fiction. Well, in its hitherto published form it *was* partly fiction, because at the time — 1895 — I could not write the full truth. The full truth was even more fantastic than the fiction — too fantastic, surely, to be believed; or if believed, too disturbing to received notions of Time. And besides, there were living people to protect: in particular, one young person who was very dear to us.

It was agreed, therefore, among our small group that I must abbreviate the ending, and publish the story as a novel, an invention. I did, and the novel served its purpose. But now, in 1934, the time has come (*the* time! a nice phrase; well then, a time) in which I can tell the whole truth — of those famous dinner parties in Richmond in 1891, and what really resulted from the second party.

You have met us, the guests, before. My name is George Hillyer, at that time barely known to the world as a minor writer of short stories. Doctor Browne and Ellis the Psychologist had been with us the previous Thursday, October 1. Today, October 8, we had also present the Editor, the Journalist, and the person I formerly called the Shy Man. I practised a little deception there, deliberately putting him well in the background. He was not really shy at all, simply a good listener, slow to speak unless he had something worth saying. He was young, with fair-brown hair and blue eyes; to make himself seem older, at that time he sported a trim little brown beard. He was a mathematical physicist, and he had once been a student under our friend the Time Traveller, when the latter was still a professor at London University.

The party went much as described in my novel. The Traveller was late, and we began dinner without him. We talked of what three of us had seen last week — the big Time Machine nearly finished, and the little model which disappeared. I suggested the Traveller was late now because he was travelling in time. “He left that note, so he must have anticipated —”.

“Oh, stuff!” said the Editor. “If he can travel *backward in time*, why should he expect to be *late*? He need only stay on his machine a little longer, coming home — and he could be *early*.”

“*Very early!*” The Journalist laughed. “Why, he could get back the previous week — and meet you fellows *last Thursday*.”

“Including *himself!*” said the Editor. “Don’t forget, he could meet himself too! Then there’d be two of him, one a week or so older than his brother. And, I presume, then there’d be *two* Time Machines! And if he took money with him, he could multiply that as well — a bad look-out for the Bank of England! So you see, it’s all nonsense — a gaudy lie, a conjuring trick. There can’t be any time travel.”

“Excuse me,” said the young Physicist. “Your argument holds only against travel backwards in a single time line. I see no objection to forward time travel. We do it all the time — at sixty seconds to the minute. And skipping forward in a machine is no more, logically, than hiding yourself for a while, and then coming on the scene again. It’s the logical equivalent of the Rip Van Winkle coma. With clever technology, perhaps he *could* go *forward*.”

“But what’s the use of that,” said the Editor, “if he couldn’t come back?”

Just at that moment the door slowly opened, and the Time Traveller appeared — limping, bloodstained, ghastly. He was a man of middle age, and now he looked older, grey and worn.

He drank his wine, went out, changed, ate dinner, and told us his story. He had spent eight days in the year 802,701, and he had returned.

I need not repeat his story in detail: you have heard it before. In the far future, the human race had split into two species: above ground, the rich had turned into little mindless Eloi, living in a half-ruined fools’ paradise; below ground, in caverns and tunnels, the enslaved workers had turned into foul, lemur-like Morlocks — and turned upon their former masters, turned cannibal — if that was the right word — coming out at night, especially in the dark of the moon, to eat the Eloi. He told us of his life among the Eloi: of Weena, the little Eloi girl-woman, blonde and helpless, whom he rescued from drowning when none of her companions would raise a decadent finger to save her; and how at last he had lost her, in a night of fire and torment,

with Morlocks all around — lost her to death by fire — or worse. And then he added an episode still more terrifying, the episode of the sun flickering out some thirty millions of years hence.

At that point, the young Physicist objected. “Are you sure about that date, Sir? That sounds like Kelvin, and his theory of the sun’s energy — or rather, lack of it. But we don’t really know what makes the sun shine. I am working on the structure of the atom; at the sun’s enormous temperatures, who knows what strange energies may lurk there ... Anyway, I’ve read the geologists. The earth, and so the sun, must have existed for hundreds of millions of years already; and if so, why not hundreds of millions more?”

The Traveller hesitated. “I *think* it was thirty million ... I must admit, I was rather hysterical after I left the Morlocks. All that Further Vision was like a bad dream.”

“Then perhaps,” said Ellis, the Psychologist, “that episode of the Eloi and Morlocks was also nothing more than a dream, though a fascinating one. The symbolism —”

“No, no! That was absolutely real. As real as this room! And — I’ve shown you Weena’s two flowers.”

The two sad little flowers lay withered upon the table. And we looked at the Traveller’s scars.

“I believe you about the Morlocks,” said the young Physicist suddenly. “It’s exactly in line with present trends. We are really two nations, so why not later two species? And we treat our workers abominably.”

“Hear, hear!” I said.

The Traveller smiled wanly. “Thank you, Welles. I know your socialist leanings — yours too, Hillyer — but thank you. As for me, I wish we could simply *abolish* the workers — be served by intelligent machines. Then certainly no Morlocks could evolve.”

“But now,” said Welles, the Physicist, “what do you intend to do, Sir? You’ve still got a working Time Machine, haven’t you?”

“Go back,” said the Traveller.

“Go back in time? To the past?”

“No, go back to the future. I must — I will try again to rescue Weena
...”

“I’m afraid,” said Welles, “there may be a problem about that, Sir.”

“You would meet yourself,” I said. “Will you wrestle with your former self over who has the honour to save Weena?”

The Traveller looked shaken. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I don’t think that would happen,” said Welles. “The real trouble, I think, is that you wouldn’t get back to the same future.”

“There is only one future!”

“No, Sir, there must be at least two. According to your hopes, one future in which Weena dies, another in which you save her. And I think something like that might happen. But not *exactly* that. You see, by coming back and telling us about the future, you have already altered the future. You have reinforced my socialist fears, and I think Hillyer’s also. We will now make extra efforts — talk urgently to William Morris, to the Fabians — so the Eloi-Morlock situation may never arise, in *this* stream of time. Time is not really a single stream, a single fixed railway-track from fixed past to fixed future. There are many tracks of possibility, some close together, some far apart. And you have just proved that — by apparently *coming back* from our future.”

“*Apparently* coming back. I *have* come back!”

“Not from *our* future Sir, no. From a future which *was* ours until — a moment perhaps two hours ago. When your machine stopped in the laboratory and you dismounted, while we were eating dinner — I think I know the exact moment — that was when you split time, and pushed us onto a slightly different line. Like a railwayman shifting points. We have all been running on a different line since then.”

“This is preposterous!” said Doctor Browne. “We didn’t feel a thing!”

“I felt dizzy at one moment,” said Welles. “A slight *blurring* feeling, about 7.45. It only lasted a fraction of a second. One could easily disregard it.”

It struck me then that I had felt it too — I thought at the time I might be

going to faint. Nobody else would admit to it.

“Is there a piece of paper handy?” asked Welles. “I need to draw a diagram or two to explain my Theory of Time. It’s my belief that backward time journeys are never straight back — always oblique. Otherwise you have circular causation.”

Pencil and paper were found, and Welles drew the following sketch:

“This is the happening I deny,” said Welles. “A single time-track — which I had to draw rather thick — and you, Sir, going forward to 802,701 and returning to 1891. You see that you have circular causation? For instance, we are not *all* socialists here. Your tale of purely underground workers may strike one or two of us as a *good* idea. They might push it ... Then the Morlocks in the future become the *cause* of the Morlocks in the future — practically, they are *uncaused*. Or if you go less far into the future, to the advanced time, you could bring back the secret of some wonderful invention — say, anti-gravity flying machines — and publish it now. Then that invention will never have to be *invented* — the future flying machines would be their own cause. And so on ... That is why I deny any straight returns. This is how I see the true situation.”

And he drew:

“You see,” he said, “there is no longer any circular causation — there are only zigzags. And 802,701B awaits your next journey, Sir — that would be the dotted line. There is no fear of meeting yourself: because you have never been in 802,701B, only in 802,701A.”

“It’s still crazy,” I said. “What if our learned friend went back a week now, as our newspaper friends suggested — to our last dinner party. Would he meet himself, and us, in that case?”

Welles smiled. “I think he could. The situation would be as follows:

“That gets us a third time-track,” said Welles, “Track C. On our present track, which is Track B — also on Track A — our learned friend did not turn up last week *because we know he didn’t*. Several of you lived

through that party, and you know there was only one Traveller, and only one Machine. But on Track C, there is no circular causation to prevent doubling of men or machines. Maybe the conservation laws would have to be modified — one track loses matter, another gains ... Of course, there would also be a corresponding future on Track C, a year 802,701C. I don't know what it would be like, but it might be exposed to a raid by *two* Time Machines."

"My head is splitting," said Doctor Browne. "All this airy, crazy theory!"

"It need not be only theory," said Welles. "I know it's late, but if we're not too tired to spare, say, another hour, we could experiment."

"Experiment!" said the Traveller, rousing himself. "Why not? But I'm not ready yet for another long time journey ..."

"No, Sir, I meant short hops, fifteen minutes or so, forth and back. Could you stand that?"

"Certainly, young man!"

"Then let's go, Sir. You know, I've never even seen the Time Machine as yet..."

* * * *

2

We all trooped into the laboratory — and there was the Machine, just as the Traveller had described, in the northwest corner: a little battered, a little stained, but wonderfully impressive. The Editor and Journalist stared and tittered, but Welles was immediately touching it here, touching it there, almost stroking it, and asking technical questions which I for one could not follow. The Traveller answered him.

"*Gravitational* energy?" said Welles at last. "My God, Sir, that — if you can touch *that* you are far beyond anything we now imagine ... and the conversion factor?"

The Traveller gave him some numbers.

"That means, practically unlimited. You can reach the ends of Time, and only slightly reduce the earth's orbital momentum. Ah, what a glorious

device!”

“For my next raid on the Future, however,” said the Traveller, “I’ll have to install some modifications. An extra saddle, wheels ... But those can wait. Now, what little experiment do you want, Welles?”

“Can you go forward in time just a quarter of an hour?”

“Yes. I adjusted the fine control as I was returning. Go forward fifteen minutes, and then what?”

“Stay there, Sir. We’ll just wait here, and see you reappear.”

“Stand well back,” said the Traveller.

He mounted his machine, pressed a lever — and vanished! A strong gust of wind blew in at the open window.

We all gaped. “God, what a trick!” said the Editor. “Better than that ghost he showed us last Christmas. I suppose it’s done with mirrors ... Well now, now what do we do?”

“We could go back to the smoking room, and return,” said Welles. “But I intend to stay right here, watching that empty corner.”

We all agreed to stay.

“Don’t move from *this* corner,” said Welles. “There might be a nasty accident if he reappeared *in* one of us.”

We waited. The Psychologist took up a topic he had raised the previous week. “Suppose — he went back to the Battle of Hastings — and then *saved* Harold, won the battle for the Saxons! What then?”

I laughed. “We’d be speaking a different language now, Ellis — something more like German or Dutch, with almost no French roots. And our gracious Queen would probably be called Sieglinde — or something like that!”

“Not at all,” said Welles, smiling. “You’re on the one-track theory again, Hillyer. No Traveller could affect the Battle of Hastings in *our* time-stream. It can’t be done, because we know it *hasn’t* been done. But our friend could go back to 1066 in another track — D, would it be? — and

then in that stream there would be no Norman Conquest. I have a feeling that there may be very many time-streams, some very similar to our history, some very different. Perhaps these streams are diverging all the time, even without Time Machines ... I don't know. But my guess is, the ones that are very different are inaccessible to our present selves. If our friend were to go back in time and tamper with some version of history — then I'm afraid we would never see him again. He could return to 1891 — but it wouldn't be *our* 1891. He would exist for our counterpart selves — the ones speaking Saxon perhaps; but no longer for us."

"Perish that thought!" exclaimed Doctor Browne. "I'd hate to lose him! Even now..." He gazed uneasily at the empty corner.

"No, no: no danger. He has simply gone into *our* future; which any minute now will be our present."

A few seconds later, he was proved right. The Machine and the Traveller flashed into existence in the northwest corner. We felt a swirl of air.

"Still there?" said the Traveller, looking cheerfully at us. "Has anything happened? I just pressed the lever a fraction ..."

"Fifteen minutes have passed," I said. "We had an anxious wait."

"For me," said the Traveller, "it was less than a second."

"Very good, Sir," said Welles. "Now we have proved — for those who aren't too sceptical — that forward time travel is feasible, and involves no paradoxes. But now — would you go forward again, another fifteen minutes — *and then come back*, on the machine, to a point just a few seconds ahead of now? Say, to avoid trouble, to half a minute ahead of the time you leave?"

"This will take fine tuning," said the Traveller, looking at his dials, "but — yes, I will do it. Here goes!"

Again he vanished. This time we had only a few moments to wait. Suddenly I felt dizzy, and I saw the man and the Machine flash back into their place. But now the Traveller looked troubled. He dismounted, and came over towards us.

Welles held up his hand. "Did anyone feel strange, just now?"

“Yes,” said Browne, stroking his grizzled beard and looking meditative. “Now you mention it, just as our friend flashed back, I felt a little dizzy.”

“So did I,” said Ellis.

“And I,” I said.

“The splitting of the tracks,” said Welles.

“I say,” the Traveller began, “what happened to you people? When I dismounted, fifteen minutes ahead, there was nobody — not in here, not in the whole house! I questioned Mrs Watchett. She said you had all gone home. Then I came back in here, got on the Machine, returned — and here you are!”

“Ah well,” said Browne, smiling, “I suppose it *is* late, and we *will* depart in the next few minutes.”

“No,” said Welles, taking out his watch. “I am going to stay right here for *twenty minutes*. Why don’t you all stay? That way we will prove something important.”

His meaning sank in to all of us. “Prove it’s all nonsense!” the Editor laughed.

“I — I didn’t see you!” said the Traveller.

“No — and you didn’t see yourself either, Sir, in this corner. If you’ll just wait...”

We waited twenty minutes. And nothing whatever happened. The Traveller moved the Machine into the centre of the room. But the far corner remained empty. Everyone looked at their watches, the Traveller consulted the chronometer on his Machine. At last he looked round at us, dismayed. “It — it is five minutes past the moment I arrived and found you gone. Yet — you are *not* gone!”

“And you have not reappeared in the far corner, or anywhere else,” I said. “If that had happened, five minutes ago you would have met yourself, too. Evidently, that journey has been wiped out.”

“Not *wiped out* —” Welles began.

“I’ll settle this!” cried the Traveller. “I’ll ask Mrs Watchett!” And he rushed out of the laboratory.

“I’d like to see the housekeeper’s face,” said the Journalist, “when he *does* ask her. Why — there might be a story in this — in the silly column.” And he ran out too.

We heard voices in the passage, and then they both re-entered — with Mrs Watchett, that motherly, elderly widow. “Oh, no Sir,” she was saying, “you never did ask me any such thing. And I never told you the gentlemen had left. How could I? They’ve been here with you all this ‘alf hour and more, lookin’ at your experiments.”

“All right, Mrs Watchett, you can go,” said the Traveller. “I — I just had a dream, that’s all. It’s over now.” He passed a hand wearily over his brow. He seemed quite crestfallen.

“It’s high time to make our dream *departure* come true,” said the Editor crisply. “Well, thank you, mine host, for showing us some diverting illusions. Maskelyne is nothing to you. I look forward to something really startling this Christmas. Perhaps you can conjure up for us the ghost of a Morlock. That’d be something — the ghost of a being who doesn’t yet exist — and probably never will.”

And he left, and the Journalist went with him.

“Hopeless people,” said Welles savagely. “Two ancestors of the Eloi.”

“But — perhaps they’re right,” said the Traveller. “Perhaps I did dream all this future travel. You have just shown, Welles, that one of my trips to the future was an illusion.”

“No Sir — not at all,” said Welles. “It was real, all right. But by *returning*, by slipping back those fifteen minutes and telling us about your trip, you shifted us onto another time-line. We all felt the shift as a blurring, the moment you returned. We are now on Track C — before that, we were on Track B, the one you created by your return from the Morlocks. Track B still exists — in some metaphysical dimension you have just interviewed Mrs Watchett, she has told you the house is empty, and from that track you have vanished on your Machine, I fear for ever, leaving *that* Mrs Watchett

and your other servants aghast. But I don't think abandoned tracks snuff out of existence."

"What is Existence?" said Ellis. "I think Berkeley had something. Where there are perceiving minds, there you have Existence. I rather like your many-tracked world, Welles."

Welles laughed. "Consciousness is certainly a great mystery. Why do we feel confined to *this* track now, why are we not also aware of our continuing lives in Tracks A and B? Perhaps our counterparts in Track B, who have long since gone home, are even now wondering the same thing ... But it's no more mysterious, I think, than the odd fact that our consciousness is confined to one body. Why do I always wake up in the morning and find myself confined to the body and brain of Herbert Welles, the not-very-brilliant student of physics — and not one day find myself in the body of George Hillyer, the excellent story writer? Anyway, Sir, the world is a very strange place — and backward Time Travel makes it stranger. You came back obliquely just now, thereby creating a new track and a new future. This evening you have created two new futures, by making two backward time journeys."

"But then," said the Traveller, "Weena still exists, in what you call Future A."

"Yes, Sir."

"But I can't get back there."

"Not exactly *there*. But if you go forward again to 802,701, on this Track C, you may find it not *very* different."

"Then that is just what I shall do."

He agreed with us that his next journey would be in five or six days' time — the time needed to modify the Machine, and make other preparations. And we agreed with him — Browne, Ellis, Welles and myself — that in the interval we would do nothing to disturb the far future. No political activities, no socialist meetings. Doctor Browne even promised to limit his charitable work among the poor to a minimum. And of course, we all promised to keep the projected future journey a complete secret from all outsiders. We thought alike on most matters — Browne was a Liberal, Ellis a Radical: now we had become a conspiracy.

As we were leaving the house, Welles said to us: "It's just occurred to me that *not* doing something is also a modification. To be fair to our friend — to ensure that he meets something like Eloi — I suggest we just carry on as usual, doing neither more *nor* less. I shall visit William Morris as usual — but won't say a word to him about the future triumph of capitalism."

"How do you rate our friend's chances," I said, "of finding Weena?"

"Not high. We can't suppress our own knowledge of Future A. Even those newspaper idiots ... Trivial little actions now, smoking one cigar more or less — they must have increasing effects over 800,000 years. Unpredictable effects. I hope I'm wrong, but — I'll visit William Morris, and *try* to be unaffected by what I know."

* * * *

3

In the event, only I had time to visit William Morris; Welles, unavoidably, became involved in one unusual activity; for the Traveller pressed him into service as a collaborator in modifying the Time Machine. Welles hardly resisted the Traveller's request; soon he became eager to help. For the Machine fascinated him.

By Saturday evening they had installed the four wheels which could be lowered when needed below the level of the runners. They were bicycle wheels, small size, with solid tyres. The Traveller was determined now to wheel his machine into an Eloi building, and there chain it to a pillar, safe from the prying eyes and fingers of the Morlocks.

On Monday, there was a new development. The second saddle, installed behind the Traveller's seat, was first intended for the rescued Weena. Then Welles said: "Why don't I go too, Sir? With two of us, you'd be more than twice as secure. We could stand alternate watches, at night. And I could always cover your back."

The Traveller was half elated, half dubious. "It's very good of you. But you know the dangers?"

"Of course. But after your pioneer journey, they should be small. *Much* smaller with two of us. And a much greater chance of a successful rescue."

“Yes, yes. But it would alter things. And I want them, as far as possible, unaltered ...”

“Sir, I would stay in the background — especially as regards Weena.”

That settled it. It was agreed that they would return with Welles carrying Weena before him on a slightly lengthened saddle.

I also was given a little job. As a writer of fiction, I should have the necessary talent, and the Traveller called on me to invent a story for Mrs Watchett. Silently I invoked the spirit of Dickens, to account for the sudden arrival of a young foreign female, alone, oddly-clad, and unchaperoned, in the Richmond house. I think in the end my tale would have gladdened the great Charles’s heart. On the Monday evening I took the housekeeper aside, in her little office-cum-sitting-room, and broke it to her.

The Traveller, I said, had an uncle — recently deceased — who had worked most of his life in Transylvania, and married there. Wife half Transylvanian, half French — also dead now. They had left an only daughter. The poor girl was utterly without resources — a wicked business partner had ruined that family, and indirectly caused the father’s death ...

When I got this far, Mrs Watchett could barely restrain her tears. “Oh, Sir, the poor little thing! How old is she?”

“We are not very sure. In her teens, I believe. She is now in France, with a relative on her mother’s side — an old woman who is herself poor, and unable to travel. It is not yet at all certain, but we *think* the girl may manage to come over to England this week. She will then be utterly dependent on her cousin, your master. We hope you, Mrs Watchett, can take care of the girl — you being the only woman in this house, apart from the maid.”

“Oh yes, Sir, of course, it’d be a pleasure. I had a little daughter meself once ...”

“You must be prepared for some surprises, Mrs Watchett. Miss Driver will be *very* foreign, I’m told — not a word of English. You’ll have to use sign language. And — they have rather *simple* manners in Transylvania. I don’t think they use knives or forks. Oh yes — and they’re vegetarians.”

“Bless my soul! Sir — how will we feed her? Vegetarian ...”

“Oh, Doctor Browne is preparing a diet sheet. Perhaps gradually we could tempt her to cheese and eggs. If you’ll have the things by Wednesday ...”

Wednesday, indeed, was fixed for the great journey. The Traveller had cancelled all his usual Thursday parties: if we got Weena, we would have to keep her very secret for a while. Luckily, the Editor and Journalist had lost interest in us — not even a paragraph had appeared in their paper.

Ellis was unavoidably detained for most of that day, but on Wednesday morning, four of us assembled in the laboratory. It was nearly 10 am, a grey dismal October day, but the electric lights in that big room burned brightly. The Traveller and Welles prepared to mount the newly-polished Machine in its old spot in the southeast corner; Doctor Browne and I stood well back. We two were the farewelling and, we hoped, the welcoming committee. Browne had his medical bag. “Pray it won’t be needed,” he muttered. I felt pangs of fear for Welles, my close friend ...

The Traveller and Welles had large haversacks — this time they would be well equipped with revolvers, a camera, a patent lamp, extra clothing. Clothing! Welles had visited a theatrical costumier’s, and now they both wore Roman tunics over trousers and boots. Welles had also shaved off his beard — and his hairless chin made him look very young, if anything less than his actual twenty-five years.

“We want to be inconspicuous this time,” said the Traveller. “As much like Eloi as possible. I’m too tall, of course — but my friend might just pass as a very tall one of that people. We are going to arrive, of course, in full view of that Sphinx, and the Morlocks who live in its base may have spy-holes.”

“They may also have dark goggles,” said Welles.

“My Morlocks didn’t,” said the Traveller.

“Perhaps not, Sir, but perhaps *these* Morlocks will have. You know, we have been forced to do some unusual things. It can’t be *exactly* the same future ...”

“No, you proved that last Thursday night,” said the Traveller, somewhat bitterly. “But we must try to repeat events as nearly as possible. We’ll arrive just one day earlier, secure the Machine, check the next day that no other Traveller arrives in the middle of that thunderstorm — then wait to meet Weena at the river, so I can rescue her —”

“And then come directly back?” said Browne.

“No.” The Traveller looked stubborn. “I mean to repeat things — as far as it’s safe. We’ll spend five more days there, so she can get to know me again — so she is willing for the ultimate rescue, from the Morlocks. She has to love and trust — so that she will not be afraid to get on our Machine.”

I saw what he left half unspoken: he wanted the *same* experience as before, but with a happy ending. He would have to win, all over again, the affections of a girl in the far future — a girl who might not now even exist.

I said: “Do you all realise, that today is October 14?”

“What of it?” said the Traveller.

“It’s the anniversary of the Battle of Hastings. Which we talked once of changing. Well, with your return voyage today, you ought to change at least *our* future history.”

“How?”

“Weena must change things a little,” I said.

Later, I remembered that as the understatement of the century. Or two centuries.

* * * *

4

When the Machine and its two occupants vanished, there was the usual cold blast of wind from the open window, as air rushed in to occupy the little vacuum.

“Well,” said Browne, “if all goes smoothly, we shouldn’t have long to wait. That’s one crazy thing about this Time Travel: they can spend eight days away, but for us it should be only a few seconds. Or if they overshot...”

“They’d arrive in our past — on a different time-track,” I said. “And I think, we would never see them again. Because we *haven’t* so seen them. Other selves of ours would meet them, greet them — but not *us*.”

Browne shuddered. “I can’t bear to think of that.”

“Well, they agreed not to overshoot.”

“Why aren’t they back already?”

The question hung in the air. The laboratory remained silent and bare in the glare of the electric lights.

“Who was it,” I asked, “who said, ‘You can never step into the same river twice’?”

“Heraclitus.”

“Heraclitus was right. But our learned friend is trying to do just that. I suppose it’s what we all long to do — to re-live some moment of our lives, but live it *better*.”

“Yes, indeed. You drop a precious crystal goblet, your favourite — and it shatters into a hundred pieces. Gone for ever. If only you could have ten seconds back! And once I lost a woman patient — and just afterwards thought of a different treatment, which might have saved her. Oh, to go back just one day! But one never can. Time’s arrow is relentless, Hillyer. What’s done is done, once and for all. And Time Travel does not alter that — as Welles proved the other night. Because of the zig-zag effect. You can never have things over again —”

As he was yet speaking, I felt a familiar qualm of dizziness, a blast of air — and there was the Time Machine, solidifying, only feet in front of me. I cried out, and reeled backward. Browne also jumped back. The Machine was moving — rolling on its wheels. As it came to a stop against the wall, I saw that there were three figures on it. The two men were in modern trousers and shirt-sleeves; Welles had the handle of a revolver drooping from his trouser pocket.

In front of Welles, almost in his lap, sat a young girl, blonde, fair-skinned, blue-eyed. She wore a short white tunic trimmed with gold, and gilded sandals. She looked terrified. She was clutching the waist of the Traveller, just ahead of her, and crying out in an unknown musical language: “Periu, Periu, puio isu olo!” In spite of her fear, the quality of her voice was strangely beautiful, and warmer than I would have expected: contralto or mezzo-soprano, clear but not shrill. As she held the Traveller by the waist, so Welles also held her firmly round her slim waist on that long saddle. I

realised that he must have been holding her so through all their journey back across the years. Lucky man, I thought, to hold so sweet a little creature!

The Traveller now jumped down from his saddle, and reached up for her. "It's all right, Weena!" he laughed. "You're safe! No more Morlocks!" Then he added: "Laio, laio — pu Molokoi alo."

They were all off the Machine now, all facing us. The Traveller and the girl had their arms round each other.

"Everything is fine!" said the Traveller, laughing. "And this is certainly Weena — my Weena! I rescued her from the river, just like last time, and rescued her from the Morlocks. No second version of me appeared. I suppose Welles is right in his basic theory — just as well, or we *couldn't* have rescued her. But otherwise — it was just the same — or a little better! Weena slept on my arm, those nights in the big grey house — and by day, she crowned me with flowers ... She's the *same* girl, I tell you — just as sweet, just as loving — but this time she's saved!"

"So much for Heraclitus," I murmured. "Doctor, you *can* have things over again."

"Well, I am glad, very glad," said Browne. "And Weena..."

His voice trailed away. I too, for a while, could do nothing but gaze at her. She was not quite as small as I had first thought — under five feet, certainly, but not by much. I could not tell her age at all: she might be anything between fourteen and twenty, and even of those limits I was not confident. Age seemed not to *apply* to her. Her skin was flawless, not dead white but slightly kissed by the sun; her features were symmetrical, her curly hair a rich golden colour; and her eyes were very bright, with a green sparkle within their blue. Her beauty was indeed *awesome*. Like a Greek goddess on a small scale: a nymph, immortal and ageless.

"You — you did not really tell us —" I began.

But this nymph was still frightened. She raised a shapely fair arm, and pointed at Browne. "Moloko?" she cried.

Welles laughed. "No, no." He caressed Weena's bare shoulder. "Pu Moloko, Wini — niio, pereno." He turned to Browne. "She thought you might be a Morlock, Doctor. It's your beard. I'm glad I shaved mine off. The

Morlocks are — hairy.”

Weena said a few more rapid musical words, looking wildly all about her. The Traveller replied quickly, reassuringly, in the same language. He stroked her hand.

“She doesn’t like this place,” Welles explained. “It’s dark, it’s enclosed. For her, it has a Morlockish feel. I don’t blame her. She doesn’t know about Time Travel: we told her we were taking her away to a different *place* — Beriten — Britain — where there’d be no Morlocks. It’ll take her a long while before she realises the truth.”

“You all seem quite *fluent*,” said Browne. “I thought...”

The Traveller turned to us. “That was another thing that went *better*. I at least knew some of the language from the start. We picked up much more before we even met Weena. And since ... Now, come on — we’ve got to get her out of here, make her comfortable.”

“After that,” said Browne, “I’d like to *examine* her. Thoroughly. Superficially she looks ... but after 800,000 years...”

“Not today,” said the Traveller. “You’d frighten her.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Welles. “Where we came from, the Morlocks —”

“Enough, Welles!” said the Traveller, sharply. “Now, *out*.”

So we all left the laboratory; and Weena was introduced to the household, and the household to her. The sun came out of the clouds, the house brightened, and when Weena entered the sumptuous drawing-room, she quickly lost her fear. She slipped off her sandals, and stood on the carpet in very shapely bare white feet. Mrs Watchett gasped when she saw the newcomer — “Oh, what a *pretty* young lady!” — and James the manservant goggled, and Ellen the maid, who was young, fell over in making her curtsy. Weena laughed; she had a very lovely laugh. Then she seized Ellen’s hand, and kissed her on the cheek. She kissed Mrs Watchett also. Perhaps she would have kissed more of us — including James — if Mrs Watchett had not grasped her firmly by the arm.

“She’s just a child, Mrs Watchett,” said the Traveller.

“Oh Sir, maybe so — but she’s too old to go about in them *clothes!*”

I knew what was offending the good housekeeper: Weena's tunic hemline. It came only a little way below her knees, revealing lovely bare legs as well as feet; and in 1891, even ankles ...

"Yes of course," said the Traveller. "You shall measure her presently, Mrs Watchett, and get proper things made. But give her a little time ..."

Weena was now marvelling at everything she saw. She ran her hands over the furniture, and laughed when Welles demonstrated sitting on the sofa. She bounced up and down on that. Then she ran, amazed, to stare at the coal fire in the fireplace.

"Don't they have no *fires* in that Silvania?" said Mrs Watchett.

"It's a warm country," said the Traveller hastily. "They don't need them."

Now Weena wanted to know all our names. She had a great affection for the Traveller, whom she called "Periu" — a version of his first name — but she was also on very good terms with Welles, whom she called "Abio" (Herbert). "Mr Hillyer" was too much of a mouthful for her, and "George" was quite impossible, so she quickly christened me "Ilio".

"These are also meaningful words in Eloic," Welles smiled. "*Abio* means 'coloured glass' or 'jewel' and *ilio* means 'clear glass'."

"Charming," I said.

Weena also could not manage "Mrs Watchett," but took to calling her, from her first name, Meri or sometimes Meri-a.

"The *a*-ending is honorific," said Welles. "From the way Mrs Watchett is bossing her, I think she imagines *she* is the head of things here."

Weena now laughed, pointing to each of us in turn, beginning with the women. "Meri-a na Eleni ... na Periu na Abio na Ilio ... na Baranu na Demu. Oli perenoi, sa?"

"She asks if we are all friends," said Welles. He turned to her. "Sa, Wini — oli perenoi."

The Traveller coughed. "Really, Welles! No Socialism now, please!"

“Well, Sir, we’re not enemies, are we? We’re as much perenoi to each other as all the Eloi are — nearly. We don’t eat, dissect or enslave each other.”

“Oli laii, laii Taweloi!” exclaimed Weena.

“She says we are all good people,” said Welles. “And *Taweloi* — that means, Big or Great Eloi.”

The only thing Weena disliked about us was — our clothes. These she thought *ogo* — ugly. She was asking, evidently, why we wore such things — so sombre, so heavy. To that there was no answer. I noticed that though she was very lightly clad, and the day was not warm, she did not feel the cold. Mrs Watchett remarked on that.

“Oh,” said Welles cheerfully, “in Transylvania, Mrs Watchett, they bring up children not to mind the cold. You’d be surprised how little the young ones wear.”

The Traveller frowned. But at that moment, Weena kissed Mrs Watchett again.

“Oh, the darling little pet!” cried Mrs Watchett. “Oh, I *do* beg your pardon, Sir —”

“That’s all right,” said the Traveller. “See, it’s exactly what I told you all before — she’s just like a child.”

As the servants left the room, Browne said: “A child of what age?”

“That we still don’t know,” said the Traveller. “Probably she won’t know herself. All the Eloi who are adult look about the same age — no visible ageing. She thought the lines on my forehead were *wounds* — scars. Their youthfulness — there’s probably a sinister reason for that — which we can all guess.”

I shuddered, looking at lovely white-and-gold Weena. She had won all our hearts, and I was very glad that the Traveller had, after all, succeeded in saving his little girl-woman from the horrible Morlocks. Moreover, she struck me now as not altogether mindless. I had feared, from the Traveller’s first tale, that we might have a sweet idiot on our hands. Not so: she was obviously full of curiosity about “Beriten” — and many of her sentences

were longer than just two words.

At the cold luncheon which followed, things went on like that. According to the Traveller's custom, no servants waited at table — Browne had laid out vegetarian dishes for Weena, and we other carnivores had bread, cheese and discreetly cut up bits of ham. Weena quite liked her food. Of course, she ate at first with her hands; she laughed in astonishment when she saw us plying forks. And then she began to learn that trick too: rapidly she began impaling sections of her apple.

"It's just a game to her," said the Traveller.

"But a game she's good at," said Welles. He sat next to her, on the other side from the Traveller, and helped her to place her fingers correctly on the fork and knife. "See — we'll soon be able to pass her off as an English lady!"

Then Weena rapidly kissed him on the cheek. I laughed. "Not if she does things like that!"

"Just a child," said the Traveller. But he frowned; and Welles was flushing.

"Come now!" I said. "Your adventures in the Far Future! Surely they couldn't have been *exactly* the same as the first time?"

"Well, not *exactly*," the Traveller admitted. "The thunderstorm on our second day — corresponding to my first day, the other time — that was a very mild affair — no hail, just a little rain. And we roamed to a few different places."

"And I," said Welles, "I had to shoot a Morlock just as we were escaping. We had to wheel the Machine out on to the lawn in front of the Sphinx — so as to arrive just in the laboratory — and it was broad daylight, and the Morlocks erupted out of the base of the Sphinx, wearing black goggles and shooting metal arrows at us ... And there were — other differences."

"But not in Weena," said the Traveller. "And that's all that matters."

After that, he became rather uncommunicative; and Welles, noticing his mood, also remained silent.

When the meal was over, Browne lingered to help with arrangements;

but Welles and I had our own affairs to attend to — some of them recently rather neglected. So we took our leave, Welles making it clear to Weena that he would return the next day. She gave him a fervent hug — he had difficulty getting away.

Since our lodgings were close together, in Putney, Welles and I shared a cab home. As soon as we were clip-clopping on our way, Welles leaned towards me.

“Hillyer — he is deceiving himself!”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Two things. First, she is *not* a child: I have spent enough time with her to know that. She is a bit puzzled by the way he treats her — by the things he *doesn't* do, if you take my meaning.”

“I do take it, Welles. And I've known you long enough to know you would know. Well, what's the *other* thing?”

“The other thing is possibly metaphysical. Across the parallel time-lines, what does it mean when we say a person is ‘the same’ or ‘not the same’? But if you alter history — alter conditions noticeably, say, for the year 802,701 — can a person in that altered year be ‘the same person’? He kept trying to convince himself, in that future world, that nothing important was different. But things *were* different. Some he might have failed to notice on his first journey, but certainly not all. Not all non-human mammals were extinct, for a start. There was a species of nocturnal deer: I saw it as I stood watch the fourth night, and the Morlocks were hunting it, with crossbows. And once in the distance, I saw beasts like large sheep ... There would be no need in that world for the Morlocks to eat Eloi, and I suspect they didn't — unless for the pleasure of revenge. The Eloi feared them, yes. In the Grey House, they told frightening stories ... But the Eloi were not mindless. Each House had organisation — with a head-woman, and orchards owned by particular Houses. And that Sphinx: even *he* agreed it was less dilapidated. And the language: the roots were the same, but I'm sure the structure was more complex. He is not a linguist, but I have good German — and in the end I was becoming more fluent than he. Nouns had plurals: singular Elo, plural Eloi. Similarly, Moloko and Molokoi. That means, of course, ‘Morlocks’ — and the Eloi were *not* averse to discussing them. To me, she hinted things, once when he was not there: midnight kidnappings by Morlocks, medical examinations in the bowels of the earth, piercings. It sounded more like *vivisection* than cannibalism.”

I shuddered. “Just as horrible — worse!”

“Yes. But it shows intelligence — in both species. Those Morlocks were *scientists* — among other things. And in the far distance, the London area had a *wall* round it — like the Great Wall of China. The area inside, with the great Eloi Houses — she called that ‘Lanan’ — the Land, maybe derived from ‘London’. Outside the Wall was ‘pulan’ — the Uncountry. I think the Morlocks ruled there, on the surface. Once when *he* was tired, she led me up a hill near the Wall. I suppose it was near Croydon, and from the crest we saw beyond the Wall: I think, that was the area of our Bromley. The Morlocks had great machines there, mirrors collecting the sun’s rays, I presume for power. If any Eloi lived in the Uncountry, they were mere slaves of the Morlocks. I think we saw a few: they were naked and brown, herders of the big sheep-like animals. She called them ‘pu-Eloi’ or ‘poi-Eloi’ — Unpeople, Dead People. Within the Wall, the Eloi paradise was only a reservation — or a zoo. Oh yes, and the Morlock Uprising had happened not all that long before. I gathered from her that it was only about ten lifetimes ago: there were traditions surviving from the time before ‘the Molokoi became great’.”

“Phew,” I said. “That’s a lot of stuff you’ve gathered in a few days from pretty little Weena.”

“She is not pretty,” he said, “she is beautiful. *And her name is not Weena.*”

“What!”

“No. It’s *he* who keeps calling her that, and she tolerates it — it’s a joke, for her, because the —a ending is honorific, it sounds as if he’s flattering her. Her real name is Wiyeni — or Wini. Most Eloi names mean something, and *wiyeni* means something like ‘female organiser’, or ‘junior leader of a House’ — you might say, ‘princess’. But she likes it when I use the short form, Wini.”

“You’re in love with her,” I said.

“Yes,” said Welles.

* * * *

The name problem, for our nymph, was luckily soon settled, or rather evaded. The Traveller decided that to mislead the curious she ought to have a proper English name. He chose Winifred. And he told Mrs Watchett that her full name was Winifred Jane Driver — she had been christened “Winifred Jane” by her late English father, albeit in Transylvania the name had become somewhat mangled. At times he still called her “Weena”, but to most other people she was “Winnie”. I called her that, too; but secretly I thought of her as Wiyeni — the Princess.

She had a wild, pagan quality, which did not really disappear, not even when Mrs Watchett clothed her in Victorian garb, first in things borrowed from Ellen. Wiyeni showed her mettle over that business! The lendings dismayed her — why underclothes? And then, when the tailored things appeared, she flatly refused to wear them. “Puio, ogo!” she cried. The things were bad, ugly. And corsets — no, never, did they want to kill her? And the shoes — she would rather go barefoot, and round the house she did. (She had very beautiful feet, which certainly did not deserve to have their toes cramped, or distorted by high heels.) In the end, the matter was compromised. The hemline was taken up, daringly revealing her ankles, so that she would not trip over; and less stylish but more comfortable shoes were ordered for her. The mode of bodice and collar for ladies, that year, was a little masculine. I thought, in the end, she looked like an angelic choirboy — or like Hebe come to earth, disguised as Ganymede.

The bedroom reserved for “Winnie” was another shock for her. The bed and the other furnishings were wonderful — she had been used to sleeping on bare stone floors — but what was this, was she to sleep *alone*? She had never done such a thing in her life! It was too frightening! That first night, she stood at the door and argued with Mrs Watchett and the Traveller. Already she had a few words of English; with those, and gestures, and some Eloic, she made her meaning plain.

No Morlocks? Maybe — hard to believe — but maybe other dangers? “You, Periu — you — why not you sleep too?” And she pointed to the bed.

Mrs Watchett nearly had a fit. “Oh, *Sir!*”

“She means no harm, Mrs Watchett,” said the Traveller hastily. “She’s just a child — terrified of the dark. Transylvania was a dangerous country. There were — wolves ...”

“Maybe, Sir. But she’ll have to learn. Go now, Sir — I’ll soothe her.”

She managed that, at last; and got the girl into a warm nightdress. Then she showed her how to lock and unlock the door. Winnie seemed delighted, and kept turning the key, one way and the other.

“Now,” said the housekeeper, “goodnight, Miss Winnie. And you *lock* now — yes?”

“Sa — yes — lock-a. Goo’ nigh’, Meri-a.” And as Mrs Watchett went out, she heard the key turn. Suspicious, she lingered a while; but the key did not turn back again. “Poor little thing,” she murmured. “Master’s right — an innocent baby.”

What followed after that, I heard much later, from Wiyeni’s own lips. Neither the Traveller nor Mrs Watchett breathed a word to anyone.

First, Wiyeni waited till Mrs Watchett’s steps could no longer be heard. Then she unlocked the door, and in her nightdress slipped into the Traveller’s room. He was on the point of undressing. She smiled. “Periu, dear, cannot I sleep with you here, dear friend?” But he went red in the face; he seized her arm, marched her back to her room, and made her lock herself in. Wiyeni turned from the door with a little sob.

It was dark in that bedroom: the house had electric light only in the laboratory, and they had not given her a lamp for fear of accidents. But by drawing back the curtains from her south-facing window, she let in some light from the eleven-day-old gibbous moon. The moon was high in the sky, and that surprised her: in the Eloi world it had been summer, and she knew that summer moons rode low. Still, the good light comforted her: she looked out over the strange and wonderful garden, and saw no prowling Morlocks. So she went to her lonely bed. But under the great pile of bedclothes, she felt too hot. And the nightdress, borrowed from Ellen, was coarse and scratchy. She stripped it off, and then, naked under the sheet, fell comfortably asleep.

Thursday began with a shock for Mrs Watchett.

She came about 7.30 am with a tray of tea and toast to Winnie’s door, and knocked. She heard a light scamper of feet, the door was unlocked, and in the half-light of the room she saw a little white form topped by golden hair. At first she took the whiteness for Winnie’s nightdress. Then the rising sun emerged from a cloud, and Mrs Watchett realised that Winnie was naked.

She rushed in, almost upsetting her tray, and slammed the door shut

behind her with her heel. “Oh, you *naughty* thing!” she cried.

It was a long time before Winnie could be made to understand her crime.

That same Thursday, just after breakfast, Ellis arrived. This was his second meeting with Wiyeni, and he found her fascinating. The psychology of a girl from the Far Future ... Nearly as interesting, too, was the Traveller’s attitude to her.

