

# StarShipSofa



Stories

SSS  
STORIES  
VOLUME 1

*Featuring*

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

ELIZABETH BEAR

KEN MACLEOD

GENE WOLFE

PLUS MANY

MORE

*Edited by*

TONY C SMITH

*"Superb short  
SF from one of  
the field's great  
podcasts."*

CORY DOCTOROW





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...YER RIBS ARE SHOWING!



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**CHARLES ATLAS**

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VOLUME 1

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**EDITED BY TONY C. SMITH**

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## Ed's Letter

*To Mel, my amazing wife, and Elly and Reed, you are my world. I love you all so much.*

*Tony/Dad*

IN SOME WAYS IT WAS THE GIFT OF AN iPod from my wife that led to the birth of StarShipSofa and ultimately the publication of this book. So I think we have to thank her. *Thank you, Mel.*

I am proud to hold my hand up and say "I am a Geek." I love computers and I love gadgets. With my iPod came the discovery of podcasts. There was no more listening to radio stations that bored me stupid. Podcasts were out there, and they were playing what I wanted to hear, and this is still the case today. I have fine tuned my listening pleasure down to precisely what I want, all thanks to the iPod.

And what do I want to listen to? *Why; science fiction.*

But it wasn't the first thing that came to mind as I scrolled through the oodles and oodles of podcasts. I was trying all things: geeks, gadgets, and gizmos. Then I stumbled upon science fiction and, way back in my brain department, little motors slowly began to whirl and clunk, hiss and spit, until eventually it coughed up the computation: *You used to like science fiction! You used to read it all the time. Why did you stop?* I thought about why I had stopped. There was a period in my life when the sole reason for me being me was to read, but I'd drifted away and even to this day I cannot say why. Maybe it was gradual and time tricked me – who can tell.

I have my iPod; I have discovered science fiction podcasts; and now came another discovery.

Anyone can make a podcast. So began the teetering foundations that were to lead to where StarShipSofa is today: one of the biggest SF literature podcasts in the world. A grand statement, you might say, but nearly four years down the line that is where we are. That makes me feel rather proud. I didn't get there by myself; StarShipSofa is a community, and we are all here because we love science fiction. StarShipSofa is made by many and put together by one. If it wasn't for everyone – listeners, writers, and narrators – being so kind and helping out so much, I think the good ship Sofa would have crashed into a star and burned long ago. The Sofa community has made this show what it is today.

And so we find ourselves celebrating StarShipSofa Audio Magazine hitting show 100, and this time it's done something quite remarkable: it's evolved from digital bits, servers, and drives into this fine printed book. Who would have thought after listening to StarShipSofa – a show made of kbps, mono, stereo, mp3s, wavs, uploads, and downloads – you would be holding the *StarShipSofa Stories: Volume 1*.

I hope you enjoy reading it, and I'll see you in a year's time for *Volume 2*.

Tony C. Smith

Newcastle, September 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: This book wouldn't have come into being if it wasn't for the kindness of all the writers and artists involved with this project. I thank you from the bottom of my heart – without your help, this would have just been a silly dream. I also want to thank Dee Cunniffe for igniting the idea and making it all happen – in two weeks! I have to say a big thank you to Skeet for doing such a wonderful cover art. Skeet, you have been so kind with your time, energy, and skill. I hope this goes a little way into making your dream come true – having your art on the cover of a book. Finally, Josh Leuze, who at the last moment was asked to build a website and didn't flinch when told the deadline. Most of all this is a thank you to the StarShipSofa's community – you have made this old guy very proud, and I am truly grateful from the bottom of my heart – thank you.

# WHEN THEY COME



**Will your  
family be  
READY?**





# LONDON BONE

By Michael Moorcock

*For Ronnie Scott*

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1

**M**Y NAME IS RAYMOND GOLD AND I'M a well-known dealer. I was born too many years ago in Upper Street, Islington. Everybody reckons me in the London markets and I have a good reputation in Manchester and the provinces. I have bought and sold, been the middleman, an agent, an art representative, a professional mentor, a tour guide, a spiritual bridge-builder. These days I call myself a cultural speculator.

But, you won't like it, the more familiar word for my profession, as I practised it until recently, is *scalper*. This kind of language is just another way of isolating the small businessman and making what he does seem sleazy while the stockbroker dealing in millions is supposed to be legitimate. But I don't need to convince anyone today that there's no sodding justice.

'Scalping' is risky. What you do is invest in tickets on spec and hope to make a timely sale when the market for them hits zenith. Any kind of ticket, really, but mostly shows. I've never seen anything offensive about getting the maximum

possible profit out of an American matron with more money than sense who's anxious to report home with the right items ticked off the *beento* list. We've all seen them rushing about in their overpriced limos and mini-buses, pretending to be individuals: Thursday: Changing-of-the-Guard, Harrods, Planet Hollywood, Royal Academy, Tea-At-the-Ritz, Cats. It's a sort of tribal dance they all feel compelled to perform. If they don't perform it, they feel inadequate. Saturday: Tower of London, Bucket of Blood, Jack-the-Ripper talk, Sherlock Holmes Pub, Sherlock Holmes tour, Madame Tussaud's, Covent Garden Cream Tea, *Dogs*. These are people so traumatized by contact with strangers that their only security lies in these rituals, these well-blazed trails and familiar chants. It's my job to smooth their paths, to make them exclaim how pretty and wonderful and elegant and *magical* it all is. The street people aren't a problem. They're just so many charming Dick Van Dykes.

Americans need bullshit the way koala bears need eucalyptus leaves. They've become

totally addicted to it. They get so much of it back home that they can't survive without it. It's your duty to help them get their regular fixes while they travel. And when they make it back after three weeks on alien shores, their friends, of course, are always glad of some foreign bullshit for a change.

Even if you sell a show ticket to a real enthusiast, who has already been forty nine times and is so familiar to the cast they see him in the street and think he's a relative, who are you hurting? Andros Loud Website, Lady Hatchet's loyal laureate, who achieved rank and wealth by celebrating the lighter side of the moral vacuum? He would surely applaud my enterprise in the buccaneering spirit of the free market. Venture capitalism at its bravest. Well, he'd applaud me if he had time these days from his railings against fate, his horrible understanding of the true nature of his coming obscurity. But that's partly what my story's about.

I have to say in my own favour that I'm not merely a speculator or, if you like, exploiter. I'm also a patron. For many years, not just recently, a niagara of dosh has flowed out of my pocket and into the real arts faster than a cat up a Frenchman. Whole orchestras and famous soloists have been brought to the Wigmore Hall on the money they get from me. But I couldn't have afforded this if it wasn't for the definitely iffy *Miss Saigon* (a triumph of well-oiled machinery over dodgy morality) or the unbelievably decrepit *Good Rockin' Tonite* (in which the living dead jive in the aisles), nor, of course, that first great theatrical triumph of the new millennium, *Schindler: The Musical*. Make 'em weep, Uncle Walt!

So who is helping most to support the arts? You, me, the lottery?

I had another reputation, of course, which some saw as a second profession. I was one of the last great London characters. I was always on late-night telly lit from below and Iain Sinclair couldn't write a paragraph without dropping my name at least once. I'm a quintessential Londoner, I am. I'm a Cockney gentleman.