As the morning was fine, they went for a walk in the garden. Almost all the plants and trees were new to Wiyeni — she kept darting about among the yellow fallen leaves, picking up strange items. And then suddenly, as he strolled from behind a tree-trunk, she met Mrs Watchett’s white cat, Tiger. Both cat and girl seemed equally startled (so Ellis told us later). She had never known a tame animal before.

“Tikuro!” she breathed — then said to the Traveller in Eloic, “Periu — this is a creature we have known, carved over the great door of one of our Houses. That House is named for the carving, House of Tikuro. I did not know they were real. Ah, Beriten is a land where old tales are true! But is it dangerous, will it bite us?”

“Pu, pu,” laughed the Traveller. “No, Weena. He is a little friend. See! — Tiger, Tiger, Tiger ... come here, puss!”

He now made them acquainted. Soon Wiyeni was kneeling, stroking Tiger and laughing, as Tiger purred.

“Isn’t she just a marvellous sweet child?” said the Traveller.

Ellis gave him a considering look. “Marvellous, yes...”

A similar thing happened when they came up to the hedge. Beyond, in a field, two horses were grazing.

“Osoi!” cried Wiyeni. “More carving-animals! I come from the House of the Oso. But, they are very great! Do they eat people?”

“No, Weena-child, only grass. And we ride on their backs, and they pull us in machines.” He translated for Ellis. “Imagine, she thought they might eat us!”

“A reasonable guess, in the circumstances,” said Ellis. “They might

be omnivores — like us Great Eloi.”

“She’s a perfect child,” said the Traveller.

“Well, she’s not a perfect fool.”

Immediately after that, Browne arrived, with a middle-aged nurse. And now he got his wish. In her bedroom upstairs, he and the nurse examined Wiyeni. She had lost all fear of “Baranu,” and stripped naked without hesitation. Browne’s examination was not intrusive; but he noted her small breasts, her little fringe of golden pubic hair, her wide hips; and he felt her bones. He decided that she was probably about eighteen years old — and should have very little trouble when she came to bear children.

* * * *

Those days, those next few weeks, we were continually in and out of the Traveller’s house, at many times of the day. The education of Wiyeni-Winnie was an urgent priority. Until she could pass for a nineteenth-century girl, if only a foreign one, she must remain a virtual prisoner in that house and garden, yet already she was eager to explore “Beriten”. I, as a literary man, was given the primary and very agreeable task of teaching her English. Welles undertook to explore her mental skills, especially in the direction of arithmetic.

On that first Thursday forenoon, I met Welles in Putney, and we took a cab for Richmond. “Come on,” I said, “now you must tell me everything. So far I’ve had only snippets. The Far Future! What was that like?”

His blue eyes twinkled, and he looked almost boyish. “Well, it was *fun*, you know. And some things will still be *our* future. Little bits of weather may change, but the climate is surely beyond human control, and the stars ... It is a warm world, beyond all Ice Ages. The sea level is higher, the Thames wider. And the stars! All different! There are two Pole stars, bright blue ones which circle the actual pole like the hands of a clock ... But *he’s* told you some of that already. As for the Eloi — some of the things were really the same on his first trip, only he was too prudish to mention them. For instance, nakedness. The Eloi all bathe naked, and think nothing of it. Wini was naked, you know, when he leapt into the river and rescued her.”

“Golly!”

“Yes, indeed. He was a bit embarrassed, bringing her to shore, and me there — especially as she was in no hurry to get dressed again. The

Eloi are not in the least prudish. The young kids, up to about four years old, go stark naked all the time — I think it makes them very hardy against cold; and at night, when they huddle together in those Houses, most of them huddle naked. We three slept in a little side room of the Grey House, where we had the Machine chained to a pillar; and I'm sure Wini would have taken her tunic off if *he* had let her."

"What!"

"Yes. She never left us, you know, from the moment she met us, and she was very grateful for being rescued. Mind you, her cramp was only a momentary thing, and she was recovering as he got to her. And other Eloi were swimming up ... He managed to win the credit, but only just. And she was impressed not just by the rescue, but by what he was — a benevolent giant, with wonderful powers and devices, so useful against the Morlocks. I think she expected to reward him in the obvious way, and was quite willing to do it. But he kept treating her as a child, so she — just cuddled him. I showed more willing, and that time we were alone near Bromley, coming down from the crest of the hill — she suddenly hugged me, and kissed me on the lips. She was grateful to me too, you see, and the view of the Uncountry and its Morlock machines had just frightened her. I didn't let things go any further, then, out of loyalty to *him*. But God, Hillyer, she is sweet! By the bye, I'm pretty sure she has had lovers before. The Eloi don't seem to have marriage. Life in Lanan is so easy, apart from the Morlocks, that a woman can easily bring up her children without the help of a man. And they do it: I saw always these units of mother-and-child, with never a possessive man about. But in the house-tribes, there is plenty of help to be had when needed, and the men are gentle with children. Eloi women are not very fertile, I think, so they make sure they have plenty of lovers. I — I think this will be the greatest problem with Wini — she won't have any sense of what we call respectability."

I whistled. "A Greek goddess indeed — with the morals of one ... But she seems so *nice*."

"She is, too. Her feelings go deeper than those of most Eloi. She may be casual about sex — but I'm sure she can also *love*. Affection ... she has a strong *affection* for our learned friend. Let me give you one example. You know, he tried to repeat everything possible — so on our last morning there, he descended into that Morlock well, to take his flash pictures. He expected me to stay with Wini and console her. I was rather looking forward to that ... But *she* didn't stay. She started climbing down that well after him."

“Good God! I thought they were terrified —”

“She was terrified. She cried out ‘They will cut him!’ I’m sure she meant, dissect him. The Eloi lived always with the possibility of being kidnapped one night, taken down a Morlock hole, and used in experiments. Yet she was going to risk the same fate, to save her friend. I rushed after her, stopped her, wrestled with her. It’s no joke, wrestling on the rungs of an iron ladder over a bottomless pit. Luckily, in the end I convinced her that he was in no real danger. This time he had a miner’s lamp ... When he came out, we decided to evacuate at once. Just as well — the Morlocks were thoroughly alarmed, and that was when they came at us out of the Sphinx.” He mused. “Wini is not in the least stupid. The Eloi as a whole, on this time track, were brighter — decadent, yes, but not idiots. But of them all, Wini struck me as exceptional. The others were placid, never thinking that their lives could ever be different. But Wini had the instincts of a fighter: she was very curious, and restless. She had left her birth-house, and now she knew many house-tribes — she’d been travelling between them — and during our days there, it was really *she* who was our leader. She realised that the Morlocks ought not to see us two. She made us avoid certain hillsides — ‘The Molokoi will see’. I think she meant they had hides in there, with spyholes. Without her, I don’t think we’d have lasted that many days. As it was, we stayed one day fewer than we’d planned. She slept on his arm for only four nights, not five.”

“And you?”

“I watched while they slept. Then, when it was his watch, I slept close beside her. Not touching her, though I ached to, since *he* could see ... I don’t know how deeply she feels for me. She is very *fond* of me — as she is of him. I don’t know if it goes beyond that. I expect she would sleep with me, given the opportunity. But I — I want more than that... But I do know one thing.”

“What?”

“I’m very glad we did not bring back Weena — his original Weena. Wini, Wiyeni — she’s an enormous improvement.”

“She’s also an enormous problem,” I said.

“Yes, but a delightful one. She seems to have a gift for language — she began imitating English sounds even in *that* world. So, as soon as she has enough vocabulary, I think we should tell her the whole truth. And then

see what she does.”

“About Time Travel? Will she understand it? It was bad enough for *us*.”

He laughed. “Try her, and see. She is ignorant, but not stupid. And she’ll soon notice an oddity. It was midsummer in that Eloi world — now it’s autumn. You can’t keep the *season* a secret, not in England. And they must have had winters in the Eloi world, even if mild ones — short days and long nights. How long do you think it’ll take her to notice?”

It took her, in fact, about one more day. And by Saturday morning, she was quite sure. She had seen the fallen leaves, and from her south-facing window she had watched three sunrises and three sunsets. And now, on Saturday, at a joint lesson in the breakfast room facing the garden, she tackled Welles and myself. She looked very fetching now, in her nineteenth-century garb — all but the shoes: in the house, she preferred to go barefoot. She spoke to us in a mixture of English and Eloic (for the latter, Welles translated).

“Abio, Ilio,” she said, frowning with concentration, “how can it be, that it was hot time when we left my place Lanan — and now, in your great Eloi place, it is coming to the cold time? I thought it was just a few heartbeats, that wonder journey — but it must be many moons!”

“It is many moons — *months*,” said Welles. “But not quite in the way you think, Wini ...”

She could already count very well, both in Eloic and in English, and now she mastered, from twelve months, the word *year* — and a flood of illumination followed.

Yes, she could count years. “I, Wiyeni — it is twenty-and-one years since I come out of my mother.”

Twenty-one! And Browne had thought her no more than eighteen ...

“Yes, and my sister Isi is of thirty years, and my mother Mena is of fifty-and-three. My mother is *tamana* — great-house-mother — of the Oso House, far south near the Wall of the Uncountry. My mother, so, will die after seven years, and Isi will become Isa, and house-mother.”

“Your mother will *die*?” I cried. We had shown her a dead bird in the

garden. No, there was no mistake. She mimed *dying* quite well. And confirmed it by translation: in Eloic, *poi*.

“She means it,” said Welles. “How do you know, Wini, that your mother will die in seven years’ time?”

“Because she is fifty-and-three. People die when they are sixty years old.” Suddenly she looked anxious. “O, Abio, Ilio! How old are you? Not fifty, not nearly sixty?”

I burst out laughing. “Do we look it? I am twenty-six; Abio is twenty-five.”

She looked at Welles with joy. “Then you will live, Abio, my dear, near as long as me: thirty-five more years.”

A little more questioning revealed the astounding truth: all Eloi, if they survived other hazards, died peaceful deaths at age sixty. Before that time, once they were full grown, they did not age visibly at all.

“*That’s* why they all looked young,” muttered Welles. “Not mass slaughter by Morlocks.”

“It sounds like the Golden Age indeed,” I said. “Like in Hesiod. ‘Death came to them as sleep’.”

But Welles was now greatly moved. He gripped her arm, her shoulder. “Wini — darling! You — at sixty...”

“Oh yes,” she said brightly. “But there is nothing to fear in that, Abio, my jewel, my friend. After some years, few or many, we come out again from some other woman. So they say in the Houses.”

“It is pleasant if you can believe that,” he said.

“But now, Abio, Ilio, tell me how that wonderful Machine moves through months ...”

Then we told her — that the Machine had borne her, not forward a few months, but *backward* a great many years, to a time before there were any Morlocks in Britain. After a short while, she grasped what we were saying — but could not at first believe it.

"I did not believe it at first either, Winnie," I said. "But Periu is very clever — *he* made the Machine, and he has shown us that it does truly carry people forward and backward in time."

A great light seemed to dawn in her face. "Then — then you are truly the Taweloi, those who are told of in the stories of our Houses — you who built the Houses! You are the men of our fore-mothers! O Abio, Ilio!"

And she slipped from her chair, knelt before us, and began kissing our feet. Welles hurriedly raised her. She laughed.

"Now I will find Mother Meri-a, and kiss her feet too. For she is a woman, and may be one of my foremothers, my mother's mother's foremother!"

"Wait," I said. "Do you know, Winnie, how the Morlocks started?"

"No, Ilio..."

We told her. Her expression became one of horror. "People made *Taweloi* into Morlocks!"

"Taweloi like James, like Ellen," I said.

"But Demu and Eleni are lovely people! Oh, that was bad, bad!"

"Is," said Welles. "It is happening now, Wini. What should we do about it?"

"Stop it — stop it from happening! Do not let anyone be pushed down out of the Sun!" said Wiyeni indignantly.

"That's exactly what we mean to do," said Welles. "Will you help us, Wini?"

"Yes, yes, yes! All I can how!"

"I think you can a lot," said Welles.

* * * *

The secret of Winnie was confined, outside the household, to the four of us — Browne, Ellis, Welles and myself. I sent a note to the Editor saying that the Traveller's second great journey had failed — he had not found Weena. Which, in a way, was true ...

It was agreed among us and the Traveller that we could not go public for a long time. Not even his strange photographs could be displayed as yet. Debate continued as to whether we could ever go public with the whole truth of Time Travel. The Traveller himself was in two minds about that. He liked having the monopoly of the secret and the power — not even Welles understood how the essential trick was done — but on the other hand he knew that if he published, he would become more famous than Newton or Galileo.

“Or the inventor of dynamite,” said Welles at one of our conferences. “That's the true analogy. In this world of wars and rumours of wars — can the world be trusted with such a power? Can Germany — or France — or Russia? There'd be a million revisions of history, for a start. Not that we'd know about it — but still ... If anything can happen, or has happened, nothing remains interesting, there are no serious issues. And I don't like the idea of *armies* suddenly appearing in our real future. Sir, you must not release your invention till the world has become a far more civilised place. Meanwhile, for a long time, some of us will be trying to make it so.”

That argument seemed to convince even the Traveller. Browne and Ellis began some urgent social projects. Meanwhile, all of us were helping to educate Winnie. And she made very rapid progress. By early November, she was able to go out shopping with Mrs Watchett, mostly to Richmond, but occasionally to the inner areas of London. Thus she learned the hard facts of the money economy, and saw poverty, ugliness, dirt and desperation. They shocked her profoundly; and dark basements and underground railways filled her with special horror. “You — you are half Morlocks!” she once whispered. Even the Richmond house had a basement kitchen, and she often lingered there, grieving, and trying to help Ellen with her drudgery. But her relations with Welles, and partly also with me, grew ever closer as she realised how much we too hated the existing situation. Under cover of our lessons, we preached socialism to her. But she was no simple disciple: she objected to our ideas of scale.

“The whole of this land cannot be one House,” she said. “It must be a friendship of many Houses — some small, some big. This House of ours, now — it is not big, but it could hold twenty people. Ellen will have children, I may have some, and we could invite a few more women, and their lovers.”

“You’re forgetting one thing, Winnie,” I said. “This house doesn’t belong to us — it belongs to Periu — as you call him.”

“That is bad,” she said, frowning. “Bad, bad! A House must not belong to one person — especially not to a *man*. It should belong to the people who live in it — all of them.”

“Don’t say anything like that to Periu,” said Welles. “Not yet, anyway.”

The Traveller was continuing to treat her as a child, or a very young woman. But she was fast outgrowing him. I sensed some uneasiness between him and Welles. Perturbed, I consulted Ellis.

“Rivalry?” he said. “Yes, there will be — of a kind. But don’t think our learned friend will ever propose marriage to her. He is not a very sexual being. Rather like Ruskin — or Dodgson the mathematical photographer. He likes girls to be young — very young. If it comes to a contest, Welles will win.”

By Christmas, Winnie’s English was nearly perfect, and Welles was beginning to teach her German. That would come in handy later, he said. I was teaching her to read and write. Both came easy to her, especially as I began to teach her letters using Eloic words, one letter to one sound.

At Christmas, also, she was introduced into society, as Miss Winifred Driver, the Traveller’s foreign-born cousin and ward. The Thursday dinner parties were resumed. “Winifred” charmed everyone with her beauty, her delightful not-quite-perfect accent, and her semi-socialist opinions. The Editor and Journalist suspected nothing, and Filby and the Mayor fell in love with her. But the Traveller became increasingly subdued. He did not really like House Socialism. And he was beginning to admit, even to himself, that this was not the first Weena he had loved and lost.

In spring 1892 came the crisis. Winnie wanted to go out more, especially to political meetings, and unchaperoned. The Traveller forbade that.

“Then I will go away,” she said calmly. “I love you, Periu, but no man tells me what I must or must not do. We did not live so in my country.”

Welles came to her rescue. He got her to marry him. At first that idea also outraged her, but he explained that only the form was necessary to make her respectable. “I won’t in fact own you, Wini. Of course you may love whom you like.”

“I should hope so!” she said.

“But I hope,” he said softly, “that I may mean a little more to you than all the rest.”

She kissed him fervently. “Abio — Bertie — you know you will always be my *taleyeno* and *tapereno* — best lover, best friend.”

So, after a brief civil ceremony, and now with a gold ring on her finger, she moved in with him, in his Putney lodging. There, at last, those two consummated their love.

It was in every sense a wonderful love; for both of them rich and strange. She found him gentle, but stronger and more serious than any Eloi man. She liked that. And he — he once confided: “Hillyer, she’s not quite *human*. But better!”

She was faithful to him, in her own fashion. He was certainly always her best friend, as he was, in our world, her first lover.

But not by any means the last ... I, too, have held her lovely, perfect nakedness in my arms.

Not much now remains for me to record, except the triumphs of Winnie-Wiyeni, and how they affected our world.

During the summer of 1892 she began to be famous. She remained friends with the Traveller, and often visited him at Richmond; but she also gladdened the hearts of many other people — including William Morris, whose last years she cheered considerably. He liked to call her “Jane Welles”. But Jane Welles argued with him that Marxist Communism was a dreadfully bad idea. She was utterly opposed to class hatred, and she thought socialism could only work with very small-scale communes. “The workers must all be friends and lovers,” she insisted.

In late 1893, in circumstances I shall describe later, she did in fact set up a small commune, and it flourished. When I married, a year later, my wife and I moved in to the same establishment, and lived there very happily. People came to call it “The Welles-Hillyer Place”. Many years later, we also bought an estate in Essex, which became our main headquarters. Within our House, and the Houses other people founded in imitation, sex was a matter of free choice. Winnie sometimes persuaded men to join by making love with them; but she never went to bed with a man she really disliked. By

now, she realised that men and women of our time were much more possessive and jealous than the Eloi. She shrugged her little shoulders, and made allowances and adaptations. “A House can be as small as one woman and one man,” she said, “so long as it is friend to the other Houses.”

In 1895, of course, I published *The Time Machine*, which made me famous — especially, I think, the illustrated edition, which used the Traveller’s photographs. That book brought in plenty of money, and really launched our brand of socialism. Some people called us “the anti-Morlock movement”. The Marxists hated us, but many of the Fabians came over, and Chesterton was also very friendly.

The rest is history. “Winnie Welles” became a world figure — long before her husband won his Nobel prize for atomic physics. She charmed most of the influential men in Europe and America; and also went to bed with many of them. Among her conquests, reputedly, were the German Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas. The Kaiser launched a famous saying: “When is socialism not socialism? When it’s in bed with Winnie Welles!”

She was also very active in the feminist movement and the Federal Peace Movement. When the Pan-European Alliance was signed in Brussels, August 4, 1914, she was present as the guest of both the Kaiser and the Tsar. That was the same year that the Liberal government in Britain gave votes to women, and Home Rule to Ireland, and passed the second round of bills establishing the welfare state. At Christmas that year, Winnie said: “Bertie, George — I think we’ve done it. There won’t be any Morlocks in *our* future!” I am sure she will be proved right.

By then she was one of the most beloved women in the world — and not only by her lovers. Of course it helped that she remained so amazingly young and amazingly beautiful. Hollywood made her huge offers, the British government offered her a peerage in her own right — but she turned all such things down. We had enough money, partly from my writings and Welles’s scientific work, to be comfortable in Richmond and Essex — and Winnie preferred before any other title to be known as the house-mother of Easton Glebe.

After X-rays came in, Doctor Browne gave her a really searching internal examination. He found that she had no appendix, and there were one or two other things which made him pronounce: “Really, she should be classified as a different species — not *Homo* (so-called) *sapiens*, but *Homo amabilis*.”

We had suspected that before, especially as the years went by with no child. But in 1900 she did bear her single child — easily, with hardly any labour — a daughter whom she called Amber. Welles was certainly the father. Amber is beautiful, too, with her mother's blue-green eyes, and gold-brown hair. She is now a fine biologist, and with her special knowledge she declares that she is a sterile hybrid: she will never have children. Instead, she has adopted two, a boy Anthony and a girl Amy. Amber Welles is now thirty-four, but looks not a day over twenty.

We do not know if she will die in the same manner as her mother. Yes, that sad event happened four years ago now. There was hardly any visible change in Winnie, but one day she told us all that she was going. "Do not grieve too much, Abio," she said. "We have had a good life, thanks to you. I was a slave of the Morlocks, and you set me free to work in this world. And Amber will comfort you." Then, one fine summer's evening, she lay down in that garden in Essex, quietly closed her eyes, and did not open them again.

Her funeral was attended by an enormous number of celebrities — including the old Kaiser and the famous German painter Adolph Hitler. Hitler was a great man in the world peace movement; he was visibly in tears all through the ceremony. "She was followed to her grave," said one newspaper, "by a procession of her lovers: an exceedingly long procession."

What would the world have been like today without Winnie-Wiyeni? Impossible to say — but surely a much worse place. Over the last forty years, through our mixture of socialism, capitalism and distributism, the gap between rich and poor has narrowed wonderfully. And now with the World Federation strongly established, and no major war possible, I think it is safe to tell the world the truth about Time Travel. But even so, perhaps it is better that the actual invention is lost — forever, unless a genius comes on the scene again the equal of Peregrine Driver.

For that was the Traveller's name. We lost him, and his Machine, one day in October 1892. He vanished from his laboratory, one Thursday morning, leaving a note to say that he had gone in quest of "the real, the one and only Weena".

He also left a will which stipulated that, if he had not returned by the same date in 1893, he was to be presumed dead, and all his property was to be made over to Winifred Jane Welles. That was how, in October 1893, we acquired our first commune in Richmond.

One cannot choose but wonder: where did he go? To yet another version of the year 802,701 — to meet, perhaps, his end at the hands of some super-Morlocks? Or did he go back into the past, as a preliminary — to establish a time-line in which Welles would not be a possible rival for the affections of Weena?

Welles once suggested to me: “He may have messed us up thoroughly — so that in that world, Bertie Welles is the writer, and George Hillyer — I don’t know what.” I once wrote a story somewhat like that. In my tale, Professor Driver returned first to the second Thursday *morning*, October 8 about 10 am. There he picked up one version of himself and another Time Machine; then the two of them went back to the first Thursday dinner, October 1 — the dinner at which Welles was not present. In that time-line, the second dinner party on October 8 never took place at all, Welles was therefore eliminated, and the raid on the far future was made by three Travellers on three Machines ... That was fiction; but I do suspect that something *like* that may well have happened. If so, of course the Traveller disappeared completely from our own time-stream.

For in our world, as everybody knows now, he has never returned.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

This story had a long gestation. In 1990 I was teaching a course in SF at Queensland University, and of course we had a close look at Wells’s *The Time Machine*. I pointed out to my students the evidence that Wells was aware of the “time paradoxes” — hence the Traveller returns *late* at the second dinner party. What if he had returned *early*? That would have been easy — only a few more subjective seconds on the returning Time Machine. He could have returned several hours early, and met his earlier self on the morning before he set off on his great journey. Then the two selves on two Machines could have gone back one week to the first dinner party, and met a still earlier clone...

On that basis, I wrote a whole novel, *The Time after Time Machine*. A posse of three Travellers and two friends go off to the far future on three Machines to rescue Weena. They fail, because they are now on a different time-track, but bring back two other girls from the future, who then affect the history of our own world...

I did not try very hard to get this novel published. But this year, 1997, I drew on it for a shorter version of the same idea, “The Truth About Weena”. This story arose from an argument I was having about backward time travel with a friendly correspondent. He said there was a logical distinction between excursions into the past and returns from the future. I said no, all backward time travel produced the famous paradoxes. I wrote my story partly to prove this point. I had just written the main draft of my handbook on *The Time Machine*, in which I said Wells was aware of the paradoxes, but didn’t want to get involved in them in a serious story, the first one ever about a Time Machine. So now I wrote my story to show what really happens in backward time travel — one shifts time-tracks. Just after I had written the story, I found the same idea put forward by David Deutsch in his book *The Fabric of Reality*. Deutsch works from quantum theory; I work simply from logic.

The title, “The Truth About Weena”, alludes to the Wells short story title “The Truth About Pyecraft,” just as my earlier novella *The Man Who Loved Morlocks* alludes to Wells’s “The Man Who Could Work Miracles”. But “Weena” uses a different time-theory from *Morlocks* — it is one I believe could really be true. “Weena” was easy to write because I already knew all about the revised Eloi world — I simply drew on my unpublished novel of 1990 for the background, the commune-like Houses, the improved Eloi language, and much else. The plot of the novel is alluded to as a possibility near the end of the short story. But I think the story improves on the novel.

For one thing, the story does not claim (as the novel did) that “good sex” is a cure-all for the world’s troubles. I got to that position in the novel because I was trying to be faithful to Wells’s ideas in his second phase, e.g. in his *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). In the short story I have still alluded to Wells’s life — thus *Jane* and *Amber* are both names of Wells’s women — the one his (second) wife, the other a girlfriend who bore him a daughter. And Easton Glebe was Wells’s actual home in the 1920s.

Since Writing “Weena” I have come to realise that Wells himself never intended his Traveller, on his second voyage, to try and rescue Weena. For Wells believes in a *single time-line*, and therefore the future is fixed. Weena once lost is lost for ever. So the Traveller on his second voyage, in Wells, is not going back to 802,701 — he is merely seeking proof of time travel, and we are told that he takes a camera — we are not told he takes a gun. Probably he is going into the past to photograph a dinosaur ... But that’s not very dramatic. I think my creative misreadings, *Morlocks* and “Weena,” are a little more exciting ...

— *David Lake*

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TWO RECIPES FOR MAGIC BEANS

ROSALEEN LOVE

Okay, we admit it: we couldn't resist buying "Two Recipes for Magic Beans" from Rosaleen Love, whose story "Real Men" appeared earlier in this volume. And we'll bet that you can't resist this mythic story of a girl and her pig.

Or to be properly and respectably specific: Esmerelda the *talking* pig.

* * * *

Jinny and Esmerelda the talking pig walked along the path through the dark forest on their way to the market fair. From time to time Jinny threw Esmerelda a slice of white Sunnysooft bread from the bag slung over her shoulder. Esmerelda trundled along behind Jinny, carefully picking up every crumb. Getting a pig to the market is not easy for a twelve-year-old girl, with a pig with the strength of ten and a mind of its own. Jinny had to resort to her own low animal cunning and deep knowledge of pig food preferences.

Jinny kept sharp watch for the dragon, but truth to tell she was less worried about the dragon than being caught out of school — again.

"Organic farming is a perfectly viable career option," Grandfather informed Miss Barnes, the day she flew in to visit. Miss Barnes was school counsellor and knew there was more in the world for smart girls like Jinny than mucking out the pig pens. She wanted Jinny to go to school and learn astronavigation, she said, for you never know what will happen to a girl in life, and astronavigation will stand you in good stead when pigs desert you.

"Pigs desert you?" queried Esmerelda the talking pig.

Miss Barnes took a pink fit when she heard Esmerelda. Her cheeks grew red and her mouth grew round in a shriek "That pig can talk!"

"Yes," said Grandfather, "Genetic engineering is wrong. I see that now."

Jinny hadn't been back to school ever since Miss Barnes came to

visit. Jinny wished Grandfather had explained things more. Miss Barnes just didn't get the right message, about Esmerelda, about Jinny, about Grandfather's agricultural reforms. Take Esmerelda. It wasn't as if the pig could really talk. Echolalia, that was the pig's problem. The pig was more a pig-parrot, picking up the last three words that anyone said and repeating them back. In every other way Esmerelda was a perfectly ordinary pig, not a Son of Satan or a product of the Ten Wise Ways. Though, now Jinny remembered, actually Esmerelda was a product of the Ten Wise Ways, but that was before Grandfather saw the light and took the ten-step plan to renounce do-it-yourself bio-creation.

But the damage had been done. Miss Barnes knew about the pig. That was why Grandfather was sending Esmerelda to the market.

The leaves of the dark forest hung silently above. Jinny rounded a corner of the path and saw the bridge in the clearing ahead. She paused. This was a place of danger. She threw a slice of bread onto the bridge and watched carefully as Esmerelda pushed past to get it.

Jinny shivered. There was someone there, at the edge of the forest as it gave way to the river flats. The leaves rustled where no wind blew.

Jinny stopped and motioned Esmerelda to silence.

The branches parted. Out stumbled a dragon, its back legs in the way of its front legs, and its front legs caught up in its tail.

Jinny was pleased it wasn't Miss Barnes. Dragons she could handle.

It was only a baby dragon, uncoordinated in its movements in the manner of all baby creatures, and uncertain of its powers. Its fiery breath was just warm enough to singe the hairs on Esmerelda's back.

Esmerelda stood her ground. The baby dragon took a backward step. Esmerelda let out a ferocious snort. The baby burst into tears and the tears ran down its face to put out its fire. It ran away, snorting puffs of air.

"Now you've done it," said Jinny, "It's off to tell its mother. We're in big trouble. I wish you'd let me handle these things." Jinny knew she could handle dragons on account of her knowledge of the Ten Wise Ways, though truth to tell she'd not yet been put to a proper test, not with a full grown dragon. She watched gloomily as the baby dragon lolloped its snivelling way, half flying, half jumping, across the river flat. It was on occasions like this Jinny had to agree with Grandfather, that genetic

engineering, particularly in the hands of medieval theme park entrepreneurs, was wrong. Especially when the dragons went feral and took off over the electrified barbed wire on top of the battlements.

“Why is it that things always go wrong in the world, whenever we try to make a change for the better?” Jinny looked at Esmerelda and got no joy, for Esmerelda was part of the problem.

“For the better,” Esmerelda stated emphatically, turning back to her half-eaten slice of bread in the middle of the bridge.

“Mere echolalia,” said Jinny.

Esmerelda didn't reply. Her snout was in the bread.

Jinny hadn't always lived with Grandfather and Esmerelda. Astronavigation, that had been the cause of her present plight. She didn't want to explain to Miss Barnes, that astronavigation had been the life choice her own mother had made, while Jinny was left with Grandfather to keep her company, while Mary Beth went off to the stars. “There's just no child care out in space,” Mary Beth had said, “That's the way of it. I'll be back as soon as I can be, relativistically speaking. But I've had the call of the wide open starry spaces, and I've got to answer that call, and follow it, wherever it may lead.”

Jinny knew it would be a hundred years or so before she saw her mother again. Their relationship had been only a biological link and, as such, soon superseded. Whatever had happened, and for whatever reason, it had happened; Jinny tried to look on the bright side. She glanced after the departing dragon. Perhaps renouncing biological ties might have its up side. There was this pull of biology, but there was also the pull of cosmic destiny, and Mary Beth had chosen one above the other.

Jinny brooded. What would her own future hold? She forgot where she was, what she was doing. She forgot to throw another slice of bread at Esmerelda.

Esmerelda gave a loud harrumph, and set herself down in the middle of the road for a good sulk. Jinny walked on, not noticing.

A helicar skimmed past and the driver honked. It shook Jinny out of her dream. It was Professor Rhine, the genetic engineer from the theme park.

“Some pig,” the Prof, yelled. He landed the helicar in a paddock and ejected with pizzazz.

“Some pig,” said Jinny, “You don’t know how mad Grandfather is with you. That’s why he’s sending us to market.”

“Some Prof.,” Esmerelda muttered to herself, lumbering into motion. She walked purposively along the road to greet her former engineer.

The Prof, stroked the sooty bristles on Esmeralda’s broad pink back. “Hey-up, have I been looking for you two.”

“We’re going to the market,” said Jinny, “We have to be on our way.”

Esmerelda harrumphed to get their full attention. When both Jinny and the Prof, obliged, Esmerelda asked, “I’ve been meaning to ask. Just what is this market thing? What’s in it for me?”

Jinny was stunned.

“Some pig!” said the Prof, with pride in his engineer’s eyes.

“Did you hear that?”

“I heard that,” said the Prof., pleased.

“She really can talk!”

“I knew that,” replied the Prof. “You have to respect her choice. She simply decided not to talk when people were listening.” Professor Rhine stroked Esmeralda’s bristles from back to front. Esmerelda purred.

“I don’t believe it.”

“And she can purr,” said Prof. Rhine, pointing to the obvious.

“It’s not just parroting, then.”

Esmerelda took full advantage of Jinny’s confusion. She put her head in the Sunnysooft bread bag and helped herself.

“Pig!” Jinny snatched at the bread bag.

Esmerelda glared at Jinny and snuggled closer to the Prof.

“Some pig,” Jinny muttered.

“I called by at the farm, and here you are. I’ve come to fetch Esmerelda. I heard she was for sale.”

“Was for sale?” The pig spoke in a tone of voice which indicated some surprise.

“Pig, you think you’re so smart,” said Jinny crossly.

“You’re going to the market. I’m going to the market. Hey, let’s cut a deal.” The Prof, took out his purple haversack.

Jenny glared at him suspiciously. She had seen the contents of that haversack before. But before she could object, the school bus hovered by. “Miss Barnes!” cried Jinny. “She’s out to get me.”

The hoverbus circled in to land. “I’ve got to make a break for it,” said Jinny.

“Lucky you’ve got me,” said the Prof. “In you get.” He pulsed the hovercar and the roof slid open to permit entry.

Jinny had no choice. Together they heaved Esmerelda into the back seat and soon they were off, up and away.

Now Miss Barnes was on the ground, out of the bus and looking up at the sky. But not at Jinny and the pig. There was some kind of commotion just above the forest. The dragon. This time, it brought its mother. “See, what did I tell you?” Jinny turned to Esmerelda.

“Even a small dragon means big trouble.” With wild flurries of wings and puffs of fiery air, the two dragons dived straight for the school bus. The baby trailed after its mother, closely mimicking her actions.

Miss Barnes leapt back in the driver’s seat and activated the force field. Jinny relaxed into her hoverseat. That should take care of Miss Barnes. Dragon calming is a lengthy business. Miss Barnes couldn’t really get mad with Jinny. She’d always said Jinny should use the brains she was born with.

But what would happen next? Miss Barnes and half her old class were trapped in the school bus, and soon the news crew would arrive, and the

fire department, and Grandfather would be forced to send Jinny back to school. Another school. Somehow, as she looked down at her old school bus, she knew that Miss Barnes would never have her back with her old classmates again.

Jinny glared at Esmerelda. "You and your little pig secrets." The pig was clearly worth a packet, but Grandfather wouldn't want to know about it. Not now he'd renounced his former wicked ways.

And the Prof, was no help. He set the automatic pilot and swivelled his seat round to face Esmerelda. He whispered his message in her large soft pink ear. "Want to know what I know about the market?"

Jinny knew she should never have got into the hovercar with him, let alone bring Esmerelda along. That pig would never protect her from the wicked ways of the Professor's brave new world. That pig was a pig which put pigs first.

"I want to know," said Esmerelda. "I think I should be told."

"It's where they buy and sell pigs." The Prof, nodded in Jinny's direction.

Esmerelda glared at Jinny, her round pig eyes narrowing into slits.

Jinny wriggled in her seat.

"But, hey, what's past is past, and there's a whole new world to come. And have I got a deal for you," the Prof, announced.

There was a bellow from the pig. "Sell pigs at the market? Sell me?" Jinny threw Esmerelda a slice of white bread, but this time Esmerelda only toyed with it. The pig was thinking.

"That pig is some pig," said the Prof. "I want her for my new project."

"You're not going to trade her for magic beans?" Jinny glared at the Prof. "I told you Grandfather's had it up to here with genetic engineering."

How well Jinny remembered her first packet of magic beans. It was back in the old days, when she still went to school, and Miss Barnes had taken the class on an excursion to the medieval theme park.

"Jack and the beanstalk," said the Prof, that fateful day when she first

met him. “The goose that laid the golden eggs. Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum, you know, all that’s a story. But these here magic beans, well, take them, plant them, and, hey, trust me, something good will happen for you.”

Jinny won the beans, fair and square. She had to guess the number of feathers on a dragon, and she was the first person to guess right. There are no feathers at all on a dragon. A dragon is a reptile, not a bird, bio-created from pterodactyl DNA, with firefly and glow worm additive genes for fiery breath.

“Some girl!” said Prof. Rhine, back then when Jinny first met him and learned she couldn’t trust him.

Jinny planted her magic beans and when they grew fast and high into the clouds, she knew better than to climb up to see what was there.

“Genetic engineering, hey?” said Grandfather, scratching his head when he came out next day to take a look. “What’s it good for then? Bigger and better beanstalks, with nary a bean in sight. All show and no go, all process and no product.” Grandfather renounced his faith in genetic engineering. He chopped the beanstalk down and turned it into biomass compost.

A golden goose of unknown species toppled out of the sky and ran off into the bush. A giant landed heavily some distance away, and found a home in the medieval theme park, Fee, Fi, Fo, and Fumming at medieval banquets.

There’d been nothing in it for Jinny, nothing at all.

“Magic beans are just not worth the problems they bring down upon your head,” said Jinny firmly.

“You are so right,” the Prof, agreed. “I’ve seen the light myself. Forget the golden goose. It’s pig teleportation I’m into now. This pig is for the stars.”

“Some Prof.” Esmerelda dropped a soggy slice of white bread into Jinny’s lap.

“Now why would anyone want to teleport a pig?”

“Not just any old pig. This pig is a talking pig.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Beam me up, beam me up. Magic words. Need I say more?”

“If you want this pig you’ll have to talk big business, and I mean big money and not just magic beans.”

“Aha, but these magic beans are a new improved variety.”

Esmerelda snorted for attention. She cleared her large pig throat. “Weighing up the balance of probabilities,” she said, “I think I’ll go with the Prof.”

“It’s a deal?” the Prof, asked.

“Do I get to have a choice?” said Jinny bitterly. “It’s always the same. You get me into trouble. I get to take the blame, and it’s never my fault.”

The hovercar landed at the market. Esmerelda refused to budge. Jinny climbed out.

“Look,” said the Prof., “I don’t want to rob you. Take the haversack. Miss Barnes was right. Use your brains to think.”

Jinny did as she was told. She took the haversack tall of magic beans, but this time she did not plant them herself. She set up a stall at the market and traded magic beans for education credits. She bought herself a place at the university and studied astronavigation. Then she piloted a spaceship to the stars, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Esmerelda became an ambadress for earth.

Jinny met up with Mary Beth upon her travels, and the mother and daughter team explored the furthest reaches of the galaxy, where no pig had gone before.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

“Two Recipes for Magic Beans” began as a joke. I’d been asked by Ellen Datlow to be part of a Round Robin story for Omni Online with three other writers. Our story was going to be the second in the Round Robin series.

The first Round Robin story was a story of a boy and his dinosaur. I was terrified at the Round Robin idea, and in my panic I sketched a story of a girl and her pig. It turned into “Two Recipes for Magic Beans”, a kind of homage to *Charlotte’s Web* and *Babe*.

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* * * *

WIRED DREAMING

PAUL COLLINS

Paul Collins was born in England, raised in New Zealand and at eighteen emigrated to Australia. Since then his stories have been published in over 140 magazines and anthologies; some of his best fiction can be found in his collection *The Government in Exile*. He also writes adult novels, children's novels and non-fiction books. Some of these titles are *Cyberskin*, the *Cyberkids* trilogy, *The Wizard's Torment*, *Out of this World* and *Dog King*. Collins is the editor of *Metaworlds*, *Dream Weavers*, *Fantastic Worlds*, *Tales from the Wasteland*, and other anthologies and series. His most ambitious work was the definitive *Melbourne University Press Encyclopaedia of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. He has recently coedited, with Meredith Costain, fifteen anthologies of science fiction, fantasy and horror, called *Spinouts*.

The next story "Wired Dreaming" is dark, gritty, and edgy — and reads like Sam Spade on speed.

* * * *

"Angel, we have another one for you." It was a soft murmur inside my temporal lobe unit.

Okay, let me have it. I jacked into the public node and took a download, then within the hour was at the victim's flat with all the relevant details ordered and accessible within my mind. Caucasian male, thirty-three, sex offender with a chip full of priors.

The Forensic Field Crew had bagged and tagged everything, including the body.

"Hey, Angel! You're late for the party. Everything's been gift-wrapped already!" Spurious laughter.

"You're a strange man, Burbank. I bet when you were born the doctor slapped your mother."

Burbank's grin didn't falter. "Have a good night, Angel." The detective

looked over at the body bag. “You ask me, someone’s doing us a helluva big favour whacking this scum.”

Burbank and his FFC boys moved out, and I wandered about the room before taking a look at the victim. Blinds drawn at half mast, rusted 70s chrome formica table and chairs, kipple stuffed into vague bed shapes. And a rank smell that persisted despite the cold wind creeping through the broken windows. Fear.

A VR system was near the body, as had been the case with the other victims. Virtual sex was on the way up. For all its electoral clout, the League of Decency was fighting a losing battle.

As with all the others, the unit was not connected to him. The derms were lifeless anchor lines wound around the black and grey Sanyo like a squid hugging itself.

I unzipped the bodybag quickly, and closed it even faster. I preferred the imager photo of Derrick stored in my TLU to the tortured face in the bag. In any case, I knew it wasn’t the man I’d been looking for these past six years.

The FFC carrier stuck his thumb out toward the bodybag. “You finished with it?”

I walked out into the cold night without answering.

* * * *

I spent the next two shifts and much of my own time sifting through files and records. Protocol these days is to let the TLU assess everything and give you logical conclusions, but old habits die hard. I simply don’t trust some technologies: fuzzy logic can mean fuzzy results.

The similarities between the deaths were there, but told me nothing. The victims had died of shock. Each had been a sex offender with priors. Two had been on parole at the time of death. All were males in their thirties. A search of their residences showed nothing out of the ordinary, but they all shared a propensity for low budget porn disks. Three of them even had *Private Predator*, a “slash ‘em/slay ‘em” title. But Trevor Derrick hadn’t owned a copy.

I checked the producer’s name. It figured. *Private Predator* was the sort of vid scumbags like Jerry Anderson’s SpaceScape specialised in.

Hardcore dildonics. I'd check him out.

Each of the victims was enrolled in a Corrective Censure Programme, and they shared the same service psychiatrist.

I mulled over this last fact. It was feasible that someone with enough savvy could install a limbic virus designed to activate at a certain time then self-destruct.

I quickly scanned my working file for the times of death. They'd all died at night in their sleep, but at different hours.

More hack work took me through to 0300 hours, then I slept soundly into mid-morning. Showered and sharp, I asked the bureau to book me a meeting with Dr Gabrielle Serguson at the CCP. In the cab I flashed her dossier through the TLU. Nothing of significance came up.

I patched into the priority news. Giselle Brash, newsreader for CNA, came on line. She smiled with well manicured geniality, an all-teeth smile, a lower half smile at odds with the rest of her face.

"Thousands are feared dead after today's earthquake that rocked eastern Taiwan. Measuring 8 on the Richter scale, the earthquake toppled buildings —"

I swapped to In Depth.

"The effects of global warming have never been so evident as they were today as thousands fled their homes when tidal waves from the Taiwan earthquake swept the East Asian coasts. Smashing over dykes, they —"

Obvious. I switched channels and caught an ad for genetic health therapies. Then Mike Davies, reporter for HUN TV filled my imager.

"Civil libertarians today have condemned the latest of President Jason Clark's already much criticised welfare housing reforms. Dubbed by the Opposition as 'Draconian and tantamount to martial law', they —"

Nothing new on the home front or globally, but the ad for HealthScape's genetic health therapies snagged in my mind. The cab arrived at the CCP building.