I read Israel Zangwill and Gerald Kersh and Alexander Barron. I can tell you the best

books of Pett Ridge and Arthur Morrison. I know Pratiface Charlie, Driff and Martin Stone, Bernie Michaud and the even more legendary Gerry and Pat Goldstein. They're all historians, archeologists, revenants. There isn't another culture-dealer in London, oldster or child, who doesn't at some time come to me for an opinion. Even now, when I'm as popular as a pig at a Putney wedding and people hold their noses and dive into traffic rather than have to say hello to me, they still need me for that.

I've known all the famous Londoners or known someone else who did. I can tell stories of long-dead gangsters who made the Krays seem like Amnesty International. Bare-knuckle boxing. Fighting the fascists in the East End. Gun-battles with the police all over Stepney in the 1900s. The terrifying girl gangsters of Whitechapel. Barricading the Old Bill in his own barracks down in Notting Dale.

I can tell you where all the music halls were and what was sung in them. And why. I can tell Marie Lloyd stories and Max Miller stories that are fresh and sharp and bawdy as they day they happened, because their wit and experience came out of the market streets of London. The same streets. The same markets. The same family names. London is markets. Markets are London.

I'm a Londoner through and through. I know Mr Gog personally. I know Ma Gog even more personally. During the day I can walk anywhere from Bow to Bayswater faster than any taxi. I love the markets. Brick Lane. Church Street. Portobello. You won't find me on a bike with my bum in the air on a winter's afternoon. I walk or drive. Nothing in between. I wear a camel-hair in winter and a *Barraclough's* in summer. You know what would happen to a coat like that on a bike.

I love the theatre. I like modern dance, very good movies and ambitious international contemporary music. I like poetry, prose, painting and the decorative arts. I like the lot, the very best that London's got, the whole bloody casserole. I gobble it all up and bang on my bowl for more. Let timid greenbelters creep in at weekends and sink themselves in the West End's familiar deodorised shit if they want to.



That's not my city. That's a tourist set. It's what I live off. What all of us show-people live off. It's the old, familiar circus. The big rotate.

We're selling what everybody recognises. What makes them feel safe and certain and sure of every single moment in the city. Nothing to worry about in jolly old London. We sell charm and colour by the yard. Whole word factories turn out new rhyming slang and saucy street characters are trained on council grants. Don't frighten the horses. Licensed pearlies pause for a photo-opportunity in the dockside Secure Zones. Without all that cheap scenery, without our myths and magical skills, without our whorish good cheer and instincts for trade – any kind of trade – we probably wouldn't have a living city.

As it is, the real city I live in has per square inch more creative energy at work at any given moment than anywhere else on the planet. But you'd never know it from a stroll up the Strand. It's almost all in those lively little sidestreets the English-speaking tourists can't help feeling a bit nervous about and which the French adore.

If you use music for comfortable escape you'd probably find more satisfying and cheaper relief in a massage parlour than at the umpteenth revival of *The Sound of Music*. I'd tell that to any hesitant punter who's not too sure. Check out the phone boxes for the ladies, I'd say, or you can go to the half-price ticket-booth in Leicester Square and pick up a ticket that'll deliver real value – Ibsen or Shakespeare, Shaw or Greenbank. Certainly you can fork out three hundred sheets for a fifty sheet ticket that in a justly-ordered world wouldn't be worth two pee and have your ears salved and your cradle rocked for two hours. Don't worry, I'd tell them, I make no judgements. Some hard-working whore profits, whatever you decide. So who's the cynic?

I went on one of those tours when my friends Dave and Di from Bury came up for the *Festival of London* in 2001 and it's amazing the crap they tell people. They put sex, violence and money into every story. They know fuck-all. They soup everything up. It's *Sun*-reader history. Even the Beefeaters at the Tower. Poppinland. All that old English duff.

It makes you glad to get back to Soho.

Not so long ago you would usually find me in the Princess Louise, Berwick Street, at lunch time, a few doors down from the Chinese chippy and just across from Mrs White's trim stall in Berwick Market. It's only a narrow door and is fairly easy to miss. It has one bottle-glass window onto the street. This is a public house which has not altered since the 1940s when it was very popular with Dylan Thomas, Mervyn Peake, Ruthven Todd, Henry Treece and a miscellaneous bunch of other Welsh adventurers who threatened for a while to take over English poetry from the Irish.

It's a shit pub, so dark and smokey you can hardly find your glass in front of your face, but the look of it keeps the tourists out. It's used by all the culture pros – from arty types with backpacks, who do specialised walking tours, to famous gallery owners and top museum management – and by the heavy metal bikers. We all get on a treat. We are mutually dependent in our continuing resistance to invasion or change, to the preservation of the best and most vital aspects of our culture. We leave them alone because they protect us from the tourists, who might recognise us and make us put on our masks in a hurry. They leave us alone because the police won't want to bother a bunch of well-connected middle-class wankers like us. It is a wonderful example of mutuality. In the back rooms, thanks to some freaky acoustics, you can talk easily above the music and hardly know it's there.

Over the years there have been some famous friendships and unions struck between the two groups. My own lady wife was known as Karla the She Goat in an earlier incarnation and had the most exquisite and elaborate tattoos I ever saw. She was a wonderful wife and would have made a perfect mother. She died on the A1, on the other side of Watford Gap. She had just found out she was pregnant and was making her last sentimental run. It did me in for marriage after that. And urban romance.

I first heard about London Bone in the Princess Lou when Claire Rood, that elegant old dike from the Barbican, who'd tipped me off

about my new tailor, pulled my ear to her mouth and asked me in words of solid gin and garlic to look out for some for her, darling. None of the usual faces seemed to know about it. A couple of top level museum people knew a bit, but it was soon obvious they were hoping I'd fill them in on the details. I showed them a confident length of cuff. I told them to keep in touch.

I did my Friday walk, starting in the horrible pre-dawn chill of the Portobello Road where some youth tried to sell me a bit of scrimshawed reconstitute as 'the real old Bone'. I warned myself in the showrooms of elegant Kensington and Chelsea dealers telling outrageous stories of deals, profits and crashes until they grew uncomfortable and wanted to talk about me and I got the message and left.

I wound up that evening in the urinal of *The Dragoons* in Meard Alley, swapping long-time-no-sees with my boyhood friend Bernie Michaud who begins immediately by telling me he's got a bit of business I might be interested in. And since it's Bernie Michaud telling me about it I listen. Bernie never deliberately spread a rumour in his life but he's always known how to make the best of one. This is kosher, he thinks. It has a bit of a glow. It smells like a winner. A long-distance runner. He is telling me out of friendship, but I'm not really interested. I'm trying to find out about London Bone.

"I'm not talking drugs, Ray, you know that. And it's not bent." Bernie's little pale face is serious. He takes a thoughtful sip of his whisky. "It is, admittedly, a commodity."

I wasn't interested. I hadn't dealt in goods for years. "Services only, Bernie," I said. "Remember. It's my rule. Who wants to get stuck paying rent on a warehouse full of yesterday's faves? I'm still trying to move those *Glenda Sings Michael Jackson* sides Prataface talked me into."

"What about investment?" he says. "This is the real business, Ray, believe me."

So I heard him out. It wouldn't be the first time Bernie had brought me back a nice profit on some deal I'd helped him bankroll and I was all right at the time. I'd just made the better part of a month's turnover on a package of theatreland's most profitable stinkers brokered

for a party of filthy-rich New Muscovites who thought Checkov was something you did with your lottery numbers.

As they absorbed the quintessence of Euro-ersatz, guaranteed to offer, as its high emotional moment, a long, relentless bowel movement, I would be converting their hard roubles back into Beluga.

It's a turning world, the world of the international free market and everything's wonderful and cute and pretty and *magical* so long as you keep your place on the carousel. It's not good if it stops. And it's worse if you get thrown off altogether. Pray to Mammon that you never have to seek the help of an organization that calls you a 'client'. That puts you outside the fairground forever. No more rides. No more fun. No more life.

Bernie only did quality art, so I knew I could trust that side of his judgement, but what was it? A new batch of Raphaels turned up in a Willsden attic? Andy Warhol's lost landscapes found at the Pheasantry?

"There's American collectors frenzied for this stuff," murmurs Bernie through a haze of Sons of the Wind, Motorchair and Montecristo fumes. "And if it's decorated they go through the roof. All the big Swiss guys are looking for it. Freddy K in Cairo has a Saudi buyer who tops any price. Rose Sarkissian in Agadir represents three French collectors. It's never catalogued. It's all word of mouth. And it's already turning over millions. There's one inferior piece in New York and none at all in Paris. The pieces in Zurich are probably all fakes."

This made me feel that I was losing touch. I still didn't know what he was getting at.

"Listen," I say, "before we go any further, let's talk about this London Bone."

"You're a fly one, Ray," he says. "How did you suss it?"

"Tell me what you know," I say. "And then I'll fill you in."

We went out of the pub, bought some fish-and-chips at the Chinese and then walked up Berwick Street and round to his little club in D'Arblay Street where we sat down in his office and closed the door. The place stank of cat-pee.



He doted on his Persians. They were all out in the club at the moment, being petted by the patrons.

"First," he says, "I don't have to tell you Ray that this is strictly double-schtum and I will kill you if a syllable gets out."

"Naturally," I said.

"Have you ever seen any of this Bone?" he asked. He went to his cupboard and found some vinegar and salt. "Or better still handled it?"

"No," I said. "Not unless it's fake scrimshaw."

"This stuff's got a depth to it you've never dreamed about. A lustre. You can tell it's the real thing as soon as you see it. Not just the shapes or the decoration, but the quality of it. It's like it's got a soul. You could come close, but you could never fake it. Like amber, for instance. That's why the big collectors are after it. It's authentic, it's newly-discovered and it's rare."

"What bone is it?"

"Mastodon. Some people still call it mammoth ivory, but I haven't seen any actual ivory. It could be dinosaur. I don't know. Anyway, this bone is *better* than ivory. Its in weird shapes, probably fragments off some really big animal."

"And where's it coming from?"

"The heavy clay of good old London," says Bernie. "A fortune at our feet, Ray. And my people know where to dig."

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2

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I had to be straight with Bernie. Until I saw a piece of the stuff in my own hand and got an idea about it for myself, I couldn't do anything. The only time in my life I'd gone for a gold brick I'd bought it out of respect for the genius running the scam. He deserved what I gave him. Which was a bit less than he was hoping for. Rather than be conned, I would rather *throw* the money away. I'm like that with everything.

I had my instincts, I told Bernie. I had to go with them. He understood completely and we parted on good terms.

If the famous Lloyd Webber meltdown of '03 had happened a few months earlier or later I would never have thought again about going

into the Bone business, but I was done in by one of those sudden changes of public taste which made the George M. Cohan crash of '31 seem like a run of *The Mousetrap*.

Sentimental fascism went out the window. Liberal-humanist contemporary relevance, artistic aspiration, intellectual and moral substance and all that stuff was somehow in demand. It was *better* than the sixties. It was one of those splendid moments when the public pulls itself together and tries to grow up. Jones's *Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* song cycle made a glorious come-back. *American Angels* returned with even more punch. And Sondheim made an incredible come-back.

He became a quality brand-name. If it wasn't by Sondheim or based on a tune Sondheim used to hum in the shower, the punters didn't want to know. Overnight, the public's product loyalty had changed. And I must admit it had changed for the better. But my investments were in *Cats*, and *Dogs* (Lord Webber's last desperate attempt to squeeze from Thurber what he sucked from Eliot), *Duce!* and *Starlight Excess*, all of which were now taking a walk down *Sunset Boulevard*. I couldn't even get a regular price ticket for myself at *Sunday in the Park, Assassins or Follies*. *Into The Woods* was solid for eighteen months ahead. I saw *Passion* from the wings and *Sweeney Todd* from the gods. *Five Guys Named Moe* crumbled to dust. *Phantom* closed. Its author claimed sabotage.

"Quality will out, Ray," says Bernie next time I see him at the Lou. "You've got to grant the public that. You just have to give it time."

"Fuck the public," I said, with some feeling. "They're just nostalgic for quality at the moment. Next year it'll be something else. Meanwhile I'm bloody ruined. You couldn't drum a couple of oncens on my entire stock. Even my ENO side-bets have died. Covent Garden's a disaster. The weather in Milan didn't help. That's where Cecilia Bartoli caught her cold. I was lucky to be offered half-price for the Rossinis without her. And I know what I'd do if I could get a varda at bloody Simon Rattle."

"So you won't be able to come in on the Bone deal?" said Bernie returning to his own main point of interest.

"I said I was ruined," I told him, "not wiped out."

"Well, I got something to show you now, anyway," says Bernie.

We went back to his place.

He put it in my hand as if it were a nugget of plutonium, a knuckle of dark, golden Bone, split off from a larger piece, covered with tiny pictures.

"The engravings are always on that kind of Bone," he said. "There are other kinds that don't have drawings, maybe from a later date. It's the work of the first Londoners, I suppose, when it was still a swamp. About the time your Phoenician ancestors started getting into the upriver woad-trade. I don't know the significance, of course."

The Bone itself was hard to analyse because of the mixture of chemicals which has created it and some of it had fused, suggesting prehistoric upheavals of some kind. The drawings were extremely primitive. Any bored person with a sharp object and minimum talent could have done them at any time in history. The larger, weirder looking Bones, had no engravings.

Stick people pursued other stick people endlessly across the fragment. The work was unremarkable. The beauty really was in the tawny ivory colour of the Bone alone. It glowed with a wealth of shades and drew you hypnotically into its depths. I imagined the huge animal of which this fragment had one been an active part. I saw the bellowing trunk, the vast ears, the glinting tusks succumbing suddenly to whatever had engulfed her. I saw her body swaying, her tail lashing as she trumpeted her defiance of her inevitable death. And now men sought her remains as treasure. It was a very romantic image and of course it would become my most sincere sales pitch.

"That's six million dollars you're holding there," said Bernie. "Minimum."

Bernie had caught me at the right time and I had to admit I was convinced. Back in his office he sketched out the agreement. We would go in on a fifty-fifty basis, funding the guys who would do the actual digging,

who knew where the Bone-fields were and who would tell us as soon as we showed serious interest. We would finance all the work, pay them an upfront earnest and then load by load in agreed increments. Bernie and I would split the net profit fifty fifty. There were all kinds of clauses and provisions covering the various problems we foresaw and then we had a deal.