Serguson's secretary showed me into the office. "Gabby — Detective

Inspector Hart to see you.” She smiled almost apologetically and left the office.

“Sex Offenders Squad,” I added.

“Good afternoon, Detective. I presume you wish to discuss the recent deaths?”

I was slightly taken aback. She didn’t waste time. Either she was very clever or she had something to hide and so took the offensive. “That’s right,” I said.

I gave her a hardcopy precis and sat back to wait.

She met my eyes after a minute. “I’ve been reading about these deaths,” she said candidly. “Bit of a coincidence.”

“Oh?”

“They’re all my clients, of course.” She accessed her desk node and worked for some moments. A disk presently slid out of a slot. “Everything I know about them is in there.”

I pocketed the disk.

“What about doctor/patient confidentiality?”

She frowned. “A thing of the past, Detective Inspector. EEG, ECG, temporal monitoring, thermal resonance scanning, even monitored sessions of them doing slash VR — it’s all in the files.”

“Any theories?” I asked. “A serial killer it isn’t. We know it’s not a virus, there are no residues. I’m thinking maybe something along the lines of neural-induced hypnotherapy.”

“An REM-triggered response that kills its victim leaving no trace?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Well?”

“If I think of any, I’ll let you know.”

I got up. “Thank you.”

“And Detective Inspector?”

I turned.

“I hope you have a strong stomach.” She looked faintly amused. “Their files make *The Butcher’s Knife* seem like a post-modern romance.”

* * * *

“Angel? You’re on duty.”

I jerked awake in my darkened bedroom at the neural call. Damn them. It wouldn’t be long before they could read our thoughts.

“Calm down, Angel,” said the chip tone. “Doesn’t pay to get all unfocused.”

I downloaded the emergency brief. I think my heart missed a beat when I saw Miles Rogers’ name. One of Burbank’s boys had just died.

* * * *

Burbank glared at me when I arrived. He was dressed in a tuxedo and his face glistened with the afterglow of a heavy night on the town.

“How you going on this case, Angel? You getting a target or what?” He waved his FFC men out of the room.

I faced him squarely. “I just got here.”

“You’re a right comedian, Angel.” He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. His breath was redolent of whisky. The bureau was monitoring him, he was even acting for the monitors. I side-stepped and made straight for the body bag that contained Rogers. Different face, same expression of terror.

“Harrison?” I called. “You got a list of all Miles’ stuff?”

Burbank’s partner, Dale Harrison, came over and handed me a disk. “Everything down to the last knife and fork, Angel.” He shook his head discouragingly. “Nothing unusual.” He looked over to Burbank. “No illegal substances. Nothing.”

I smiled briefly. “No worries, I’ll just look around now. You’ll get my

brief by 1600 hours.”

Dale left and took Burbank with him.

And that’s when I spotted *Private Predator* on Miles’ disk. Iridescent green flag-marked the title. It matched with three of the four previous victims, and it had probably belonged to the fourth. That didn’t make the connection conclusive, but it was another lead.

I obtained a new copy of *Private Predator* through the services of a gofer called Harvey.

“Research, is it?” he enquired.

I noticed the silver security tab had been spliced. “You seen it?” I asked. “Before bringing it here?”

“Not me, mate. I’m a natural-born victim. You guys know that.”

I transferred credits to his account and he left the office. Rather than view the disk there, I took it home. Harvey’s insinuation of my own interest in such filth left me queasy.

* * * *

I watched each of the five *Private Predator* disks on “view only”. I could not even contemplate the “participation” option. The plotline was as one would expect: sleazebag meets girls in lowlife bar scene.

The girls are whoever you want them to be, and morph instantly into your own personal fantasy. Mine are dykish, genetically-enhanced Paraguayan beauties. One is in a see-through latex bodysuit; black sheen hair cropped razorboy-style, pouting lips shaded turquoise framing pearl-white teeth. Her twin is wearing a burnt orange neoprene bodysuit hugging her musculature like an immaculate golden tan.

It’s no wonder virtual sex has captured so many aficionados.

“Sweetmeat,” my character says. Suave and sophisticated he isn’t. He’s gutter-level sleaze material, but the girls just *adore* him.

“Oohhh!” one of them squeals. “He’s coming over!”

It's sickening. He can't do a thing wrong.

The rest I'll relate in short: Man takes girls to bondage scene where adoring girls finally figure out he's not such a nice guy after all but some kind of perverted freak who gets his kicks by hacking and slashing.

I watched this shit five times that night, starting with Harvey's bought disk. Identical. They weren't pirated, and no virus had impregnated the datablocks. Apart from making me nauseated and longing to turn them off, viewing them had no discernible effect. I'd seen that stuff in real life.

And snuff movies are now legal. Mostly terminals sign up with studios like Rhinestone to get killed on film — glorified consensual death. In return, their beneficiaries get a lump sum payout. It's a superannuation for the desperate, a gift for their loved ones when the "terms" know they're about to die and leave nothing. Some unfortunates even do it rather than suiciding. Great for charities, many of which become astonished cash recipients of anonymous donors.

When I finally wound down in bed that night, it wasn't for a good night's sleep. I played a few Daffy Duck vids, and they pushed the horrors away into the shadows of my mind. I dozed.

That's when I noticed I had blood on my hands. And someone was pounding on the door.

"I heard screams coming from that room!" A frightened voice. An elderly woman's.

"Break the door down. We've got the bastard this time!"

I swung around. A body was strung out like a broken marionette across the bed. Her head was mercifully out of view. Thin steel wires had cut deep into her ankles and wrists. I stubbed my toe against something else at my feet.

Another body. The same two women that I'd seen in *Private Predator*.

The door burst into firewood. A body stumbled forward and others fought their way through the ruined door.

I made it to a window. The drop was one storey. I leaped, braced, landed awkwardly.

“After him!” from above.

I didn't get far. Excruciating pain ripped through my crushed ankle. I hopped across the street, stumbled over the kerb and knew it was hopeless. Footfalls closed on me.

I turned in time to duck a left hook, kicked out with my crippled foot. Tac. squad automatics fanned about me like thin black petals.

I'd rather die than be nailed for a sex crime. I lunged for the barrels, begging for death. But my tormentors dispersed like fog on a windscreen.

I woke with a start, and tossed and turned for a while, too groggy to get up. Exhausted, I drifted into sleep again, and another nightmare bore me away.

* * * *

Cloud cover masked the cityscape like some dark and potent magic as I stood gasping at my bedroom window. I killed my TLU auto-alarm. It didn't like pulse irregularities in its host and mine must have been running rampant.

Nightmares so realistic they even fooled my auto-alarm. And my foot throbbed where I'd kicked the bed rail. Jesus it hurt. Then a thought hit me. Why hadn't Miles' TLU wakened him before he went into regenerative shock? I begrudgingly logged in and scanned for that information. His ECG had hit its ceiling at the time of death, yet Miles had been asleep when he'd died.

Bruised, bleeding and utterly drained, I sat in the shower and cleaned myself up. A breakfast show babbled cheerily on my antique transistor radio.

I re-read Jerry Anderson's dossier. He had withdrawn from public view when his wife was brutally murdered back in 2004. At that time she had been the director of the embryonic science arm of SpaceScape.

The late Mrs Anderson's maiden name had been Schepis — as had Gabrielle Serguson's.

Voila!

I visited SpaceScape Productions.

Jerry Anderson's voice had an almost androgynous quality: the words were softly enunciated but tempered with streetwise severity.

"Make it brief, Detective Inspector. I'm a busy man."

I placed all five copies of *Private Predator* carefully on his polished agate desk.

"You're a fan? Here, let me sign those for you."

"I'm sure your company does have its fans, Anderson. But I'm not one of them."

"So what's your beef? Everything here is fully licensed and above board. I'm an honest man."

"The other side of SpaceScape belonged to your wife. Her specialty was genetic AIs."

Anderson's face went tight. "Her role was small. Rosie's work was mostly experimental." He tried to sound nonchalant.

"Yet you advertise on the net? Genetic health therapies? HealthScape *is* a subsidiary of SpaceScape."

"Where's all this heading, Detective Inspector?"

"Try this: a VR program interacts with the player's amygdala, creating a neural feedback that acts on the victim's brain like an intense emotional shock, inducing an Obsessive-Reiteration-Disorder. A very, very intense regenerative Obsessive-Reiteration-Disorder. A TLU can't snap him out of it. He dies of shock, and it's always a male victim. How am I doing?"

"You got a great imagination, Detective Inspector Hart." He glanced at the window. Five storeys up and fusion glass impregnated with chameleon phosphors. No way would it burst. Little chance of escape there.

"You're right, of course," he added, in that well modulated, bland voice. "So *what* if the bottom of the barrel gets scraped every now and then? *Private Predator*? Merely my answer to a failing society."

“How many copies sold?”

“Millions. My brainchild specifically targets men who feed emotionally on the degradation of women.”

“Fantasies aren’t illegal, Anderson. VR might be a form of wish-fulfilment, but it doesn’t turn its viewers into homicidal murderers.”

“Really?” He spread his hands and laid them flat on the table. “As I was saying, my program is designed to protect those viewers who don’t find it pleasurable. If it revolts them, they drop out. Only those who play it through become conditioned. Which raises the question: why are you still with us if you researched the program?”

“Allow me my secrets —”

“You’re an odd one, Hart, an anomaly I’ll never get a chance to examine.”

I reached forward to pin his arms but he evaded me. He sprang for the window, hit it hard, bounced and crashed sickeningly hard back onto the carpet.

“As I was trying to say,” I admonished, “allow me my secrets and I’ll allow you yours.”

* * * *

I was getting changed at the gym later that morning. Too engrossed in my personal but secret triumph, I failed to hear Burbank come up behind me. “You got a nice neat locker, Angel.”

“Like my mind, Burbank.” I didn’t shut the locker in time.

“That your sister?”

I glanced up at the portrait slick hanging in my locker. It was signed Angie, and she was dressed in her gym gear, holding up a trophy for Best All Rounder. Mum and Dad doted in the background.

“My dead twin, Burbank. Sex attack.”

“Yeah? Guess it figures, then.”

I slammed the locker door shut. “What figures, Burbank?” Our noses were almost touching, but he didn’t pull back. He got off on invading personal space.

“This hang-up you have with the SOS. It eats your gut away, doesn’t it, Angel? You been stuck in that girlie squad for years now.”

We stood there for a moment, eyes locked, his rancid caffeine-breath hot on my face.

I backed down of course. I had plans for Burbank. I left the locker room, knowing that his mind was already ticking. I wondered when he would eventually view *Private Predator*. That thing was a soul cleanser that I had no intention of withdrawing from its adoring public. I’d already made some creative deletions in the forensic databases, and there would be more.

No-one would check my TLU file unless I was audited, and that was unlikely.

It hadn’t been hard to change. I was an only child, and a loner. My parents worked hard to be supportive through the transition, and a whole new persona only takes months if you’re connected. Angie certainly had died during a vicious rape, and Angel had stood up amid her ashes. He had survived because he hadn’t watched *Private Predator* as a man.

I sat on the incline bench and got into a set of alternate dumbbell curls.

Always the loner ...

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Colin Steele once wrote in the *Canberra Times* that “Collins has a penchant for the hard-boiled hero, a lineage derived from Hammett and Chandler”. Angel Hart, our protagonist here, fits rather snugly into that description, although in a role quite dissimilar to that of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. The astute reader will recognise some of the science from *Cyberskin*, a more likely source might be from my collaboration with Damien Jones, “Supremacist”, which appeared in *REvelation*.

— Paul Collins

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* * * *

DESCENT

CECILY SCUTT

Cecily Scutt's first story, "Spider's People", appeared in *Hecate*, and she sold a story, "Photographs of David", to *Southerly*. Another short story, "Re-making", has appeared in *Westerly*, and also in a Western Australian anthology, *Over the Fence*. An award-winning oral storyteller, she performs at libraries, schools, bookshops, cafes, and homes for the aged. (She says she also performs at aquariums and bus stops.)

When not writing, she works in Perth as a university tutor in the social sciences, and procrastinates over her PhD thesis. Her most recent technique for this involves research for a novel about evolution, racism, nineteenth-century factory practices, and Tierra del Fuego. She is also obsessed with cephalopods, but admits an older loyalty to Class Amphibia.

In this deft and wry story — her first fantasy tale — she takes us right into Hell ... to visit family, of course.

* * * *

I went to visit my Grandmother, in Hell. She had died about six weeks earlier, slipping on the wet paving of her back garden and breaking her hip. She lay there amongst the last of the tomatoes until her deaf neighbour looked over the fence and called an ambulance. She died of a heart attack on the way to Emergency.

The vicar said in the funeral oration that Mrs Southey had been an example to us all. If her formidable self sufficiency had led her to take risks, he said (a reference to her refusal to move into the local Home of Peace), still it was a virtue sadly lacking in the younger generation. She was, he said, peering over his glasses at her pale and shrunken descendants, one of the Old School.

Grandmother lay in her coffin looking strangely gaudy, the funeral directors having given her her first make-up job in over forty years. She seemed tiny. Alive she had been a big woman, running to fat and smoking too much. She hadn't had much time for Church either.

All the same, I was surprised to find her re-housed in Hell.

* * * *

Hell is really small. They don't tell you that. The corridors are narrow, and the ceiling presses down. The walls are painted green.

Grandmother shares her room with two other old women. She has a high bed by the window, yellowed blankets stretched into neat corners. The window blinds are grey and tightly sealed. One of the fluoro lights has a permanent flicker. She peers at me from the chair by the bed.

"It's Rosa, isn't it?" she says. "Or is it Bree?"

"Hope, Gran. Mary's daughter, remember?"

"Of course, of course. Damn fanciful names. Did you bring me some fruit?"

"They took it from me at the entrance. Something about a balanced diet."

She looks disgusted. She snaps off her glasses and polishes them on her old pink cardie. "Damn the lot of them. Imps and Demons! Stealing an old woman's fruit!" She leans forward suddenly and hisses in my ear. I have trouble making out the sibilants. Her breath smells of Denture Soak.

"Sorry, Gran?"

She scowls at me and looks around. "I said, don't you eat anything here," she whispers, louder. "Remember Persephone!"

"Persephone?" I wonder if she means my sister Phoebe.

"Persephone and the pomegranate seeds!"

"Oh," I say. "Right you are Gran. No problem."

The other old women are staring at us across the room. There is a tiny blue-rinsed one with a pink nose, and a large black-clad one in a headscarf. The little one has a TV screen mounted at the end of her bed. Soapie stars swim across it, twittering vaguely. The scarfed one's bedside table is cluttered with photos of smiling black-haired children. Their stares are unwavering. I decide to change the subject.

“So how are you settling in, Gran?”

She looks at me with disbelief. “How do you think? One minute I’m trying to die with some dignity in my garden, and the next thing I know I’m stuck down here!”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, inadequately. I look around for something cheerful to talk about. My gaze sticks on the drawn blinds. “Perhaps a little fresh air?” I jump up and pull at the blind cord.

“They’re *stuck*.” She rolls her eyes. I was never her favourite grandchild. Still, I’m the only one who has bothered to visit her. I want to prove my usefulness, and wrestle harder with the blinds.

They suddenly snap upwards, revealing the window. It has been bricked up. The bricks are a brutal red, with crumbling mortar. The room shrinks. The old woman in the headscarf begins to cry.

Grandmother clenches her hands, and speaks in a stiff, patient voice. “Perhaps you had better pull them down again, child.”

I get them down again. Silence falls. Behind the low voiced soapie stars I hear distant clatters, and the hum of climate control. The woman’s sobs slow, and falter. She hunches a black cloth shoulder against us, turning on her other side.

I stare at the covered window. Grandmother used to keep tomatoes on her window sill. She would pick them when they were still green, just hinting at yellow. Before the fruit flies were interested. In rows on the kitchen window they would slowly ripen in the sun.

I went to Gran’s quite often, when I was little. I remember long summer afternoons playing in the back shed while she napped. Helping her with the compost. The sound of the sea sifting the evening quiet, while we ate hot buttered toast in the kitchen.

“Remember the way you used to mix together butter and marge?” I say suddenly. “I saw in Coles the other day they’re now selling it as a special new blend. More spreadable, and lower in fat.”

She gives me another of her looks, scratching her faded curls. They are still not entirely grey. “I learned that in the War. It made the butter last longer. And the marge by itself tasted like” — she lowers her voice,

conspiratorially “— *bird shit.*”

I laugh. She pulls her head back, looking haughty but satisfied, and checks out the others with a careful sideways glance. “Not that I should use such language. I try to set a good example. So tell me about the family, child.”

The blue-rinsed old lady from the far end interrupts my first sentence. She nods her head continually, smiling anxiously. “Is this your lovely daughter, Joan?”

Grandmother frowns and shifts in her chair. “No Maisie, this is my granddaughter Faith —”

“— Hope,” I mutter.

“Hope,” she continues in the same breath, “who has come to visit me. We were *talking.*” It occurs to me that she is possessive of a visitor, even me. This is gratifying. I smile graciously at the little woman.

“Welcome to Hell, dear,” she pipes. “Are you here to stay? You must have done something bad. I did something bad. Yes I did. I used to touch myself. The priest said it was a sin. But at boarding school I was so lonely. It helped me to sleep. I just wanted to go to sleep.” Her eyes are fixed on a point just above my eyebrows. I stretch my neck to try and meet them. “So here I am, as all sinners should be.”

“Nonsense,” snaps Grandmother. Her face has that rigid look talking about sex always gave it. “All that pious stuff about sin! That’s not why we’re here. She takes too many pills,” she adds, in an audible hissing aside. “I spit mine out.”

“But Joan dear —” The little woman’s head is still nodding.

“I’ll tell you, Maisie, why we’re here. Because nobody wants us. We are too old and too ugly. Can you imagine me in golden wings and fluffy clouds? Me with my dentures and my stomach problems? Or you with your bedwetting cluttering up the angels? They don’t want us there.” She coughs her familiar smoker’s hack. “And Limbo’s for babies. So they send us here. All the unwanted.”

“You are lying!” The woman in black sits up with a sudden rasp of bedsprings. “He is coming to fetch me! I was promised he will come!” Her fingers send photos sliding as she gropes on her table.

Grandmother sighs. “If you’re looking for your rosary, Elena, they took it away, remember? Why don’t you get up now, and we’ll all go down to the TV room.” She gives me a martyred look. I think of her down at the local RSL, her almost brutal practical help for those she called “feckless”.

“I think you should go now, child,” she says briskly. “Visiting hours must be almost up.”

I feel both guilt and relief. I get up in a hurry, before her mood changes again. “Shall I come back next week?”

She slides her glasses along the bridge of her nose. I see they have been mended with pink Elastoplast. Her arms have a marked tremor. “If you like. But go now. And remember” — she reaches out and snags my wrist. Her hands are cold — “remember not to look behind you!”

* * * *

Hell is very small, and very crowded. The corridors are narrow, and the air smells of old cooking. My Grandmother sits on her chair by the white bed, receding.

I walk quickly through the corridors. I avert my eyes as I pass through the gates. I am holding my breath. I am concentrating on tomatoes, ripening on a sunny windowsill, and I don’t look back.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I wrote “Descent” at a round white plastic table in the kitchen of a flat in South Perth. I would like to say that there was a bowl of pomegranates in the centre, but in fact it was covered in junk mail and tea stains. I had brashly rung up the Perth women’s performance group WEB and announced I wanted to read. The reading was on Tuesday, and this was Sunday afternoon.

I had been playing with an idea of a theatrical troupe putting on Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* in the lower regions of Hell. (As you may guess, I had recently read Neil Gaiman for the first time. Also Erica Jong quoting Edna O’Brien, saying that Hollywood movie people are possessed by demons, but a very *low* form of demons.)

It finally occurred to me I knew too little about theatre direction. On the other hand, I knew more than I wanted about Sunday visits.

When I finished this story I couldn't place its genre. How do metaphor, fantasy, and allegory connect? My previous work appears as just "fiction": this is "fantasy." A strange divide! One of my ambitions is to join those writers happily messing up this boundary.

I would like to thank Peter McMahon for (among other things) lending me his kitchen table; Stephen Dedman, who told me this was a fantasy story; Grant Stone; the Thursday Nighters; and WEB, who gave me a deadline.

This story is dedicated to my own grandmother, who also grew tomatoes.

— *Cecily Scutt*

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* * * *

TAMED

ROBERT HOOD

Described in a recent issue of *Aurealis* as “one of Australia’s leading horror writers”, Robert Hood has had over sixty short stories published in major magazines and anthologies. He won the Canberra Times National Short Story Competition in 1975 and the Australian Golden Dagger Award in 1989, and his collection *Day-dreaming on Company Time* was shortlisted for Best Collection by a Single Author at Readercon 1990. He co-edited (with Bill Congreve) the “Best of” Australian horror collection *Bonescribes* in 1996. Nine “gross out”, but hilarious novels for kids — under the series title *Creepers* — came from a collaboration with Bill Condon in 1996-97. Hood is currently writing a young adult novel, *Backstreets*, to be published by Hodder Headline in 1999. He has also just finished revisions to an adult fantasy novel, *Fragments of a Broken Land*.

Hood’s *Fragments of a Broken Land* is one of the strangest and most interesting visions to come out of the modern horror/fantasy genre. Based on the thought and imagery of William Blake, *Fragments* is an exploration of the nature of perception, magic, and the way in which emotional and moral states become metaphysical realities. It is truly something new in the world of the imagination.

The next story is part of that universe, a universe fashioned out of nightmare — where the real darkness is the dark behind your eyes, where the wind screams through stone, and the monsters of the unconscious circle ever closer...

* * * *

Sometimes, at night, I hear screaming. Low and full of pain. It comes when I drift off to sleep and the noise wakes me again. Then it’s gone. Imagination, I suppose.

I’ve asked others about it. My brother, Bryalt, shakes his head and smiles at my foolishness. “Some animal,” he says. But no animal sounds so desolate.

At times I sense an anticipation in the screaming that may be fear

or may be glee. If I could hear it clearly, perhaps I could understand. But it's always skirting the edge of awareness, like a blemish on the periphery of vision which moves away when you try to study it.

I force myself to sleep. Sometimes hours pass, restless with unease, before I manage it.

And the sound is there again. Waiting.

* * * *

Wind blowing over the escarpment disturbed him. Torm pur Nathal could detect a significance in that wind. No smell. No vision. No sound. But whatever it was that nagged at his heart, it heralded a disruption of great importance, and he needed to understand it. The need was like a knife at his throat.

He turned and stared at the sea. Was the wind's message meant for something out there?

"You! Nathal! Pull your head from your arse and give me a hand." The thick-set, balding man, whose authority owed as much to his volume as it did to his position as property foreman, was red-faced under the burden of a large crate. His scowl was intimidating.

Torm walked towards him. "You should call me 'pur Nathal'," he said. "'Nathal' by itself means nothing."

Lawke Yarl wasn't impressed by this distinction. "Call you 'arsehole' more like," he mock-growled. Torm could hear the contempt that lay beneath the man's tenuous joviality. On the lower coastal fringe of Tenen, so far from the more cosmopolitan areas of the Rheateeshan continent, there existed a mere facade of racial tolerance — here, existing at all only because the region's economic decline made any worker valuable. The intolerance didn't offend Torm. He understood the social isolation of strangers — and how such isolation could offer scapegoats and ease fear.

"Drag this to the wagon," the foreman demanded.

Collecting the crate from Lawke's burly shoulders with an ease that belied his slight build, Torm hauled it towards a wagon waiting atop the jetty road. It was a good three hundred metres distant. He hadn't been able to get it any closer — the road surface was too pitted, desperately in need of

repair. Such maintenance would not be undertaken, of course — not in the near future. Forethought was gone from this place — perhaps from the whole country.

Lawke was close behind him with two large sacks, having paid the trader and seen off his barge. A black seabird hovered above them briefly, checking out the possibilities. Torm watched as it wheeled about, cawed stridently and flapped away among the cliffs. He shivered with chill.

“Damn trader was late,” Lawke commented, though only by default was it directed at Torm. “It’ll be falling dark soon.” As he spoke his eyes scanned the distance. They did not yet hold terror, but the potential for it was strongly visible to Torm in his features.

Torm reflected how ironic it was that this man so feared the night. His master tamed monsters, and he knew how rarely deformed creatures came their way at all, let alone randomly. Yet he had a superstitious reverence for darkness. The wooden sides of the wagon were carved with totems designed to ward off the demons and to act as a surety against evil.

“We’d best hurry,” Torm said, thinking of more mundane dangers — potholes, invisible in the dusk, that could cripple horses and snap axles.

They loaded the wagon, tying down the goods with hide-cloth and ropes. By the time they were ready to leave, evening discolouration had crept into the sky. Torm clambered onto the seat at the front, leaving the foreman to control the reins. Anticipating departure, the horses stirred restlessly. “Damn traders,” muttered Lawke, for no immediate reason.

“We’ll be safe,” Torm offered.

The way back was rough, seemingly rougher than the way there. The wheels found rocks and holes everywhere. Curving upward slightly, the track wound over a rise, then down through crevasses and out over dry, abandoned fields. An animal skull watched them from a patch of quivering weeds. Torm could feel the twilight thickening.

* * * *

My brother is always so sad, these days. The process of dying can be wearing, yes, but Bryalt’s mood relates to more than that. His weariness is deep. The doctor says our mother will not last out the month. Strange and disturbing that I cannot feel more than a distant sorrow, and I think, too, that my brother is similarly unable to dread her passing. Our inheritance is cold,

as cold as the stones out there on the hillside. When our mother dies, I think the farm will die with her.

What Bryalt needs is to be loved. I love him, of course, but it's not enough. There must be fire. In all his years, there has been no fire. How can someone with his power be so cold and distant? It's the power that keeps him that way, I'm sure, denying him humanity even while it defines him. I wish he would confide in me.

There was a time when he was a hero to me, someone beyond the normal rules, almost a god. Not now. I'm older. So is he. And as much as I honour him for his skill and his devotion to the family, I more often look at him and feel anxiety.

I fear for him.

And am afraid for myself.

Yesterday mother called me in to see her. Her room was drab and close in anticipation of her passing. The doctor — so gaunt it seemed his body had absorbed the ills he cured — pulled me aside as I entered. "She may not make sense," he warned. "Her mind is drying out and is full of mischievous spirits. But do not contend with her. You mustn't argue. It will only speed her dying."

I gave my bewildered agreement and went to stand at her side. She looked dead, already mummified.

When her shrivelled hand reached for mine, it was all I could do not to cry out. "Eisha, the darkness is singing to me," she wheezed. I expected more, but she said nothing further and I began to fear she wanted some response.

"It's late," I managed.

She smiled vacantly. "Your father will take care of you."

I turned away at those words, angered by them but remembering the doctor's injunction. Mother's bedroom mirror threw back my image: a slight, unfashionably boyish girl, stricken by memories so painful that she stood hunched into herself.

"He's a good man."

“He’s dead, mother,” I replied, feeling the legacy of his drunken assaults in my bones. “He threw himself into the sea over a year ago.”

Seen in the mirror, my mother seemed to shrink further into her blankets. “He was a good man once, Eisha. He sang to me.”

“Sang to you? Is that supposed to make up for what he did?”

The doctor scowled and, guilty, I tried to tame my anger. Now was not the time for recriminations. “He will sing to you, too, if you ask him,” mother continued.

“Mother,” I said, more kindly I hoped, “he’s passed on. He’s at peace.”

For a moment she stared into a dark corner of the room as though she suspected he might be hiding there. “Oh, yes,” she said with a slow nod. “I’d forgotten.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. I was suddenly ashamed of my outburst, which must have seemed so wanton to her. She didn’t reply. Perhaps she hadn’t heard.

Several minutes passed. Her sunken eyes closed, so that I thought she’d fallen asleep. Yet I couldn’t leave; her hand was clutching my arm. “I’m afraid,” she said.

I nodded, not knowing how to respond. “I fear for Bryalt.” Her lips trembled. “His heart is stony.”

“He’s tired, mother. He works hard.”

“He does what he does — but the evil doesn’t go away. I never cared for his magic.”

“It has saved the property.”

I almost cringed at my own words. The property has been everything, always — a substitute for human love and caring. A god that demands endless sacrifice — and mother was always willing to offer up anything necessary to maintain it. Yet, as always, I defend it. I speak of it as something more important than life. The property consumed my father. Has all but taken my brother.

Mother looked worn now. She was not an old woman, nowhere near the age of other old women I have met in surrounding villages. But nor did she have their vigour. She looked wasted, skin clinging to her bones reluctantly, eyes hollow and dark. Even when she smiled, the darkness remained. As I watched, she lowered herself into the blankets and allowed saliva to leak from the left side of her mouth. Her head slumped. "It might have been better to let it go," she muttered.

* * * *

Torm became convinced that something was shadowing them, flitting from rock to rock as the wagon jogged and thudded against his spine. Unexpected rushings at the edge of sight would startle him. He'd concentrate in that direction, only to discover that the movement was in fact bushes rustling or his own flickering shadow. The lowering Wave of Day, its dazzling energies fading southward now, was sporting with his perceptions. Strange, though, that he spied no wild animals, no birds, wherever he looked. The world was silent and waiting.

Lawke stared ahead with a sort of determined anxiety, urging the horses to go as fast as the state of the track would allow. The animals seemed calm enough — even indifferent. But their attitude was unnaturally deliberate. As though they, too, were waiting.

While they travelled, anticipating grim possibilities, Torm's mind threw up an image of the first "tamed" monster he had ever encountered — one of master Bryalt's. He didn't know why that moment came into his head now, as they careened along a darkening track, but he suspected. Fate was catching up with him.

It was nearly a year ago that Torm had come to Tenen from the southern continent. The ship had docked at the port of Stren-Halg, a ramshackled town on the northern Tenenian coastline, and on embarking, Torm had immediately ventured along the main street, seeking the "Seabed" guesthouse. The ship's purser had recommended it as a possible lodging for the night, and being alone and friendless in this foreign place, Torm keenly anticipated the possibility. He had no better plan. He'd stumbled from the wharf with his bag, past produce carts and wagons lined up to receive goods ordered months before, but had failed to notice the large creature that suddenly stepped into his path. It was taller than a man, with a thick body covered in gnarled flesh and skin like a snake's, legs massive, like hardwood trunks, and four serpentine arms sprouting from its chest that each ended in heavy, three-fingered claws. Its head was small and insect-like, with slitted mouth and five or six growths that might have

been eyes. Whether any of them saw the world that Torm saw, he couldn't tell. A carved yoke was strapped to its shoulders; it pulled a cart large enough to exhaust a full team of heavy horses.

Torm took in all this detail instantly and recoiled, expecting a warping perceptual rush — a bending of the mind evoked by the monster's deformity. But there was nothing, only a grey fog where the thing's spiritual presence should have raged with fire, scalding, threatening.

"It's been tamed," someone whispered in Torm's ear.

Tamed? The word entered Torm's mind uneasily, sitting ill with his knowledge of such beasts and the metaphysical processes that created them. How could a monster be made safe? By definition they were unnatural, their distorted forms and warped spirits arising from the dark currents of Creator Junsar's ancient error. Their evil could not be domesticated. Lowering his mental barriers, he allowed himself to "read" the qualities of the monster before him, evaluating its implications.

Tamed? No. It was empty rather than broken.

Torm backed against the wall and let it pass, breathing deeply to calm his own panic. Whoever had spoken to him had moved on, but now Torm wanted to question him. He rushed after the figure closest, a heavy-set man in a knee-length leather coat, grabbing at his shoulder.

The man hissed, drawing a dagger.

"That creature," Torm said, ignoring the weapon, "how has it come about?"

The man's weather-lined face snarled. "How should I know? I'm no priest. It's *drontagis* — a monster."

"But its anima is so *quiescent*."

"*Du'hon*, we call them. Visiting workers." He shoved Torm. "Like you. They work — and we hope they'll die of it before too long."

No lodgings were available at the "Seabed", nor was Torm offered a place in any other establishment where he made enquiries. Eventually he slept in the shadows behind a storage barn, alone until discovered by a street whore happy to share his warmth. They huddled together sexlessly

and, at his insistence, she told him about the *du'hon*.

"Quieted by deviant magic, they are," she explained, "though local priests have given their approval to it. I think they weren't always so agreeable. But the *du'hon* are worth something — at least to the larger landowners. Their deformities can be put to use." She ran her hand over Torm's bald head. "It's wrong ... forbidden elsewhere I've been told. Too dangerous. But the Weller family does the Rites."

"Rites?"

"Of Purification, they call them. The son has a power. People here say the family's inbred with a demon. Superstition. But you can never tell in these times."

Her words cemented his purpose, and in the morning, Torm set off along the coast towards the isolated Weller freehold.

* * * *

"You asleep?" Lawke was leaning toward him, one hand shaking his arm, the other still clutching the reins. He glanced left, right, ahead.

"Thinking," Torm said. He was suddenly sensitive to a disturbance in the air and fought back bone-chill that for a moment threatened to cause uncontrollable trembling in his limbs.

"There's something." Lawke gestured, though there was no knowledge in it. "Out there."

"Bandits?"

"Something."

Torm could feel Deformity now, a growing ache that plucked at his skin. Darkness was more than the absence of light — it seemed to deny memory of it. Ghostly tracings twitched across the sky.

"How far to the farm?"

"Half an hour maybe."

Indistinct in the night, something that wasn't hill or bush surged up to their right. Beneath its own movement, the wagon trembled.

The horses screamed, pulling away in blind terror — it was a weird sound that Torm had never heard before and it made his stomach muscles tighten in fear. Lawke fought to control the horses, dragging them back to a trot. Torm watched as the outline of a boulder grew long, spindly legs and raised itself like a monstrous spider. It disappeared into the night. Trees snapped and squirmed in a sudden wind.

“Nathal, what’s happening?”

Why was Lawke crying out to Torm so earnestly? Independent, contemptuous, yet he sensed the purpose in this stranger, despite himself. Torm gripped the man’s shoulder, to give him reassurance. Lawke didn’t turn to look but remained intent on controlling the horses as best he could. Amazingly, he kept them on the track.

Around the wagon, night heaved.

* * * *

I sit on the edge of my bed, listening. Wind is battering the walls, forcing unnatural movement into the joints of the building. It has always seemed solid enough, but now it’s as frail as straw. My head swims.

I lie down again, thinking nothing, trying to ease my panic. The darkness behind my eyes squirms with a thousand half-formed images. Sounds hiss in my ears. They’re almost like voices. I concentrate on them, but the voices, if they are voices, speak only nonsense. Aborted words that mimic speech. Some of them clarify.

*“Truth ...a clenched fist
pounds on the Body of Life.
Form that cannot decay;
form that is not, but will be again;
form reformed by Power unending ...”*

From the litany of Purification. I hear the chant and know that it’s Bryalt’s mouth that says the words. I see him, there in my doorway, looking in at me; hear the song again, though his lips do not move in time with the sound now. He is naked.

Fingers emerge from his chest. He looks on calmly as a hand forces itself through his skin. Then another. The hands tear his body

apart, tossing off the useless shreds and stepping out into the room. My mother. She wears nothing but the wrinkled skin hanging from her almost-visible skeleton. I stare at her distended belly, realising that she's pregnant. Soundlessly she screams, bending backward as an arm and then a head push out from between her legs. The figure struggling to emerge from her tears her apart as it comes into the world.

My father stands bloody and silent before me. After a moment, he steps closer, snarling like a beast.

I wake, gasping and afraid.

* * * *

Bryalt was standing alone by the northern fence, staring up along the ragged escarpment as though waiting for a sign. He didn't turn as I approached, though he must have heard my shoes crunching on twigs and dry grass. I followed his gaze — it was focussed across arid fields towards Jar'ut Road and the Land's Breach Pass, which offered a clear route to the coast.

"Bryalt?"

"Leave me, Eisha."

The earnestness of his dismissal hurt me, but I contained my sadness. "It's mother. She's dying."

"I know."

"Now, brother. You should go to her now."

His indifference startled me. I grabbed at him to make him face me. He could have flung me aside, for compared to him I'm small and weak, even though his posture had become increasingly lax and his torso thick — but instead he allowed himself to be drawn away from whatever thoughts obsessed him. Dark hair, peppered with premature grey, fell limply over his face. His eyes squinted, especially the right one, though not against glare. He looked like he'd slept in his clothes and had been ingesting *twan*; I could smell the tang of the drug.

"You're a mess," I said.

“You’re not my mother, Eisha.”

“Your mother’s dying.”

Some emotion passed over his features — grief or fear, I couldn’t tell.

“Bryalt, please, don’t be so distant. I know what you’re feeling ... I’m confused myself. She makes me angry and I don’t even know how I can love her. She’s been so cruel. But she is our mother. She wants to see you.”

“It’s ending. Seeing her would only ... confuse me more.” He glanced up suddenly, looking toward the house. A tremor shook the ground, a relaxation of the earth that threatened to open it up beneath my feet. Thunder rumbled along the distant escarpment.

Bryalt seemed to collapse internally, shadows crossing his face. “She’s dead.”

“What do you mean?”

“She died. Just then. I no longer need to see her.”

Confusion turned to anger. I grabbed at him. “Bryalt, for god’s sake, tell me what’s going on? I can’t stand you like this.”

Firmly he loosed my grip and held me away from him. Tears gathered in my eyes. He softened. “You must be prepared, Eisha.”

“How can I be prepared? You won’t be honest with me.”

He gazed at me, as though the movement of my lips mesmerised him — yet at the same time I knew he was already looking beyond.

“Bryalt!”

“She held me here, Eisha. She held the reins tightly.”

I shook my head, bewildered.

“It was her will. She wouldn’t let go. I knew it was wrong, but she was determined — and now it’s freed.”

“What’s freed?”

He pushed me away. “I tamed nothing, don’t you understand? Nothing. All I did was repress the wildness, divert it. It soaked into the land, into us. Why did our father become violent and wanton? Why was our mother so determined, yet so dried up and loveless?”

“Because that’s what they were like. They let themselves be that way. You’re not responsible.”

He laughed derisively, dismissing my words. “Well, now she’s gone, there’s nothing left of Family to keep the darkness from me.”

I tried to touch him gently, though he withdrew from my fingers. “What of me, Bryalt? I’m your sister. I’m Family.”

He scoffed. “You don’t want to be here. You never have. I’ve felt you straining against the need.”

I protested, but even as I did I knew he was right. I couldn’t remember when I first grew restless here, felt the smothering dryness of this place, the bondage. I had drifted into it. Now, confronted by his words, I could see the truth clearly. Yet there had been no question that I could ever leave. No hope of it. It was a need that could only take form as futile discontent and pointless anger, emotion increasingly warped and spoiled. I was a Weller. This was my place.

“There’s a sickness in the soil, Eisha. We can try to heal it, but it will never be cured. We made it worse, in fact, because we’re tainted and we found a way to add our own illness to the evil of this place.”

The light had faded, so that Bryalt was a dark silhouette against the sky. I could no longer see his lips.

“The Family wanted to control everything. It fought floods and droughts, feral tribes that obeyed no law but their own, wild animals and harsh flora. With no support from anyone, it tamed the land, and eventually made some kind of living from it.

“Yet the land was never welcoming. It existed too close to the edge. By the time I was born, decay was stronger than renewal. For a while, I staved off the inevitable, but it was a deception, all of it. I merely hid the corruption.”

I hadn't been able to interrupt him. Hadn't wanted to. I knew something was seriously wrong and was hoping he would tell me what it was. But this made no sense — our Family history as a sickness of the land. What did it explain?

"Bryalt, come back with me," I pleaded. "See mother this last time, before she goes."

"I told you. She's already dead."

A scream lanced through the twilight, so loud and startling I stumbled away from Bryalt, as though he'd made the noise. But it came from behind, from outbuildings on the other side of the compound. The scream was overtaken by an animal keening.

"My god, what's happened?" I strained to see; the gloom was thick, but I could make out rushing figures and a dark pall of rising dust. A gust of wind churned over the roofs.

"Drontagis" Bryalt whispered.

"Monsters? Has one escaped from the cages?"

"The cages were all empty. This is something that has been buried for too long." He took my hand. "You must run, Eisha. Take the Breach Road."

"You've got to help. You can quell them."

"There's no will for it in me any more. This is a returning — it won't be tamed again."

Wind swirled around us, fetid and stinking. It carried cries and pleadings.

"Do what I say, Eisha," Bryalt said, pointing toward the escarpment. "Run, now!"

"Into the wild? Alone? How can I do that?"

"Use the road. Torm pur Nathal and Lawke Yarl will be along soon, returning from the Supply Jetty. Pur Nathal will know what to do."

"But the farm. My friends. How can I leave them? How can I leave

you?”

Bryalt looked old and tired. His eyes seemed to bleed black tears, but his manner was almost uncaring. “You can’t save them, Eisha. If you don’t leave now, you can only die as well.” More cries. Shouts. Fire swelled here and there in the darkness; I saw desperate figures stark against the glow. Impressions of grotesque shapes came and went. Dust and smoke churned across the hard outlines of walls and fences, blurring and bending them so that nothing was clear. The wind melted the land and the whole world seemed to be shifting.

“I don’t understand,” I cried. “I can’t just run.”

“Go!” he ordered. “None of it matters. Dust and waste.”

I was breathing raggedly. Panic gnawed on the edges of my consciousness. “I didn’t think you could be so cold.”

He grimaced and for the first time I sensed not just his despair, but a deep embittered submission to the darkness that was overwhelming him.

Pulling out of his grip, I ran toward the homestead. It was burning.

Bryalt’s footfalls pounded behind me, and he yelled something, but I ignored him. He couldn’t catch me — I was young and light-footed. Smoky air swirled around me, shredded by a wind that turned normal sight-images into phantoms and then fled with them out toward the escarpment.

I had no idea what I intended to do. I wasn’t thinking, just reacting. Blinded, I stumbled through the murky air, shouting the names of workers I knew, friends. Cries of despair and pain — mingled with dark snarlings from throats I could barely imagine — returned to me from the chaos. A man, nameless in the gloom, crashed across my path, flailing wildly. Before he disappeared into the shadows, I caught a glimpse of red flesh, spine, ribs ... something fibrous that moved in him, tearing at his belly. At the same time one of the shadows above me became a knot of sinew and bone, roaring through a maw filled with teeth and bloody remnants. It ducked away without noticing me, leaving scarlet ripples in the smoke.

Horror stopped me short. I stood, gasping.

“Eisha?” Bryalt had caught up with me. He held my shoulders. “Are you hurt?”

“My head ...” I groaned. “Throbbing. I saw — “

“*Drontagis*.” He began dragging me back the way I’d come. The night was a complex fabric of sounds and emotions, terrible images half-seen, elusive — an amorphous beast clawing in through eyes, ears, the pores of my skin. I staggered.

“You must leave,” Bryalt said.

I nodded dumbly, no longer able to resist. Not wanting to.

“You can’t help,” he persisted. “You can only save yourself.”

“What about you? Are you coming —?”

He silenced me with a gesture. “I’ll stay. Help who I can. Tell pur Nathal I’ll come to the base of the Pass with survivors. By dawn. If I’m not there by dawn, you must leave. Quickly.”