The archeologists came round to my little place in Dolphin Square. They were a scruffy bunch of students from the University of Norbury who had discovered the Bone deposits on a run of the mill field trip in a demolished Southwark housing estate and knew only that there might be a market for them. Recent cuts to their grants had made them desperate. Some lefty had come up with a law out of the *Magna Carta* or somewhere saying public land couldn't be sold to private developers and so there was a court case disputing the council's right to sell the estate to Livingstone International which also put a stop to the planned rebuilding so we had indefinite time to work.

The stodies were grateful for our expertise, as well as our cash. I was happy enough with the situation. It was one I felt we could easily control. Middle-class burbnerds get greedy the same as anyone else, but they respond well to reason. I told them for a start off that all the Bone had to come in to us. If any of it leaked onto the market by other means, we'd risk losing our prices and that would mean the scheme was over. Terminated, I said significantly. Since we had reputations as well as investments to protect there would also be recriminations. That's all I had to say. Since those V serials kids think we're Krays and Mad Frankie Frazers just because we like to look smart and talk properly.

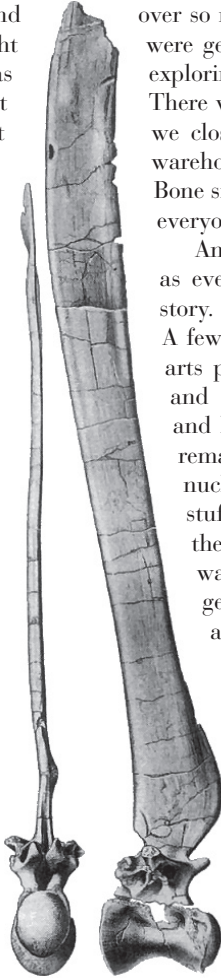
We were fairly sure we weren't doing anything obviously criminal. The stuff wasn't treasure trove. It had to be cleared before proper foundations could be poured. Quite evidently LI didn't think it was worth paying security staff to shuft the site. We didn't know if digging shafts and tunnels was even trespass, but we knew we had a few weeks before someone started asking about us and by then



we hoped to have the whole bloody mastodon out of the deep clay and nicely earning for us. The selling would take the real skill and that was my job. It was going to have to be played sharper than South African diamonds.

After that neither Bernie nor I had anything to do with the dig. We rented a guarded lockup in Clapham and paid the kids every time they brought in a substantial load of Bone. It was incredible stuff. Bernie thought that chemical action, some of it relatively recent, had caused the phenomenon. "Like chalk, you know. You hardly find it anywhere. Just a few places in England, France, China and Texas." The kids reported that there was more than one kind of animal down there, but that all the Bone had the same rich appearance. They had constructed a new tunnel, with a hidden entrance, so that even if the building site was blocked to them, they could still get at the Bone. It seemed to be a huge field, but most of the Bone was at roughly the same depth. Much of it had fused and had to be chipped out. They had found no end to it so far and they had tunneled through more than half an acre of the dense, dark clay.

Meanwhile I was in Amsterdam and Rio, Paris and Vienna and New York and Sydney. I was in Tokyo and Seoul and Hong Kong. I was in Riyadh, Cairo and Baghdad. I was in Kampala and New Benin, everywhere there were major punters. I racked up so many free airmiles in a couple of months that they were automatically jumping me to first class. But I achieved what I wanted. Nobody bought London Bone without checking with me. I was the acknowledged expert. The prime source, the best in the business. If you want Bone, said the art world, you want Gold.



The Serious Fraud Squad became interested in Bone for a while, but they had been assuming we were faking it and gave up when it was obviously not rubbish.

Neither Bernie nor I expected it to last any longer than it did. By the time our first phase of selling was over we were turning over so much dough it was silly and the kids were getting tired and were worrying about exploring some of their wildest dreams. There was almost nothing left, they said. So we closed down the operation, moved our warehouses a couple of times and then let the Bone sit there to make us some money while everyone wondered why it had dried up.

And at that moment, inevitably, and late as ever, the newspapers caught on to the story. There was a brief late-night TV piece. A few supplements talked about it in their arts pages. This led to some news stories and eventually it went to the tabloids and became anything you liked from the remains of Martians to a new kind of nuclear waste. Anyone who saw the real stuff was convinced but everyone had a theory about it. The real exclusive market was finished. We kept schtum. We were gearing up for the second phase. We got as far away from our stash as possible.

Of course a few faces tracked me down, but I denied any knowledge of the Bone. I was a middle-man, I said. I just had good contacts. Half-a-dozen people claimed to know where the Bone came from. Of course they talked to the papers. I sat back in satisfied security, watching the mud swirl over our tracks. Another couple of months and we'd be even safer than the house I'd bought in Hampstead overlooking the heath.

It had a rather forlorn garden the size of Kilburn which needed a lot of nurturing. That suited me. I was ready to retire to the country and a big indoor swimming pool.

By the time a close version of the true story came out, from one of the stoddies, who'd lost

all his share in a lottery syndicate, it was just one of many. It sounded too dull. I told newspaper reporters that while I would love to have been involved in such a lucrative scheme, my money came from theatre tickets. Meanwhile, Bernie and I thought of our warehouse and said nothing.

Now the stuff was getting into the culture. It was chic. Puncher used it in their ads. It was called Mammoth Bone by the media. There was a common story about how a herd had wandered into the swampy river and drowned in the mud. Lots of pictures dusted off from the Natural History Museum. Experts explained the colour, the depths, the markings, the beauty. Models sported a Bone motif.

Our second phase was to put a fair number of inferior fragments on the market and see how the public responded. That would help us find our popular price – the most a customer would pay. We were looking for a few good millionaires.

Frankly, as I told my partner, I was more than ready to get rid of the lot. But Bernie counselled me to patience. We had a plan and it made sense to stick to it.

The trade continued to run well for a while. As the sole source of the stuff, we could pretty much control everything. Then one Sunday lunchtime I met Bernie at *The Six Jolly Dragoons* in Meard Alley, Soho. He had something to show me, he said. He didn't even glance around. He put it on the bar in plain daylight. A small piece of Bone with the remains of decorations still on it.

"What about it?" I said.

"It's not ours," he said.

My first thought was that the stoddies had opened up the field again. That they had lied to us when they said it had run out.

"No," said Bernie, "it's not even the same colour. It's the same stuff – but different shades. Gerry Goldstein lent it to me."

"Where did he get it?"

"He was offered it," he said.

We didn't bother to speculate where it had come from. But we did have rather a lot of our Bone to shift quickly. Against my will, I made another world tour and sold mostly to other

dealers this time. It was a standard second-wave operation but run rather faster than was wise. We definitely missed the crest.

However, before deliveries were in and cheques were cashed, Jack Merrywidow, the fighting MP for Brookgate and E. Holborn, gets up in the House of Commons on telly one afternoon and asks if Prime Minister Bland or any of his dope-dazed cabinet understand that human remains, taken from the hallowed burial grounds of London, are being sold by the piece in the international market place? Mr Bland makes a plummy joke enjoyed at Mr Merrywidow's expense and sits down. But Jack won't give up. They're suddenly on telly. It's *The Struggle of Parliament* time. Jack's had the Bone examined by experts. It's human. Undoubtedly human. The strange shapes are caused by limbs melting together in soil heavy with lime. Chemical reactions, he says. We have – he raises his eyes to the camera – been mining mass graves.

A shock to all those who still long for the years of common decency. Someone, says Jack, is selling more than our heritage. Hasn't free market capitalism got a little bit out of touch when we start selling the arms, legs and skulls of our forebears? The torsos and shoulder-blades of our honourable dead? What did we used to call people who did that? When was the government going to stop this trade in corpses?

It's denied.

It's proved.

It looks like trade is about to slump.

I think of framing the cheques as a reminder of the vagaries of fate and give up any idea of popping the question to my old muse Little Trudi, who is back on the market, having been dumped by her corporate suit in a fit, he's told her, of self-disgust after seeing *The Tolstoy Investment* with Eddie Izzard. Bernie, I tell my partner, the Bone business is down the drain. We might as well bin the stuff we've stockpiled.

Then two days later the TV news reports a vast public interest in London Bone. Some lordly old queen with four names comes on the evening news to say how by owning a piece of Bone, you own London's true history. You become a curator of some ancient ancestor. He's clearly

got a vested interest in the stuff. It's the hottest tourist item since Jack the Ripper razors and OJ gloves. More people want to buy it than ever.

The only trouble is, I don't deal in dead people. It is, in fact, where I have always drawn the line. Even Pratface Charlie wouldn't sell his great, great grandmother's elbow to some overweight Jap in a deerstalker and a kilt. I'm faced with a genuine moral dilemma.

I make a decision. I make a promise to myself. I can't go back on that. I go down to the Italian chippy in Fortress Road, stoke up on nourishing ritual grease (cod, roe, chips and mushy peas, bread and butter and tea, syrup pudding), then heave my out of shape, but mentally prepared, body up onto Parliament Hill to roll myself a big wacky-baccy fag and let my subconscious think the problem through.

When I emerge from my reverie, I have looked out over the whole misty London panorama and considered the city's complex history. I have thought about the number of dead buried there since, say, the time of Bodicea, and what they mean to the soil we build on, the food we still grow here and the air we breath. We are recycling our ancestors all the time, one way or another. We are sucking them in and shitting them out. We're eating them. We're drinking them. We're coughing them up. The dead don't rest. Bits of them are permanently at work. So what am I doing wrong?

This thought is comforting until my moral sense, sharpening itself up after a long rest, kicks in with – but what's different here is you're flogging the stuff to people who take it home with them. Back to Wisconsin and California and Peking. You take it out of circulation. You're dissipating the deep fabric of the city. You're unravelling something. Like, the real infrastructure, the spiritual and physical bones of an ancient city...

On Kite Hill I suddenly realise that those bones are in some way the deep lifestuff of London.

It grows dark over the towers and roofs of the metropolis. I sit on my bench and roll myself up a further joint. I watch the silver rising from the river, the deep golden glow of the distant

lights, the plush of the foliage, and as I watch it seems to shred before my eyes, like a rotten curtain. Even the traffic noise grows fainter. Is the city sick? Is she expiring? Somehow it seems there's a little less breath in the old girl. I blame myself. And Bernie. And those kids.

There and then, on the spot, I renounce all further interest in the Bone trade. If nobody else will take the relics back, then I will.

There's no resolve purer than the determination you draw from a really good reefer.

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So now there isn't a tourist in any London market or antique arcade who isn't searching out Bone. They know it isn't cheap. They know they have to pay. And pay they do. Through the nose. And half of what they buy is crap or fakes. This is a question of status, not authenticity. As long as we say it's good, they can say it's good. We give it a provenance, a story, something to colour the tale to the folks back home. We're honest dealers. We sell only the authentic stuff. Still they get conned. But still they look. Still they buy.

Jealous Mancunians and Brummies long for a history old enough to provide them with Bone. A few of the early settlements, like Chester and York, start turning up something like it, but it's not the same. Jim Morrison's remains disappear from *Pere La Chaise*. They might be someone else's bones, anyway. Rumour is they were KFC bones. The revolutionary death-pits fail to deliver the goods. The French are furious. They accuse the British of gross materialism and poor taste. Oscar Wilde disappears. George Eliot. Winston Churchill. You name them. For a few months there is a grotesque trade in the remains of the famous. But the fashion has no intrinsic substance and fizzles out. Anyone could have seen it wouldn't run.

Bone has the image, because Bone really is beautiful.

Too many people are yearning for that Bone. The real stuff. It genuinely hurts me to disappoint them. Circumstances alter cases. Against my better judgement I continue in the business.



I bend my principles, just for the duration. We have as much turnover as we had selling to the Swiss gnomes. It's the latest item on the *beento* list. 'You *have* to bring me back some London Bone, Ethel, or I'll never forgive you!' It starts to appear in the American luxury catalogs.

But by now there are ratsniffers everywhere – from Trade and Industry, from the National Trust, from the Heritage Corp, from half-a-dozen South London councils, from the Special Branch, from the CID, the Inland Revenue and both the Funny and the Serious Fraud Squads.

Any busybody who ever wanted to put his head under someone else's bed is having a wonderful time. Having failed dramatically with the STOP THIS DISGUSTING TRADE approach, the tabloids switch to offering bits of Bone as prizes in circulation boosters. I sell a newspaper consortium a Tesco's plastic bagfull for two-and-a-half mill via a go-between. Bernie and I are getting almost frighteningly rich. I open some bank accounts off-shore and I became an important anonymous shareholder in the Queen Elizabeth Hall when it's privatized.

It doesn't take long for the experts to come up with an analysis. Most of the Bone has been down there since the seventeenth century and earlier. They are the sites of the old plague pits where legend had it still living corpses were thrown in with the dead. For a while it must have seemed like Auschwitz-on-Thames. The chemical action of lime, partial burning, London clay and decaying flesh, together with the broadening spread of the London water-table, thanks to various engineering works over the last century, letting untreated sewage into the mix, had created our unique London Bone. As for the decorations, that, it was opined, was the work of the pit guards, working on earlier bones found on the same site.

"Blood, shit and bone," says Bernie. "It's what make the world go round. That and money, of course."

"And love," I add. I'm doing all right these days. It's true what they say about a Roller. Little Trudi has enthusiastically rediscovered my attractions. She has her eye on a ring. I raise my glass. "And love, Bernie."

"Fuck that," says Bernie. "Not in my experience." He's buying Paul McCartney's old place in Wamering and having it converted for Persians. He has, it is true, also bought his wife her dream house. She doesn't seem to mind it's on the island of Las Cascadas about six miles off the coast of Morocco. She's at last agreed to divorce him. Apart from his mother, she's the only woman he ever had anything to do with and he isn't, he says, planning to try another. The only females he wants in his house in future come with a pedigree a mile long, have all their shots and can be bought at Harrods.