I could barely hold on to what he was saying. The words were breaking apart.

He lifted me and carried me toward the periphery of the farm.

* * * *

Lawke Yarl was screaming. Before Torm could defend him, the foreman was taken by something that came out of nowhere and squeezed his heart.

Yowling like a kicked dog, Lawke dropped the reins and began compulsively clutching at the air. His eyes bulged. Grasping the reins in one hand, Torm struggled to steady Lawke with the other. He felt the *drontagis* power coursing through Lawke’s muscles — sensed his own blood responding to it, calling. “Fight it, Lawke Yarl,” he cried. “Drive it out of you.”

But the foreman had no resistance; his cringing superstitions had already paved the way for the evil to enter him. He began beating and clawing his chest, while his eyes glazed over and parts of his body bulged and knotted. Torm took a moment to ensure that the wagon was not in immediate danger, then tried to lend his aid to Lawke’s struggle. His fingers probed for the pulse at the base of the man’s neck, seeking a conduit. When he sensed an opening, he concentrated his will along the pathway. The Deformity within Lawke howled in recognition, and Torm prepared for struggle.

But it was too late! A violent tremor quaked through Lawke's bone and tissue, he spasmed and went limp. Like a leaden net, the dark chill of dead matter encased Torm's spirit, forcing him to pull away, hard. The foreman's corpse tilted back off the driver's bench, collapsing against crates in the rear of the wagon.

Torm sucked in breath like a drowning man. His head throbbed, so he let his mind drift into a semiconscious state where it was peaceful. At last, dragged back to awareness by the pull of the reins, he glanced forward. Land's Breach Pass rose in jagged spires on either side. In the distance, beyond the escarpment foothills and the arid plainland at their base, fiery spectres rose into the night-sky.

Rocks to his right snarled at him from the shadows.

* * * *

The homestead and most of the outbuildings were burning as Torm drove toward them across cornfields on the eastern side of the Weller freehold. Plumes of smoke spiralled into grotesque shapes in the sky above. Even from this distance he was aware of monstrous things that lurched, snapped, tore through the smoke. Could anyone human survive in that pandemonium? Surely Bryalt Weller had resisted the chaos. He was the one with Power, the one Torm had come here to find. He must have had the strength.

But it was a slight, dishevelled figure that staggered toward him a few hundred paces from the eastern gate. Torm dragged the horses to a halt. Fetid air swirled around him, carrying traces of torment deep within it, so that Torm felt as though he heard screams from a buried torture chamber through thick stone walls. "Eisha, you escaped it," he said. He asked nothing about the nature of the attack; he knew what it was.

"Bryalt?" Her eyes were dazed, her manner numbed.

Torm leapt off the wagon and held her. "No, Eisha. Torm pur Nathal."

"Oh, yes," she replied. "And Lawke Yarl. Bryalt said you'd come."

"Foreman Yarl didn't survive." Torm helped her toward the wagon. "What of your brother?" he asked gently.

She half-glanced in the direction of the homestead. The area was a

perceptual miasma — splintering, contorting, quickened only by the processes of dying. Monstrous shapes within the smoke-shadows fed upon themselves. “He went back,” she whispered.

“To rescue those he could?”

She looked at Torm, her eyes wet. “So he said.” She turned away. “But he wanted to die there. That’s all. He wanted to die.”

Torm understood it all then. His coming here, his belief that in Bryalt Weller there existed a strength and will to fight the Darkness that was coming upon the world ... it was a false hope, born of ignorance. His prescience had betrayed him, so that all he could be was a witness to self-destruction. There had been no companionship here, no offering from an Otherworld that desperately wanted this one to survive. He felt his isolation more strongly than ever — and feared the possibility of despair.

Nearby movement and a sudden nauseous surge shoved him from his reverie. Eisha clutched his arm. A foul wind thudded against his back.

On the wagon, Lawke Yarl was drunkenly climbing to his feet. Torm felt the force of the Deformity emanating from him. His own flesh ached with its proximity, forcing him into a renewed effort to suppress the *drontagis* power that whispered in his mind like an old friend. Lawke’s body twitched and spasmed wildly; before Torm could find the will to act, the foreman began to change. His face elongated, jaw twisting into a stretched-out, fanged parody of itself; his arms and legs warped, sprouting muscular offshoots that then re-joined the main limb, thickening it like the trunk of an ancient mangrove. From his chest, shoulders and abdomen, knotted pustules of flesh and bone tore through his clothes — an excrescence that finally destroyed any semblance of humanity he might have retained. A long, fibrous root with a slaver’s head on its tip reached toward Eisha, shedding bloody mucus in streams through the wind.

Torm cried out a warning and leapt to intercept the appendage. It slammed into him, and he held it with his right hand, digging his fingers into the tumorous mass. His inner strength rose to repel the decay blossoming throughout Lawke’s corpse — but he was too slow. Excruciating pain enflamed, then paralysed the right side of his body. His arm, torn away, spun into a stream of foggy air. Spraying blood like a benediction for his death, Torm fell from the monster, crashing to the earth at Eisha’s feet.

From his prone position, he looked up at the monster, knowing him

defeated, turned to Eisha. Strangely, she seemed calm and purposeful. She held up her hands.

“No,” she said gently. “No.”

* * * *

Consciousness returned to Torm slowly. He was surprised when it did. Eisha was wrapping soiled cloth around the bloody wreck of his shoulder.

“Your arm,” she said. “I think you might bleed to death.”

Torm considered his injury and, for a moment, concentrated on easing the pain. “The flow’s stopped. Don’t worry. The arm will grow back.”

She stared at him blankly. Clearly she was suffering from shock.

“I have no race,” Torm continued, knowing now that she was the one he had come for, not her brother. “No people. My bones, my flesh, have been touched by *drontagis* corruption. It is part of me. I control it.”

There was so much to know, so many questions to ask, but Eisha asked none of them. She simply nodded, as though what he had said was both obvious and acceptable.

“Where I come from, far south,” Torm continued, “the plague is deeply ingrained in the lives of the surviving inhabitants. We have absorbed it. What happened here, today, is a common occurrence there. But it worsens, and now it’s spreading.”

She said nothing.

“What happened to Lawke?” Torm asked, seeing the human corpse draped over the side of the wagon.

“I told him to be still,” she said.

* * * *

Screams still echo around me, though the fires died out long ago. Dawn comes to light a world that is grey and cold. We wait at the base of the Pass. Bryalt hasn’t arrived. I knew he wouldn’t. This destruction is his and he wanted it to claim him.

Torm says I have my brother's Power, but it is purer, untainted by despair. I wonder about that. Right now, everything seems dim and threatening to me. He says it will not consume me.

"How long will it take us to reach Stren-Halg?" I ask.

"A day or two, if the horses can make the distance." Torm glances worriedly southward as lightning blanches dark clouds along the horizon.

"We'd better go," I say.

Torm rests his hand gently on my arm. "And after Stren-Halg? Where then, Eisha?"

"Away from here. Away from these poisons. Away."

He looks sorrowful, as though he suspects there is no escape, and I smile to reassure him. But the plague will follow us — I know that, for the knowledge aches in my bones. It's like a song, a dark, violent song which I will carry with me wherever I go.

Perhaps the clamour of the world beyond this place will drown it out.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

"Tamed" takes place in a corner of Tharenweyr, a world I developed as the background for a novel, *Fragments of a Broken Land*. "Tamed" is likely to become part of the sequel to that novel, though it does not include characters and settings from it. It is the metaphysical nature of Tharenweyr which comes to the fore here and I was pleased to have the opportunity to explore some of my interests in that world's metaphysics.

In "Tamed", several of my interests — some say obsessions — find expression. One is the nature and meaning of the Monstrous in art, literature and, beyond these, the human psyche. It is a Blakean obsession, reflected in that poet's own proto-Jungian mythology. The existence of Monsters — conceived as a physical reflection of spiritual failing, and hence symbolising a material world that deviates from an (perhaps

impossible) Ideal — is an inherent part of the metaphysical structure lying behind the creation of Tharenweyr. Here it is focused on issues of family and tradition, though its implications are wider, as is most obvious in the final paragraphs. I wanted the reader's response to the story's monsters to be more complex than a mere good vs evil revulsion. These monsters are intricately connected to the characters' emotional being and as such are not, I hope, one dimensional.

The second interest that finds expression in "Tamed" is my ongoing exploration of the blurred line between the Objective and the Subjective. Do demons have an objective existence or are they psychological states? Are we what we perceive? There's no one answer, but I enjoy exploring the parameters.

Beyond the above rationalisations, I wanted reading "Tamed" to be an emotional and viscerally compelling experience — one that resonated at several levels. A friend who read "Tamed" in draft form found it vivid but bleak, saturated by feelings of sorrow. Perhaps this is so, but I think there is some hope of redemption beneath the despair. However, readers may have to examine their responses closely to find it.

— *Robert Hood*

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* * * *

AND NOW DOTH TIME WASTE ME

GEORGE TURNER

George Turner was an important Australian mainstream author, who won the Miles Franklin Award in 1963 and the Commonwealth Literary Fund Award in 1968. His mainstream titles include *Young Man of Talent*, *A Stranger and Afraid*, *The Cupboard under the Stairs*, *A Waste of Shame*, *The Lamé Dog Man*, and *Transit of Cassidy*. He began writing science fiction criticism in the 70s (he was a very perceptive and demanding critic), and then he turned his hand to writing the science fiction novels, which gained him international critical acclaim, a Ditmar Award, and the Arthur C. Clark Award. He became a major voice in the science fiction genre and has been compared with another philosophically rigorous polymath: Stanislaw Lem. His science fiction novels include *Beloved Son*, *Vaneglorry: A Science Fiction Novel*, *Yesterday's Men*, *The Sea and Summer*, *Brain Child*, *The Destiny Makers*, and *Genetic Soldier*. Some of his stories can be found in the collection *A Pursuit of Miracles*. He also wrote an autobiography (*In the Heart or in the Head: An Essay in Time Travel*), a memoir (*Off-Cuts*), and edited the anthology *The View from the Edge: A Workshop of Science Fiction Stories*. Since 1970, he had been the science fiction reviewer for the *Melbourne Age*.

Sadly, George Turner died of a stroke on June 8, 1997.

He had been working on a story for *Dreaming Down-Under*, and every few weeks your editors would call and pester him for the story, and he would say, "I'm working on it ... it's coming along". Well, the short story had turned into a novelette and then into a novella and was well on its way to becoming a novel when George died. When Bruce Gillespie, George's executor, sent us "And Now Doth Time Waste Me," we could immediately see that this was major work ... this was Turner at the top of his form.

We believe that this is George Turner's "unfinished symphony" and should be presented as such. In fact, George has bequeathed us a puzzle, and your editors found themselves trying to solve it. We're betting that you'll enjoy becoming a part of this story, as we did ... becoming, in effect, collaborators with George.

We asked Bruce Gillespie and Judith Raphael Buckrich, George's authorised biographer, to offer some insights into how George worked and

where he might have taken this brilliant piece of work. Their short essays follow the story.

But before we give you over to Turner's sad, unsettling reflection on eternal life, we quote from a letter we received from George's friend and literary agent, Cherry Weiner. It warmed us to read how vigorous George was right to the end, and that we made some small difference...

"I have been honored to meet with George Turner once a year since I took him on as a client. Until his stroke, I had never seen him disappointed or tentative about his writing ability. His stroke did that to him. For over a year he had complained to me that he had no new ideas and didn't know what to write about ... or if he ever would again. Jack Dann, Janeen Webb, and the anthology *Dreaming Down-Under* changed that. When I saw George in May of 1997, three weeks before he died, he was excited. He was gregarious. He was having trouble doing the short story because it was turning into a novel. Those words were the sweetest I had heard this trip. We spent a good two hours talking about the compression of the novel into the short story Jack and Janeen wanted ... and the expansion of the story into the novel he, George, wanted. I don't think I have ever, over the years, seen George so happy."

With that, we bid you farewell, George...

* * * *

*I have wasted time,
And now doth time waste me.*

— Shakespeare, *Richard III*

1

(I)

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The boy insisted, "But I seen 'im! I seen the witch and I seen 'im go down under."

The big copper winked at the thin copper and said, "There's no such thing as witches, boy. You saw some crazy old girl dancing around."

The kid held his ground. No more than ten or eleven, he was a sturdy little streetwiper who had learned early to steal and run with the sewer packrats; he held police in patient but wary contempt. "It was the man I seen. And everybody says they's witches. And I seen 'im go down under. And I follered 'im to see where 'e lived. An' then I see —"

The big copper interrupted him, "Yes, you said what you thought you saw. But you were scared stiff and not seeing straight."

The kid knew you had to be patient with coppers because they always thought kids were silly, fancying they saw things. "I seen where 'e went an' the woman witch was in there too, an' there was this smell. And 'e seen me lookin' an' 'e started after me but 'e fell over an' I run like 'ot shit —"

The thin copper asked then, "Why have you come to us?" Because he knew the packrats didn't go to coppers, not for anything. But this kid had had a scare of some sort.

"So you can get 'em off our patch! We don't like witches. You make 'em go an' leave us alone. Besides, she stinks."

The thin copper said, "We ought to have a look, Joe."

Joe didn't like it but he wasn't going to admit he was nervous of the down under and packrats; the kid could see it in his face. But when his mate said the obvious he didn't have much choice.

So here they were, underground on the narrow walkway with the magnetic suspension trains whiffing past and the wind of their passage making the men hold to the guard rails while the kid trotted freely on familiar territory. Until they came to the workspace ...

... and the thin copper looked in and said, "Oh, Jesus Christ!"

Must be one of them Godwallopers, the kid thought. Cops ought to be tougher than that. He had told the silly buggers what to expect, hadn't he?

What the thin copper, Constable Andy Phillips, saw was the inside of a crashpad. Crashpads had been excavated from the tunnel walls in the early days of magnetic suspension transport, maybe a hundred or more years ago, when there were still glitches in the system with occasional breakdowns, even a crash or two, and space was needed for storage of emergency ambulance supplies and repair tools. It ran about six metres into the tunnel wall but now it was empty of tools and supplies in this era of

super-efficient robot-handling from a distance, empty of everything but the witches.

Phillips, after his exclamation of shock, steadied his vision of the two skeletal, starvation-thinned forms. His next perception was that the woman was asleep, lying relaxed on her back, and that the man was mad.

The man crouched against the rear wall as if he would force a way through it, watching over his shoulder with insanely terrified eyes as Phillips moved cautiously towards him. Now the policeman realised the presence of charnel house blood over the floor, dried and blackening, and the sweetish smell, not yet quite a stench, of the woman's body not asleep but in incipient decay. His fellow constable, Allenby, was already on the intercom, stuttering and gagging on the smell.

The witch man ceased his scrabbling at the wall and sat down against it. The crazy stare died out of his eyes and became servile with eager friendliness, as though the police were guests, unexpected but welcome in the home.

Phillips bent over the woman under the blanket, taking in the terminal gash in her throat; he had never seen a cut like it — literally from ear to ear. Slowly he eased back the blanket, sickly registering her nakedness and the mutilations from which blood had flooded over the crashpad floor. So much blood ...

The witch said, confidingly, in the rounded, clear tones of the wealthy classes, "It was, after all, necessary." He peered intently at the petrified Phillips. "Surely you see that."

The boy, who had crept in, wide-eyed, behind the copper, retreated on the run. The wind of a passing train splashed the shreds of his vomit on the tunnel wall.

* * * *

(II)

In the canteen the coppers refused to be impressed by the story; they had all confronted equal eeriness in some duty shift in the ratpack corridors. The paunchy Sergeant said, "Bloody witches! You'd think even the shitlickers would've grown out of baby tales by now."

Phillips said, "They're shut out from decent life so they invent fantasies to explain even the simplest mystery. Some of the religions in the corridors are full of spells and visitations."

The squad coppers tended to listen to Phillips. He was a book reader in an only functionally literate social stratum, in the eyes of his peers something of an intellectual who would go far in his profession. He knew a thing or two, they said to each other, and the Sergeant consequently hated his guts.

The Sergeant asked, with scorn, "So what did they do to get them kicked out of the corridors? Turn somebody's milk sour? Raise warts on a baby's bum?"

"Better than that," Phillips said. "They stayed young. I asked the kid about it and he said they were really old, that some people remembered them from thirty years ago and said they hadn't aged at all."

"Juvenation job." The Sergeant was dismissive. "You say the bloke's got a posh accent. So he's a moneyboy who had an illegal juve job and then went broke and finished up in the corridors."

Part of Phillip's prestige among his fellows derived from his persistent talking back to the Sergeant. "You ever seen a juve job, Sergeant? It takes twenty years off them, but in twenty years they put it back on like anybody else. The story is that they've stayed the same, haven't changed at all."

Someone asked, "How old is the bloke?"

"I'd say about twenty-five."

The Sergeant snorted, "It'll all turn out to be a load of shit."

* * * *

(III)

A number of people were already less sure of that. After Constable Allenby's scarcely coherent verbal report had been smoothed and rendered intelligible by his junior patrol mate, Constable Phillips, and the sickening mutilations had been spelled out, the Station Manager had simply asked, in outraged puzzlement, "But why?"

It was a reasonable question. The corridor people, who comprised some thirty percent of the city's population, were ferocious, combative, thieving, and incredibly superstitious, but not given to outrage on the bodies of the dead.

Of course, insane! The SM demanded to be taken to see the prisoner and the body. Aside from their starved condition — their bones seemed about to penetrate the flesh — he saw that the woman had been sickeningly attacked, stripped of flesh on buttocks and thighs, and Phillips' shaken report, repeated verbatim from his lapel recorder, whispered a memory at him, "It was, after all, necessary," in a cajoling whine.

It was all the prisoner had said; he had lapsed thereafter into terrified, hands-over-mouth silence, and now refused to speak to the SM who agreed, not unreasonably, that the man was demented. It was a matter for the psychs.

The Area Psych placed the man, now weeping but still mute, into Total Cerebral Scan and in two minutes had the computer report. "Pretty normal," he told the SM. "His present trouble is an excessive hysterical reaction, probably resulting from his confessed barbaric behaviour, so reported. He is in a state of abject terror, totally disorganised. He won't talk about it — or anything else. In any case I can't Deep Question him without prior authority."

Correct; he could not. The damnable Common Rights Act slowed investigations unconscionably. No use arguing about it. "But you must have sedated him."

"Of course, but there are limits to that. Sedation isn't a truth serum, you know. This man is too scared to open his mouth at all; scared out of his wits, I'd say, of the power of authority to scour his mind."

The SM sighed at the prospect of complex interdepartmental vocorder argument preparatory to a simple printed-and-signed application. "It sounds like a Deep Question job."

"It surely does." The Area Psych signed off.

And the SM asked helplessly, "But what the hell were they doing starving in the crashpad?"

He asked the question of the empty air, but received an answer from

a still shaken Allenby, who had just placed his completed formal report on his superior's desk: "It could be, Sir. You see, the story is the corridor people had thrown them both out, told them not to come back or they'd, er — set on them, do them harm. So they had nowhere to go. They couldn't even go back to their room for fear of attack."

This was new to the SM. "And what caused the ostracism?"

"The people thought they were witches. Corridor folk believe in things like that, Sir. They aren't what you'd call educated down there."

A simple atrocity was beginning to sprout cancerous secondaries.

"Witches!" And why not? He could believe anything of the corridor scum. "And who told you about that?"

"Well, Sir, there was this boy —"

When he had heard the story the SM said, "Of course you brought the boy in?"

Allenby stared at his boots.

"Well?"

The constable said, "He ran off, Sir," and continued to stare down while the storm broke about him.

* * * *

While the hysteric crouched in a corner of his cell, alternately weeping and muttering disjointed phrases that made no sense, a batch of junior detectives went door-knocking in the corridors, concentrating on the area where the kid had confronted the constables.

As they might have expected, the area of hard information turned out to be two miles away in another corridor district, but there, on the home ground of dissension, it came in a torrent.

"You mean them Colsons? Got rid of 'em? I'll say we got them bastards out —"

"— told the pair o' shits if we ever seen 'em 'ere again we'd trample 'em."

“Witches? ‘Course they was witches. My Jessie only poked ‘er tongue at the woman an’ nex’ day she was all out in acne pimples. Quick as that. Overnight!”

“— an’ ‘er walkin’ around wif ‘er nose in the air ‘an’ ‘er posh voice! Lady bloody muck an’ us all dirt!”

“You can’t tell me what ‘appened to old Jerry wasn’t set up an’ witch-planned! All ‘e done was spit when the bitch walked past ‘im an’ she give ‘im a glare ‘er sizzle ‘is balls. Nex’ thing ‘e trips on the gutter an’ busts ‘is knee an’ that same morning ‘e falls downstairs an’ cracks ‘is ‘ead an’ that night ‘is ration coupon goes loose from ‘is pocket so it takes ‘im three days to get a new one. An’ ‘er lookin’ at ‘im every time she passed like she’s workin’ out what next! An’ ‘im a steady man that never fell about or lost fingers! It scared the shit outa ‘im.”

“— so they ‘ad ter go. We couldn’t put up with —”

“— an’ Mrs Ogg knew ‘em at once. She knew ‘em in Sydney before she got redunded an’ ‘ad to come to the corridors. That was thirty years before an’ them lookin’ only in their twenties same as now. Then she seen ‘em in the street ten years on an’ they pretended they didn’t know ‘er, but it was them all right. Then they come ‘ere an’ they was still the same, lookin’ like twenty-five or sumfing. She wasn’t game to claim ‘em again but she told everybody. Thirty years an’ not a day older! So what could a right person think? They ‘ad ter go!”

And so the Colsons had been driven from their miserable one room in the corridors, with threats and menaces and the jeers of children — and more than a few blows on their departing backs from good and proper people who would not risk facing their eyes — to the sterile safety of a crashpad.

The detectives reported back to an SM preoccupied by another report from Med Section. His preoccupation became alert only at the account of the woman who claimed to have seen them in past years.

“Bring her in! I want to hear her for myself.”

Two puzzled detectives departed to seek the rambling, batty old woman — while the SM meditated on his conversation with the Med Section Manager’s confidential addendum to his official report, putting a hazy two and two rather shakily together.

The Med Manager had said, “That looney of yours was shit scared of something. Wouldn’t take — not a word out of him — but as soon as he saw the Gen Ex setup he froze stiff as a board.”

“He’d just been through the Total Scan; the General Examination Unit looks much the same. The corridors think it can read thoughts; it rocks them silly.”

“It’s a bloody shame about the corridors. Public Aid should do something about eliminating the scatty beliefs in the jobless sector.”

The SM had heard all that before. He said, “Public Aid wouldn’t know if half the corridors were up ‘em. Besides, the man did say something, just once, to my constables, and according to them he had an upper class accent. Question: Why was he living in the corridors?”

The Med Manager matched him. “Further question — and this one will go into the full Superintendent’s report because I haven’t any answer to it: Who were the parents who bequeathed him deathless body cells? It came up more or less accidentally in the general scan and we took a closer look to verify it. His cells are perfect, without a sign of senility or budding. All the telomeres are full length, nary a one shortened.”

That was why the SM sent detectives to round up the old woman who said she had known the twenty-five-year-olds for thirty years of unchanging age. And, after he had spoken to her and checked Her veracity under a General Scan, he made a full vocorder report for the ears of the Superintendent — and relaxed, satisfied that this intriguing can of worms would shortly be removed for inspection at a higher level.

Still, it would be interesting to know ...

* * * *

(IV)

The Superintendent said to his unsurprising Adjutant of Police, “The Wandering Jew is with us again. This yarn has been doing the rounds of the superstitious since the Middle Ages, but I haven’t heard of him chopping his wife before.”

“But Deep Question,” said the Adjutant, “will reveal a simple

explanation without putting so much as a dent in the legend.”

“Party-pooper!” said the Super. “Still, get it rolling and we’ll be first with the latest.”

And so, on the next day the crying, screaming, fighting, terrified man was injected with a sophisticated cocktail which floated his conscious mind on euphoric clouds while his unchained tongue charted the paths to hell.

* * * *

“Date of birth,” said the Super, “eighth of October, nineteen ninety. A hundred and forty years later he cut his wife’s throat as a matter of necessity! I’ve seen him — who wouldn’t want to take a look at a man with that beginning and ending — and I’d swear he’s not a day over thirty, after allowing for wear and tear. And Med Section says his physical markers confirm it.”

“The greatest recorded age of a human being,” said the Adjutant, “belonged to some old geezer in Tibet — a hundred and thirty-two. But he was a blind, stuttering bag of wrinkles when he died. There must be some other explanation for this.”

“It will also have to explain how he could impossibly lie under Deep Question. It took them half an hour to get to the birth date because they kept on quizzing him about his upper class accent and getting nonsensical answers. Then at last somebody woke that there might be a clue in Mrs Ogg’s story, and asked him when he was born. And I’ll bet that reply rocked their psychological boat right over the waterfall.”

“It won’t be hard to check.”

“It’s out of our hands now, thank all the little laughing gods. History Department will check back on birth records and then start squirrelling for traces down the years. The best of ageless luck to them!”

* * * *

The History Department of State Records observed the request, wondered briefly if the Police Psychology Section was out of its collective mind, then set its data files in action.

The search of Births, Deaths and Marriages verified the birth of John Vincent Colson on eighth October, 1990, and his marriage to Paula Bette

Constantinou on fourth May, 2012. There was no record of children of the union.

Hist Dept scratched its collective head in disbelief, checked and rechecked, made its report and waited for the uproar. There was no uproar, only a further request for detail on Colson's life.

Then the search was really on.

First, and obviously, the newspapers. With the introduction of the molecular nanochip early in the twenty-first century the data capacity of computers became figuratively astronomical; every piece of printed material after that time was preserved in those illimitable maws. History Department asked for Colson references in 2012 and got several hundred of them, scattered all over the country; it became a matter of elimination. Someone recalled that the request data identified Colson's accent as "upper class". He didn't know that the present "upper class" accent was the common Australian speech of Colson's day and that language had deteriorated as wealth and degrees of education had become almost strata caste marks in speech, scaling down, stratum by stratum, to the gutter argot of the corridors; he thought that the society wedding might have attracted news cameras. In ignorance he struck gold; the internet had featured the Colson match in a Weddings of Distinction slot in the "rich bitch" weekly update.

The likeness to the man, recorded in Deep Question placidity, and the woman, calm in death in the morgue, were unmistakable. Startling as they were, they were not yet proof, but Hist Dept now had a line to follow.

John Colson was a millionaire — several times over, and over again; one contemporary tattler estimated his worth at a hundred million (which was quite a packet in those days) while wife Paula was no genuine rich bitch at all but had been a small part player in stage musicals.

Oh, lucky Paula, with the catch of the week!

The news followed their society trail, for they were "bright young things" of their generation and their trail of celebration and spending was conspicuous — for fifteen years of monotonously unageing camera reportage. Then they vanished.

"Now, where the hell did they get to?" asked the Tracer.

His more imaginative Supervisor asked, "Where would you get to

once people began to notice and ask questions? They were touching forty by then and still looking twenty-five.”

“Anywhere you weren’t known.”

“Not good enough. In the big money stratum you’re always known among the globetrotters. Try somewhere that no questions would be asked so long as you had money. Try Korea or Egypt or the Russian States. Anywhere away from the jet setters.”

“You mean just the whole rest of the world.”

“Not really. I mean, wait till we get the report of the Deep Question. We have the initial proof of something screwy; the rest will be just a checkup.”

“For a moment,” said the Tracer, “you had me frightened.”

* * * *

2

(I)

Even now that Psych Section knew what to look for, the Deep Question session had its frustrations. From the beginning Colson demonstrated a congenital inability to tell a connected story. He veered off at tangents, mixed real events with remembered speculation and leapt from one subject to another with a lack of continuity that drove his questioners to confusion. And the drug-induced ability to remember entire century-old conversations verbatim, in search of some fact of presumed but doubtful relevance, bored them to tears.

In desperation they called for an IQ summary and the trembling man was returned briefly to Psych Section. The scanner buzzed and mumbled for its few minutes of readings and comparisons. “IQ 108” flashed in the holospace, followed by a list of capacities and incapacities. Not very many useful mental capacities.

108! And this very ordinary intelligence had been in control of a vast fortune! Little wonder he had finished broke.

Not only was the intelligence ordinary, but queries about school

reports suggested that even what existed had come in for little use. The questioners gave a collective sigh and settled in for a long, long haul.

Their final report — consisting, as required, of the subject's actual words — was in fact a masterpiece of joint editing and compression. They ran it first past Hist Dept's Supervisor and Tracer to check for errors and anomalies that might have arisen during the editing process.

* * * *

Supervisor and Tracer settled back in their chairs. The Tracer waved his hand over the control arm and the wedding photo of John and Paula Colson flashed in the holospace in the centre of the room, the bride in a complicated confection of white frills and flounces, the groom in formal grey, both of them smiling and waving.

The Tracer groaned, "What a time! Dressing like that for a hitching! What would they wear for a really serious occasion? Deep mourning?"

They would have been, in any clothes, an unimpressive pair. John Colson was of average height, with an average slender build and a face unmemorable in any crowd; only the smile enlivened him but not very much. Paula was more lively, but without real personality — "cute" was possibly the word of that time for her.

"And that pair of nitwits," said the Supervisor, "had a hundred million and the gift of life! God works in a mysterious way!"

From midair John Vincent Colson spoke the story of his life in a light voice and easy, everyday speech, not much distinguished by personal quirks or oddities, and its expressiveness slightly flattened by the effects of the Deep Question drug cocktail.

* * * *

(II)

It wasn't my doing that I was rich. My parents died suddenly when I was twenty-one, and as the only child I inherited the lot. The Area Guidance Grid had just come into use in Melbourne, bringing all vehicle traffic under radio control. You have different systems now but for us, suffering almost permanent gridlock in the central business district, it was a godsend. But nothing pleases everyone and it took only one dissenting ratbag of a

demonstrator to close a master switch that let all the traffic suddenly loose at fifty kilometres an hour with the drivers sitting back, not holding their wheels because the Grid was guiding them. There were over a thousand accidents in the ten seconds it took someone to tear the fool away from the switchboard and return power, and both my parents died.

And there I was, suddenly sole heir to the income from a hundred million dollars in shares. I had just come back from a holiday in France after finishing my university course (I didn't do too well, missed out on my degree) and so had no business experience. And with a hundred million behind me, I didn't intend ever to have any. Why should I? I had the world at my feet, didn't I? I had drawn the big ticket in the money pool, and all I had to do was spend it.

You can call me stupid and I suppose I was. But just remember that I was twenty-one and on top of the world. It all came unstuck eventually, but that was long afterwards. For the moment I was free as the air; and after I had got over the deaths of the old folks, I married Paula. She probably had her eye on the money as much as on me, but I was love crazy and could have what I wanted, and together we lived the high life — travel and parties and nobody to please but ourselves.

I suppose, now, that our lifestyle was what attracted Doctor Templeton's attention. With millions to spend and no work to do, we must have made an obvious target.

Paula heard of him before I did, and she heard from her personal maid. We had plenty of house staff then; what with automation and robotic assembly lines and what they called "company downsizing", there was plenty of cheap labour then, and things got much worse for the unemployed later on. Anyway, Paula told me about her maid passing on a bit of gossip about some scientist with a treatment that could add years to your life. She was just laughing it off. But a couple of days later I heard it from my chauffeur, and thereafter it seemed to crop up every so often. But it always came from the staff, never from the gossipmongers of our social set. Maybe we should have noticed that, but we didn't.

Paula got quite worked up about it, thinking that it was so persistent there must be something in it. But at that time there had been a big increase world wide in rejuvenation treatments of a new kind that required not only superficial surgery, but some jacking up of enzyme activity to make it last longer. Several people died of it, and quite a few countries, including Australia, banned it. Paula thought this was why this Doctor Whoever didn't come out openly. He probably had something new, but was stopped by the

ban.

She dropped a few questions among the staff, in an idle not-very-interested sort of way, and eventually they came up with a name — Doctor Templeton.

Well, just for curiosity, we asked around our set if anybody had ever heard of him, and it turned out he was quite a bigwig in one of the city universities; but nobody had heard about any juve work. I forget which uni — does it matter?

(The Supervisor muttered, "Of course it matters, you twit!" To the Tracer he said, "Check out Templeton.")

That was simple. Professor Ernest Templeton, 1965-2023, had been the head of Biology in the then new University of Eastern Suburbs (est. 2009).

"So he wasn't just a phoney looking for suckers. Or was he the real thing, but still looking for suckers?"

* * * *

This was in 2015. I was just twenty-five and Paula was twenty-four. We were enjoying life — and I mean really enjoying it, partying and whooping it up — and when the rumours seemed to die out, we just forgot about this Templeton feller. Then, out of the blue, I got a vidcall from him saying he wanted to see me.

Naturally I wanted to know what for, and he said he'd heard I had been enquiring about him. You could have knocked me down with a feather; nobody in my crowd was likely to know him well enough to pass on gossip, and especially not the servants. I didn't know what to say because the whole idea suddenly seemed like a load of hogwash and I think I began to stutter a bit. I said something about hearing his name in connection with some research.

He broke in on me there, saying the nature of his research was top secret and he didn't want it discussed on the public vid. So I shut up and didn't know what to say. He went on about these rumours being embarrassing and asked could he talk to me privately, in my office, for instance. I told him I had private means and didn't need an office and suggested I could come to the university and see him. But he said, "No, no,

not there,” and it would be better if he came to my place.

Well, that was all right with me. I think I was a bit flattered at having one of the big brains wanting to talk to me, especially as there was a bit of secrecy about it. Our crowd of professional highfliers didn't get on the inside of intellectual things much, and this sounded novel. Anyway, I fixed it for him to come out that night.

I told Paula, and she was happy with the idea. She said, “Perhaps we'll find out if there's anything in the story.”

(The Supervisor said, “Smell the makings of a scam!” but the Tracer objected, “If so, it was one that paid off.”

“Sure — but to whom?”)

* * * *

We had somewhere to go that night, but we cancelled because this was a new sort of thing to happen to us, and we were both curious about it.

The professor arrived on time, and he seemed quite young. Actually he was about fifty. Paula was surprised because she had thought professors were old and looked like the pictures of Albert Einstein, whereas Templeton might have been a shopkeeper or a bus conductor. We took him into the smaller lounge and offered him a drink, but he brushed that aside and started right into business.

He said, “You have been asking questions about me. Why?”

That flustered me a bit; I wasn't used to the middle classes and their direct ways. My crowd always liked to set a cosy atmosphere, go into things gently; but Paula had had a tougher upbringing, and she said right away, “Because we heard about your work and it sounded interesting.”

“And what did you imagine my work to be?”

He didn't quite sound aggressive, but it was a give-me-no-nonsense question. It didn't bother Paula any. She said straight out, “We heard you had a new kind of rejuvenation treatment, one that added actual years to your real lifetime as well as making you look young.”

“And you believed that?”

“Why not?”

It was time for me to take part; a man shouldn't leave this sort of thing to his wife. Besides, I had had professors at the uni and their status didn't impress me at all. I said, “It was only rumour, wasn't it? We didn't exactly believe it, but it didn't sound impossible, and you would have to keep it quiet because of the fuss about juvenation treatments and the laws prohibiting the injections after people started dying.”

He still had a question. “Can you tell me, please, how you came to hear of this, er, rumour? It could be very disturbing.”

It was for Paula to tell him, “I heard it first from my personal maid. She was doing my hair one day and talking about things in general, and she said it as one of the silly things you hear.”

I said, “My wife told me, and a few days later my chauffeur mentioned it to me as a bit of the silly talk doing the rounds.”

Templeton said musingly, “Maid and chauffeur.” I thought he sounded almost satisfied. “Only those two?”

“And some of the other servants, but they might have heard it from the first two. It was just working class gossip; they'll latch on to anything just for something to say. I asked some of our social crowd if they had heard about it, but they hadn't; so it was just the servants' tattle. And like all these stories, it died out after a week or two.”

That seemed to make him happy. “That is just as well. It would be interesting to know where the maid and chauffeur heard it in the first place. But to enquire would only give rumour fresh currency.” He was quiet for a moment; then he said, “There is some truth in their tale.”

I can tell you my ears pricked up at that, and I heard Paula breathe a mite faster beside me. I didn't look at her and tried to seem unexcited myself, just interested in what he was saying.

But Paula went straight at it: “You mean about extending the life span?”

He stared a moment at both of us, as if he was making up his mind what to say. And then: “That is what I mean. I think I should trust you in this; you have had the chance and temptation to spread gossip and have not

done so.”

I felt guilty. I had to say, “I did make a couple of enquiries but shut up when nobody knew what I was talking about.” I wasn’t going to say I shut up because the buggers laughed at me.

“That was natural, Mister Colson, and on drawing a blank you let the matter rest. I am conscious of dealing with intelligent, cautious people.”

I don’t flatter myself all that much, but it’s a good feeling to hear yourself praised for doing the right thing by someone with real brains. But Paula was properly stirred up and curious; you heard it in her voice when she felt hot on the trail of something.

She asked straight out, “You mean you can prolong people’s lives. I mean, really?”

Templeton thought about it before he said, “Shall we say I am working to that end? The basic knowledge requirement has been available since the end of the last century, but harnessing the knowledge, making a usable technique from disparate facts is a complex matter, not one to be rushed.”

I couldn’t think of a remark that wouldn’t be obvious or plain silly, but Paula had more imagination than I did; she said, “A really long life would be wonderful, but you can’t just get older and older and more useless and maybe contract Alzheimer’s or something like that.”

“Of course not, Mrs Colson. The thing is, to add the extra years to the prime of life, to make time stand still in youth. And even Alzheimer’s disease can be dealt with today.”

It could? I wasn’t up with things like that; you could always find out the technical stuff when you needed it, and my way of life didn’t need it. Not then, anyway.

Paula complained that that was only like rejuvenation, and Templeton corrected her. “Rejuvenants start to age normally as soon as their treatment is completed. My procedure looks to maintain youth. You see, it is not rejuvenation, which in any case is illegal, but preservation of the status quo. If I treated you today, you would remain at your present age.”

“But for how long?”

Templeton shrugged. “I can’t guess. One might have to wait a century

to find out.”

“A century!” I couldn’t help it; surprise jerked it out of me. But on thinking about it, it made sense. And this man sounded as though he was really on to something.

We talked for a while after that, guessing how terrific life would be if people could stay young, working out how you could do all those things you keep putting off until you’re too old to bother, how you’d see the good times going on and on ... I suppose you’d say we came up with silly things; I know we laughed a lot.

When the time came that Templeton said he must leave, we were seeing him out when he asked casually if we would like to see his laboratory and get a better idea of how the work went. Paula said, “Yes,” right away. She was really taken with the whole idea.

So we made an appointment for a few days’ time ...

As he was going, he said he hoped we would treat our conversation as confidential. We told him that went without saying. Scientists had to keep their work confidential, didn’t they?

(The Supervisor slapped his thigh. “See the hook being dangled to a brace of babes in arms?”

The Tracer was dubious. “Can’t say I do.”

“Like this: Templeton actually had a long-life gismo, but he can’t waste years doing tests on lab animals — he needs human subjects. But that will tangle him in all sorts of legal restriction, and with the juvenation laws already in place, he’s got Buckley’s chance of a grant or any sort of backing. He needs money; who doesn’t? One way or another he needs a sucker, so he casts around for a wealthy fall guy. He comes up with Colson, living on the investment of a hundred million dollars and living it up in the social whirligig, having no job, not even sitting on a management board, a pretty obvious featherhead. So he gets somebody to do a little bribery of Colson’s house staff. Remember that then the out-of-work percentage was rising everywhere, private staff was cheap — no unions, you see — and a couple of hundred was manna from heaven to the little people, same as now. Just pay them to drop a bit of stray gossip into the ears of madam and the boss, wait for it to settle in, and then make your contact, complaining about rumours. If they look

interested, start paying out the line. A visit to the laboratory, maybe — all in strict confidence, of course — making them privy to a big secret. And then the big spiel. Bingo!”)

* * * *

(II)

Templeton’s laboratory wasn’t at the uni. He had a small private setup, at his home, with just a single assistant, where he did his own unfunded research. Well, who would back that sort of work with the juvenation laws in place and soundly policed? Paula asked why he did it if the work couldn’t be used, and he said that science wasn’t based on law, but on the search for truth; laws could and would be rescinded as rime passed and circumstances altered, but truth was itself, unchanging, waiting until its time came to be recognised.

He was a selfless man, dedicated to his work. At least that was how I saw him.

(The Supervisor made a noise between a chuckle and a bray.)

The laboratory was more or less what I expected — long benches with taps and sinks, lots of glassware in racks and stands, a couple of microscopes, a few complicated setups that I couldn’t recognise at all as well as small video screens. It was all very neat and orderly, not at all the common version of the scientist up to his armpits in weird-looking bric-a-brac.

As if he thought we had some such hazy idea of the researcher at work, Templeton said, “You can see it isn’t spectacular, but neither is the work — just a monotonous checking of ongoing experiments and pondering the reasons for unwanted results. There is actually very little to see, but I will make my explanations as untechnical as possible.”

Of course Paula, with her unfortunate tendency to try to impress people, had to say, “We’ve been reading up on the biology of ageing in the last couple of days just so we would know what you would be talking about. It’s fascinating stuff, Professor. I hadn’t realised there were so many angles to it.”

Yes, we had been reading it up in articles downloaded from the net and finding them pretty heavy going; even “popular” scientific articles can

present you with a whole raft of new words; and while reading we were constantly calling up the dictionary, but on the whole we had gathered a fair grasp of the up-to-date knowledge about ageing.

Just the same, I thought I caught a speculative gleam in Templeton's eyes, like a man repressing a smile while he seeks the right thing to say, but his only comment was, "Then the essential key words will be familiar to you, which will help."

Paula said eagerly, "Telomeres and cell division and enzymes and all that." There was a sort of strangled note in her voice. I hadn't realised that she was quite so worked up about this visit.

If Templeton detected her excitement he did not show it, saying only, "Telomeres make a useful place to start," as he shepherded us to a pair of the microscopes standing side by side. He had everything set up ready for us. We didn't even have to look into the microscopes; he closed a switch and the picture of the slide appeared on the vidscreen behind it.

He said, "You know that every cell nucleus in your body contains chromosomes consisting mainly of DNA and proteins, and every chromosome carries a protein tail called a telomere. The enlarged screen picture shows it clearly enough, I think."

He might have thought so, but to me the picture was mostly a blur. Everything about a cell is transparent, and as a result the thing is hard to make out unless you have the knowledge and the practice. What you see is like a jelly with little solid bits spread through it, with the seeing made harder because of the other jellies crowding it. As for the tail — the telomere — I had the impression of a transparent, wispy thing, quite long and sinuous. It was hard to credit that one's whole body was made up of millions and millions of these cells, all of them too small to imagine.

I was lost in contemplation of this miracle of human construction but Paula, usually a fairly self-contained woman, was in the grip of a real agitation of words she could not hold back. As if she would urge Templeton on she said, "The cell divides and the telomere shrinks every time until the cell is too old to divide any more. And you use telomerase to control it, stop it shrinking. And that makes it immortal! Is that how you do it?"

Templeton said quietly, as if that might calm her down, "The telomere certainly marks off the life of the cell, but the simple introduction of telomerase might result in a rather brutal form of cell immortality — cancer."

Most of the cancers were controllable by then, but the word still had its menace; it stopped Paula. She said simply, “Oh,” and shut up. Which I thought was just as well. Her enthusiasm ... call it that, but it was more like a dog smelling prey and dragging at the leash ... made me uncomfortable.

Templeton carried on: “Telomeres and telomerase have their place in the process, but the whole is vastly more complex. The basic problem is the prevention of cell senescence. This can be achieved, even to the point of cell division, without shrinkage of the telomere; but even the healthiest cells — those wherein ageing and division have been artificially halted — may be subject to invasion by viral infection or genetic mutation and, given sufficient time, will be. So, you see, the problem widens to include the working of the immune system, which is itself a complex of interactions, to protect the potentially immortal cells.”

The problem was, in fact, one on a scale far greater than our naive introductory reading of simplistic texts had allowed us to realise, and now Templeton launched into explanation of all the things we didn't know and hadn't dreamed of knowing. He tried to make it easy, to simplify it for our unscientific educations, but we listened in a sort of daze, trying to look as though we were following intently. As he introduced each new term, I forgot the meaning of the one before it and in the end was reduced to simply waiting for him to finish; and later Paula told me it was the same with her. It wasn't that we weren't totally interested, just that after a while we stopped understanding.

(The Supervisor gave an exaggerated sigh. “Portrait of a pair of high society halfwits being worked over by a master.”

The Tracer objected, “But in the end he produced the goods.”

“Yes, but why?”)

* * * *

I remember he started with the way the genes in the cell DNA misbehave as we get older — favourable ones ceasing to operate while unfavourable ones tend to spring into action, leading to brittling of the bones and expression of the collagenase enzyme that causes wrinkles, and making the immune system deaf to the messenger molecules that keep disease at bay. He went on with how helicases enable repair enzymes to deal with random mutations that keep on occurring in the cell ... how a minimal diet can prolong the cell's lifespan but has other undesirable consequences ...

how telomerase is “switched on” in sperm cells to prevent their telomeres shrinking during the furious division rate of the embryo ... how the immortal cancer cells could be merged with normal cells to lengthen their lifespans ... and so on and on with all sorts of ideas until he completely lost me in pouring out ideas I could no longer follow.

In the end he said, “I completed this work three years ago and am slowly realising that it was a complete waste of time. All I have to show for it is a batch of puppies.”

He gave a loud whistle which made both of us jump, and through a catflap in a door at the far end of the laboratory burst a spate of fox terriers, four of them, that made straight for Templeton and fawned at his legs while he patted their heads. One was full-grown, one about nine months old, one about half that, and the fourth at not much more than the suckling stage.

“They are all from the same litter,” he said, “but given my anti-ageing treatment at different stages of their development.”

He bent down to the little one which promptly rolled on its back to have its belly tickled, squealing with delight.

He said, “God only knows how long they’ll live, or if they’ll die at all, except by accident. I’ve done good work on the immune system — published a couple of papers in fact — but the main work is unpublishable of course.”

Paula asked, “Why, ‘of course’?” but I saw at once what he meant. Let this secret out and every ratbag in creation would be clamouring for eternal life. It was the sort of thing to be handled with great care and discretion, given only to those who would make good use of it.

Templeton expressed it differently. “No responsible government would permit such information to be published. The real reason behind the banning of juvenation treatments, aside from the occasionally lethal side effects, is its potential to increase the lifespan of individuals in a world already overloaded with mostly useless nonagenarians. Do you realise that world population is increasing by more than a hundred million every year, each new child having a life expectation of ninety years, that a day is coming when actual birth will be necessarily rendered illegal simply because the planet will not be able to feed its hordes of aged? Consider such a situation rendered intolerable by people who never die!”

Put like that, his work seemed a real dead end. But Paula argued,

“Just the same, there are useful people — useful to everybody, I mean — like geniuses and great artists. They should be exceptions.”

Templeton smiled. “With the rest of the world crying out, ‘Why them and not me?’. With the rich and powerful finding backstairs methods of achieving immortality while the bulk of people become the second grade citizens of the short term?”

I wanted to say, “We aren’t like that,” but the fact was that, given the chance, we would be exactly like that. I felt a little shiver up my spine at the idea of being offered such a chance.

Paula said, like a little girl denied a treat, “Then all your work’s useless, all for nothing. Why bother doing it?”

Templeton shrugged. “I am a research scientist. There was a problem for solution. The basic facts were known, but the mode of application was not. I applied myself to the mode and made it possible.”

She said, “So now you just sit on it because it’s not publishable?”

He smiled. “There is great satisfaction in a goal achieved. And there are many side issues yet to be investigated. There will come a time when humanity’s population problems have been solved, and then my work will come into its own.”

Paula was amazed. “You mean you’ll just slog away at these side issues just for a fame you’ll never live to see? With just a few dogs to show for all your work!”

The dogs had quietened down and now lay on their bellies, gazing up at Templeton as if they offered support. He said, “The dogs are evidence enough for the tests a scientist can apply. But they are not evidence that the procedure would give similar results on a human being. Add that the anti-juvenation laws could be invoked to forbid the procedure and human experiment becomes impossible.” It seemed a crass sort of end to all his work, until he added like a quiet throwaway, “I have processed myself, of course, but that is a personal matter the law cannot control.”

I remember thinking that of course he’d try out his treatment on himself (what man wouldn’t?), but it was Paula who asked, breathlessly, “And how long will you live?”

He laughed at her earnestness. “Certainly not forever. I am sixty years

old, my body has already some of the earmarks of senescence, and mine is not a juvenation process; it preserves only what is already there. I expect to remain in my present condition until some failure of already degenerated cells triggers an ending. Long life is for the young whose body cells have not been subjected to degeneration and replacement.”

There didn't seem much to be said after that, but Paula had some nag that had to be satisfied, and she asked, “So what will you do? Just go on exploring your ‘side issues’ and writing papers that disguise the real truth?”

“Perhaps not even that. My field of biology does not attract university grants which increasingly demand research which will bring a financial return, which in turn means providing cures for the new diseases forever emerging from the rainforests and mutating faster than medicine can pursue. That is not my field, nor is it one that attracts me. And without money I am finding it difficult to continue. A laboratory does not run itself on a professor's stipend, and the large financial concerns cannot be expected to take much interest in a branch of biological research which in the end promises little in the way of patients and big returns.”

I was thinking of what must be a lifetime's dedication gone for nothing because of the restrictive population laws, which were likely to become even more stringent as the cities spread and the forests shrank to provide farm land. I thought Paula might say something, but she kept quiet, even seemed a mite pensive in sympathy with Templeton. We talked for a while about nothing that mattered, but the visit was already over.

(The Supervisor cheered, “Trap set!”

The Tracer nodded. “It seems obvious when you know the end result. He needed money, and he needed youthful subjects who couldn't talk afterwards without risking gaol.”

“Most of all,” said the Supervisor, “he needed a couple of social nits with money and the IQs of ants, who would see nothing but the glittering prize.”)

* * * *

That day we were using the small city runabout rather than the big limousine (it was, after all, only a minor social visit we made, not an occasion for display among equals), and all the way home Paula was in a state of suppressed excitement. When I asked her what was up, she indicated that

the chauffeur could hear us, and wouldn't answer me; but as soon as we got home she practically exploded.

You have to understand that I literally never thought about money. All my life I had had money without asking or thinking where it came from. I had never worked for it — why should I? My dad had talked about my getting some “business experience”, but he had died before doing anything about it, leaving me with the income from something like a hundred million dollars being paid into the bank regularly. Why should I work? In sanity, who would want to? So I never thought about money.

And so when Paula bubbled over with her idea, I was taken by surprise. She had actually worked for her living on the stage, and she amused me at times by feeling guilty about our expenditure, as though one day the money might in some fashion vanish; but I was really taken aback now by the way her mind really worked.

On the way home I had played with the idea of giving Templeton a few thousand to go on with while he looked for a backer, but now Paula wanted to build him a private laboratory, with us financing the whole thing. “He can do his research and hire some people to work on the tropical diseases and stuff. That way the laboratory can pay its way with patents and medicines.”

“God preserve us,” said the Supervisor, “from entrepreneurs who learned their trade in drama school.”

I said there was no guarantee that the lab could pay its way, even if Templeton was a genius, and she stamped her foot at my stupidity. She practically shrieked, “The treatment! The ageing treatment! If we own the place, he'll have to let us have it!”

Naturally, I had played with the idea of undergoing Templeton's treatment as a fantasy of watching history go by before my unchanging gaze, while I enjoyed the whole world's emerging pleasures with what was for all practical purposes an inexhaustible supply of cash. Faced with a very real plan for making this true, I became cautious. To tell the truth, I didn't at first take her seriously; the whole thing suddenly seemed the stuff of abracadabra and ali-kazam, with Templeton the wizard who would vanish on our waking.

I protested, “We don't even know that it works.”

“The dogs!” she screamed, shaking my arm. “The dogs!”

“They prove nothing really. We have only his word that they belong to the same litter.”

She said only, “I believe him.”

In fact so did I. It wasn't only that he was persuasive in his directness, but that he had no obvious reason to build up an edifice of lies.

“We could build him a bigger laboratory to research the disease work,” she insisted.

And why not? I had thought about giving him a handout, hadn't I?

And I thought some more about those four dogs stabilised at different stages of development...

Actually, ownership of the laboratory wouldn't give us any title to his previous work. But we could dangle it as a bait, couldn't we?

But what would we get if he agreed to give us his anti-ageing treatment? The dogs looked healthy enough, but what long-term side effects might there be? The business about marrying cancer cells with normal cells sounded a bit dicey; he said it was fully controlled, but I didn't fool myself I understood his explanation of how it was done.

The truth was that I was attracted and distrustful — call it “frightened” — in equal measures. On one hand was the prospect of eternal youth stretching into an immeasurable future; on the other was the possibility that the human guinea pigs might come to some uncalculated, unforeseen, ghastly end.

It was Paula's insistence that eventually won me round. I was still very much in love with her vivacity and gaiety and charm, still in the state wherein I found it almost impossible to deny her anything.

Looking back and looking deeper into ourselves, I see that Paula was hysterical with greed for a life of endless youth and pleasure while I, hesitant and even cowardly in the face of one of a yearning mankind's greatest fantasies was, at bottom, utterly seduced by it.

Neither of us gave a thought to the meaning of an unending time.

* * * *

(III)

We invited Templeton to our home and he came. Neither of us remarked that he didn't even ask what we wanted with him, simply agreed to the appointment and came.

We gave him dinner and then, with the servants out of the way, I asked him straight out what would be the cost of establishing a laboratory where he could carry on his own private work while assistants carried on a more financially productive research.

He must have known what basically we were after, but the laboratory offer may have surprised him. He pondered a while, pushing a wine glass to and fro on the tablecloth while he frowned in concentration. It took him quite a while to say, in a cautious, half-querying tone, "About four million dollars. A considerable amount of that would be an investment to cover staff wages during the setting-up and pre-productive period."

It was a bigger sum than I had expected. Much bigger. I glanced at Paula and saw that she cared not a damn what the cost might be — she was hooked on the dream. It would mean selling off about four percent of my total holdings, but that would not make enough of a dent in my income to cause any reduction in our lifestyle. I was in a position where money simply piled up, year after year; we lived the good life to be sure, but we never went in for expensive collectables or more establishment than reasonable people could use, and so we lived easily within my income. Call us drones if you like, but not fabulously expensive drones.

("He was probably hooking in seven or eight million a year," said the Supervisor. "Even with about fifty percent tax, the unimaginative shits couldn't think how to spend it! The social partying set dangling at the end of its tether!")

"A nice life, though," murmured the Tracer.)

* * * *

I said, "Supposing that I should make that money available for such a project..." I let it trail off, leaving it to him to make the running. I didn't mean to go into such a commitment blindfold.

Templeton said, slowly, like a man bemused, as if he was working out

the best way to go, "In, say, three days, I could provide a breakdown of costs. That is, if you are serious about this."

And of course I said I'd be interested to see it, as if it was all in the air, just in the idea stage.

("Not blindfold, only led by the nose," said the Supervisor.)

* * * *

In three days I had the breakdown. "You can check the costings," Templeton told me, "against market prices."

Perhaps I could, but I didn't know where to start. I told him I'd take a few days to think about it, and he seemed satisfied; then I sat down to read the lists and explanatory documents and couldn't make head or tail of the greater part of them. In the end I took them to an accountant friend who kept them for a week and then said he couldn't fault the documents although some of the setting-up expenses, like initial building costs and such, were hazy but reasonable.

So I had Templeton out home again and told him I was prepared to go ahead with setting him up in his own establishment. He wasn't effusively grateful, but totally business-like, which suited me well; after all he was a brilliant man, at the top of his tree, who had no call to behave like a servant.

I held the crucial condition for the last minutes of the meeting, when his mind was fully engaged with the prospect of a free hand to pursue his dreams. Paula was with us, of course, and I held her hand as I told him we wanted to be the human guinea pigs for the trial of his extended life treatment.

He was silent for a long time, and at the end said only, "Have you thought? Are you sure you wish this?"

I asked, "Why not? You have treated yourself, and no harm has come to you."

Beside me, Paula burst out, "It is a condition! Our condition! Your laboratory in exchange for the treatment!" She was beside herself with excitement at seeing the prize in her grasp.

Templeton tried to slow us down, to provide time for thought, but I caught some of Paula's urgency and insisted that he make up his mind.

And in the end he agreed. What else could he do?

“Trap closed!” said the Supervisor. “And the hunter warning off his victims to the last. His life’s work and a handsome personal salary, no doubt, in exchange for a leap in the dark.”

“But a pretty attractive leap,” said the Tracer. “You have to pay that.”

“One that has come to very bloody grief. There must have been tripwires along the way. Or did a pair of idiots get their desserts?”

The Tracer thought of Paula’s mutilated body. Dessert?)

* * * *

My money was tied up in two big companies — 21st Century Finance and, an older one, Pegasus Equity. Both had bit holdings in the stocks of other institutions and were too rock solid for me to ever think of dabbling elsewhere; the cash rolled in, I attended directors’ meetings, and life rolled on regardless — until I wanted to withdraw money and was in well over my head. The lawyers had to be called in, and the amount of ensuing entanglement was hard to believe in. You might think that what was on the face of it a simple act of philanthropy would be pretty well straightforward, but just arranging the sale of shares was a major eruption and finally defining the terms of contract between Templeton and myself was a headache two months long. They argued that the idea was not financially viable, that biology was becoming a limited field closed in by the huge, hungry internationals, and that my money would go down the drain.

Half the time I couldn’t follow the duck-and-weave of their arguments, and there was nothing for it but to close my ears and stand firm. I got what I wanted, but it was like surfacing after swimming in treacle; it was my initiation into finance, and a bloody exhausting time it was, but in the end I owned a newly constructed laboratory, and it was time for me to call in Templeton’s big IOU.

I can’t say he was unwilling, but he spent a lot of time pointing out to us that we were embarking on a venture which, by its nature, we could not see the end of. Mostly he seemed concerned with the possibility of uncalculated side effects of the treatment.

Paula pointed out, more than once and with an uncomfortably shrill

persistence, that he had treated himself and had come to no harm. Her entire mind was bound up in the prospect of a never-ending youth, and the slightest contra argument brought out a touch of the harridan in her. I suppose that deep down I was as much gripped by the desire as she, but I tried to keep a steady mind until the thing was done. Then would be time to consider the endless future.

Well, not endless perhaps. Only with no end in sight.

Curiously, he never mentioned what turned out to be the first big, discomforting hurdle to be overcome. Perhaps, being an older man, it had not occurred to him. But that was still in the future.

When he accepted that we were fully determined that he keep his side of the bargain, he sent us to our doctor for a full examination — x-rays, brain scans, tests for all manner of metabolic levels. Name it, we had it and came out of it all a very healthy pair. As Templeton said himself, with me twenty-five and Paula twenty-three, we were at the peak of our physical development, right at the brink where cellular old age would begin to complicate our expectancy.

The treatment itself was unspectacular, mostly a matter of progressive injections which, he said, were in the main preparatory, readying various organs for some sort of temporary upset after the final “invasion”, as he termed it.

I must confess to a queasy stomach when this turned out to be injection of a virus, though Paula heard it without a qualm, still fixed on the goal, the prize, the bliss.

This virus was not one found in nature, but a construct, an artificial form conceived, designed and finally created by Doctor Templeton. Don't ask me how that was done because I haven't a clue about it. All I know is that it invaded the body cells and inserted its DNA into the cell reproductive system, like any other virus, but this one carried a gene that negated the effect of cell division. That is, the cell didn't age and the telomere didn't shrink. That was the real heart of his treatment.

(The Tracer asked, “Did Templeton leave any lab documents behind?”

“You bet he did, and they all went to his son when the Doctor died, but the old man had more sense than to record the essentials of this little

lot. His lab notes were eventually transferred to computer records, so they are still available; but the only remote connection with this affair is two names, scribbled in a margin probably as an aide memoire, which turn out to be the names of Colson's chauffeur and Paula Colson's personal maid. And that's how we know he targeted the Colsons deliberately. He needed big money and he offered a big bait."

"Send me one like him," prayed the Tracer.

"The real point," said the Supervisor, "is that he needed the money for research, not for personal squandering. He probably thought himself justified in suckering a pair of flossbrains. The single-minded are like that.")

* * * *

We had to go into "hospital" in a special sterile room of the laboratory (this was before his new staff were hired, so nobody knew we were there), with only a nurse to attend to us — a male nurse who turned out to be Templeton's son, but pretended he knew nothing about why we were there. The idea was that our immune systems had to be damped down so that antibodies and interferon and 'phages and such wouldn't chew up the virus before it did its work. So, naturally, we had to be carefully looked after while all the defences were down.

I can tell you that was a bad two weeks, even in a sterile environment. Anything could have happened.

But nothing did. At the end of it, we simply got dressed and went home, feeling no different from any other day. I suppose there was no reason we should feel different though I think both of us felt as if there should be a big celebration, a public holiday and fireworks and an endless party.

What actually happened was a farewell lecture from Templeton. "I'll want you under observation for at least ten years. You are both young and it may take at least that long to be certain there are no signs of ageing or lack of signs. And be especially careful not to give way to temptation to tell anyone of your treatment, even a best friend in dead secret. First, because they wouldn't believe you and would spread the story to everyone they knew as a good joke on the foolish Colsons. Second, because they would eventually bring the anti-juvenation law down on you."

He had hammered us with that a dozen times and even Paula's excitement and jubilation recognised the necessity, though her high spirits chafed at the bit.

He said something else, too. "Don't fool yourselves with ideas of freedom from commonsense precautions. You can still be killed in an accident; nothing can cure a crushed brain. Be careful with diet; you are not immune to heart trauma or cholesterol build-up. Under adverse circumstances, you could even succumb to starvation. Your immune systems are at their zeniths and will remain so, but they can be penetrated if you abuse your bodies with drugs or alcohol beyond moderation."

So we went home with a sermon and took up life very much as it had been before. What else could we do? Some years would have to pass before we could be sure the treatment had taken.

It all felt like a bit of a letdown.

* * * *

3

(I)

("A letdown!" said the Tracer. "A man sinks four million dollars into a dream, and all he feels is a letdown!")

The Supervisor understood. "They were children. They lived in a world where you put your money on the counter and the goods were handed over, ready wrapped, no waiting. They were rich children who had no responsibility for their riches. They lived in fairyland. But now they'd bought something that wouldn't begin to show for years and years. Ten years is a hell of a long way into the future when you're twenty-five.")

* * * *

I was able to be pretty calm about it. I suppose that at the back of my mind I had always had a speck of doubt about the Templeton thing, and my attitude was, at bottom, a repressed curiosity about the outcome buried under a determination not to think about it. But of course, it was always present, particularly as it couldn't be mentioned except between ourselves. I had some weird dreams.

But, Paula was a real problem. When we were alone she talked obsessively about the future, our future, about us in stasis watching history flow by, never touching us. I would listen, laughing as her ideas flowered into the fantastic, but later I tried to calm her, to get her mind off the future and fix it on today. I didn't realise the depth of her obsessive involvement until she became hysterical, screaming that I had no imagination, no appreciation of life and living, that my mind couldn't encompass any vision beyond the present. She was a job for a psychiatrist, but having anyone poking into her mind was out of the question. In a couple of years she quietened down, but I found out that she was having photographs taken, dozens of them, at least every week, and that she pored over them, searching for signs of ageing.

My love for Paula was very deep; I suppose it was obsessive, and for those first few years it needed to be. I was forever afraid that she would lose control and start to gabble in public. That, at least, never happened. You might think her suppressed hysteria would put a strain on our marriage, but I had been infatuated with her from the start and saw her as my Baby Doll (I called her that), my proud possession entitled to her whims and fancies because I could afford them. Looking back, it sounds shallow but I wanted her, just as she was, for ever and ever. And that was what we had been promised, wasn't it? That was what calmed my shred of doubt.

On the surface of our lives nothing much changed; we partied and holidayed and travelled, bought pretty things and popular things and lots of useless things, and in secret waited for the first signs of age to appear — or not to appear.

Templeton was a busy man whom we rarely saw. He sent us regular reports on the progress of the laboratory but we didn't pay much attention to them; after all, nothing was expected of it in the first years. My money rolled in and we never spent all of it; the laboratory was at base a philanthropy, a sort of "Thank You" in advance that wasn't really meant to flourish and profit.

But it did. In its seventh year the laboratory produced not a mere moneymaker but a worldshaker — the Viral Mutation Index. I won't pretend I understood it (something like it is still in use today), but I caught the general idea that one of Templeton's scientists had devised a method of typing viruses into distinctive groups which each followed a predictable series of mutational changes in different varieties of circumstances, making it possible to chart ahead the progress and changes of new viruses. It wasn't Nobel Prize stuff apparently but it put the Templeton Laboratory and Doctor

Linus on the map, on the net and in the money. It gave rise to a swag of patents and the laboratory rake-off bid fair, in time, to return the whole initial outlay.

Paula and I were pleased about it, but it was just another of the good things that happened to us; our world continued on the up and up.

Then the laboratory burned down and Templeton, working alone at night, burned with it.

The police investigation found signs that could be interpreted as deliberate vandalism or a careless accident; for lack of proof the case was never determined. For us it was a warning that no true immortality exists; Templeton, who had warned us against fate, had suffered its accident. For a little while we became cautious, switching off electrical appliances, installing fail-safe gadgetry, being wary of traffic, until familiarity bred its usual contempt and we reverted to normal.

Insurance covered the laboratory pretty well and we let Doctor Linus rebuild the place; it seemed only fair somehow. When in the end he offered to buy it from me I let him have it. It was no longer important to me.

(The Supervisor snorted, "Not a real thought in his head. 'Let it run — I can always sell it if it gets to be a bore.' Heigh-ho for the life of the totally idle rich!")

* * * *

And then we had another warning, at first barely recognisable as a cloud on the horizon. It was one which would pursue us for ever.

I was thirty-five by then. People occasionally remarked on how young I looked and I would give a shrug and say something dismissive like, "Some have it, some don't," while I gave myself a little ecstatic cuddle because poor old dead Templeton's "treatment" was working. Paula was still collecting photographs and treating herself to secret sessions of poring over them, making "then and now" comparisons of lines at the corners of eyes and mouth, integrity of hair colour, unblemished smoothness of skin, unable to believe the miracle for all my attempts to convince her. But our lifestyle didn't change. That's if you call "carefree" a style.

Then one of Paula's friends got her on her own, away from the gang, one day and asked in an excited whisper where she had got her juve and

could Paula give her an intro.

Juvenation procedures were risky and had been banned because of this, but that didn't stop ever-fresh rumours of new "safe" processes that could be had — for a price — if you knew where to go. There were "hidden country retreats" where the wonder-workers performed. Well, maybe there were, but Paula knew nothing about them and the enquiry put her in a fluster. She protested that she had had no operation of the kind (which I suppose was half true) and knew of no such people as juve practitioners. The friend did not believe her — and why not when at thirty-three Paula looked a radiant early twenties — and made pointed remarks about "that laboratory of your husband's where almost anything could be going on". Paula was frightened enough to lose her temper and call the woman a nosey bitch jealous of Paula's youthful looks.

That cost her a friend, in itself not a tragedy because there were plenty more available, but her deep scare was the realisation that as the years progressed this scene was likely to be replayed time and again. And she had failed the first encounter.

She hadn't done much growing up at that stage, was still in behaviour the young girl I married. She came home in a state of repressed hysteria to throw herself into my arms in a fit of outrageous trembling. Still besotted with her, I calmed her down with baby-talk and hugging and patting until she could tell me sensibly what had occurred, and at first it didn't really hit home.

Looking back, it seems incredible that this obvious outcome of our condition had not occurred to us. We had seen ourselves wheeling down the years in a sort of endless laughing carnival, the glittering envy of all, with never a thought of the wrinkling and encroaching frailty of those about us or what their reaction to eternal youth might be. I feel now that it was a kind of selfishness. I had never thought of us as a selfish couple, but now it seems to me that we mistook the careless generosity of easy wealth for generosity of spirit. Whether that be right or wrong, we suddenly had an enormous problem on our hands, one that meant we must consider our place in the world and how others saw us — and would continue to see us.

It was so enormous that I put it by, unwilling to think on such a scale, waiting to see what would happen, how it would all somehow come right in the end.

It didn't come right and there was no end. Juvenation was still a sleazy underground trade for those in the know and willing to take the risk, and

Paula's would-be confidante, smarting under insult, pointed the finger of gossipy innuendo at both of us. The story that we had been juved and would not reveal our contacts went the round of our social set; people looked at our youthfulness and agreed that some interference ("hormones" was the in word of the moment) had taken place. Our denials, interpreted as refusal to talk, were not believed. With a surprising suddenness we found ourselves losing friends.

It was not a matter of backs being turned, though there was a certain amount of catty rudeness, so much as an ignoring of our social existence. Parties were given and we were not asked; when we gave parties the number of excuses was daunting. It seemed too great a reaction to a rumour; it was surely the kind of thing that would run its course and die out.

("IQ 108!" The Supervisor was disgusted. "Even a half-witted rabbit would have known they couldn't go on for ever while everybody aged around them.")

"Circumstances," said the Tracer. "He was just an average bloke with a very average intellect who had never had to use it. He had easy money and nobody to pull rugs from under him; he never needed to use even the brains he had. He just coasted without watching out for rocks ahead, but now he was being woken up.")

* * * *

It wasn't, and it didn't. It got worse, even a little sinister. I asked one of the few acquaintances who still would talk to me what was going on.

He wasn't keen to say much, but eventually he told me that people had been checking back and nobody could remember any time when Paula and I had been away for the month or so necessary for a complete juve. They felt it was a bit eerie, the way we were "preserved", as though something unnatural had taken place. Quite a few of them had flirted with the popular cults at one time or another, sufficiently to taste satanic ritual and the charlatanism of the supernatural and come away with their brains more or less intact, but the mysteriously satisfying feeling that "there could be something in it".

And so now we were "dangerous" people better kept at arm's length.

I tried talking to Paula and she only kept repeating, "We don't have a friend left. Not one!"

I said, "They aren't real friends; I don't think they ever were."

She screamed at me, "That doesn't help! It will just get worse as they grow older and older!"

So it would. I had a sudden vision of our agelessness being talked about by the servants, seeping out to the tradesmen, spreading until some news vulture got hold of it and we became feed for the net and the gawping of millions. And then the police interest and the juve laws.

I said, "We can go away, never come back."

At once she became unreasonable. "You mean leave everything we have here, everyone we know? Go to live among strangers?"

I said, "They've all become strangers, haven't they?" and she began to cry, clinging to some belief that if we hung on it would all go away.

Then I had to comfort her.

It took a lot of comforting, a lot of pointing out the problems and eventually the dangers of our situation, and then a lot of love-making to make her see reason. She was simply afraid of change, like a little girl, wanting everything to continue as it was for ever and ever. She was a desolate little girl, but one with whom I was still entranced to the point of never thinking of refusing her anything — except that this time I was afraid of the future's problems. I could see nothing for it but to cut and run, and at last she gave in the inevitable.

Even then she cried out, looking for someone to blame, "That rotten Doctor Templeton! He knew, but he never told us!"

I knew we should have seen it for ourselves.

You can see that by now we were really convinced that we were going to live for ever. Or, at any rate, a long time. A hell of a long time.

("In God's name," asked the Supervisor, "why couldn't he have picked somebody suitable for his treatment?"

"Money, money, money. He wanted it and he got it."

“Soulless bastard!”

The Tracer pointed out that every man has his moral blind spot. “And to him, obsessed with his research, it wasn’t a con; it was only a way out of his cash drought. Lot of good it did him!”)

* * * *

(II)

We had to decide where to go. It had to be some place where we weren’t known, which at once ruled out all of Australia. We had society acquaintances in all of the capital cities and we certainly were not going to live in the backblocks, rustivating in some country town with the farmers and small shopkeepers. I didn’t care much where we settled, so long as we found company and comfort, but Paula could not make up her mind about any country or city.

Her actual acceptance of our situation did not come until I said, quite casually, “We’ll see them all eventually,” and she replied that she wasn’t going to spend her life running from place to place; she meant to settle down; it was bad enough having to leave Australia ...

It simply hadn’t struck her that we would have to move on every few years as people around us began to comment on our youthfulness. You have to realise that Paula had come from a minor stage career at the age of twenty to sudden wealth and a life wherein she had needed to think only of what suited her. I can see now that it was a life of utter selfishness and that I actively encouraged her in it; she had literally stopped thinking beyond the immediate minute because thought had become unnecessary. Now, with consequences and the necessity to think ahead forced on her, her response was to become hysterical.

My attempts to calm her were hopeless; she simply screamed at me and locked herself away. In an avalanche of terrified foresight, she saw her future of luxury and pleasure take on the features of a beast pursuing her down the years. She recovered, of course — we always do when there’s nothing else for it — and listened to my plans in the mutinous silence of a little girl deprived.

Paula liked people around her, but she never made close friends; I think that in those days she never had an intimate companionship. I, on the other hand, had a few good friends who would go out of my life and never

be seen again. This distressed me more than I can explain. What was worse was the perception that this would be a recurring pattern as every few years we would need to move on and reappear in a new place, in new company, under a new name. I said nothing about that; Paula's sullenness was burden enough.

Why we chose India I no longer know. Possibly because we had never been there and knew nobody there. We would become Mr and Mrs John Hammond, late of Australia and now resident in Bombay. The rest was for the lawyers to manage. They were curious about the projected name change (I imagine they were curious about many things, having their ears to the ground), but there was no illegality in that and they contented themselves with raised eyebrows. Their main business was to arrange the continuing transfer of rands to a Bombay bank so that they could be drawn on in the name of Hammond.

At that time it had never occurred to me that there were goods and services money could not pay for. Or that any reasonable right could be denied a law-abiding citizen. Or that human fortune balanced on knife edges.

So off we went to Bombay, which had a largish European component among its fifteen or so millions, mostly in business and fairly well off, and our first need was to make the right social contacts. Strangely, some of the young people in our law firm tipped us off how to go about that. (It seemed peculiar to be sitting in those drily computerised offices and listening to advice from those I would have thought to have little conception of our social stratum.)

Once I had explained the idea to Paula, she perked up considerably; she had always had a manipulative streak and the prospect of penetrative action was right up her street. We started by attending some contemporary art shows and buying some much publicised items at prices that just pipped the limits of big local collectors. That made the art news in the local papers, made us people to be pointed out at such gatherings and established the fact that we had money. And possession of money made us people of note in the right quarters. So much for the speculation about us.

We also joined the Opera Society, which was busily fostering western opera in the larger cities, and made a substantial donation to the local backers. Though neither of us was inherently drawn to Wagner et al., Paula's stage experience made her able to comment on aspects of production and presentation. The women were the powerful force in this

area and the women listened to her as a fresh voice.

Inside of a month we were in — invited here, invited there, noted in the press, hunted by the social commentators. Our legal advisers had certainly justified their advice. (Thinking back, did I detect a faint note of repressed derision from those young lawyers as they laid out their plan for netting the local rabbits? At the time, no, but I have had years for recollection and reflection.) Curiously, the local Indian politesse were slower to welcome us, almost as though they perceived us as buying our way into their goodwill (this again is hindsight), but soon we were taken up by the younger generation, those of our own age. Well, our apparent age.

Paula was in her element, behaving publicly with an exact appreciation of what was required of her and privately with the squealing joy of one who had conquered in a great battle of wits. And because she was back to her normal self again, I rejoiced with her.

It was almost as though we had taken up life again where the Australian days had broken off.

(The Supervisor's voice intruded into the recitation from the holospace: "Here follow ten minutes of unimportant talk of the Indian experience, which we have deleted from this recording. Other such deletions have been made to preserve continuity. For those interested they are preserved on the full recording.")

* * * *

All in all, we had a good life in India; we were among our own social kind and, once we had learned the local ways, we fitted in, snug as bugs in a rug. Of course, there was a down side to India (there's a down side to any place, isn't there?) but we didn't see too much of that. Most of the one and a half billion population (I suppose there are more than that now) lived in grinding poverty and in spite of government rules they bred like flies. We would see them occasionally, thin and boney and sick, but the police kept them out of the upper-class part of the city.

Constant sight of them would have been hard to bear when there was nothing that ordinary human kindness could do for such vast numbers. Paula and I were among the fortunate who coasted through life, cherishing our little secret and saving it for bursts of private laughter when we thought of those who would pay millions to share its benefit. It wasn't cruel laughter; we were just happy to be alive — in world without end.

But the world of India had its end, for us. We were ready for it and did not fuss too greatly; it was a damned nuisance but one we had to face, a small payment in view of the lasting gift. The whispers about youthfulness began after about ten years, and the puzzled frowns over questions bubbling in our friends' mouths, but which they hesitated to ask. So we simply got out. Our firm of ageing lawyers made all the arrangements from Australia (passports, visas, bank transfers and such); they arranged sale of our house and purchase of a comfortable small Long Island mansion — and Mr and Mrs Hunter, late of Australia, moved to New York.

That was about 2035, I think; why try to pin down dates when time doesn't matter? We lived in quite a lot of countries at different times — America, Spain, Scotland for a while (too cold), France, Argentina, Egypt (too bloody hot) and all sorts of island resorts. Seeing the world became our pleasure and our habit; we stopped waiting for our welcomes to decay into questionings and instead took a sip of each country or district and its people and moved on. There was always more to see, a new place to go. As I said — world without end.

But it did end, in 2078.

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(III)

The first intimation that change was about to come to us — to our lifestyle, to our whole world — was a vox message from my law firm: they wanted us to return to Australia to attend a shareholders' meeting of 21st Century Finance. I had never attended any such meetings (except one right at the beginning, out of curiosity); the minutes would be sent to me, but I read only enough to see that everything was going well and the dividends remained high. I ignored the recorded call. Then the firm voxed me to contact them in person, a request they had never made before.

So I made a person-to-person visual, to be confronted by a middle-aged stranger who announced himself as a senior member of the firm, and I realised with a small shock that we had been away more than forty years and that the firm's personnel had aged and passed on and the business had moved into the hands of sons and daughters, or even been sold so that only the name remained. He told me, very briefly, as if remembering that calls cost money, that it would be in my interest to attend the meeting, that 21st Century Finance was the subject of a State

prosecution and that all its assets had been frozen.

What I understood was that half my income had been cut from under me because of some maladministration by the company. As a purely passive participant in the business, I knew nothing about its actual day to day workings and nothing about the company law which was now looking into its operations; I knew that 21st Century existed by an involved system of financing large-scale projects and that the intricacies of its own financing were hard to follow — and you could say pretty accurately that represented all I knew. My first reaction was to instruct the lawyer to arrange for proxy attendance at the meeting, but he insisted that the matter was very serious and that my personal presence was desirable.

I gave in as much because lawyers are nearly impossible to argue with as because he roused in me a buried desire to see Australia again after so long a time away. And I was a little concerned by the frozen assets business, though I was confident that his firm would deal with that in good time.

When I told Paula she was horror struck at the loss of income, however temporary. When I had succeeded in calming her down, she showed an unreasoning fear of return to Australia. She cried out that people would recognise us, questions would be asked, police would investigate us, and juve laws would close around us ... In the end she said, “You go if you want to, but I’ll stay here. I’m not going back to be arrested!”

Never in all our time together had she suggested that we be separated even for a day or two, let alone a period that might stretch into weeks.

I suppose that at this point I have to discuss our private relationship. We had been married then for over fifty years, and pretty good years they had been, full of travel and laughter and sightseeing and all the things you can do when there’s nothing to stop you doing them. We loved each other, which counted for a lot.

When I say “we loved each other” I don’t mean the totally involved way of the first years together; that would be a silly pretence. Nobody maintains such a high peak for so long, but we still enjoyed a sex life and a real caring for each other. We loved each other and our closeness was not just the closeness of a shared secret which had over the years become like a shared joke between us, a sort of hidden superiority of ourselves over other people, an acknowledgement that we played in the world but were not really of it. There were times when we fell into a way of nose-in-air

superiority and were brought back to reason by the cold shoulders of those who resented it; we made mistakes, but the mistakes carried their own retribution. I have to admit, too, in time the sexual relationship developed a secret elasticity; I played in strange beds and I knew, after a while, that Paula did, too. It was something we never admitted to each other; it was not a denial of our faithfulness so much as an occasional refreshment of it. That was how I saw it and our mutual affair never slackened because of it.

And now she was afraid to return home. I had never appreciated the depth to which Paula was affected by our secret. It had very early on become for me an integral part of my life, an ongoing acceptance that wore out its first aspect of wonder and became my manner of being, my way of existence that no longer required thinking about, except every few years when a change of scene was dictated. I began to see that for Paula it was a daily miracle, an affirmation that each morning she awakened to youth and beauty, as though a day might come when the miracle ceased its magic and in her mirror she would see the first wrinkle spreading its shadow of impending age. She was a good actress who betrayed nothing, but I knew now that she lived in fear of eternity lost, as well as in fear of Australia and discovery and the law.

There was nothing for it but for me to make the trip alone. We were in Hawaii at the time, an easy hop to Melbourne. We were still using the name of Hammond, since we had never returned to any of our round-the-world venues to risk recognition, and I decided to keep it for the time being. The trans-Pacific hop took only ninety minutes and a taxi shuttled me to the lawyers' establishment; there I was ushered directly to the office of Jason Bradley, the head of the firm.

As I entered the room he switched on the privacy insulator, doing it slowly to be sure I saw him. I knew there could be no pretence here and knew equally well that our communication was privileged; nevertheless, I was uneasy about the meeting.

Old Jason was about seventy. He motioned me to a chair, regarded me with the kind of interest you'd give to a curio and said, "You would not remember me."

I didn't.

He said, "I had just joined my grandfather's firm when I first saw you. I remembered you because he pointed you out as an example of the perfect waster, heir to an immense amount of money, who exercised neither control over nor interest in it so long as the dividends were paid and nobody

bothered you.”

Expecting questioning of my youthfulness, I had received instead an insult. Such a man needed to be very sure of his position to risk it, so I swallowed anger and replied that with his firm hired to attend to the minutiae of my life, there was no reason for me to do my own spadework.

He nodded. “And with virtual eternity for your playground the possibility of change did not occur to you?”

With a distinct sense of shock I asked him, “What do you mean by virtual eternity?”

“I mean Doctor Templeton’s treatment. Don’t panic, Mister Colson; the privacy insulation is first class. I am the only possessor of the facts of your existence and in the legal sense they are no business of mine for public airing. The Doctor’s treatment did not, in the strictest sense, contravene the law, though the law would have acted very swiftly to make it a contravention had it been aware.”

His knowledge did not distress me too greatly while he was prepared to keep it to himself, but I had to ask how he came by it.

It appeared that after our dealings over the setting up of the laboratory Templeton had adopted the Bradley firm for his own personal dealings. After his death, the new owners, Doctor Linus and friends, discovered a number of encrypted voxcode recordings in his private safe. Deeming these, with doubtful legality, to be the property of the laboratory, Linus tried to read them but could not, so he engaged the services of a cryptographer who broke the code but fortunately did not have the technical expertise to understand what he read. One recording contained the detail of Templeton’s treatment for the prolongation of an unageing life, with an account of the Colson dealings. Linus saw at once the impossibility of publicising such a procedure across a planet not only over-populated but overburdened with increasing numbers of nonagenarians; but, understandably, he did not want to destroy the record of incidental side issues.

“He brought it to me,” said Bradley, “as the person in charge of the laboratory’s legal affairs — after first extracting all the less questionable data. I saw the matter from the point of view of responsibility to a client. I recognised at once your possible private complications and suggested that he leave the tape with me for placement in a private strongbox until such time as its content could be safely released, which might be never. He was

glad to be rid of it. He died, as I assume you know, two years ago, leaving myself as the only possessor of your secret.”

After a moment he added, “I suppose I should be pleased, on your behalf, to see that Templeton’s meddling was successful, but frankly I am not. I am, despite my profession, an ordinary man who dislikes sitting on secrets. For your sake and your wife’s, I have kept all your business in my own hands. I have wondered now and then whom to hand it on to when my own span ends, but I feel that may no longer be a problem. Frankly, Mister Colson, in a year or two, allowing for the law’s delays, you may have no business at all with Bradley, Bradley and Macrone.”

He paused as if he waited for a response from me, but I had none. Until his final few words I had fixed my mind mainly on his preservation of the anonymity of Paula and myself, but now I was brought uneasily to the major purpose of this visit. I didn’t much mind his obvious dislike of me, but it promised no joy in what was to come. I could only stare uncomfortably.

He said, “You know that the assets of 21st Century Finance have been frozen by order of the court and that precludes your taking any profit from their transactions.”

I had to say, “Yes, but I don’t understand.”

“You don’t bother to follow Australian news?”

Why the hell should I? I didn’t answer.

“So you are not aware that the chairman and two members of the board of directors are under arrest, though free on bail of half a million dollars? The charges are fraud, conspiracy, embezzlement, and a dozen more. I trust that you do at least know —” (there was open contempt in his voice) “— that the company made its profit by backing large, expensive projects on a scale too great for the average entrepreneur. Some twenty years ago it became one of two backers of Pacific Plankton; that disastrous attempt to augment the food chain at its lowest level failed through poor research, directorial silliness and managerial milking of assets. It railed for over a billion dollars, with your firm to foot half the bill. Instead of declaring the facts, the board decided to hide from the inevitable market decline by falsifying books and trusting to other investments to tide them over. Not only did other bad investments fail, mainly through a spate of poor judgments, but the cover-up enabled some less honourable members of the board to paddle their fingers in a rapidly shrinking till. The end result is a bankruptcy estimated by the government auditor at a minimum of two and a

half billion dollars. Your shareholding will be a bare nibble at the edges of the debt.”

You hear of such things, but they happen to other people. Then suddenly they happen to you. There is no sensible reaction to something so big.

So I said, “Then I’ve only lost half my income,” almost as if that were a plus.

Old Bradley looked as though he didn’t believe what he heard. After a while he said, “You have not asked who was the second backer of Pacific Plankton.”