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I expect you heard what happened. The private Bonefields, which contractors were discovering all over South and West London, actually contained public bones. They were part of our national inheritance. They had living relatives. And stones, some of them. So it became a political and a moral issue. The Church got involved. The airwaves were crowded with concerned clergy. There was the problem of the self-named bone-miners. Kids, inspired by our leaders' rhetoric, and aspiring to imitate those great captains of free enterprise they had been taught to admire, were turning over ordinary graveyards, which they'd already stripped of their saleable masonry, and digging up somewhat fresher stiffs than was seemly.

A bit too fresh. It was pointless. The Bone took centuries to get seasoned and so far nobody had been able to fake the process. A few of the older graveyards had small deposits of Bone in them. Brompton Cemetery had a surprising amount, for instance, and so did Highgate. This attracted prospectors. They used shovels mainly, but sometimes low explosives. The area around Karl Marx's monument looked like they'd refought the Russian Civil War over it. The barbed wire put in after the event hadn't helped. And as usual the public paid to clean up after private enterprise. Nobody in their right mind got buried any more. Cremation became very popular. The borough councils and their

financial managers were happy because more valuable real estate wasn't being occupied by a non-consumer.

It didn't matter how many security guards were posted or, by one extreme Authority, land-mines, the teenies left no grave unturned. Bone was still a profitable item, even though the market had settled down since we started. They dug up Bernie's mother. They dug up my cousin Leonard. There wasn't a Londoner who didn't have some intimate unexpectedly back above ground. Every night you saw it on telly.

It had caught the public imagination. The media had never made much of the desecrated graveyards, the chiselled-off angel's heads and the uprooted headstones on sale in King's Road and the Boulevard St. Michel since the nineteen seventies. These had been the targets of first generation grave-robbers. Then there had seemed nothing left to steal. Even they had balked at doing the corpses. Besides, there wasn't a market. This second generation was making up for lost time, turning over the soil faster than an earthworm on E.

The news shots became cliches. The heaped earth, the headstone, the smashed coffin, the hint of the contents, the leader of the Opposition coming on to say how all this has happened since his mirror image got elected. The councils argued that they should be given the authority to deal with the problem. They owned the graveyards. And also, they reasoned, the Bonefields. The profits from those fields should rightly go into the public purse. They could help pay for the Health Service. "Let the dead," went their favourite slogan, "pay for the living for a change."

What the local politicians actually meant was that they hoped to claim the land in the name of the public and then make the usual profits privatising it. There was a principle at stake. They had to ensure their friends and not outsiders got the benefit.

The High Court eventually gave the judgement to the public, which really meant turning it over to some of the most rapacious borough councils in our history. A decade or so earlier, that Charlie Peace of elected bodies, the Westminster City Council, had tried to

sell their old graveyards to new developers. This current judgement allowed all councils at last to maximise their assets from what was, after all, dead land, completely unable to pay for itself, and therefore a natural target for privatization. The feeding frenzy began. It was the closest thing to mass cannibalism I've ever seen.

We had opened a fronter in Old Sweden Street and had a couple of halfway presentable slags from Bernie's club taking the calls and answering enquiries. We were straight up about it. We called it *The City Bone Exchange*. The bloke who decorated it and did the sign specialised in giving offices that long-established look. He'd created most of those old-fashioned West End Hotels you'd never heard of until 1999. "If it's got a Scottish name," he used to say, "it's one of mine. Americans love the skirl of the pipes, but they trust a bit of brass and varnish best."

Our place was almost all brass and varnish. And it worked a treat. The Ritz and the Savoy sent us their best potential buyers. Incredibly exclusive private hotels gave us taxi-loads of bland-faced American boy-men, reeking of health and beauty products, bellowing their credentials to the wind, rich matrons eager for anyone's approval, massive Germans with aggressive cackles, stern orientals glaring at us, daring us to cheat them. They bought. And they bought. And they bought.

The snoopers kept on snooping but there wasn't really much to find out. Livingstone International took an aggressive interest in us for a while, but what could they do? We weren't up to anything illegal just selling the stuff and nobody could identify what if anything had been nicked anyway. I still had my misgivings. They weren't anything but superstitions, really. It did seem sometimes that for every layer of false antiquity, for every act of disneyfication, an inch or two of our real foundations crumbled. You knew what happened when you did that to a house. Sooner or later you got trouble. Sooner or later you had no house.

We had more than our share of private detectives for a while. They always pretended to be customers and they always looked wrong,

even to our girls. Livingstone International had definitely made a connection. I think they'd found our mine and guessed what a windfall they'd lost. They didn't seem at one with themselves over the matter. They even made veiled threats. There was some swagger come in to talk about violence but they were spotties who'd got all their language off old nineties TV shows. So we sweated it out and the girls took most of the heat. Those girls really didn't know anything. They were magnificently ignorant. They had tellies with chips which switch channels as soon as they detect a news or information programme.

I've always had a rule. If you're caught by the same wave twice, get out of the water.

While I didn't blame myself for not anticipating the Great Andrew Lloyd Webber Slump, I think I should have guessed what would happen next. The tolerance of the public for bullshit had become decidedly and aggressively negative. It was like the Bone had set new standards of public aspiration as well as beauty. My dad used to say that about the Blitz. Classical music enjoyed a huge success during the Second World War. Everybody grew up at once. The Bone had made it happen again. It was a bit frightening to those of us who had always relied on a nice, passive, gullible, greedy punter for an income.

The bitter fights which had developed over graveyard and Bonefield rights and boundaries, the eagerness with which some borough councils exploited their new resource, the unseemly trade in what was, after all, human remains, the corporate involvement, the incredible profits, the hypocrisies and politics around the Bone brought us the outspoken disgust of Europe. We were used to that. In fact, we tended to cultivate it. But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that our own public had had enough.

When the elections came round, the voters systematically booted out anyone who had supported the Bone trade. It was like the sudden rise of the anti-slavery vote in Lincoln's America. They demanded an end to the commerce in London Bone. They got the Boneshops closed down. They got work on the

Bonefields stopped. They got their graveyards and monuments protected and cleaned up. They got a city which started cultivating peace and security as if it was a cash crop. Which maybe it was. But it hurt me.

It was the end of my easy money, of course. I'll admit I was glad it was stopping. It felt like they were slowing entropy, restoring the past. The quality of life improved. I began to think about letting a few rooms for company.

The mood of the country swung so far into disapproval of the Bone trade that I almost began to fear for my life. Road- and anti-abortion activists switched their attention to Bone merchants. Hampstead was full of screaming lefties convinced they owned the moral highground just because they'd paid off their enormous mortgages. Trudi, after three months, applied for a divorce, arguing that she had not known my business when she married me. She said she was disgusted. She said I'd been living on blood-money. The courts awarded her more than half of what I'd made, but it didn't matter any more. My investments were such that I couldn't stop earning. Economically, I was a small oil-producing nation. I had my own international dialling code. It was horrible in a way. Unless I tried very hard, it looked like I could never be ruined again. There was no justice.

I met Bernie in *The King Liar* in Old Sweden Street, a few doors down from our burned out office. I told him what I planned to do and he shrugged.

"We both knew it was dodgy," he told me. "It was dodgy all along, even when we thought it was mastodons. What it feels like to me, Ray, is – it feels like a sort of a massive transformation of the zeitgeist – you know, like Virginia Woolf said about the day human nature changed – something happens slowly and you're not aware of it. Everything seems normal. Then you wake up one morning and – bingo! – it's Nazi Germany or Bolshevik Russia or Thatcherite England or the Golden Age – and all the rules have changed."