“Should I? Who was it?”

Even as I asked the question I knew the answer, and felt a shiver taking over my whole body.

Bradley said, “It was the other firm holding your investments, Pegasus Equity. There is suspicion of collusion between the two and warrants have been issued. Also, the assets of Pegasus Equity have been frozen as of this morning. As you would have known if you took any interest in your own country.”

The shivering was uncontrollable; I could only clasp my hands and stare at him.

He continued cruelly, as if wiping me clean from his slate, “You have no source of income and on present indications are not likely to retrieve any in the future.”

It was a dismissal. He looked down at his desk like a man finding other business for his attention. I got up, still shaking and cold with shock, and made for the door, but he had a last word for me.

“If you have a bank account in the name of Hammond I would advise a total withdrawal before the auditor’s hounds get wind of it — and of your double identity.”

* * * *

I got out of there in a state of mental blankness and wound up on a seat in one of the city plazas, watching people go by, unable to think. Mostly I was

hurt by Bradley's unveiled dislike and contempt. All the rest would in some fashion take care of itself; my life had no place for catastrophe. But Bradley's attitude ... I was what I was because I had no call to be otherwise; why should he or anyone adopt a superior moral position?

It was late evening before I returned to my hotel and on an empty stomach drank whisky in mutinous solitude, refusing to acknowledge anyone in the bar. Mutiny turned to self pity and I went to bed for lack of a better thought.

I woke about three in the morning, sorry for myself, and took a hangover tablet. Bradley's last words had risen to the surface of my empty mind and, before the alcohol had finally lifted, I called Internet Finance and transferred my Hawaii bank balance to a Melbourne bank. The "Hammond" account was some four hundred thousand dollars; it seemed enough to go on with. Then I vided Paula, told her what I had done and that she must come to Melbourne immediately.

She crescendoed from insulted disbelief to hysterical tantrum, screamed at me in language that would have shamed the gutter and cut the connection.

I remember thinking calmly that she would come as soon as she realised her cashless position, and thinking also that after sixty-and-odd years my attitude towards Paula had changed. Even hopeless passion has its limits. We were good friends.

At last we were just good friends.

No, something more. We were partners, shackled together by the fact of our uniqueness, by the simple truth that, save in the short run of a decade or so before the necessary moving on, we had only each other in the whole world — and on and on into the future.

At the end of a week she came, vengefully smouldering — and heard me out in silence as I told her just what had happened. When I had done she burst into tears. And when the tears were done she said, "We must plan."

Indeed we must — but when the end came we had no ideas; we were not equipped to deal with the real world.

The end was a dozen directors and accountants of both firms in gaol, one suicide, total collapse of both establishments and the ruin of small

stockholding thousands. For Paula and I, it was the Hellgate's opening.

* * * *

4

(I)

The trials and sentencing occupied about a year and by the end of that year we were close to broke.

It was not only that we were unused to being careful with money, it was partly the decline in the value of money itself. Attempts had been made to curb inflation in most countries, usually with only temporary success, but by 2079 our four hundred thousand was worth less than half of its value sixty years before.

We bought a small, decrepit house, little more than a shack, on the outskirts of a country town, furnished it in our estimation cheaply, and sat down to think. Say, rather, to discover the limits of thinking.

You people today, fifty or so years later, have little idea of the changes in the world; you welcome the new gadget, the new gimmick, call it progress and swallow it into your experience without a glance at the past. Why bother with the past now that the real problems have been solved and the present flows evenly by? Let the old folk "remember when ..." and grumble at the intolerant present while their grandchildren gaze out from the Corridors on a safely unchanging future. But in 2079 the forecast bottoming out of population growth had not occurred; there had been slowing down but no cure for the climb to thirteen billions and attempts by governments to stem natural fecundity had foundered in protest, riot and violence. The world's forests were gone, the seas had been fished to near vanishment of life, vagaries of the Greenhouse weather made food crops always problematical, science was moribund for lack of funding and the wealth of nations was spent in feeding the fifty percent of people born to be jobless all their lives — and still children were born to those to whom the extinction of the race was "just the talk of them innerlecshals". That fifty percent had been created at first by runaway automation and then by the self-replicating manufacturing techniques fostered by greed almost to the point where little buying public existed among the State-warded many.

(Paula and I had been careful to have no children. We found sound social reasons for the decision, but the truth was that in our hearts we

feared Templeton's manipulation and magic. We feared monsters born of unnatural science.)

(The Supervisor snorted, "Magic and monsters! Unnatural science! They already had the mentalities of Corridor people, grabbing at the supernatural for anything they didn't understand. What they really feared was the paradox of children growing up with unchanging parents.")

* * * *

What all this meant to Paula and myself — and the condition of the world always comes down to a personal crisis — was that when our money ran out, which would be very soon, we would be reduced to applying for government sustenance (the Suss as the low-lives called it), which would involve the filling in of application forms, including Date of Birth ... which would be checked against Central Data ...

... and it would be found that as Hammond we did not exist in Central Data ...

... or that as Colson we presented as patently healthy youngsters in our ninth decades of life!

We speculated and theorised for hours as to what action the government would take in our case. The procreation laws were strict to a point just short of child murder (but were still defied); euthanasia was practised to a degree where doctors shrugged and turned their backs and the law turned a blind eye; even genetic research (what there was of it in a poverty-stricken world) was policed almost to extinction — and here were we, avatars of life virtually unending, subjects for study that would quickly give up its secret in a world that could not afford the life it had, let alone the miracle of forever.

Our case fell between the cracks of extant law, so they would simply kill us. In a world wherein the gap between the haves and have-nots was unbridgeably deep, few cared what happened to the poor. As two who had long ago ceased to give a damn for any lives but our own we knew that we would simply vanish without sound or trace.

We did not want to die. Even in Suss circumstances life was precious. We told ourselves that the Suss civilisation was a phase, a historic period which would give way to new eras of hope and prosperity; we would suffer, but we would see it out. In the meantime there had to be a

way of existing until the new future arrived, but for all our desperate discussion we could not see it.

What way? Paula's stage experience in chorus lines and bit parts meant nothing in a profession inundated by out-of-work hopefuls; she auditioned persistently until the rage for new techniques and new styles of acting convinced her that she had nothing to offer to stage or holoscreen. She gave up the attempt and lapsed into a mulish silence, only unwillingly stirring herself to clean our grimy little house. Much of the time she spent trying on the remnants of an expensive wardrobe she had fiercely insisted on keeping over my attempts to get her to sell off the vast collection of clothes; she lived in dreams of the past.

And I? What did I have to offer the world of industry and commerce? I am a smallish, slender man, strong enough for most pursuits but utterly inexperienced in anything useful. I had never done anything useful. In the world of 2079, you went to school (if your parents could afford it) with an employment goal in mind from a suffocatingly early age, and trained yourself towards it. When your time came, you went straight into your waiting profession, hand-picked by employers whose scouts had silently overseen your performance for years — or you went on to the scrap heap.

I was for the scrap heap, and knew it. In a highly mechanised society there were no jobs for the unskilled.

I grew vegetables in our backyard, discovering that even so simple a chore required knowledge and a measure of dedication, but carried on with it because I had no better way to pass the time. For the rest, I could only watch miserably as our money slipped away; you can imagine that we were poor managers.

Paula grew increasingly uncommunicative as the months passed. I tried to jolly her out of it, but she only glared at me and went to the bedroom to fondle her dresses. We never quarrelled openly; we knew that bad blood between us would create an impossible situation; an endless enmity was unthinkable.

In a chokingly short time the money disappeared. No more time existed for indecision and we had been unable to make up our minds to anything. The more we talked or argued, the more it seemed all avenues of decision were closed.

But now that only action remained possible, I told her what I proposed to do. She said, as though it was no matter of importance, "They'll kill us

both.”

I pointed out that the alternative was starvation, more protracted and surely less pleasant. She said nothing to that but at least did not try to prevent me.

Her uncaring, life-is-over attitude engendered in me the pity for my little girl that had always been my reaction to her downcast moods, but this time it carried an underlay of irritation, an understanding that she wanted all the high life of our past but had no mental backbone to fight to preserve it. It was for me to battle for both of us.

It may seem peculiar to you because you don't share my bizarre circumstances, but I felt that I had attained a new stage of growing up in the world.

* * * *

(II)

If we were not to starve we must go on the Suss, the fortnightly government handout of food-and-necessities accompanied by a little money for “emergency extras”, but there were dangers in making the necessary application. Paula's “They'll kill us” was an exaggeration born of creeping distress, but the State would have to take some action once our life condition was revealed, as it surely must be, and surely that must involve some form of incarceration. But there was nothing else for it; the application would have to be made. Even if paid work had been available, in a time when selection of the fortunate percentage was made by psychological machinery and intrusive questioning neither of us had training or a talent to offer.

And so I went into the village, to the Communications Office where such requests were handled. I knew the pitfalls, the details that must remain hidden, and wound my mind round a whole spate of clever dodges for evading and bamboozling the staff.

At the last moment, on the doorstep, it occurred to me that there might be no staff, only a bank of machines with buttons to be pushed and merciless holoflash questions to be answered in a humanless void. The possibility queased my stomach into near illness, and I entered the little hall almost in a state of shock.

There was a human staff, a middle-aged woman who sat behind a desk with a holospace against the white wall at one end and before her a largish, complicated keyboard. Nothing else. The banks of machinery, the data files and processing activities, were miles away in Melbourne city; it was a wonder our village environment provided work for even a single operator. The almost empty ambience completed my depression.

The woman looked at me without interest, probably wondering what so well dressed a man could want of a Comm Office that his private installations could not provide. I explained to her what I wanted — enrolment on the Suss register for myself and my wife — and made a stammering mess even of that, unable to treat her with the casual certainty I commonly used with the worker breed. She seemed suddenly a class enemy, ready to claw.

At the sound of my voice her eyes widened a little; it would be only rarely that she heard an upper class accent — the kind she would call “posh” — in the village.

When I had finished my roundabout declaration, she said, “You’re not the first to come down in the world. You’d be surprised how many.” “How many useless, classy bastards” her tone said. “Full name?”

This was the first hurdle. I said, a bit creakily, “John Vincent Colson.”

She fingered it on to the keyboard and sat back while something somewhere hummed. In a few seconds the holospace flashed: Personal details John Vincent Colson db 8.10.1990.

She said, “A slip-up there somewhere,” as though slip-ups were all in the day’s work, and I said quickly, “That’s my grandfather. All our men carry the same three names.”

“They do?” I could see her thinking that was the sort of dynastic nonsense the moneybags would go for. She typed: Recheck.

The halo vanished and in seconds repeated the same information.

The woman said contemptuously, “Bloody amateur recorders! See the name and look no further. They’ll have your father and you all lumped under the one name.” She pondered a moment and asked, “Have you ever been abroad?”

I had been working out how to introduce the idea into her head, afraid

of seeming pushy, of trying to tell her how to do her job — and she had done it for me. I said, “I was in America a few years back.”

“You’ll have had to register there.”

“Yes.”

She said into the air, “USA connection!” and in seconds the holo flashed: USA open. “So — date of birth?”

I had to hope my memory of that trip was correct and I said as firmly as I could manage, “Tenth March, twenty-fifty-two.” It was the day and month I always used overseas, only varying the year as I grew older. I remained always aged twenty-five at signing-in, which made me a believable twenty-nine now.

She typed and the holo flashed down a list. The USA is a big country crowded with people and there were plenty of John Vincent Colsons, but only one born in “fifty-six”. The flashdown included Paula and the dates and “factual” information we had manufactured for her.

The woman — I never knew her name — said, “Transfer!” and our data were entered into the Australian system. We were legal! And entitled to Suss benefits. Against odds, our luck had held.

The rest took only a few minutes. I was leaving when the woman called, “Just a minute!” and I stopped dead, afraid of some last minute disaster, wanting to run but not daring. I turned slowly back — and she asked, “When you were in the money, did you ever do any sailing?”

“I owned a racing yacht for a few years.”

I suppose it was a fair if unexpected question.

Yachting was one of the expensive pursuits of the wealthy, and I had played along until at the end of a stay somewhere or other I had sold the yacht and taken up some other hobby.

She asked, “Did you ever get seasick?”

“Never.”

Then she said something which legend had it was heard by only one Susser in a million: “There’s a job come into Melbourne area. One

qualification is you mustn't get seasick. Interested? There's not too many Sussers ever had sea experience and everybody else travels by plane."

I suppose I was dumbfounded; like an idiot I asked, "What sort of job?".

She literally threw her hands in the air, despairing of all high-class twits. "Christ! A job, ninny! A bloody job! Do you care what sort?"

I nearly choked in my effort to say, "No I don't care. Of course I don't."

And I didn't. Any job was better than subhuman existence on the Suss. Even to a man who had never had one.

She called, "Employment list!" and the holo sprang to life. She typed a number and the display read: Ocean Growth Arafura Branch. General hands. Seagoing experience essential... and a deal more that I was too excited to take in.

The woman said, "The interview's in Melbourne. I'll give you the address."

("I don't get it." The Tracer was appalled. "Would an operator brush off an identity search as easily as that?")

"Fifty years ago!" the Supervisor reminded him. "A single-operator station in a tin shed village in the sticks where subsistence farmers couldn't afford full-comm home set-ups. And a woman bored out of her skull just sitting there, mostly passing on messages. She probably resented anybody actually coming to the place at all, disturbing her vid viewing. This one just took the easiest option — and let Colson off the hook.")

* * * *

Along with the address the woman gave me a travel voucher to get me to Melbourne and I took the train (an old electric, must have been nearly the last of them) into the city.

The Personnel Manager interviewed me right away. It seemed there were precious few Sussers with sea experience, and most of those were too old for what he wanted — young, active blokes who could get around.

He checked my credentials (which were only an hour old on the computers!), listened to my voice and gave me one of the half dozen jobs offering. Just like that!

He said at one stage, "The Bridge nifties will probably snap you up. They like posh voices around them."

I didn't know what he meant and didn't care. I was only full of the miracle. I had gone to apply for the Suss and instead landed a job. It would have to be a record of some kind.

The one unpleasantness had been during the medical inspection when the doctor said, "You're on the skinny side but a job of work will cure that." I resented that, although he meant only that I did not carry a load of unused, surplus muscle like some farm labourer.

* * * *

(III)

As soon as I got home, excited as a kid, I broke the news to Paula that we were going to have real money coming in, not just the Suss. That brightened her up more than anything that had happened in the past year.

Then I explained that I would be away for three weeks in every four, ferried home for a week after each three-week stint. "The job is up north, in the Arafura Sea, on a sea production rig, growing food for the Sussers."

She heard all that with a puzzled frown because, I thought, I was too excited to explain things properly. But she said, "How much?"

"How much what?"

"The pay, silly!"

I actually hadn't asked, but I knew it would be base rate starting, with proficiency increments every six months. I explained that I had arranged for the money to be transmitted to her because all necessities were provided on the rig. It wouldn't be a big sum at first, but it would improve in time.

"So now your husband's a working man, looking after his own!"

She said, "Yes, isn't he?" in a return to that far away fashion that

meant she wasn't really hearing me, but looking inward to some thought of her own.

I know now that that was just what she was doing, looking inward to a thought of her own.

I didn't pay much attention then. I had only two days to finalise any family arrangements and report to the Arafura flight. I must admit that I was looking forward to this new experience of discovering how "the other half" actually lived; it had the charm of mysterious novelty.

(The Tracer exploded, "He's a right bastard, that one, isn't he?"

"Took you long enough to notice."

"He talks only about what directly affects himself, only mentions even his wife when she's doing something that upsets him. Sees she's been having a bad time, but all he can talk about is looking forward to his job as if it was to be some sort of party game. We don't even know what she looks like. In fact we don't know what anybody looks like except for a quick rundown on Doctor Templeton, who excited him. He doesn't even comment on his lifespan, just accepts it as something paid for and delivered."

"The perfect self-centred individual."

"Self-centred! He doesn't even see anybody else!"

The Supervisor laughed. "Let that be a lesson to you against accumulating unearned riches and meeting with the Devil")

* * * *

(IV)

I didn't know much about the Arafura Project beyond the netnews fact that it was another attempt to use the oceans to bolster the food rations. This hadn't been a thing to interest me too much; I had always been able to buy what I wanted (though the privately run shops were sometimes wildly expensive even for the well off) and it was the government's business to look after the poor. It interested me now in a touristy kind of way; I think I saw myself as some sort of high-lifer taking an amusing taste of low life.

The AP certainly looked fascinating from the air as we circled over it before landing. It was immense beyond anything I had imagined, a vast man-made structure whose edges began a few kilometres off the north coast of Australia's Arnhem Land and stretched away into the distance, way beyond where we could see even from thirty thousand feet. And this was only, I had been told, a kind of pilot plant, a trial run for the construction of AP spawn that would spread across the oceans of the world! And it was green, just a green blanket resting for a thrilling distance on the surface of endless water.

There were some others with me in the jet, middle-class working types who left me alone when they heard my "posh" accent, probably taking me for some kind of senior exec, also a couple of Sussers who had somehow passed the Personnel screening and sat together yammering in accents you could have cut with a blunt knife. I knew that, historically, there had been a *laissez faire* Australia where all the social groups mixed together in a more or less common speech form, but financial pressures had long ago put an end to that; the Suss had drifted into being the uninterested, uneducated stratum, and the wage workers observed a careful if not particularly subservient division from their betters. I supposed I might have to make some effort to meet these people on their own terms.

But that was for tomorrow; the present day was the jet diving down to a great central stretch of clear water from the mid-point of which rose a building large enough to cover a couple of city blocks. We tied up at a pier that could have harboured a huge freighter (and did so, I discovered later) and disembarked. Carrying our own baggage — and that was for me a new experience — we were taken into the building and into a featureless room where we sat on benches and waited for the Personnel Officer at his central desk to pay some attention to us.

Which he eventually did, calling each of us by name. I was the last called. All the others after a short exchange went out the way we came in and I understood later that they were ferried across to quarters on the green "mainland" of the Project, but to me he said, "You have no work experience of any kind?"

I said simply, "No." It was all on the vidscreen in front of him; why ask?

He said, not very nicely, "We'll give you a try in the junior mess. I suppose you've eaten in restaurants often enough to know what's required of a waiter?"

I said I thought I had. He looked as if he didn't believe me but said, "Report to the Number Two dining room at 0700 in the morning; at least you'll know what the words on the menu mean," and handed me over to a gopher who took me via lifts and corridors to a small room with a bed and minimum furniture, somewhere on the top floor. He said, "This is yours, mate," and left me to it.

All very efficient and smartly processed; I was a cog in the works.

I settled myself in, which took about five minutes, and set myself to find my way about the building, wishing I'd thought to ask some directions of the gopher. (I spent a lot of time in the first week wishing I'd thought to ask the obvious; it takes time to learn to think like a worker.) I found the Number Two dining room eventually down on the first floor, and the staff dining room where I was too late for the midday meal. As I left there, I heard someone snigger, "Another poshie for the fat pigs." I supposed there would be a lot of that for a while, until I settled in. Being only a small man I would have to keep my temper and bear with it.

During the afternoon I walked across the pontoon bridge connecting with the mainland — and discovered why freedom from seasickness was a job requirement. The whole mainland, seemingly endless miles of it in every direction, rolled with the swell of the ocean beneath it; the entire Arafura Project was a vast, undulating platform a few centimetres thick and covered with a layer of thin, heavily fertilised soil which, in turn, supported endless fields of fruit and vegetables laboratory-developed to ripen only a handsbreadth above the soil.

I vaguely recalled reading some news releases telling these things, but it had not been the sort of information to interest me greatly and now, in the middle of it so to speak, it seemed a pretty impressive technological feat.

But the world was full of such things, wasn't it? You didn't have to stand and gaze with your mouth open.

There was a scientist of some kind doing soil measurements and he, when he heard my accent, was willing to answer a few questions.

It seemed that the reason for the thinness of the Project's billowing under-structure was cheapness of construction, using some carbon-strengthened material, as strong as steel and with most of its bulk taken up by tiny air bubbles to provide flotation. Most of the "land" surface was taken up by forced-growth vegetables for shipping out and some

experimental hemp for processing into cloth for the Suss people; even the underside was used for growing some sort of edible algae as a bulk food, also for the Sussers. I discovered also that the Arafura is a cyclone area, which made it seem a pretty foolish place to float a garden, but the Project had done some kind of deal with local authorities to have Weather Control steer the big blows away from the farm and disperse over the sea.

But I don't need to tell you all this; you know about it because all the oceans today are covered by float farms and half the world eats from them. It's just that Arafura was the first.

(The Supervisor signed, "How right you are. We can also do without the harrowing account of his first days as a waiter in Diner Two — all the spilt soup and mixed-up orders and the rudeness of middle-management sub-nabobs, to say nothing of the kitchen gibes at his prissy accent. I think we should have edited it out on the first run. The trouble with Deep Question is the bloody questioners who can't tell relevance from garbage and let the twits run on until their throats give out.")

He ran the voice fast forward for a few seconds. "I think this should do."

Colson's voice, caught in mid-sentence, said, "— what Paula was doing —"

"Uhuh, too far!" said the Tracer. "Back a bit, Sir. This is a really important part.")

* * * *

So you can see that finding out how the other half lives is no joke. Even table-waiting is deceptive; the real rush and bustle goes on out of sight, in the kitchen and pantry. The bitching of the low-life staff behind the scenes and the rudeness of the management diners was hard to take at first, but I learned the knack of letting it roll off me as if I didn't hear. Looking back, I think it was a big help that my mind was in some degree busy with Paula.

I vided home a few times and contacted only the answering machine. She would ring back and be vague about her activities; she would ask uninterested questions about my doings and we would ring off with nothing really said. I found myself obsessed with whatever was going on behind her uncommunicating face, convinced that she was hiding some

private, secret train of thought from me; the hours on shift, where I had to watch what I did, became a relief from the continual wondering.

I was behaving like a suspicious husband — and that realisation, coming to me while I was restless in bed, brought on a fit of coughing laughter. Me a suspicious husband! As though I cared! As though our lives really intersected on any plane save the fact that we were two of a kind, unique and bound by our common secrecy!

It was a discovery, an awakening. I had always been a placid type, content that things flowed along without any hitches, accepting what was and never getting too excited over anything. The only really big node in my existence had been my passion for Paula and that, I suddenly realised, was sixty-six years old and had become another, other thing with the passage of time.

I lay in the dark, seeing the two of us, not as lovers (after all, we had both had our bits on the side, pretending not to observe) but as people thrown inexorably together, never drifting apart but clinging, each to the other, as refugees. That was what we were, refugees! We played in the world with a sense of joining the fun, but safe in the knowledge that we could disengage and go on to the next group, the next country, the next generation; it was as though we watched the world, paddling like big children in its shallows, but never wholly part of it, then scuttled to our secret privacy where we could gloat over its drab ageing.

Sixty-six years! I thought of Paula as a love object and saw that such a vision had faded and vanished somewhere along the years. Loving her had become a given, not really even a habit, and it was pretty plain that she saw me in the same light and was retreating into her own privacies.

This was more than discovery; it was release. Release into what I could not tell, but the surge of ecstasy, of sudden power, was overwhelming. I had glimpsed a great truth, that I was not just a lucky man with the secret of agelessness, but a man on the lip of the future. My time was not yet, with over-population still beleaguering the planet in its own fecund dross, but I could wait while history rolled by me to at last reveal myself to a more receptive age. Meanwhile I lived on, able to wait for my revelation to come.

“Shows a nice turn of speech at times, doesn’t he?” the Tracer observed.

“Went to a good school,” said the Supervisor, “but he uses it to

show a nasty turn of mind. Having time to think has uncovered the nest of worms."

"Seems a bit sudden."

"No, the signs were there in little things. He was isolated on the Arafura; nobody wanted him, and there wasn't even Paula to talk to, so he had time to meet up with his personal devils. It could have been the first bout of extended thinking in his whole life. Since he was interested in nobody but himself he was able to make it from placidity to paranoia in one jump.")

* * * *

The company flew a batch of us home for leave in the fourth week, and I arrived to find Paula in a good mood. Accustomed to her twists and turns (we even made love a couple of times), I didn't think much about it until on the last day before my return to work she brought up a plan to sell the house.

Why? Because she was lonely among the country hicks (that was understandable) and wanted the city life she was accustomed to. Now that I had a job we could afford a suburban flat and she could find some friends. (Friends? I had to cast back and remember her working-class background. For her it made some sense.) She became insistent, and I couldn't see much against the idea. But I was never good in arguments; it was only after it was all over that I always thought of the things I should have said. I agreed because she flustered me with her practical view that saw all the advantages and I suppose because I would really rather come home to city life.

At any rate, I agreed and at the week's end I left behind me the most agreeable and attentive Paula who had manifested in years.

Only on the plane, hurtling north to Arafura, did I begin to wonder just what she had in mind. She was the one who always planned ahead, whereas I just took things as they came; now I wondered what lay behind the idea of a town flat that she hadn't told me. There had to be something; there was always something.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

BY JUDITH RAPHAEL BUCKRICH

It is hard not to jump to poignant conclusions about the fact that Turner's last work was an examination of eternal life, but in fact immortality was an issue he had dealt with in many works. Still there is a sadness about the tone of this work that is new, as is the love that the man has had towards the woman, as he tells of their long and agonising lives. Lives that had begun with wealth and beauty. This in itself is novel for a work by Turner whose male protagonists have often been orphaned or deserted and traumatised and then had to struggle to make of themselves what they could. This is a story of a personal paradise turned to hell by greed and lack of thought.

"It seems incredible that this obvious outcome of our condition had not occurred to us. We had seen ourselves wheeling down the years in a sort of endless laughing carnival, the glittering envy of all, with never a thought of the wrinkling and encroaching frailty of those about us or what their reaction to our eternal youth might be."

In a way one could stretch the point and see Turner in these poor lost people who have traded their souls for dust. There is something of Dorian Grey here, except that the cruelty is not done by them, but in the end is done to them. After all Turner did have, by his own admission, so many regrets for what he'd done and not done in intimate relationships, all of which he kept separate from his various lives as a respectable writer, critic and friend.

That Turner could write about these feelings is a sign that he was still changing at eighty, that he was having feelings that he'd never felt before, or at least never written about before. One can only stand in awe of the eighty year old changing as the world turned, never standing still, straining for ever new understanding.

Eternity and love and prejudice and decency and superstition, all things that Turner dealt with, wrote about, felt in his bones, and stretched himself to take in and hold in each character in various portion. And all the characters are Turner. For me this last work had the makings of another breakthrough, and like anyone else reading the pages that he managed to complete, I can only see the shadow of what was yet to be written and be utterly frustrated that I will never get to read the rest.

* * * *

Judith Raphael Buckrich has written a biography of George Turner and a

history of St Kilda Road, Melbourne's Grand Boulevard. She co-edited the first Australian women's anthology of science fiction and fantasy, *She's Fantastical*, which was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award, and has continued to teach and write feature articles on cultural affairs. Her next major project is a history of Collins Street.

She is the Melbourne president of International PEN.

* * * *

AFTERWORD BY BRUCE GILLESPIE

"And Now Doth Time Waste Me" stops at novella length, but obviously George Turner was heading towards a novel-length manuscript when he died in June 1997. Why couldn't some ambitious writer try to finish it?

The simple answer is that George left no notes to work from. That's not only because he found handwriting extremely difficult after suffering his first major stroke in 1993. He also left no notes for his earlier, as-yet-unpublished novel. That's why he was so distressed to find, after recovering from the 1993 stroke, that he could not remember what he had planned for that novel's second half. He had to reconstruct it from scratch.

I can't remember George ever describing his working methods in print, but he did describe them in person to some of us from time to time.

The beginning of each novel usually took the form of a short story. In his literary estate is a short-story version called "The Wasting Time", different enough from this novella version to be interesting to scholars, but not quite self-contained. Many short stories that later grew into novels can be found in his collection *A Pursuit of Miracles* (Aphelion, 1990).

After writing the short-story seed of his book, often George would throw it away and start again from the beginning. The impression I had from George is that he planned a major part of each novel at that point. He kept the plan in his head. The second draft would be quite long, but George often spoke of getting stuck at the 20,000-word mark.

Each time George became stuck in a novel, he threw away everything he had done and would start again at the beginning. Usually he would write most of the novel during the third draft. Then despair would set in. He would turn up at social gatherings, telling us, "I just can't get the ending to this

book. I don't know whether I'll ever finish it".

George didn't like writing short stories because he felt the form gave him little scope to develop his characters. He relished the freedom that the 100,000-word novel gave him. In the central sections of a novel he could stretch his characters to their limit. That always left him with the problem: what to do with them at the end? How do you give a conclusion to what is really an ongoing drama?

As we know, George always finished a novel, even if it took him six months of waiting around before he could do it. The exception is "And Now Doth Time Waste Me". It is the only Turner novel that tells us its end at its beginning. When death forced the abrupt breaking off of this narrative, it would seem to have been flowing inevitably to that ending-in-the-beginning.

Do you believe this? I don't. Some brilliant ploy would have occurred to George, or probably had done so already. The ending would turn out to be far more ambiguous than it seems. Or George would have gone back to the beginning to change it to fit the second half of the novel. That's why the version you have just read is so exciting; the reader feels that George still holds most of his cards close to his chest, and has revealed only one or two of them.

George would have loved the idea of keeping everybody guessing long after he had left the party. But it would be interesting to hear writers' guesses at what George Turner planned for the second half of his last piece of fiction.

* * * *

Bruce Gillespie, who is George Turner's Literary Executor, is a Melbourne-based freelance editor and writer who has published *SF Commentary* since 1969 and *The Metaphysical Review* since 1984. Many of George's articles and reviews appeared in these magazines. As a member of the Norstrilia Press partnership, Bruce published George Turner's *The View from the Edge* and *In the Heart or in the Head*.

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* * * *

JETSAM

KERRY GREENWOOD

Kerry Greenwood has written a number of plays and has worked as a folk-singer, factory hand, director, producer, translator, costume-maker, cook, and also qualified as a solicitor. She works part time for Victoria Legal Aid as an advocate in Magistrates' Courts and in her spare time is currently working on several projects which include the tenth book in the Phryne Fisher series; *Death Before Wicket*, *Out of the Black Land*, a novel about Ancient Egypt; and *Scathe*, the next novel in a young adult series.

The poignant and resonant story that follows is about a special gift from the sea, and the awakening of an eternal myth in the near future...

* * * *

The water carried him effortlessly up out of the shipping channel and deposited him at my feet, like a hunting dog laying down a slain animal; neatly, gently, and smugly pleased with itself; retreating in lapping ripples, leaving the prey enlaced with sunset coloured foam, iridescent with salty bubbles.

A man. A naked young man, bruised by rocks, his skin pale and his hair as lank as seaweed and brown as kelp. He was not breathing.

One hand lay curled across his breast as if cradling his heart. The other lay upturned on the sand, relaxed and empty.

I dropped my Notebook and my knapsack and knelt beside him, rolled him over, and began artificial respiration. His muscles were cold and flabby under my fingers, chilling my hands. I expect that he did not notice, but I could feel the scrape and slice of sand in his grazes, and I winced for him as I pounded air into the sodden lungs. Water trickled from his mouth, then gushed. There was still no sign of life. I turned him over, cleared his mouth and breathed into it, laying the palm of my hand on his chest. I could not detect a heartbeat. He seemed colder than any stone. I heard my heart pound wildly. My own breath scraped in my ears.

The sun had gone down. It was darkening by the minute. It was

deadly quiet, except for the thud of the sea. No people or even dogs had passed me. I could not remember having heard a boat or a plane. Not even the Securicor helicopter was flying in this weather.

I bent to breathe again, forcing my warm air into his cold mouth. His lips were cold, like the tritons' I had kissed as a child. He was the supporter in a fountain, poor merman. The water had worn his face away. I had kissed a triton then, and I was kissing a triton now.

My hand felt for his heart, my own lungs were bursting, a red mist was clothing the beach as in a cloud. Another breath, pause, another. I felt the chest rise and fall mechanically, then he coughed, twitched, and took a breath of his own. His heart began to beat. I shoved him over on to his side and he choked on seawater, blinked, and lifted one hand clumsily to wipe his face.

His hands began to bleed.

I grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him away from the sea, in case he was a suicide and might ruin all my hard work. The wind began to howl. Sand scrubbed speech from my mouth.

"Come!" I yelled, pulling at his arm, hauling my pack by the straps. The gale began to tear the clouds apart. I could not carry him and the knapsack and cloak, so I released him gently and gathered my gear. I could find the castaway in the dark, but not my own gear.

"Wait!" I screamed over the wind and ran to the cliff, where I had found a cave on previous expeditions. Rain began to fall in stinging icy drops. He was crawling when I got back to him, having left my baggage in the cave. I dragged his arm over my shoulder and we staggered forward in the dark, bent double. We stumbled through the soft sand, falling often, until we fetched up against hard stone. I took hold of his hands and placed them on the rough stairs.

"Three steps, then a flat bit, then seven steps." He leaned against the step, panting and coughing. I shook his shoulder, pointing upward. "You'll have to crawl!" I shrieked above the storm, and a gull shrilled back at me. I saw him nod, and he began to crawl. It was a cruel journey. I heard him sob as his mistreated hands impacted against the rock. Slowly, painfully, we manoeuvred ourselves up the stairs and into the cave, where my castaway rolled to the floor and lay still.

Rain was pouring down, drumming like a hundred armies. I crawled,

swearing, and fell over him. Listened at his mouth; he was still breathing. I felt for the pack, tore it open, and scrabbled for a match. I lit one. It burned blue and yellow, casting leaping shadows.

I set fire to my heap of driftwood which I kept ready laid here, and it spat salt as it burned high and welcome. Light flared, grotesque and uncertain. The cave was perhaps thirty metres long — it might have gone right back into the hill, seamed like a rabbit warren — and there was a fresh water soak, where the rain seeped down into a natural catchment in the rock. I had found various signs that other people knew of it — the occasional lost thong, used condoms, beer can rip-tops, syringes and melted fishing line — but I had never met anyone there. The hearth had been in use for years and was thick with old charcoal, so that once well lit it would burn all night. I watched it until my hands thawed enough to be useful and then disembowelled my knapsack for aids to gracious living.

I had not expected to be spending the night out. I had expected to find a nice place to read. I had a Notebook with Simmond's Ethical Choices in Law, nastily entitled by one of my colleagues Are UneM human? which I was supposed to have read, and the recently-recovered poems of Ovidius Publius Naso in Gaetic, which had been translated by three different people; I wanted to compare them to the known rhythms of *Metamorphoses*, my favourite work. Flexing my fingers, I caught myself thinking that Ovid would have recognized this situation. Either a god had come to a mortal and I was about to be overwhelmed by a swan or a shower of gold, or a princess had rescued Odysseus from the ocean. Perhaps my young man, also, was trying to get home.

Everyone has an Ithaca.

I had provided myself with my thick cloak and a blanket. Since the ice-caps had calved and the sea had risen, places which were land were now water, and the climate was chancy. Melbourne had been struck, of late, with weather which could range from typhoon to heatwave in the course of a day. On the Net — the only uncensored words in the world — people were saying that the planet was trying to obliterate us: the Gaia hypothesis. It might be true. The goddess might be ridding herself of inconvenient, destructive humans in the way which large organic systems work: slowly, but very thoroughly.

Black poppies bloomed now on the ice-sheet. I had seen digitalized images of the sable blooms on snow.

I had also packed a picnic. I had some rather battered apples — real

apples, grown on a real tree, not the force-ripened perfection of organic engineering, all wax and polystyrene — coffee bags and a billy, cup, plate and spoon, a lightstick, some matches, a Notebook PC and a cake of chocolate. Coffee and chocolate would have made me a target in most places. Since Brazil had been struck by Arzulie Fever no beans had been exported as far as Australia, because no-one knew how the fever was transmitted. The crops in Africa supplied the High Ones, who lived in their towers in New York and Berlin and felt no lack. Net said that they even had tobacco and heroin. But there was a lot of gossip on Net and the best cigars had gone down with Cuba, under the sea with Fidel. It was probably insane for me to have taken such treasures out of my secure housing. But I had felt the walls closing in, needed to get out into something which wasn't at a remove; real waves, not electronic ones. Real salt, not packet. Real danger, not imagined.

I wondered if my captive had also come out to surf the wild edge.

If so, he had been dumped.

I caught some water from the soak and balanced a pot on the coals, steeping my coffee bags. I went to my triton and found him asleep with his head pillowed on a rock. I hoped that he hadn't died of cold and hauled him onto the soft white sand in front of the fire, laying him on his side and wrapping him in blanket and cloak. He murmured something, then subsided again.

Outside the solid cliff, the wind howled and scrabbled, tearing at the rock, and the waves lashed. It was so dark that I felt my way back to the fire like a blind woman. No hunting packs of bandits tonight; not even they were cruising for prey in such weather.

I settled myself in the sand and took off my waterproof coat, unlaced my boots and wrung out my long hair. It was not warm enough yet to remove more clothes. I dried my face on the driest part of my shirt. I cupped both hands around the coffee and savoured it; bitter with aromatic oils, delightful, unfamiliar.

The merman's body steamed as it dried. Salt caked and formed swirling patterns on his skin. I used a little of the warming water to wash his face, dabbing it dry with the shirt. The radiant heat of the fire was sucking the sea out of him; he lay lapped in blue flame. His hands, as I took them in my own, felt less limp and sodden. He was becoming alive again. Cheered by this, I cut up the apples to stew in fresh water as they were too battered to eat whole. The cave began to smell less of salt and seaweed and more

of cooking and humanity.

As his hair dried, it fluffed into curls as brown as a chestnut horse. He moved a little, and I turned his back to the fire to warm his other side. His body was marked and blotched, but in line as pure as marble. His back was long and straight, the shoulder-blades prominent, the buttocks square, the legs long and lightly muscled. I wondered what had brought him into the clutch of the sea, so young and delightful a man.

I felt over the warming body for broken bones, wanting an excuse to touch him. The feet were cut and bruised, but not fractured, and all the long bones, the pelvis and rib cage and spine were in their correct places. The skull was intact except for a slightly soggy patch over the temple where a big bruise was spreading. A blow from a sharpish implement, perhaps a ball pein hammer or a boathook. I plastered my wet handkerchief over it — handkerchiefs were one of my affectations, like real silk underwear. Then I saw, when I examined his hands, a purple bruise over both knuckles. The skin had broken. Either he had struck out with both hands, or he had been struck with a heavy object in order to loosen his grip on something — the side of a boat, perhaps?

He had fallen no distance, then. There were no impact injuries. He must have fallen onto something soft, or into the sea. Flotsam: that which is found floating after a wreck. Jetsam: that which is thrown deliberately from a boat. He was jetsam.

He had no gang insignia on his wrist, where they are always marked. There were no calluses on his hands, no marks of trade at all. He had not spoken, so I could not judge accent or caste. He might merely be an UneM, drifting, picking up a little work here, a little theft there; not on anyone's database, the children of those who never worked, grandchildren of those who worked in factories, dug coal, drove trucks, all things done now by matter transfer and machine. His youth seemed to support that. However he had not the hands of one who had used a shovel or stood at a machine. His arms bore no tracks of needle use. His face bore no traces of masking paint which the Wanderers used, those priests of their strange religion. He had not been castrated like the Gate people or lobotomized like the Fools. Both his head and his genitalia were intact. He had no electronic temple tag for the Game headset, which plugged the user straight into the Mind of the Machine. He had no piercings such as prostitutes, Joy Boys, Pretty Ones always affected. Even his ears were untouched.

He was a puzzle. A naked, beautiful enigma. He snuggled deeper into the coverings and began to shiver. This was odd. His skin was hot under

my fingers. I found the Notebook and accessed medical information. "Hypothermia," it replied. "A condition which produces violent shuddering as the patient begins to get warm. The shuddering is an attempt by the body to generate heat. Subject should be wrapped in blankets or preferably lowered into a bath. The water temperature ..." I shut it off. He was already wrapped in all the blankets I had and the fire was evidently not a sufficient source of heat.

That left me. My body was warm. His shuddering shook him head to foot. Having gone this far, I would have to go further. No-one had touched me — I had touched no-one — for a long time. Who was it said, "If you save someone's life you are then responsible for him?" A Chinese source, I was sure.

I was afraid, but I insinuated myself into the cloak, took his head on my breast and wrapped my arms around him. His hands were icy on my flesh. Then I shivered too; he was still as cold as stone, but soon our heats began to equalise. He relaxed all of a piece like a puppy and opened his eyes.

Brown eyes like pebbles, reddened by the sea. They flicked over my face, registered that I was a stranger, widened, then examined the cave, the fire, and my breast on which he was reclining. The eyelids drooped and a voice croaked, "Who are you?"

"I am a student," I lied. I did not want to disclose my professional status to him. I am worth kidnapping, and I have many enemies. I am one of the State's Enforcers, a Judge of the High Court. People don't like me. I may not be able to order them killed, but I can order them frozen for years. Down in the underworld, they call me the Stealer of Time. "My name is Eleanor."

"Eleanor," said the voice, and trailed off. I reached out of our cocoon and poured him some coffee. He drank it greedily, carefully, and his throat cleared. I asked quietly, "Who are you?"

He jerked as if he had been connected to the Tesla grid and dropped the empty mug. His eyes stared beseechingly into mine and I stroked and soothed the body back into my embrace. He shuddered violently.

"Never mind," I said as gently as I could. "It doesn't matter. I shall call you my merman, because you came out of the sea."

"I can't remember!" he wailed. "I can't remember anything!"

His voice was almost unaccented, educated, and not what I was expecting.

“Never mind,” I soothed. “It will come back to you. You have had a blow on the head. Have some stewed apples.”

He ate as bidden but was still wary. I left him and went to the mouth of the cave to listen to the storm. It had blown into a real gale. I could not see properly through the curtains of rain and windblown sand, but there seemed to be lights and movement on the shore. Who could be there? Much better not to know. Smugglers, perhaps. A siren was wailing out to sea.

Altogether as desolate a night as I had ever seen, and colder than the grave.

The wall of the cliff concealed the entrance. No-one could find us if they did not know that the cave was there. The fire gave little smoke and that would never be noticed in this storm. I sighed with relief, which was odd, because my triton could easily be a criminal, and those out in the wind my own officers seeking him for good reason. I tried to remember what operations I had authorized for tonight. I had stripped myself of all my devices before leaving my apartment because I did not want to be called in; just for a few hours I wanted to give myself the illusion of freedom. No mobile, no aural plug. No laptop. I had even left my Quatch at home, my computer-watch which advised me of the law and the statutes: if I made a misstatement, it beeped and referred me to the correct wording. This morning I had felt that one more beep and I would crush it under my heel, watch the microcircuitry melt and fracture, bleeding information stored on atoms as I watched, vengefully pleased. I racked my memory. What was there? Nothing out this way. Tonight was the raid on the shooting gallery on King Street, where someone was selling super-speed, called “Racy”, which had driven five UneM and a city councillor’s son irretrievably insane over the past week. The councillor’s son mattered, and his father could afford to buy law. No helicopters and no boats. Therefore they were probably not my enforcers, and I did not want to attract any attention from anyone else. The last kidnapping attempt had only been foiled when one of the silent men who slunk into my office had tripped an alarm and the gas-delivery system had put all of us to sleep. I had a three day headache out of that, although I was grateful. I did not want to think about what they intended to do to me before they allowed me to die. For I was very good at my job. I was their enemy. This beautiful boy might be the bait in a trap. Research would have shown that I was mainly heterosexual, liked young men, and had no current partner since Richard had discovered a deep desire for a home and a

family and had gone off to seek for the right womb in which to plant his seed.