"Maybe it was the Bone that did it," I said. "Maybe it was a symbol everyone needed to rally round. You know. A focus."



"Maybe," he said. "Let me know when you're doing it. I'll give you a hand."

About a week later we got the van backed up to the warehouse loading bay. It was three o'clock in the morning and I was chilled to the marrow. Working in silence we transferred every scrap of Bone to the van. Then we drove back to Hampstead through a freezing rain.

I don't know why we did it the way we did it. There would have been easier solutions, I suppose. But behind the high walls of my big back garden, under the old trees and etiolated rhododendrons, we dug a pit and filled it with the glowing remains of the ancient dead.

The stuff was almost phosphorescent as we chucked the big lumps of clay back on to it. It glowed a rich amber and that faint, rosemary smell came off it. I can still smell it when I go in there to this day. My soft fruit is out of this world. The whole garden's doing wonderfully now.

In fact London's doing wonderfully. We seem to be back on form. There's still a bit of a Bone trade, of course, but it's marginal.

Every so often I'm tempted to take a spade and turn over the earth again, to look at the fortune I'm hiding there. To look at the beauty of it. The strange amber glow never fades and sometimes I think the decoration on the Bone is an important message I should perhaps try to decipher.

I'm still a very rich man. Not justly so, but there it is. And, of course, I'm about as popular with the public as Percy the Paedophile. Gold the Bone King? I might as well be Gold the Grave Robber. I don't go down to Soho much. When I do make it to a show or something I try to disguise myself a bit. I don't see anything of Bernie any more and I heard two of the stooadies topped themselves.

I do my best to make amends. I'm circulating my profits as fast as I can. Talent's flooding into London from everywhere, making a powerful

mix. They say they haven't known a buzz like it since 1967. I'm a reliable investor in great new shows. Every year I back the Iggy Pop Awards, the most prestigious in the business. But not everybody will take my money. I am regularly reviled. That's why some organisations receive anonymous donations. They would refuse them if they knew they were from me.

I've had the extremes of good and bad luck riding this particular switch in the zeitgeist and the only time I'm happy is when I wake up in the morning and I've forgotten who I am. It seems I share a common disgust for myself.

Another bloke, who used to be very rich before he made some frenetic investments after his career went down the drain, called me the other day. He knew of my interest in the theatre, that I had invested in several West End hits. He thought I'd be interested in his idea. He wanted to revive his first success, *Rebecca's Incredibly Far Out Well* or something, which he described as a powerful religious rock opera guaranteed to capture the new nostalgia market. The Times, he told me, they were a-changin'. His show, he continued, was full of raw old-fashioned R&B energy. Just the sort of authentic sound to attract the new no-nonsense youngsters. Wasn't it cool that Madonna wanted to do the title role? And Bob Geldof would play the Spirit of the Well. *Rock and roll, man! It's all in the staging, man! Remember the boat in Phantom? I can make it look better than real. On stage, man, that well is W.E.T.*

*WET! Rock and roll!* I could see that little wizened fist punching the air in a parody of the vitality he craved and whose source had always eluded him.

I had to tell him it was a non-starter. I'd turned over a new leaf, I said. I was taking my ethics seriously.

These days I only deal in living talent.



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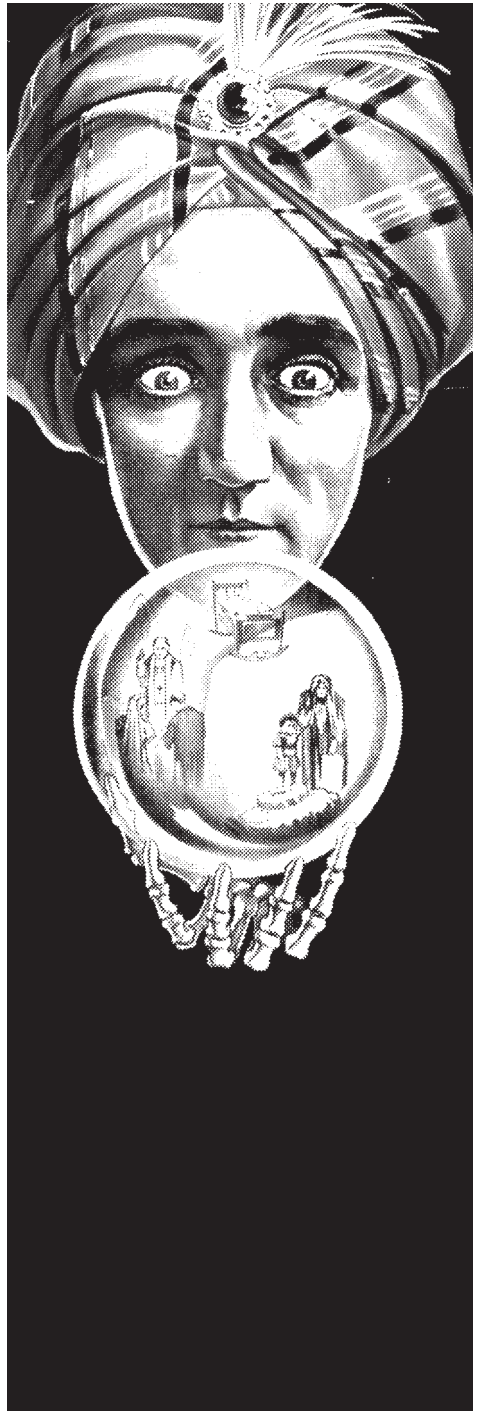
# INTO THE BLANK WHERE LIFE IS HURLED

By Ken Scholes

A SUDDEN, SHARP INCREASE IN THE Room's temperature signaled the Fallen's arrival, and William scrambled to the floor to prostrate himself. He averted his eyes, hearing the door the open, and waited as the sweat trickled down his sides. Soft footfalls passed his desk and he risked a glance up. The Fallen strode through the office, arrogant and nude, the stubs on its back twitching as if with memories of flight. William held his breath as it opened Fisk's door and slipped inside. Then, he waited to a count of twenty and returned to his desk.

The uncrowded newsroom remained silent though a hundred questions begged for asking. *The Fallen... here? Why? Did you see its eyes? No... never, never the eyes.* The temperature dropped a hair and William went back to the paper he'd been doodling.

He'd intended it to be a poem. The words rarely came to him but when they did, his fingers looked for release to no avail. In this place, pencil leads broke, words ran together, ink faded and all lines of literary endeavor bled into a meaningless puddle of bits and





blotches. The only stories he wrote now... the only stories he was *allowed* to write... were the meaningless drivel the *Gazette* required of him.

Long ago, before the War that brought him here, he remembered a blossoming career as a novelist. Tales of the fantastic and supernatural. Now, words haunted him like unrequited love.

For five minutes longer, he fiddled with the paper. The temperature shot up as Fisk's door opened again and William joined the others on the floor. The Fallen rarely traveled to this ring and to his knowledge, they'd never visited this building before today. This was the second he'd ever encountered.