He had apparently found her, too, in a rural community where they still believed in childbirth. The thought of him hurt suddenly and I flinched. Though Richard would never have been discovered in an equivocal situation like this. He never moved without his mobile and he was permanently tagged with a Situchip, which could locate anyone, anywhere.

I had watched, one night, electronically, as he moved across the city and into someone else's bed. I had been so affected by his desertion that I had only just avoided Compulsory Counselling, which the State decreed for any operative who seemed to be less than happy and well adjusted. I had taken a huge risk by leaving all my electronic devices at home and going out electronically naked and undetectable into the night.

I probably should leave the boy here with the blanket, after all, he was safe and warm, and walk to the nearest Securicor officer. She would arrange transport home. But if I left him here I would never find out who he was.

And I did not want to give him away. He was mine. He had come to my feet out of the sea, and I had given him back his life.

I returned to the fire. He was sitting up, examining his bruises.

"Move over," I said, sitting down beside him with my cold feet to the fire. "I'm frozen."

"So am I," his voice was quiet. "The heat is gone from me."

I leaned into the tangle of wrappings and began to thaw my hands. He laid one palm over mine and laced our fingers together. There was blood on his hands and I had been trained from childhood to avoid the contamination of someone else's blood. But I could not account for my lack of fear. I suddenly smelt wine, heard someone laughing.

"Someone hit you," I observed, shaken. No-one had touched me in kindness for a long time. "Was there a fight?"

"I ... I was clinging to the prow of a boat ... and someone ... yes, he hit me with a boathook to make me let go ... and I fell... I fell into the sea ..."

"Why were you there?"

“I don’t remember ...”

The lining of the cloak was silky against my skin as I removed my wet clothes and joined my triton. He wreathed himself around me, thrust his head against my breast and lay there, holding tight, sobbing with release or frustration. I felt his tears hot and wet on my shoulder.

This was unexpected. I clutched him close to prevent him from sliding into my lap. I began to kiss him as one would a child, gently, wiping away tears, when suddenly he turned his head and his mouth opened surprisingly under mine, warm and wet and salty with tears and sea water, and we kissed passionately as though we had known and desired each other for years. His hands searched my chest, seeking the nipples, and squeezed hard enough to make me gasp, though not with pain. I lay under him in the silky wrappings, my thighs pillowing his against the sandy floor, while the wise hands caressed me and I stroked him and the unreadable eyes dropped tears onto my face. I heard the voices which humans create from the patternless wind and ocean. “Evoe! Evoe!” they cried, dancing Greek maenads from before history.

With a swift, curiously final movement he was inside me; I did not feel the usual resistance of my flesh. His skin was fiery now, his breath came fast; I felt all my internal muscles gather and clutch and the delicious glow suffuse me, so lovely that I thought I might die; to burn and bloom and burn again.

He was strong in his pain, vigorous, young. He was deep inside me, but I felt no pain. I thrust my hips up, wanting him deeper, deeper. When I felt his climax I locked him tight against me lest any of his love be lost. He stretched out along me, legs aligned, his head on my shoulder, sighing, relaxing, at peace. I had never had such loving. I was bruised and fingermarked and astonished to the depths of my soul.

A hard piece of rock was making itself felt under my left hip. I moved a little, and he withdrew from me, and lay beside me, kissing my shoulder absentmindedly and tenderly.

“I have remembered my name,” he said softly, as we lay together to wait out the storm. I was so drowsy that I could not keep my eyes open.

“What is your name?” I asked, fitting my head into the curve of his shoulder as though I had been lying with him all of my life.

“Dion...” was all I heard as I was gathered into the deepest and most satisfying sleep of my life.

When I awoke in the morning the storm was gone. So, of course, was he.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I was considering the advent of the gods to humans, as expressed in ancient Greek legend. The more rational the world becomes — and I am envisaging a very rational, very ordered and strict world where all humans are monitored most of the time by machines — the more likely it is that some upwelling of the irrational will happen. The essence of the unreasoning forces of nature and the unconscious is Dionysus, the god of wine and madness. He came to Ariadne when she was deserted by Theseus on Naxos, and the vases all show a woman collapsed on the sand with a man bending over her — in fact any depiction of this scene almost has to be Ariadne on Naxos. I thought it would be interesting to reverse the roles, something I frequently do with my Greek works in order to examine the legend afresh. So the woman finds Dionysus in the sand. And it all developed from there.

— *Kerry Greenwood*

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PRELUDE TO A NOCTURNE

ROWENA CORY LINDQUIST

Rowena Cory Lindquist lives in Brisbane with her husband and six children. Writing as Cory Daniells she has sold a dark fantasy trilogy, *The Last T'En*, to Transworld Australia and Bantam in the USA. The first book, *Broken Vows*, will be released in 1999. When writing science fiction and fantasy Rowena is interested in exploring human nature under extreme circumstances and the possible paths of future society.

She makes good on that claim in “Prelude to a Nocturne”, a rigorous exploration of a possible future — a future we can only hope will not come to pass.

* * * *

The Mercedes rocked alarmingly. Senator Julia Ashton clutched the arm support. Could the protesters tip it over? She didn't want to find out. A heavier vehicle would have withstood this abuse.

Julia gritted her teeth as the vehicle dropped back on its wheels. This had to be wreaking havoc with the suspension. The impact drove her sister sharply upwards. With minimum headroom Camille thumped her skull on the roof of the Mercedes.

“Christ, Julia. What's wrong with these people?” she muttered. “We're on our way to our parents' funeral for god sake!”

But Julia knew that was why the protesters had chosen this time and place to air their views. The waiting media would be only too willing to broadcast the event nationally.

“Just another block —”

“They'll have us over in another minute!” Camille hissed as the car tilted again. She braced herself in the cramped quarters.

Julia ground her teeth, wedging herself into position, feet planted against the back of the front seat. If it hadn't been for the belt she would

have slid down the leather upholstery and collided with her sister. Better that, than if their positions were reversed.

Her sister was a Nocturne, a full grown woman and Camille was not what you'd call slender. One of her lovers had likened her to last century's film actress Sophia Loren — a snippet of information Julia could have done without. She never understood why Camille had to flaunt her lovers. Julia found it distasteful. She didn't want to share confidences of a sexual nature, wasn't interested in Camille's pregnancies, or the births of her nephews. It had been enough for her to fulfil her role as aunt to the boys.

Julia glanced down at her sister. Camille's voluptuous figure sharply defined their life choices. Not that Camille had had much choice! Julia shuddered to think what would have happened had she been just a few months older when Prelude became available.

She'd begun taking it just before her thirteenth birthday. Fifty years on, her body was still that of a slender, prepubescent child-woman.

But at fifteen poor Camille had been too physically mature to benefit from the treatment. Through a quirk of fate Julia had been one of the First Generation of Preluders.

Back then it had been a big decision. Their parents had given it due consideration. Competition for jobs was fierce so Julia would need the best qualifications possible. They were prepared to support her till she was twenty five or even thirty while she studied. It was ridiculous to suffer the distraction of puberty with menstruation and sexual awakening during these crucial years. It made sense to put it off till she got her degree, then she could begin her adult life.

This was the "Way to Go", her father had assured her — everyone who could afford it was doing it for their children. Her parents had exchanged glances. They'd pursued their careers and married late. Her mother had been forty by the time Camille was born. They could afford the best for their two beautiful daughters.

"But what about Camille?" young Julia had asked, only to see her parents shake their heads sadly. Obviously they were deeply disappointed.

Julia didn't feel sorry for her sister. In those days she'd thought Camille was a knock-out with her long shapely legs, her firm breasts. When they walked down the street together, adult men turned to stare at her sister. Camille loved the attention. In hushed whispers late one night she

had revealed the technical aspects of a tongue kiss to an admiring Julia.

It all sounded a bit grotesque to the twelve year old, but Julia envied her sister. When she'd asked Camille her opinion of Prelude the fifteen year old had shrugged. She was too busy discovering life to want to hold things up artificially. Julia thought she read pity in her sister's eyes.

Her parents wanted a decision, but Julia wasn't sure.

They'd been very understanding and had given her a month to think it over. She was on the cusp, if she wasn't careful it would be too late for her. At school the big question was — Who was on Prelude?

Those who couldn't for either financial reasons or because their bodies had matured early, became objects of ridicule. The boys' voices broke at the wrong moment, some developed acne. All of them discovered hair sprouting where their skin used to be smooth. The girls whispered in the toilets about menstruation — the embarrassment of being caught without a clean pair of knickers. Much to her parents' relief, Julia went to their family doctor and began her program of Prelude before it was too late.

Julia smiled grimly and tightened her hold on the hand rest, flexing her aching legs as she braced herself against the back of the front seat.

In those days the media was full of speculation about how society would benefit. Puberty during the early teens was a waste of time and energy. Prelude was going to change the world for the better. This generation, already dubbed the Preluders, had the time to concentrate on their studies before they took on the distractions of puberty and the responsibilities of adulthood.

But look where it had led — a society deeply divided. Today, Nocturnes were a resentful minority. Julia and her sister were the world in microcosm.

"Damn it, Julia!" Camille glared up at her. "I wasn't going to complain. But if this had been the Nocturne Mercedes instead of the little Prelude vehicle we wouldn't have been in this predicament. Trust you to be so bloody minded!"

Julia winced. It was true. She could have ordered the Nocturne merc with a Nocturne driver but no, she had to have the Prelude. It didn't matter which vehicle she chose, one of them would have been uncomfortable. Long stifled sibling rivalry had made her choose the Prelude car. Let

Camille look ridiculous in the dainty vehicle, rather than herself appear dwarfed when she exited the Nocturne car under the glare of media attention.

Their arrival together would emphasise the difference between Camille and herself, the same differences which drove the Nocturne protesters to strike out in frustration, tired of being discriminated against in a Prelude dominated world.

With a reverberating shudder the Mercedes dropped down onto four wheels and Julia leant forward. "Get us out of here, Raul."

Raul had been her driver for nearly seventeen years. He was second generation Prelude and devoted to her. She'd earned his esteem along with the media attention. She'd devoted the last fifty years to campaigning for Preluder rights.

Anachronistic mounted police forged through the protesters clearing a path. One of them indicated a side street and Raul swung the wheel of the silver merc.

"About time!" Camille hissed, straightening her knee-length black skirt.

Her sister wasn't usually so volatile. Julia hadn't expected their parents' death to upset her. After all, the pair had been over a hundred and they would take that camping trip across Australia. True they could have survived indefinitely with the Synthetic Growth Hormone. But what an existence!

When medical researchers came up with SGH, Nocturnes had embraced it. SGH helped their bodies repair and maintain their health. But as the Prelude joke went, who wanted to be sixty for fifty years? More and more Nocturnes were living into their hundred and twenties, still healthy, still sprightly but *old!*

Julia sighed. Her parents had gone onto SGH in their late sixties. Her mother had just had her hundred and third birthday and her father was a vigorous hundred and seven when he rolled the four wheel drive.

Without SGH they probably wouldn't have lasted past seventy.

Julia shivered, even Camille was getting old.

She cast a swift glance to her sister, sixty five next month and she didn't look a day over thirty. She was a voluptuous, full-blown woman but society's idea of beauty had changed. Camille's curves were regarded as tacky, over-blown.

"Jason and Marcus have opted not to come off Prelude," Camille announced abruptly.

Suddenly her sister's mood made sense. Only a small percentage of Preluders chose to stop the drug and go through puberty, even the phrase raised a few smirks nowadays. If a Preluder took this option, it was done out of the public eye. Puberty was a "dirty" word. Then there was the risk associated with it. Kick-starting puberty could trigger cancers, their rapid growth accelerated by the drugs.

A Preluder had to have the courage of their convictions to give up their privileged life, risk their health and all for what? Existence as a Nocturne?

Julia tried to be tactful. "Very few people choose to come off it. Your sons are second generation Preluders —"

"They're modelling themselves on you!" Camille twisted to face Julia, her features contorted with the force of her emotion. "You're high profile First Generation. Everyone's watching you and Oliver to see what the pair of you will do!"

Her partner was in China advising on Preluder policy. Oliver regarded his work as care-taking the world's future. It was on his advice that China made it illegal to come off Prelude without Government approval. The Chinese Government had devised a selective breeding program to halt its rampant population growth.

She was glad now she'd told him his physical presence was not needed at the funeral.

But Camille was right. This year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the release of Prelude. Julia's generation were the guinea pigs. The youngest of the medical researchers who had developed Prelude were now sprightly octogenarians. Current opinion held that the ovaries and testes would eventually atrophy. There would come a time when going off the drug and kick-starting puberty wouldn't be an option.

This was Julia's dilemma. If she didn't go off Prelude soon and

kick-start her own puberty there was a good chance her body would never be able to mature — childless, prepubescent forever.

Was that so bad?

The media was full of debate as the First Generation of Preluders faced this question. Because of her high profile position within the Prelude Political Party a lot rode on Julia's decision.

The Mercedes slowed. They were still in the maze of Sydney side streets.

“What now?” Julia muttered. “I can't be late for the funeral.” She checked her watch. “I've got a three o'clock with the Indian Delegation —”

“Can't you think of anyone but yourself?” Camille hissed.

Fury flowered within Julia. “I've spent my whole life working to improve society. What have you done?”

Camille gaped.

The Mercedes stopped and Raul wound his window down as a police officer walked to the car bent down and shot him through the head. Pulpy, pale brains sprayed across the interior of the car. The breath froze in Julia's throat. She wanted to scream but she couldn't move as the gun, an antique fire arm with its thick silencer turned towards her.

Camille's shrill scream cleaved her skull like a laser.

“Out.”

Had the police officer — strike that — terrorist told her to get out? Julia blinked.

“I said out, or I'll silence your sister permanently.”

But Camille was already silent. The single sharp scream had been the only sound to escape her. She sat absolutely still, her dark eyes huge.

“Don't, Julia,” she pleaded. “It's a terrorist kidnapping!”

The muzzle swung towards Camille.

“Okay. I’m moving.” Julia was surprised by the calm tone of her voice. “I suppose the protesters and the police who directed us down here are all in on this —”

“Shut up. In the van.”

The gun flicked in the direction of a large van. Julia opened her door and climbed out, surprised to find that she could walk unaided. She felt as if she was floating above the ground. Every sound and smell was incredibly intense. She would never forget this grimy back street with its graffiti and its ugly, discarded Nocturne furniture.

Fastidiously, she brushed Raul’s brains off her svelte black gown. Julia allowed herself one regret. She had decided against ordering a body guard escort because it was her parents’ private funeral, not a state funeral and she’d wanted to present a restrained, sympathetic figure to the media.

Too bad.

The terrorist said something, shoving her forward as he darted into the car to drag Camille out. Her sister straightened with dignity coming to her full height. She glared at the man, equal parts fury and fear igniting her features.

“Leave her,” Julia told him. “I won’t be any trouble.”

He uttered one harsh bark of laughter. “You won’t be any trouble anyway. Brat!”

She recognised the tone. The crudity named him for what he was, a Nocturne bully, a male who had refused Prelude. His type wanted to be bigger, stronger than the majority. They were the natural bullies of the pack. Nazis, KKK, or Nocturne Special Forces, only the names and places changed. As far as Julia was concerned society would be better off without them.

She met her sister’s eyes.

“I’m fine,” Camille said, answering Julia’s unasked question. Her gaze flew to the van and Julia turned to see the rear door swing open. Someone waited for them. It was only a couple of steps to the vehicle and incarceration. She considered her options.

Running would be useless. Her small body was no match for the

man's, even Camille was outclassed. Running would only force him to drag her screaming and kicking. If she was going to die, she would at least go with dignity.

Fear curled in her belly, intimate as a lover.

Ignoring it, she walked over and stepped up into the dark entrance. A hand shoved her, sent her staggering forward into the darkness, blinded, out of control. A wave of helplessness engulfed her. She hated it.

Someone grabbed her, lifted her into a seat. It was a Nocturne chair, too large for her small frame. If they meant to intimidate her they were not subtle.

Camille and her escort entered. The door swung shut, pitching them into inky darkness. She could see nothing but the squirming squiggles produced by her straining eyes.

Julia heard Camille gasp as her sister landed in the seat beside her. The van lurched, moving off rapidly. It took one sharp turn, then another. In the darkness with the sickly taste of fear on her tongue, Julia soon lost all sense of direction.

"Where are you taking us?" she asked.

No answer.

Julia felt Camille's hand on her arm and their fingers linked instinctively, one small hand inside the larger.

"How touching!" the same male Nocturne sneered.

When she'd entered the van someone had thrown her into this seat. That meant there were at least two Nocturnes and a driver. Julia did not like the odds.

Camille's fingers tightened.

Julia realised their captors had to be wearing night-vision visors because they could see the linked hands.

"You understand I will be missed almost immediately," Julia told them. She'd been negotiating for fifty years. It was second nature — find out what people wanted, then find out what they are willing to settle for. "The

funeral is due to start in around seven minutes.”

“We’re counting on it.”

Camille’s fingers flexed.

A bank of screens suddenly flickered to life, defining the van, giving breadth and height to its interior and illuminating three visor-faced Nocturnes.

The odds against her went up by one.

But Julia focused on the screens. They were there for a reason. To negotiate she had to understand the opponent’s position.

She recognised the church, a restored sandstone edifice where her parents had married seventy years ago. She had convinced Camille they should hold the double funeral there, knowing how the public would appreciate this gesture. Calculating the effect of her actions on her public image was second nature.

A babble of voices came from the screens. The major networks were reporting the protest, citing it as the reason for her late arrival. Quickly scanning the van’s interior by the dim light Julia noted two male and one female Nocturne, no Preluders. Past experience told her the terrorists had enough technical equipment to edit and broadcast.

They were well set up terrorists who knew her itinerary, but that wasn’t hard to discover. They’d killed Raul without hesitation. Fanatics. Julia hated fanatics. You couldn’t reason with someone who was ready to die for their cause.

But she had to try.

“Okay,” Julia slipped her hand from her sister’s. “You obviously have this well organised. You want to make a media splash. What do you want from me?”

By the glow of the screens she saw the bulky Nocturne female twist in the seat to face her. The woman’s lower face was revealed but her features from her cheekbones up were covered by the NV visor. The hard line of her mouth and jaw gave Julia no reason to hope.

“Simple. You’re going to recant and announce you are ready to take

the Big Step. We'll broadcast it from the van."

Negate her life's work? An inelegant snort escaped Julia.

The woman sprang to her feet like a puppet on a string. Jerkily, she strode across to tower over Julia. Feet spread to compensate for the movement of the van she laid down the law. "You're going to say you realise you've wasted your life as a Preluder, that you want to 'grow up' before it's too late."

Hatred laced the woman's voice, adding a hard edge to the emotive terms she used. Instinctively, Julia noted her own body's reaction as her heart speeded up, her mouth went dry. She took slow breaths and stared up at the woman. In one side of her visor the screens were reflected, dancing on the NV's surface in distorted miniature.

These people had already killed once. The fear in her gut told Julia they would kill her if they had to. But for now they wanted her cooperation with their mad scheme. Why should she give the Nocturne extremist party the political mileage by publicly recanting?

"Kill me now. I won't do it."

A groan escaped Camille.

"Please, Julia," she whispered. "I've got family. What about my boys? What would Oliver say?"

"Oliver would applaud. He despises bullies." Julia knew it was true. That was what she admired in her partner. He didn't need hormonally enhanced muscles to make him a "man".

"Very touching, but there are no media reporters here to bolster your image, Senator." The woman radiated scorn. "And we're not impressed. Surely life as a Nocturne is preferable to death? Think about it."

She returned to the bank of screens, asked something of the male who was fiddling with the equipment then went back to observing the screens.

Think about it?

The equipment was already set up to record her "change of heart" message. It went against everything she was. She would not do it.

News flash!

Julia jumped, her attention focusing on one particular screen amid the others.

A Prelude reporter appeared, speaking with the focused intensity of a media hound relaying bad news. The woman could hardly contain her delight. It made Julia's stomach revolt but she had no illusions about her relationship with the media. They were the parasites and she was the host, yet she couldn't survive without them. They were mutually dependent.

"Senator Julia Ashton's silver Mercedes has been found containing the dead body of her long time driver, Raul Ortega. At this point the police are treating the circumstances as suspicious."

Camille swore succinctly. Julia felt a smile tug at her lips. Suspicious was an understatement.

As the competing networks broke into a feeding frenzy of speculation footage of the alley appeared with the Mercedes cordoned off. A barrage of repetitive, competitive commentary flowed from the screens.

Julia focused on the female reporter, zeroing in on her voice amid the others.

"... as yet no ransom demand has been made, no note found. Grave fears are held for the Senator's safety."

A flash of irritation fired Julia. She was personal advisor to the President. She had better things to do than remain a captive of this Nocturne terrorist group. Death was not on her itinerary.

Camille leant closer, dropping her voice. "Give them what they want, Julia. Is recanting so bad?"

"What, negate my life's work so they can kill us sooner?"

By the light of the flickering screens Julia saw Camille's shocked face. Remorse hit her. It wasn't her sister's fault. Camille didn't deserve to die because she happened to be riding in the same vehicle when the terrorists struck.

A worm of doubt crawled through Julia's gut, forcing unwelcome self

doubt. Could she condemn her sister to death because of her principles when she just might be able to negotiate safe passage for Camille? But that would mean giving the terrorists what they wanted. Her “voluntary” live broadcast was her only bargaining chip.

The Big Step — her body bastardised by hormones, coarsened. The idea made her physically ill.

Julia took deep breaths. Now was not the time to think emotionally.

Personal feelings aside, if she were to recant it would negate her life’s work. She honestly believed Prelude had saved the world from its self indulgent downward spiral of mindless procreation.

Quality of life, not quantity!

Fear and frustration flooded her, overwhelmed her senses till she felt strangely numb and distanced. Seven screens competed for her attention, lauding her part in changing society. She focused on the news reports.

“Enjoy it while you can,” the woman taunted cheerfully. “They’re already broadcasting your eulogy.”

With a sick lurch Julia realised the Nocturne was right. Because she was a public figure the networks would have had a eulogy prepared for her death. Simultaneously the screens bombarded Julia with edited, bite-sized portions of her life’s work. The words and images rushed over her.

“...early in the Post-Prelude years the First Generation battled discrimination. They could own property, take out a loan, move out of home and hold down a job but they couldn’t drive a car, or reach the high shelves at the supermarket. Everything was built for Nocturnes.

“On a lighter note there were no suitable clothes, pre-teen clothes just didn’t look right on a university student. Julia Ashton was educated, affluent, she had a voice and she saw a need.”

Julia watched old images of herself, different only in the style of clothing worn, travel across the screen. It was like watching someone else. She had no empathy for that righteous young woman who took on the world of Nocturnes in her prepubescent body.

“At nineteen Senator Ashton became active in the newly formed Prelude Political Party. They cited the Anti Discrimination laws to prove their

point, as one by one they gained equal access to things Nocturnes took for granted. The car manufacturers, clothing designers and music industry were quick to cater to a growing market of affluent Preluders.

“At uni, Preluders wrote their own plays and published their own newspaper, dealing with topics they cared about. The Arts flowered ...”

Julia smiled, those were the days! Being in the forefront of the movement was invigorating. She’d thrived on the slash and parry of debate in the coffee shops and late night uni parties. They’d argued Prelude philosophy, with those like poor Camille. It was around that time some smart, Prelude copy writer had coined the term Nocturne to define those big, sleepy creatures who had missed the boat.

At twenty five Julia had achieved her degree in political science. Her parents and Camille had urged her to come off Prelude but she was simply too busy to stop and give up two or three years to let her body mature. She couldn’t be bothered with the nuisance of acne, menstruation and sexual awakening, not when she was a “mover and a shaker” in the Prelude Political Party.

Camille’s intense voice recalled her. “Just give them what they want, Julia. Recant. Take the Big Step. You’ll have to do it some time soon. The latest theory is that the brain of a Preluder is in an immature state. They say Nocturne hormones trigger deeply buried mechanisms in the brain, like the urge co mate, to reproduce. You don’t know what you’re missing. You’ve never felt the rush of hormone induced desire —”

“For which I’m grateful!” Julia flicked her arm free of Camille’s hand, hardly able to contain her revulsion. If her sister was hoping to convince her to take the Big Step she was going about it the wrong way. “That sounds like some crack-pot Nocturne extremist theory to me!”

Camille subsided, but her body trembled with tension.

Angry and secretly frightened, Julia regretted her cutting comment. But she hated being pressured. The flickering screens captured her attention. Her eyes were drawn to track the moving images.

A Preluder male recalled her past, society’s past.

“...at the time Nocturnes who had missed the chance to go on Prelude were disparaging. They talked contemptuously of selfish, grandstanding children who demanded the rights of adults. There was a

great deal of irrational resentment.

“The entertainment industry catered to the Preluders, who wanted to see stories about themselves, their hopes and aspirations as portrayed by Preluder actors.

“Around this time it was noted that more and more First Generation Preluders were putting off the Big Step. They didn’t have time for puberty. They had a commitment to the next generation of Preluders. Nocturne talk shows dubbed it the Peter Pan Syndrome.”

Beside her Camille snorted rudely. Julia understood her sister’s position. Nocturnes like her who had been left behind had found themselves a dwindling minority.

She studied the screens. Even the single Nocturne station was reporting her life. Of course it was all slanted from the Nocturne point of view. According to them, she had been instrumental in creating modern society which slighted them at every turn.

Resentment burned in Julia.

Her life choices hadn’t been wrong. Once Prelude was available society took logical, inevitable steps and she’d been in the forefront, riding an invigorating, dizzying wave of innovation.

The same female reporter appeared in close-up to announce another development, “...revealed that the Palestinian Liberation Front have claimed responsibility for this kidnapping. Police have theorised this is a retaliatory strike in response to Oliver Ashton’s involvement with the Jewish Prelude Party’s Palestinian policies —”

Julia groaned. That was all they needed, more factions jumping on the bandwagon for publicity. What next, the Tibetan Underground?

“You’ve had fifty years of Prelude, Julia. Isn’t it time?” Camille pleaded. “Time for the Big Step?”

Julia glanced at her sister. Why did Camille persist in believing they could escape with their lives?

A Prelude reporter’s monologue broke her concentration.

“...in a few short years the First Generation of Preluders had

redefined fashion. The popular Prelude actors changed the concept of beauty. All over the world Preluders recreated society in their image, at least in the developed countries.

“In third world countries, people still bred at eighteen, were grandparents at thirty and died of old age at forty. Research was under way to make Prelude available to the masses.

“Julia Ashton’s political party was instrumental in persuading the government to subsidise the drug so that no-one missed out. Parents could rest assured that their offspring would have an equal chance to develop and study without the distraction of puberty.

“The first Generation Preluders who had opted for puberty at twenty five saw their children become Preluders ...”

Julia recalled her own irritation at the time. Camille had wept when her two boys began their Prelude years. She’d confided to Julia that she felt they were lost to her. With her usual common sense Julia had told Camille not to be selfish. Society had changed. As a parent Camille couldn’t hold her boys back. Who would willingly inflict Nocturnism on their children?

Some people did. Look at their captors! Julia glanced at the Nocturnes who were watching the screens, obviously pleased with the media attention the kidnapping had aroused.

If their parents had let them take Prelude would they have been misfits now? Julia felt indignant on their behalf. How could they have made an informed choice at eleven or twelve? They must have been denied access to Prelude during those crucial years. They were obviously taking their resentment out on her because she was a high profile Preluder, a symbol of the First Generation.

How cruel to inflict Nocturnism on an innocent child!

Many of the less tolerant Preluders couldn’t bear to be in the same room as big, brash Nocturnes. The Prelude joke went — How can you tell a Prelude from a Nocturne in the dark if neither speaks? Take a deep breath! Nocturnes smelt different. It was crude, but true.

Julia shuddered. Sometimes when she and Oliver entertained visiting Nocturne diplomats the differences were particularly evident. The Nocturnes looked so gauche amid the delicate Prelude furniture. But it was how they acted — the men with their loud deep voices, the women with their

heavy breasts and the way they looked at the opposite sex. Lust!

It sickened her.

She'd heard there were some Preluder females who liked Nocturne men and conversely some Nocturne women who preferred Preluder males. But normal Preluders found the huge, hairy bodies of the Nocturnes lacking aesthetically, to put it mildly.

As for sex, it was revolting. Julia had seen the tapes. On one occasion she had even viewed a specially staged act, but Nocturne sex left her cold. She and Oliver shared a pure love. This kind of "love" was a recurring theme of Prelude literature and art.

"You have to make a decision," Camille prodded.

Julia studied her sister's face.

"About kick starting puberty," Camille insisted. "If you don't do it soon, you might never be able to."

Julia stiffened. "My life choices are none of your business!"

"Unfortunately your life style has made it everyone's business. Everyone's waiting to see what Senator Ashton will do."

Julia grimaced with distaste. Camille was right. She and Oliver were only too aware of their position.

Only last week they'd made discreet enquiries about having their immature reproductive organs removed, force matured and a pair of designer, genetically perfect offspring incubated in the Artificial Uterus.

It moved the whole sordid business of physical maturation for the purpose of reproduction onto an academic plane.

Julia resented being forced into recanting when it was the last thing she wanted to do.

"I don't see what you people hope to achieve," she raised her voice over the babble of the media. "The police know I'm being held by terrorists. If I were to do a national broadcast and recant it would be obvious I was doing it under duress."

“Julia!” Camille hissed.

She ignored her sister. “It would have been more effective if you could have discredited me in some way, or blackmailed me into making a public statement. You killed Raul when you didn’t have to.” His name stuck in her throat. She wanted to gag but forced it back. “They’ll know I was coerced.”

“That’s the beauty of it.” The woman swivelled to face her. “He was killed for a purpose. His death is your Emotional Trigger. Our research has shown life choices are triggered by major events. We’ve planned every detail.

“When you saw Raul die you confronted your own mortality and you understood the significance of taking the Big Step. Your speech is already written.”

As she spoke she flicked a switch and Julia saw the prompter screen come to life in front of her. Words scrolled onwards, words they wanted her to speak, lies which would negate her life’s work.

She couldn’t do it.

Yet, she couldn’t abandon Camille. They were family, sisters separated by a trick of fate. If Camille had been younger than her instead of older, she would have gone on Prelude and they would have had a close friendship instead of this often stormy, often bitter relationship.

Time to negotiate, Julia decided. She had to bargain for her sister’s freedom. Camille couldn’t identify their captors. The terrorists had been careful to ensure their anonymity.

Of course it meant she had to offer to do the broadcast. A wave of nausea washed over Julia. She consoled herself with the thought that it wasn’t as if she was actually going to have to become a Nocturne.

“Time is up, Senator,” the woman said, coming to stand before them. She held the weapon. Julia didn’t remember it changing hands. The muzzle pointed firmly at Camille’s chest.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” Julia heard her voice. An audible sigh escaped her sister. “I’ll do this ... this broadcast, but I won’t do it until you let Camille go.”

The woman glanced to Camille then back to Julia. “Your sister is our

insurance.”

“I’ve said I’ll do it. I gave my word — “

“No. She’s going to swear you weren’t coerced.”

“What?”

The Nocturne woman leant past Julia, her voice dropping confidentially. “You see, we know where Jason and Marcus live, Camille. So I’m sure you’ll cooperate.”

A look of dawning horror spread across Camille’s face. She nodded numbly.

With a jolt Julia understood the ramifications. The terrorists meant to do worse than kill her. They meant to let her live with the consequences of her actions. If Camille swore she hadn’t been coerced and Julia insisted she had, the boys died. If she refused to continue with the Big Step once they released her, the boys died.

“Surely kidnapping me qualifies as coercion?” Julia could hardly speak. Fury closed her throat.

“We didn’t kidnap you. The Palestinian Liberation Front kidnapped you. The Nocturne Special Forces freed you. You’re going to be very grateful to the NSF.

“In the safety of our headquarters you had your revelation and insisted on making your broadcast about taking the Big Step. We’ve studied your profile, you’re prone to making grand gestures. People expect it of you.”

Julia swallowed with difficulty. Even if she were willing to sacrifice Jason and Marcus, her credibility would never survive a complete about-face. She would become an object of ridicule — a high profile First Generation Preluder who went national to recant, then did an about-face. The subject was too volatile. It was political suicide.

Yet, she could not bear to take the Big Step. Her whole concept of herself lay in her Prelude identity. Her personal integrity lay in what she was, as well as who she was.

An image of Jason and Marcus as toddlers came to her ...

“We have the kick-starting drug ready.”

Julia went cold.

The woman indicated a bag. “I’m a doctor. It may not surprise you to learn my speciality is converting Preluders to Noctumism.”

Julia’s heart plunged, then pounded fiercely. She fought a wave of panic. No. It was all bluff. It took more than one injection to kick-start puberty, especially in a First Generation Preluder.

The woman stood up. “Ready, Roger Rabbit?”

The second man, who had remained quietly in the background watching over the technical equipment, nodded. The absurd code name reassured Julia. If they were going so far to protect their identity there was a good chance they intended to let them live. Live? They wanted her to live, to suffer through puberty, publicly humiliated, ridiculed...

Julia wanted to scream her protest but instead she watched as the man joined the doctor, taking up his position to monitor the equipment. Lights switched on, momentarily blinding her.

She found herself sitting in a pool of light with Camille, who looked equally startled. A potted palm stood in the corner. The wall behind them was decorated with a large but tasteful painting. On screen it would appear as if she was sitting in a studio somewhere, not the back of a van travelling to god knew where.

They had ceased their weaving a while ago and appeared to be on a long straight road.

“Ready.” The male announced.

“We’re recording this to be broadcast, timed just before your return. Don’t try anything silly. We’ll just edit it out.” The doctor signalled Julia. “You’re on.”

It started to scroll. Automatically, she said the words, but they held no meaning for her. In her heart she knew she was killing her political career, negating her life’s work, but she was doing it for Camille and the boys.

Raul’s death had made her confront mortality. She’d discovered all

the success in the world counted for nothing next to her family. Their lives were worth more than her own integrity.

Her mouth strangely dry, Julia wound up the speech.

“Very nicely done.”

She wanted to scream that it was all a lie but the woman, that barbaric doctor was already armed with an injection and an implant.

Julia swallowed bile. She would not demean herself by fighting.

The van slowed. It ground to a halt as heart raging, her whole being focused on her upper arm, Julia watched the doctor numb the area and part the skin. The woman inserted a minuscule, slow release hormonal implant then sealed the incision.

“Can’t have you peeling a patch off,” she announced cheerfully. Julia wanted to throttle her. “I’ve found this is the most effective way to kick-start it. Massive initial dose. And here’s a little something to ease the shock.”

The injection numbed the surface of her skin, seeping through her pores.

A wave of cool dizziness swept over Julia and she clutched Camille’s hand.

“What wrong with her?” Camille’s voice sounded distant.

“She’s going under ...”

Why?

But already Julia didn’t care. Her eyes would not focus, refused to stay open. She felt one of the males lift her, carry her. The air smelt different. She was outside the van. An orange glow through her closed lids told her she was facing the late afternoon sun.

It was so good to be out of the van, to know her life wasn’t going to end abruptly. What was she thinking? Her life as she knew it was over. If she didn’t play along they’d kill her sister’s children just as they’d killed Raul.

The NSF was a many headed hydra. No matter who the police caught there would always be more disaffected Nocturnes ready to commit

themselves to the cause.

They seemed to be taking a long time chatting on the side of the road. Julia couldn't hear any other cars passing, couldn't make sense of what was being said. Her mind was too fuzzy as she slipped in and out of consciousness. Vaguely she knew she should have been raging at the injustice of it all, yet she felt obscenely warm and relaxed.

A vehicle pulled up.

"Right on time," the damned cheerful doctor announced.

"What if she has the implant removed?" Camille asked suddenly.

"You think your boys mean so little to her?" someone asked.

"My research has shown quite small doses of the hormone cause behavioural changes." It was the doctor again. Julia hated her even with her emotions wrapped in cotton wool. "Besides, if she gives us trouble there's always the back-up plan."

Back-up plan? Julia couldn't summon the energy to ask.

Then she was being buckled into a seat, her head propped on someone's shoulder.

"Ready?" the new voice asked. "The media are waiting."

"Ready," Camille said.

* * * *

Four hours later Julia saw how ready her sister had been. In a news re-cap she watched Camille field questions about their kidnapping and subsequent rescue by Nocturne Special Forces. The broadcast about taking the Big Step was also a prime topic. By then the drug was wearing off and Julia had fended questions with somewhat less than her usual vigour.

But she hadn't known what to say when the reporters asked her why she had an NSF bodyguard. Camille had covered for her.

Then for several exhaustive hours they had given statements to the police. Camille was always with her, supportive as only a sister could be. The NSF body guard was a constant reminder that one wrong word would

see Jason and Marcus dead.

Julia swallowed. "Broadcast off. Download mail."

Her voice-activated bedside computer obeyed. Though her mind and body felt numb she scanned the addresses automatically. There were several urgent queries.

"No rest for the wicked," she said, using the code to alert the computer to activate the reply program. It had amused her to use an obscure personalised activation signal. Her mail remained displayed on the screen as the receptors waited to record her replies.

Still operating on automatic Julia began to deal with the most urgent problems. Camille backed into the room with a tray.

"Feeling better?" her sister asked.

"Well enough to eat," Julia answered. "Pause program." If she didn't pause it the program would simply keep recording everything said. "Where's Bunnikins?"

"Who? Oh, you mean the body guard. He's downstairs. We're alone for now." Camille put the tray on the bedside table and swung the arm around so that it rested above Julia's lap.

"I heated Italian, your favourite," she said, perching awkwardly on the dainty Prelude chair. "God, I'm tired."

"It's not every day you bury your parents, get kidnapped and make the headlines." Julia remarked, surprised to discover she hated Camille.

Her sister leant forward to touch her arm, face intent. "I know what you've given up for me and my boys and I can't express how grateful I am."

Julia could not go through with this. She put her bowl down. "You must have known I would not abandon you and the boys."

Camille nodded. "And I'm sure Oliver will not abandon you. He's flying home right now."

Oliver?

Oliver would despise her. If she were to reveal the real reason for her

change of heart he might understand her position intellectually but he'd never accept her physically as a Nocturne. Their life together was over!

With a jolt Julia realised she couldn't even tell him the truth. He'd want to inform the police.

She was trapped. Panic threatened.

Camille was speaking, her voice a soothing croon.

Julia focused on what she was saying. Her sister was sure Julia would grow to accept her new Nocturne self, even appreciate the change.

The thought horrified her. If it weren't for the threat to her nephews she could remove the implant. Remove the implant? The damned cheerful doctor's voice returned to her — "... back-up plan."

Why would they need a back-up plan?

Suddenly all the little nuances fell into place and Julia understood. They would only need a back-up plan if they had no intention of carrying out their threat to kill Jason and Marcus. And that meant her sister was part of the plot.

Cold certainty settled in Julia's belly. Camille had betrayed her, had used her love for her nephews to manipulate her. A silent scream of denial erupted in her mind. She wanted to confront Camille, to wring a heart-felt confession from this stranger who masqueraded as her sister.

"...not so bad. You'll get used to Nocturnism. After all it is the natural state of the adult human being. There's a whole world of discovery ahead of you." Camille patted her arm. "Finish your soup."

Julia pushed the tray aside. "I only have one question."

Camille grew still, her face a mask of kind concern.

"What's the back-up plan?" Julia asked.

A spasm of comprehension travelled across Camille's features. She came slowly to her feet. Her voice cold and distant.

"You always were a difficult, precocious child, Julia. How do you think I've felt, watching you grandstand for fifty years? How dare you ask what

I've done for humanity! Well, now I've taken a stand. It's time you Preluders grew up —"

"The back-up plan?"

Her mouth twisted distastefully. "This isn't necessary, Julia. I'm doing this for your own good —"

"The plan?"

Camille took a long slow breath. "If you prove too difficult to contain the doctor is going to forge your medical records. She'll discover a fast-growing inoperable cancer. Confronted with this news you will commit suicide."

"With a little help?" Julia prodded.

Camille nodded.

"That's where Bunnikins comes in."

Camille nodded. "Martin. His name is Martin."

A long thoughtful breath escaped Julia. "And Oliver?"

"If he won't see reason, he'll have to join you."

It was a variation on the Romeo and Juliet theme. Julia had seen it a thousand times in Prelude literature.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Julia breathed.

Camille shrugged. "You don't know what you're denying yourself. You can't. You'll see. And others will follow your lead. One day you'll thank me for this."

Julia sincerely doubted it. It was the worst case of Nocturne paternalism she had ever come across.

With a flick she threw back the bed covers and came to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Camille asked uneasily.

"I've work to do. No rest for the wicked," Julia said. "If you're going to

have me killed I'd better clean up my affairs. But first —”

“There’s no need for this. If you’d only accept Nocturnism as a natural progression —”

“But I don’t want to take the Big Step. I’m going to remove this implant right now. I’ll use the medikit in the bathroom.”

Julia entered the en suite.

“Don’t do this, don’t force me!” Camille warned, raising her voice. When Julia didn’t answer she announced, “I’ve summoned Martin.”

Julia opened the drawer, took out the medikit and returned to her bedroom. She would normally have done minor medical work in the bathroom but she wanted everything recorded clearly.

Camille greeted her return with distinct annoyance. “Martin will help me sedate you. Julia, you don’t need to do this. I don’t want to use the backup plan —”

“You mean you don’t want to make my death look like suicide? Let’s not mince words. You didn’t mind Raul’s death.” Julia uncapped a mild anaesthetic. She applied it to her upper inside arm.

“I didn’t know. I ... I never thought we’d have to ... Oh, Martin,” Camille sounded relieved.

The NSF male barged in, weapon drawn. He scanned the room.

“It’s Julia!” Camille indicated. “She’s being difficult.”

“That’s right, Martin.” Julia greeted him. “I’m going to remove the implant your doctor forced on me by threatening to kill my nephews. What are you going to do about it. Kill me?”

He pointed the weapon at Julia’s face. “Move away from the medikit.”

She knew he had to get near enough for the tightly beamed neuron disrupter to be effective. The closer the range the more damage it did. Pressed to the skull it could fry a brain.

Julia’s mouth went dry with fear. She had enough evidence now. It was time to back down. “Hey, don’t get excited. I’m —”

He lunged forward, grabbed her arm and jerked her away from the medikit. His Nocturne strength sent her flying across the room. The bed hit her mid thigh and she collapsed flat on her back.

He lifted the weapon.

“No. That isn’t necessary.” Camille lunged forward to grab his arm.

“Crazy bitch!” He swung his closed fist at her face. The weapon pulsed harmlessly into the ceiling.

Julia flipped off the bed, scrambling crab like across the floor towards the door. Casting one fearful glance behind her she saw Camille’s feet leave the ground as she was flung in an arc, carried by the momentum of his spin.

The weapon lifted, aimed at her. Julia’s breath caught in her throat. Pure terror turned her bones to liquid. She knew she couldn’t get through the door in time.

“No!” Camille superimposed herself between them, took the full impact of the pulse. Her body spasmed as she fell.

But Julia didn’t stay to watch. Stumbling in her haste she headed out the door, across the living room. There wasn’t time to get out of the unit. The Nocturne male could out-run her. She had a single heart beat in which to decide her best avenue of escape.

Running for her life she darted out onto the balcony. But he was already behind her, following her. He charged after her, his long legs covering the distance, taking him past her. He spun to face her, grabbing the balcony railing with one hand to steady himself and absorb his momentum.

Julia raised a finely made Prelude chair between them, trying to divert the neuron disrupter’s pulse. Weapon already trained on her he gave a grunt as the delicate railing came away in his hand. Balanced on one leg with his centre of gravity beyond the balcony, he wavered, eyes wide with fear.

Julia didn’t hesitate. She darted forward. The flimsy Prelude chair cracked in her hands, but it was enough to send him over the edge.

He screamed all the way down.

In silent fascination she watched him hit the garden bed three stories below.

Then she ran inside, into her bedroom. Camille lay on the floor, a fine silver sliver of saliva trailed from her parted lips.

But she was still alive.

“Communications. Emergency. Medical assistance. I repeat, Emergency!” Julia activated the communications facility of her bedside computer.

At the sound of her voice, Camille’s eyes opened and tracked. She grimaced, focusing on Julia’s face with difficulty.

“You’re all right?” Camille croaked.

She nodded. “Don’t worry. Help is coming.”

Her sister swallowed and licked her lips.

Julia used the edge of her dressing gown to wipe Camille’s mouth, her hands trembling with equal parts anger and pity. “Why? Why did you try to save me when you planned to help kill me?”

A bitter smile lit Camille’s face. “You don’t understand. How could you? You’re not a Nocturne.” She caught Julia’s hand. “I had to protect you because you’re a child and I’m an adult woman, a mother —”

“But I’m not a child. I’m a sixty two year old Prelude!”

Camille nodded. “I know. But when I look at you I see a child. My instincts took over.” She sighed tiredly, her eyes lost focus. “A Prelude can’t hope to understand ...”

Tears stung Julia’s eyes. Voices sounded through the intercom calling from the entrance, asking for clearance. She activated the front door’s release mechanism.

They were here and she had the evidence. Camille lay at her feet, helpless. Julia might not be a Nocturne but she understood the power of instinct.

She looked up at the patient screen, where her messages waited to be answered. “No rest for the wicked. Erase all responses.”

* * * *

AFTERWORD

This story rose from a question. Why should we put up with puberty in our early teens when we don't need to be sexually mature for reproductive purposes until our twenties, or later? Amazingly, the title and attitudes of the main characters came to me fully formed in a dream.

— *Rowena Cory Lindquist*

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* * * *

THE THIRD RAIL

AARON STERNS

Aaron Sterns was born in Melbourne, Victoria, in 1972. After studying Shakespeare, the Romantic poets, and Greek tragedies at university, he convinced his graduate school to let him study contemporary horror; his PhD work examines the impact of late capitalism on the works of Bret Easton Ellis, David Cronenberg, Clive Barker, and other exponents of postmodern horror. He has presented academic papers on *American Psycho* and *Crash* at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, written non-fiction articles for *Bloodsongs: The Australian Horror Magazine*, amongst other publications, and is a regular contributor to *Hellnotes: The Insider's Guide to the Horror Field*. He is also the former editor of *The Journal of the Australian Horror Writers*. We were very pleasantly surprised to learn that "The Third Rail" is Aaron Sterns' first fiction publication.

Here is a searing vision of an archetypically decadent and dangerous city — a place of vigilance and patience and random violence ... a place where knives glitter in the silver-grey shadows of subway stations and *everyone* is the enemy.

But most importantly, here is a city that takes care of its own.

* * * *

The waitress is missing two fingers on her right hand and he thinks she will spill his coffee. She catches him looking at her and frowns. The viscous liquid slips up the lip of the cup then falls back, swirling like mercury. She is already walking away as he stutters an apology.

He stares after her across the tables and is drawn to a wash of light from the window. The backward-print of the shop's "Caffé Dante" sign partially obscures his view, but he focuses beyond that, at a couple walking past with a large umbrella coloured with white specks and realises it has started snowing. He looks up, and there is a haze in the air. He stands in a trance and walks to the window and places a hand on the glass. The man at the next table across looks up briefly from his paper and then hunches down in his dark overcoat. A group discussing chess in the corner — they

look like regulars — pause, cupfuls of black espresso teetering at their lips, and watch him. He has never seen snow, other than on television. Unless you went looking for it, back home in Australia few people probably had. He can pick out single flakes, falling faster than he had imagined, defined purely and timelessly before merging into the sludge on the ground. Across the street, narrow academic bookshops and row houses blur and blend into the white tapestry. He gazes out at the couple as they pass a derelict in a grey sweatshirt and brown parka huddled in one of the doorways, holding out a paper cup. They stop, the man folding up the umbrella and shaking it off methodically and patiently before stabbing the derelict in the face with the sharp tip.

“*Sir.*” The waitress is standing behind him, one hand on hip. He notices a lattice-work of scars tracing her temple. She self-consciously flicks hair across it and scowls.

“No, I wasn’t leaving ...” Gesturing behind him. “I was just looking out ... at ...” Pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looking to the other customers. The man in the overcoat hunches down even further in his seat, long brown hair covering his face. “I think you should call an ... um ...” But she just thrusts the bill at him as he passes back to his table in a daze. The men shake their heads.

He clumsily shuffles the half-completed immigration forms scattered across the table into a scuffed briefcase, and almost forgets to pay in his haste to get outside. Flicking open his wallet he finds himself looking at *her* face again. At her eyes, light blue, almost clear, framed by the tousle of blonde above. He takes the photo out and runs a finger over her face. After three months of rubbing, her skin is pale and ghostlike. Like the memory of her body. Of her voice. He almost leaves the photo as a tip with the dropped bills, but stops himself. He cannot purge her so easily.

He runs across the road to check the doorway, but there is only a spattering of blood on the concrete step. It looks dried and brown, like a false memory.

* * * *

Although it has stopped snowing, his shoes skid freely on the wet footpath — no, *sidewalk*, it’s goddamned New York — and he has to concentrate on placing his soles down evenly. How could he mistake the shaking of an umbrella for an attack? He muses on his misperception, barely noticing the chill in the air or the stench of the rangy, skeletal *ailanthus* trees lining the

street, or the pervasive leeching of colour the darkness causes, or the multitude of ambulance and police sirens in the distance. His thoughts gradually drift to the intrusive INS application, however, and he finds himself nervously fingering his thin goatee as he walks, churning over the questions: about how he could list his projected earnings for the next five years when he didn't know if he could last that long; about when and if he would purchase an apartment; about his intentions to ever leave the city. Whether he was intending to marry. And that makes him wonder whether she would marry any —. But the sudden images of her with someone else are too torturous.

He turns back at the café door's chiming and thinks he sees a figure slip into the alley next door, but then the footpath is no longer beneath his reaching foot and he jerks and stumbles into the gutter, dirty water splashing at his pants and drenching his cheap shoes. He stands for a moment staring down.

Bleecker Street is empty and he crosses against the light, expecting as always a yellow taxi to round a corner and run him down. He hurries up MacDougal, hoping to quickly get home uptown — not that he would *want* to sit in the cramped bedsitter listening through the thin walls to his neighbours argue and fuck, but if he hurried he could fill out the I-140 forms and still mark a few of his students' woeful papers. They wouldn't appreciate his effort, of course. He remembers their laughter at his arguments for the contemporary relevance of *The Bacchae* or *The Oresteia*, telling him the old myths were dead. They called him The Tourist. As openly contemptuous as everyone else in this city, though at least they paid him some attention. The Faculty had all but abandoned him. They'd head-hunted him back home, courting him with the position and with assurances there'd be no problems with the INS, that he'd slip through under the Priority Worker scheme. Now that officious bastard Johnston wasn't even sending a representative for his petition hearing tomorrow. They should have filled out the I-140s for him; his research profile was on file, so it wouldn't have taken them long. He'd spent years amassing his academic "points" and convincing international journals to publish his *Crash* and *American Psycho* papers despite ingrained opposition, hoping to attract one of the better institutions over here. Which he finally had. Yet all that pain and struggle and poverty for what? So some suit could refuse his Priority Worker argument tomorrow, sneering while saying, "You research *what?*".

As he hurries up the street he imagines the University clock framing the Square disappearing behind him, swallowed by the mad-Lego

skyscrapers hunched beyond. Suddenly unnerved by the silence he stops, staring up at the drab brickwork enclosing the streets, wondering where everyone has gone, if it was that far past peak hour. There weren't any roaming cars; even the ever-present sirens had died. Glancing behind and up at the World Trade Center's massive twin towers jutting like some split phallus he catches a flicker of movement at the corner of his eye, a darkness like a flag or billowing coat flashing across his retina and disappearing behind a building. Denuded tree branches sway soft and frigid above. He knows this has happened before, but perhaps it's just a flash from one of the movies he'd endlessly studied — *Jacob's Ladder* perhaps. She had hated that movie: too depressing. As was anything that meant something.

Turning forward again he stops. Crowded around the entrance to the station on Sixth and Spring they stand, laughing and wrestling mock-playfully. Unconsciously he clutches the briefcase with both hands and stares at them. His stomach churns. He remembers other sneering, hateful faces, the sharp crack to his head, hands ripping the watch bloodily from his wrist. The pure helplessness. And promising himself as he lay in the gutter of some deserted Footscray sidestreet whimpering like a whipped dog: *never again*.

He veers into Prince Street and heads past the contemporary art museum for the next subway, risking a last glance at the youths. They are silent, watching him. He starts to walk faster and then sprints up the street, ducking down an alley to his left, footsteps ringing on the cobblestones. Tiny cafés and splinter houses blur on either side and seem to shy away from his mad pounding. He realises he is over-reacting and slows down. The enclosing buildings seem familiar, and he recognises the little street as Wooster. A while back he had seen a small-scale dance performance here, set in a little warehouse replete with exposed wires and crumbling bricks. While waiting for the show he had noticed a young couple a block down taking turns photographing the other in a rubbish skip. The girl had glanced over at their waiting group and exposed a breast to her boyfriend's lens. He sees one of the rubbish bins now and considers hiding behind it, but instead he stops, head throbbing with blood and chest tight and vision blurred. He rests hands on knees and listens to his panting fill the alley. At least he is alone. Cracked, weeping cobblestones gradually coalesce between his feet and then cloud over as his glasses fog. He raises his head to clear them and sweat snakes into his eyes.

The youths round the corner. They fan out across the street in formation, ten at -least, faces in evil shadow beneath their red bandannas, emerging from some ghetto spaghetti western. They seem deformed, as if

missing — or with too many — limbs. He sees one casually reach a scar-flecked hand into the rip of his jacket pocket. Another diverts his attention by suddenly loping close to the ground like an ape. Then they are on him. He stands up and grips his briefcase impotently, trying to stare into their eyes, to offer some small act of defiance, to *understand*, but instead they part and move on, brushing against him almost lovingly. Heads swivel as they pass and one, a faltering moustache like shit on his lip, coos softly: “little fishie”.

* * * *

A faint scent of urine washes over him and mixes with his relief as he descends the steps into the subway, losing himself in the crush of commuters. Dark patches stain worn concrete beneath his feet; the worst a large black birthmark spreading out beneath the turnstiles. It looks fresh. Realising he doesn't have a token or correct change, he fights his way back to the token booth, keeping an eye out for leather and denim descending the steps. The booth's thick perspex sheet is dotted with flaking sheets of paper: fluttering Transit notices and wanted posters. The perspex is murky and he can barely make out a face beyond, above a speaker cut in the window.

A burst of static and he stands for a moment.

“Ah... hello?”

Another burst.

“What?”

Sudden clarity: “... fucking *turista*.”

“Oh ... ah, shit ... eight tokens, please.” He shoves two crumpled bills through the basin and scoops up the silver coins. Last month someone poured lighter fluid through one of these basins and incinerated the attendant, an immigrant fresh from Pakistan.

He feels eyes turn to him as he passes through the steel gates out onto the platform. Cold clings to the walls and drips into the air. He keeps his eyes on the ground and moves over to a gap by the wall, planting his back against its moist solidity. He looks up, and the eyes turn away. He begins picking faces out of the crowd, plastered with that familiar disinterested sneer. They seemed practised at taking anything the city could throw at them into stride, and his presence is as easily assessed and

dismissed as a car accident or drive-by-shooting. About a month before he was due to come here he had read a news report about a rape in the Park. Sunday afternoon and kids on swings and a group playing ball by the nets and lovers walking hand-in-hand. And a jogger pack-raped. He remembered she had been a European exchange student hoping to join one of the modeling agencies here. Coming up East Drive by the trees of The Ramble in her black tights and baggy sweatshirt, puncturing the air with white billows with each step, and passing her one of the guys had punched her — hard — in the face. The other had ripped off her tights and calmly planted his knees on her arms. A couple of tourists had reported other joggers stopping and helping the guys hold her down, and still others shouting out encouragement as they passed. Kitty Genovese '90s style. The police had dismissed such claims as fanciful: foreign xenophobia. The student had survived the attack however and had become a minor celebrity, being deluged with modelling offers. He remembers with a flash *her* disgust when he told her and wonders how he could have hoped to justify his decision to come here.

One woman standing by herself to his right is missing an arm. She carries a couple of bags with the other and has to constantly shift her weight from foot to foot to compensate. As she stares up the tracks expectantly, he notices one eye is milky and sightless. A man to his right is wearing a scarf wrapped around his neck. The scarf droops down enough to reveal a grinning white slash underlining the man's jaw. So many scars. For some reason he remembers a derelict — dressed with some weird conformity almost identically to the one outside the cafe — smothered with dirt and breathing harshly through a clogged nose outside a cinema, pleading to the people in line. No-one was paying him any attention. He had offered the man one of his bagels, thinking he might use money for alcohol, but the man had pointed to his rotted teeth and mumbled that he couldn't eat anything hard. He had stopped at the corner, looking back at the pitiful figure. When he had returned to hand over a dollar, ignoring the scowls of some in the line, the derelict had started to cry, saying over and over: "Thanks man, thanks so much ...". A teenage girl, all racoon-kohl eyes and designer-Grunge clothing, had grasped his arm as he strode past. "Don't align with them," she had said, and he could only gape at her in confusion. "The city only wants desirables." One of her friends had dragged her away, glaring at him. Walking past the cinema later with *The Post* under his arm he had encountered only the blank stares of those in the queue. And, again, the derelict had disappeared; funny that he only remembered that now.

He hears arguing and looks over to the toilets, noticing a group of youths emerging, eyes flat and dead. He tenses to run but it is not the gang and they don't even wear the same colours. He moves to the other end of

the platform anyway when they start to hit each other and bump into waiting travellers.

The train is due and he makes his way to the edge of the platform, looking around warily as he thinks of reports of people being pushed in front of oncoming trains. Cautiously he looks quickly over the edge, drawn to the tracks. As bland and dirty as ever. But out by itself, partially covered with a thin strip of wood, snakes the electrified third rail; a purveyor of casual death in such close proximity to everyday life, so necessary as to be banal. Like the city itself: prosaic life streaked with violence and death. Yet again he wonders whether he made the right decision, trying to picture their last conversation: his apartment half-packed and the rest in shambles, her stifled tears and calm resignation a focus for the shifting codes of his guilt. Wondering if she would forgive him, take him back. Calling her, telling her that he didn't belong here and that he really wanted —

Then the air jolts out of his lungs as a huge weight slams into his back and his chest feels displaced and the air somersaults around him in a confusion of brick and swirling colour. He hits the tracks heavily. Groggy and winded he peers up from his grave at the blurry faces peering over the edge. Rumbling beneath and he scrabbles to the edge of the platform, lifting himself up. One of the expressionless faces, a woman in a grey business suit, moves towards him and a high heel stamps down on his fingers. Broken fingers scream as he hits the gravel. As cold wind rushes in a wave up the tunnel from the incoming train a thin brown-haired man, all flowing overcoat and crazed eyes, launches out of the crowd and lands awkwardly next to him. The world turns red with blood as the man jumps on his chest, and the rock in the man's hand suddenly becomes his only focus, vision narrowing like some hokey near-death hallucination. It slashes again, smacking into his temple and knocking off his glasses. Groping for them in dirt and gravel he clasps a handful of the stones and grinds his attacker's eyes. He easily kicks the flailing, screaming man off over his head. Crawling again to the platform and lifting himself up with broken fingers like pure slices of agony coursing through his arms, looking back briefly and as instinctively as Lot's wife and seeing the jerking, screaming shape frying on the third rail; this time the crowd parts in acceptance as he clambers over the lip of the platform, but the train is a huge onrushing blur of movement and metal. It hits. He spins lazily along the platform as his leg seems to expand and disappear.

Through a haze he sees some of the waiting passengers jump onto the tracks. Others board the train and wait patiently inside, staring out beneath the fluorescent glare. Hands on him and he looks up into the face of the woman who stamped on his fingers. She smiles briefly, like a false

reflex, and then pins one arm down like a vise. Others similarly grasp his limbs, and another — familiar leather and shit-lip — grabs his head. Panicking, he looks down at the mangled flesh of his right foot and up at the approaching train driver, a peaked cap perched atop his balding head. A fireman's axe rests casually on his shoulder. Despite the screams and thrashing they amputate his foot, cauterising it with lighter fluid and a match handed to them by the toll-booth attendant, a small bearded man in a blue uniform.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, he sees nightmare delusions of the burned and mangled body of his attacker dragged up onto the platform and set upon by the waiting passengers. Flashes of teeth and snapping of bones. Flesh ripping and tearing like cheap cloth. Acid tapeworm sounds sinking easily into his flesh and huddling within. The attendant brings out a hose when they are finished and washes down the concrete, whistling a tuneless high-pitched whine. Someone hands out towels to the bloodied commuters.

Two businessmen pick him up underneath the arms and help him into the carriage. His right leg sways uselessly above the ground. They let him pause in the doorway to vomit into the gap between the platform and the train before placing him carefully on an aisle seat, one of them sitting beside him to prop him up. The other sits opposite and plants the familiar battered brown briefcase on his lap, silently dialling in its combination and taking out the sheaf of INS application forms. As the man begins filling in the uncompleted pages the other signals to the toll-booth attendant waiting on the platform who waves to the front of the train.

He feels the bile and saliva wiped from his chin and turns to his companion, vision blurring and wavering. The smell of charred flesh fills his nostrils. The train's side-to-side buffeting hastens his feelings of nausea.

"Welcome," says the businessman, an intense and soothing smile plastered across his face. "You played well. The city desires those as strong as you. And don't worry: you won't be needing this anymore." He feels a hand reaching into his jacket and removing his wallet. The man takes out her photo, placing it in his own pocket before replacing the wallet. "You can forget her now. We will find you someone else." Again the smile and a hand clasping his arm. "The city looks after its own." The man hands back his glasses, and he puts them on even though one of the lenses is cracked and specked with blood.

The train continues on its passage. The gentle rumbling seems a steadying, soothing mantra. Passengers leave; others take their place.

Darkened concrete and skeletal steel, wet glass and sculpted stone flash past in waves like some impossible pre-existent landscape. He sinks his head back against the seat, noticing a raving, bearded derelict in a dirty suit ahead in their carriage sit by himself near the door, glancing nervously around at the other passengers. The derelict carries a scuffed briefcase similar to his own, though only shredded newspaper overflows from gaping holes in its side. The man clutches it to his chest and starts screaming at a young girl who stares at him steadily and unblinkingly. As he watches the two, someone in a dark jacket slips through the closing doors and calmly slashes the man's throat with a thin knife. The screaming cuts off abruptly, descending into a soft gurgling. The child starts to imitate the sounds and is rewarded by a smile from her mother. The man in the jacket continues up the aisle towards him and stops at his seat. He looks up at the man, and then reaches into his own pocket and takes out a handkerchief. The man wipes the blood from his knife and hands back the handkerchief, thanking him before continuing on.

At the next station two Transit police board the carriage. One looks up at him and nods as they remove the body.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Although this is probably apocryphal, "The Third Rail" emerged, I now like to think, from a fever-induced daydream I had on a New York subway train, while I miserably blew my nose and stared out the grimy windows at the passing world-weary commuters waiting at the platforms. I had spent the past few weeks holed up in the libraries of Columbia University, and although I loved the city I was also constantly on edge, feeling every bit the stereotypical naive and paranoid outsider trying to conform to a society where all the rules and conventions are assumed, and any clumsy deviation meant opening yourself up to its casual violence. I remember staring blankly out the window as the rocking of the subway train sent waves of nausea through me and hallucinating the events of the story. I didn't take the subway again.

It's a bit more complicated than that — the story coalescing from a number of actual experiences, my obsession with news reports, myth and ritual, and the memory of Harlan Ellison's "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" playing like a mantra in my mind throughout my stay — but essentially "The Third Rail" is the dreaming of a lonely Australian amidst the dirt, destitution, and death of the archetypal city.

— *Aaron Stems*

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THE LAST DANCE

IAN NICHOLS

Poet Ian Nichols writes: “Born in Wales, too long ago, and missed out on the swinging sixties in London, but got right into it in Sydney. I live a lifestyle of which some of my friends disapprove, but it suits me. I teach in a high school, for my sins, and I’ve worked in a lot of jobs before that. Formative occupations were probably psychiatric nursing, which I found damaging, and working in theatre, which I loved. I travel as much as I can, wherever I can, whenever I can. People keep on telling me I’m too old for sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll, so I’ve given up drugs. A little like Zorba, except for a lack of children, I try to enjoy life, and can, occasionally, be overbearingly happy.”

The on-the-road experience and sensibility of that old rocker Ian Nichols infuses “The Last Dance”. Here’s the hot-sweaty, get it on, present-tense experience of hustling and then playing the gig ... except sometimes what’s out there in the audience — shouldn’t be.

* * * *

Driving. “Radar Love” on the radio. Golden Earring’s one big hit. Wonder what happened to them? Did they die and disappear, like the sixties? Did they go to a party and never come back? Or did they just get old? Lights blinking.

Lights blinking up ahead over the doorway. “Bottle shop. Bottle shop.” Pull into the carpark. Old Holdens, utes and Landcruisers. A few dogs in the dusk on the verandah of the pub. They raise their heads, but I’m not the one they’re waiting for. He’s inside, looking at his hands, feeling the work they’ve done today, waiting for the beer to soak away the ache in his back. I grew up in the city; the country’s television and radio serials: “Blue Hills” and “Bellbird”. Not the taste of dust in the water and hooded eyes watching you. The TV doesn’t watch back; the radio doesn’t go quiet when you walk into the room.

“G’day mate.”

The bloke’s behind the bar handing a couple of beers over to some teenagers. They look underage, but big. It’s harvest now, so they’ve been working, got money, and man-sized thirsts, no matter what their birth

certificates say. The local cop's not going to bother them, too much trouble. Or maybe the publican couldn't give a stuff.

"You with the band?"

It's the long hair and the clothes. Nobody thinks I'm a sales rep.

"Yeah."

"Thought so. Yeah. Your mates are out the back. They said to keep an eye out for you."

"When'd they get in?"

"Aw, about an hour ago."

"Whereabouts do we play?"

"There's a lounge out where your mates are. They're setting up the gear now. Would you like a beer?"

"No, thanks; I'd better help them get set up."

Go to the car, get the amp and guitar out of the boot, move around the back to the lounge. Boots hollow on the worn, grey wood of the verandah; go through the frosted glass doors with "Emu Bitter" etched into them. Polished wood floor, long line of a bar, a few tables. Stage at the back, near the kitchen. Mimi's there, high already, black shades watching something else. Greg sweats to set up the mikes and mixer. There's a jug of beer on the stage, going flat. Everybody's busy. Say hello, plug in the amp and tune up, try to get the feel of the place. I play some blues, listen for the echoes, try to get the place to talk to me. What do you want from me?

It's odd. There's a shiver. It's the usual barn, but different, like there's something dead, quiet and impenetrable out there, hiding in the corners. As Greg hauls the foldback wedges around I play a little louder, a little harder, try a few bars of songs. Nothing. I can't raise those corpses yet. Maybe later.

I put the Strat down, help set out the bins, lay cables. The afternoon's hot, flies buzz. Sweat starts, and I take off my t-shirt. Mimi comes and starts to stroke me, making out that she wants to fuck me. That's an old story. She's on Mandrax. I tell her to piss off. I want to hear this place when the

system's set up. I want to see if we can bring it to life.

The publican's wife sticks her head around the door as we're checking the levels and asks if we want some steak sandwiches. I don't want anything to eat, never do before a gig. I ask for more beer, and she brings a jug. It's cold, cuts the gluey feeling from my throat. Greg wants a final sound check, so I play "Rocky Mountain Way," and it sounds good. I feel on top of it, in command, and we're all working together, listening and helping to get from the beginning to the end, and then I see the shadows in the corners, where it's dead, still and quiet as the axis of the world. And I don't know whether they've always been there, or whether we brought them with us. They just seem tired, lying where they fell, like those fighters you see at the shows; always weary from travelling too many miles, always having to go one more round before the end, always wondering when the local smart-ass might get under their guard and land the one that decks them.

Full night, just about ready to go on. In my clothes for the show. Tight jeans, boots, leather jacket over bare chest. Mimi's dressed the same, except her jacket isn't unzipped all the way, just enough to show the bra underneath. Even stoned, she knows how far she can go in a town like this. What the people come to see. The bouncer's at the door, fat and hot, sweat on his face, soaking into the white shirt and black bow tie. Maybe a cop in the daytime. I can hear squealing and chattering outside. We wait. We're the first rock band they've had here, the publican tells me, as he puts a jug of lemon squash down where we can get to it. First ever. He doesn't say why. He's not sure how we'll go in the country, in this town, in this place.

"Things are a bit different here, different to the city."

"Yeah? What sort of stuff do you usually get, then?"

"Aw, you know; local stuff. Old stuff. It fits in."

"Why change?"

"Wanted to see how you blokes would go. Some of the kids were thinking you might be better."

They're from all over; all the far-off farms and shearing sheds and wheat bins. There've been a couple of fights, a few smashed glasses at the bar. Ageless guys in elastic sided boots prop up the bar without a smile, watching. The kids are restless. They mill around, excited; but there's a snarl in the air. We'd better let them in soon, get them sweating.

The warm-up tape goes on, and they come through the doors like a sandfall. Tables fill with giggling girls who look quickly around the room and whisper to each other, break into laughter. They drink alcohol and coke. The fellas drink beer, lean against the walls and act cool, badly. The quiet people sit at the back, where the light doesn't reach, where there aren't even shadows. I take a drag on a joint that's going around. I've played hundreds of these country gigs, I should be used to this scene by now. I'm scared.

They announce the winner of the chook raffle, and then we go on. Straight into "Diamond Dogs". It breaks up the congealed groups. People start to dance, but not enough. It doesn't get their attention off the beer. It's not us, we're good tonight. Greg smiles as he sits at the board, fiddling with the mix, but it's just not happening. I can still see the shadows, isolated in the corners, where no-one stands, but it's not them. This is something the crowd brought in with them, like a pack of dogs dragging an animal to where they can tear it to pieces.

Mimi talks to them, introduces the band. The response is ratshit, cold. It puts Mimi off; she's not used to rejection, so she fiddles with the zipper of her jacket, wondering whether to show a little more, and turns to look back at us. I shrug at her. I'm sweaty, sticking to my jacket. I wipe my hands on my jeans and we get into the next song. I look out at the floor while Mimi sings "Missionary Man". Not much dancing; a lot of drinking and, every now and then, I catch a glimpse of eyes. They glint with something I haven't got a name for. They glint when they look at the band.

We crank it up, put on a real show, but it doesn't do any good. There's less dancing by the end of the set. I tell them we'll be back soon, and there's no response, not even jeers. The window shows the blackness of a country night with no moon, no stars. The real dark, out at the cold end of nowhere. Tape playing.

Tape playing while we take a break. "Gold and Brown" a whisper against the clink of glasses and the rustle of people. A susurrations, like insects breathing, like animals stalking. I put my arm around Mimi because she's shivering.

"I'm scared." She huddles up against me. "I don't want to go back on."

"It'll be okay. They'll warm up soon."

“What’s wrong with them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re not used to this sort of music. Maybe we should do some Hank Williams or Slim Dusty.” Maybe we should play “Rawhide”. Maybe we should get the fuck out.

I look into the lounge. Not much movement. The lights seem dimmer, the gloom more intense, except for the spotlights that play on the stage, isolate it, make an altar of it. Greg comes backstage from the desk. He doesn’t look good.

“It’s fucking weird out there.” He pours himself a beer. “It’s like I’m not there. They just zeroed in on you. They’re waiting for something. When do you want to go back on?”

I take a drag on a joint. Allan, the bass player, has lit two since we got off stage. He wants to be somewhere else as fast as he can go. “Never.” I let the smoke trickle out. “But we’d better get it over with. Two more tracks and we go back on.”

The last track is “Born in the USA”. Dead man’s town. Right. We go back on. The back of the room is ringed with those quiet people, and the kids huddle in the centre. More people, more shapes, have come in from somewhere out there in that dark night. The shadows in the corners are still there, still weary, but everything else is so fucking strange that they seem almost like old friends.

“Smoke on the Water”; an attempt to get people out onto the floor, moving to the beat. That’s what we’re there for. We play, and people move to our rhythm, give up thinking, follow, just follow, with something that was there before the brain. The music’s a hole in the wall between the worlds, to let the gods in. Whose gods?

Darkness makes masks. Crazy light makes appearances shift, become grotesque, primaeval. A man of feathers and mud, a naked woman glittering like a serpent’s skin, but the light shifts a little, and they’re just kids with ponytails and jeans again. Behind the bar, the publican seems muscled and grim, a man of stone and thunder, then he pulls a middy and the vision fades as the sweat saturates his t-shirt. Alan’s dope must be very good.

“Crazy Mama.” Daddy Cool would have died out here. People in cities kid themselves about the country, because they don’t know about the backbreaking work that kills people, or the loneliness that drives them crazy, out here in this old, old land. In the city, we’ve made something of our own.

The country hates the city. People dancing.

People dancing, finally, as if they've just been given permission. A little bit frightened, for some reason. Isolated from the quiet circle of watchers. There's a power growing out there, out where it's as black as age. In those shadowed corners, there's tension, something struggling to be free. It nags at me like a fishhook. Our song finishes, and the kids wait for the next one.

Before I can speak, call the next number, I hear something, coming in from the dark. Music, like a penny whistle a way away down a long road. Skin drums, slapped by hard palms. The dancers begin to move, shuffle to the beat. This thing that takes them is distant, primitive, something from long ago that grows in the earth, fits in with the pain and the hurt and the knowledge that you can't win, fits in with the thirst of summer and the hunger of winter. The shifting darkness throws up images of grinning, horn-headed figures leading dances, sacrificial rites, for the old gods, the gods who held the power of life and death over the corn and the rivers and the seasons, and over men. This music isn't ours, it's theirs, coming from that darkness we drove away with fire, where those watchers are. It comes from those who would steal back fire and laughter, to keep us their animals.

I fight against the images building in my brain, hold the slippery neck of the Strat and stare past them, ignore the swelling moan of hollow wood pipes and the beat of clicking sticks. The dancers sway, keen and chant, eyes glazed. If they dance to that tune forever, they're stuck in the past, in the hunger that never ends, and they'll be consumed by the earth. I look behind me, see the rest of the band, tight and afraid. They feel it, as well. I have to fight.

Fingers move by instinct through the chords: E, D, A: "Gloria," used like Van Morrison never imagined. It brings the band back together; everyone comes in, and we're one, not divided, not alone. It's loud and fast, blasts out at the dancers, but it's not enough. They're still dancing to the weak pipe and the little drum. My head clears with it, it drives out the other music, and I bawl out the lyrics, making it up as I go along. Obscene verses, Mimi helping to bellow the chorus. Still not enough. I click the distort on with my foot and take the Strat into a lead break. Andy pumps up the rhythm on his SG. Sweat all over me, some of it from playing, some from fear. I'm fighting, and I don't know what the stakes are, but they're huge, as big as the future. Still not enough.

It's like they're laughing at us, from behind a wall that's centuries thick and ages high. They want to force us back to the land, back to the old ways,

back to being animals that grub in the earth and die at the whim of the seasons. Fuck them.

We sweat and play and struggle, harder and faster, and we're still losing, still can't crack through to the dancers, when the shadows break open. It's like the shriek of a siren, savage as broken glass. The darkness draws back, the watchers disturbed, then their arrogance returns, their focus returns, and their music swells, becomes even more primally insistent.

Mimi laughs.

I see her, and the Mandrax haze and all the fears are gone. Her hair's cut short, but she tosses her head like it's long and wild. Without even a thought, knowing it's right, I start to play, level and hard, and she wails the words out. It's nothing I've ever heard, but it grabs those dancers, those kids, and wipes the glaze from their eyes, pulls their heads up, so that they stand straighter, move stronger. It's about flat out on a Norton Commando after an all night party, racing the sun through the streets. It's about different faces every day and different places every night. I take a lead, and I've never played like this before, never pulled notes out of the air and thrown them screaming into the face of the world. What's come into me, it's almost familiar, like an echo in my head of songs unwritten, unsung, and it came out of those dead corners. With it, I can say I'm not an animal.

Now the fight's more even. Those old watchers won't give up, they're fighting for their lives. We can't give up; we're fighting to get out from under the dark, to crawl out into the light. It goes on for hours. We play louder and harder, everything we know, until we're playing things we never played before, never rehearsed, led on, conducted, by the forces that broke out of the corners when we needed them, came from their own hells and heavens, maybe back for one last gig when it counted, when they could finish what they started. "Little Wing," "L.A. Woman," "Get it While You Can," "Back in Black". We go into "The Ballad of John and Yoko," and I can see something happening out beyond the dancers, out beyond the dark, like faces pressed up against a window. "Purple Haze," and the stars start to show, outlining shapes. Stars outside so clear, like I've never seen them before. Out there, in those shapes, are all the myths we've made, all the legends the city-builders have created, pushing to get in, to join us.

They're there, willing to put their sound, their magic, up against the old magic, up against the spells and sacrifices, to take the old gods on their own turf. The stars blaze suddenly brighter, and the windows shatter, the watchers reel. We play "Dirty Deeds" as an accompaniment. There's blood,

even if we can't see it, and the dancers are all ours. The old, broken darkness dissolves and retreats into the past that's the only thing it owns, now. Our last song is "Sympathy for the Devil". Packing up.

Packing up takes a while. We don't help to clear away the glass on the floor, but there's a lot to do with our gear, and none of the guys from the pub want to touch it. We get the money for the gig from the publican, without a word. After we pay for the sound equipment, there'll be a couple of hundred bucks each.

Not bad for a country gig. Mimi climbs into the car with me. She hasn't changed out of her stage gear. Driving.

Driving along dirt roads for hours, until we finally hit the tar. Mimi says nothing, just smokes a lot until we're almost home.

She takes a long drag on her cigarette, then throws it out the window, so it sparks on the verge. Looks straight ahead as the white line unwinds.

"We'll be back in the city soon, back home."

I light a cigarette, think about it. Something new's started tonight.

"Yeah," I say.

A last turn in the road, over the hill, and the city shows before us, lights like stars strung on ribbons.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

"The Last Dance" was born in a wheatbin, twenty-four miles from Moorine Rock, which is a hundred miles from anywhere, and three hundred from anywhere you'd want to go. It was fathered by Skyhooks, performing for a numb-brained audience in Orange, NSW. It was mothered in Esperance, in the Pier Hotel, when the skimpy barmaids were in the front bar and the Troupadores were in the Lounge, playing to an audience of kids who were desperate to leave the town for the bright lights of the big city, any big city. Drive back into Perth from Kellerberin, or Williams, or Merredin, and you'll see the stars at your feet as you come over the hill into Armadale, and weep for joy as you stop at the first traffic light.

— *Ian Nichols*

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

JACK DANN

Jack Dann is a multiple award-winning author who has written or edited over fifty books, including the groundbreaking novels *Junction*, *Starhiker*, *The Man Who Melted*, *The Memory Cathedral* — which is an international bestseller — and the recently published Civil War novel *The Silent*.

Dann's work has been compared to Jorge Luis Borges, Roald Dahl, Lewis Carroll, Castaneda, J.G. Ballard, and Philip K. Dick. Philip K. Dick, author of the stories from which the films *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* were made, wrote that, "*Junction* is where Ursula Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven* and Tony Boucher's "The Quest for Saint Aquin" meet ... and yet it's an entirely new novel... I may very well be basing some of my future work on *Junction*". Best selling author Marion Zimmer Bradley called *Starhiker* "a superb book ... it will not give up all its delights, all its perfections, on one reading".

Library Journal has called Dann: "... a true poet who can create pictures with a few perfect words". Roger Zelazny thought he was a reality magician and *Best Sellers* has said that "Jack Dann is a mind-warlock whose magicks will confound, disorient, shock, and delight". *The Washington Post Book World* compared his novel *The Man Who Melted* (published in Australia by HarperCollins in 1998) with Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*.

His short stories have appeared in *Omni* and *Playboy* and other major magazines and anthologies. He is the editor of the anthology *Wandering Stars*, one of the most acclaimed American anthologies of the 1970s, and several other well-known anthologies, such as *More Wandering Stars*. *Wandering Stars* has just been reprinted in the US. Dann also edits the multi-volume *Magic Tales* series with Gardner Dozois, the *White Wolf Rediscovery* series with Pamela Sargent and George Zebrowski, and is a consulting editor for TOR Books.

He is a recipient of the Nebula Award, the Aurealis Award (twice), the Ditmar Award, and the *Premios Gilgames de Narrativa Fantastica* award. Dann has also been honoured by the Mark Twain Society (Esteemed Knight).

High Steel, a novel co-authored with Jack C. Haldeman II, was published in 1993 by TOR Books. British critic John Clute called it “a predator ... a cat with blazing eyes gorging on the good meat of genre. It is most highly recommended”. A sequel entitled *Ghost Dance* is in progress.

Dann’s *major* historical novel about Leonardo da Vinci — entitled *The Memory Cathedral* — was first published by Bantam Books in December 1995, to rave reviews. It has been translated into seven languages to date. It won the Australian *Aurealis Award* in 1997, was Number One on *The Age* bestseller list, and a story based on the novel was awarded the Nebula Award. *The Memory Cathedral* was also shortlisted for the *Audio Book of the Year*, which was part of the 1998 *Braille & Talking Book Library Awards*.

Morgan Llwyn called *The Memory Cathedral* “a book to cherish, a validation of the novelist’s art and fully worthy of its extraordinary subject”, Lucius Shepard thought it was “an absolute triumph”, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it “A grand accomplishment”.

Dann’s new novel about the American Civil War, *The Silent*, is being published by Bantam in the US, Lübbe in Germany, and HarperCollins in Australia. *Library Journal* chose it as one of their “Hot Picks” and wrote: “This is narrative storytelling at its best — so highly charged emotionally as to constitute a kind of poetry from hell. Most emphatically recommended.” Peter Straub said “This tale of America’s greatest trauma is full of mystery, wonder, and the kind of narrative inventiveness that makes other novelists want to hide under the bed”. And *Kirkus Reviews* called it “A ferocious portrait of the Civil War’s human toll”.

Other scheduled books include *Counting Coup*, a contemporary road novel.

Dann’s latest novel-in-progress is about James Dean.

As part of its *Bibliographies of Modern Authors Series*, The Borgo Press has published an annotated bibliography and guide entitled *The Work of Jack Dann*. A second edition is in the works. Dann is also listed in *Contemporary Authors* and the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*; *The International Authors and Writers Who’s Who*; *Personalities of America*; *Men of Achievement*; *Who’s Who in Writers, Editors, and Poets, United States and Canada*; *Dictionary of International Biography*; and the *Directory of Distinguished Americans*.

Dann lives in Melbourne, Australia and “commutes” back and forth to New York and Los Angeles.

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JANEEN WEBB

Janeen Webb lectures in literature at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, and is internationally recognised for her critical work in speculative fiction, Australian literature and children’s literature. She holds a PhD in literature from the University of Newcastle.

Her criticism has appeared in such diverse publications as *Omni*, *Foundation*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *The Age*, and *Magpies*; in standard reference works such as *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, the *St James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*, and *Magill’s Guide to Science Fiction & Fantasy Literature*; as well as in several collections of critical articles published in Australia, the US and Europe.

Janeen was co-editor of the *Australian Science Fiction Review: Second Series*, from 1987 to 1991. This bi-monthly journal was the premier science fiction forum in Australia and had a world-wide influence on the genre: it won a Ditmar Award in 1991. She has also been Reviews Editor for *Eidolon: The Journal of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* and a judge for the World Fantasy Award.

Janeen’s controversial book on racism in Australian fiction, *Aliens & Savages: Fiction, Politics and Prejudice in Australia*, co-authored with Andrew Enstice, is published by HarperCollins Australia (1998). Janeen has also collaborated as editor with Andrew Enstice on *The Fantastic Self*, a collection of critical essays on fantasy and science fiction (1999). She is currently working on critical bibliographies of William Gibson and Thomas Keneally for the Borgo Press Modern Authors series (US).

Janeen has recently turned to writing fiction: her short story “Niagara Falling”, co-authored with Jack Dann, won both the Aurealis Award and the Ditmar Award. Her story “Death at the Blue Elephant” was shortlisted for the *HQ Short Story Prize* and the Aurealis Award in the fantasy category. Both stories are included in *The Year’s Best Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy* (Vol. 2), Jonathan Strahan and Jeremy Byrne (eds), published by HarperCollins (1998).

She is listed in such reference works as *The Who's Who of Academics in Australia*; *The World Who's Who of Women*; *International Who's Who of Intellectuals*; *The Dictionary of International Biography*, and *The Melbourne University Press Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

NICK STATHOPOULOS

Nick Stathopoulos holds a BA and an LLB and is one of Australia's premier artist/illustrators. He is the winner of a mainstream Penguin television award and seven Ditmar awards for art. He has produced extensive box art and games graphics for Strategic Studies Group and worked for Hanna Barbera and Disney Australia as an artist. He has also written short fiction and is currently working on an original screenplay and concept album.

About his cover painting for *Dreaming Down-Under*, Nick writes: "The consensus brief: Depict a radically different future Australia to the sweeping desert vistas that have long become cliché. Create a cover reflecting the rich, diverse, fertile contents.

"And so I present a regenerating rainforest, ensnaring a tragic robot from an antique future. Motor functions long dead. Shiny metallic skin dull and pitted. Tiny vines snaking their way through the interstices. Separating joints. Splitting casings. Suspending entire segments in their tendrils.

"A disembodied head still sentient. An atomic brain with a half-life hundreds of generations distant from its creators, still functional. Cybernetic synapses still sparking. Lights — indicating neural function — still glowing.

"Thinking. Remembering. Dreaming.

"Dreaming Down-Under."