He waited, listening to the footfalls, heard them stop at his desk, and forced his eyes open to confront the bare feet before him. The Fallen hissed, then continued on its way. As it left the building, the scattered collection of reporters and support staff released held breath and the temperature returned to normal.

"Hodgson... my office. Now."

William climbed slowly to his feet and let them carry him toward Vernon Fisk's voice. The others looked at him, faces still pale.

"Be a good chap and close the door," Fisk said from behind his desk, waving half of a cigar at an empty chair. William pulled it shut and sat down. "Still taking stabs at your passion, eh?"

Surprised, William realized that he still held the pencil and scrap of paper tightly in his fist. "I'm sorry, sir."

"No need, no need." Fisk leaned forward. He was a fat man, his face pocked and perpetually slick with sweat. "I was a brewer you know. Brewed great beers. Even won an award. Of course, down here it comes to nothing. I tried for years before giving up."

William nodded.

"Well, enough of the past. On to the future." He nodded towards the door. "You're probably wondering what that was about. Special assignment... from the top, or from

the bottom if you prefer." He snorted at his own joke. "Story of the century for us, it is."

The *Gazette* printed little that was news. During his time with the paper, William had interviewed new arrivals, promoted local gossip, and churned out propaganda on demand.

"Sir?"

Fisk stubbed out his cigar. "Story of the century. Somewhat of a celebrity I'm told, too. I guess you know him; he was after my time."

"Who, sir?"

"Why... Harry Houdini, that's who. Just arrived and already at it."

William's mind lurched him back to the turn of the century in a different life. A Blackburn stage, an angry mob, an arrogant showman and the equally arrogant young man William had once been. He could still hear the clinking of the shackles.

"Smug bastard," William said in a low voice. "I'm not surprised."

Fisk looked up. "Yes, *it* said you'd met before. I trust it wasn't a favorable encounter?"

"I was young. He made a challenge; I took him up on it. Went over two hours, he did, but in the end he got out of it." William chuckled. "Of course, I didn't see it. Afraid of the mob. I fled the scene and hid out."

"Well, you've got the story. *They* insisted."

"An interview then, sir?" Dread crept into him... this was the last person he wanted to sit down with, even for half an hour in one of Hell's more tolerable rings.

Fisk belly-laughed. "More than that, Hodgson. It seems Mr. Houdini has announced his run for the Ear. You're to accompany him, chronicle the journey, and return with the story." Fisk paused. "Well, no guarantees on returning. It *is* the Ear, of course."

William knew little about the Ear. Somewhere on some abandoned edge, it supposedly stood alone. Whispered legends traveled the rumor circuit: Few had seen it, few had spoken into its cool, crystal surface.

Some believed Michelangelo had carved it on some great Assignment of Grace from Above, guarded by angels as he worked tirelessly. William believed it was most likely bunk.

“But sir, I’m not sure I’m the best – “

Fisk interrupted. “You’re *not* the best. But They want you. And who am I to deny Them?”

William swallowed. “He’ll take one look at me and that’ll be that, with all due respect.”

“How long’s it been since you met him?”

Time was hard to count here. He did the best math he could. “Over twenty years.”

Fisk grunted. “I’ll book you passage on the Titanic. You’ll leave at dawn for Hellsmouth. Two weeks... enough time for you to grow out that beard of yours, I should think. I don’t think he’ll know you, Hodgson.”

William stood. A heaviness fell over him. Two ghosts rattling their chains from his past. Houdini and the sea. It couldn’t get much worse.

William re-slung his sea-bag at the tavern door. He’d waited a full five minutes, his brain racing ahead to scout out the possibilities. Would Houdini recognize him? During his two weeks on the black, oily sea his beard had itched its way to fullness, but would that be enough? And if he were recognized, what did it really matter? The night he had bound the swaggering showman was long buried in the past. But William had not forgotten; he doubted Houdini had either.

Opening the door, he pushed his way inside. The tavern was crowded with a scattering of damned souls that drank in small groups talking in low voices.

Houdini was not hard to spot; all new arrivals carried an otherworldly quality and Houdini transcended even that. He seemed the only unbroken man in the room, sitting alone at a table in the back corner. He looked up, his face an inverted triangle beneath tangled hair. He’d aged from the young stage-hound he’d once been but his eyes still held their brightness. He smiled as William approached.

“You’re the reporter then?” Houdini extended his hand.

The grip was strong and William returned it. “Yes. Bill Hopewell, *Graytown Gazette*.”

“Englishman?”

William nodded and sat. Houdini waved to the bartender, a misshapen, one-eyed dwarf in a stained apron. The dwarf dried off his hands with a towel and moved sluggishly towards them.

“I spent a great deal of time in England,” Houdini said. “Great country, great people.”

“Thank you, Mr. Houdini.”

The bartender reached their table, his one eye soaking in his newest customer. “What’ll it be, gov?”

William nodded towards Houdini’s empty glass. “The same.”

Houdini chuckled. “Water then, Bulsby.” He leaned in towards William as the dwarf moved away. “And call me Ehrich, William. Houdini was a stage name and there is no stage here.”

They sat in silence, the low voices from other tables providing a static buzz. The dwarf returned with two glasses of slightly brown water and Houdini laid a small, carved stick on the table. Most used coins here but some few elite carried the badge of a Fallen patron. Curiosity and dread danced slowly behind William’s eyes. A patron. For Houdini.

The dwarf nodded. “On the house of course.”

“Good man,” Houdini said. He put the stick in his pocket. “These come in handy.”

William pulled a travel-stained notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket and placed them before him on the table. He sipped the tepid water, grimacing as the slight taste of sulfur hit his tongue. “May I ask you some questions, Mr. Houdini?”

Houdini looked up. “Please. And again, call me Ehrich.”

William forced a weak smile. “Very well. Ehrich.” He paused. This was always the uncomfortable bit, the question he never wanted to ask. To him, it implied rudeness and a lack of compassion. Still, he had to ask: the inquiring minds clamored to know. “What brings you to Hell?”

Houdini barked a short laugh. “Direct, aren’t you, Bill?” He folded his hands and his eyes shone in the dimly lit tavern. “A burst appendix and an inflated ego.” William scribbled this down. “How about you, Bill?”

The question caught him off guard. No one asked, at least not in polite company. He felt an embarrassed flush rise to his face like an unexpected house-guest six o’clock of a Sunday morning. He cleared his voice, eyes focused on the paper before him. “The war. Artillery shell I think.”

“The Great War?”

“There are no great wars.” Suddenly his ears were full with the crash of rifles and the screams of dying men. His nose was filled with the stink of blood and smoke. He ventured a glance at Houdini. Sympathy etched the older man’s features.

“Sorry Bill. You’re absolutely correct.” Houdini grinned a weak grin. “If it helps at all, we won you know.”

“I know. It doesn’t.” He paused, took another drink. “You were a showman before.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Of sorts. A magician. An escape artist. A de-bunker of phonies. But that’s not important anymore.”

“And you intend to run for the Ear?”

“Yes. You and I, Bill.” The light came alive in Houdini’s eyes. His face shone. “Know anything about the Ear?”

“Michelangelo. Assignment of Grace. Those who speak into it, speak to... well, speak to... it’s bunk. Rubbish.”

Houdini nodded slowly. “Perhaps. But it is out there, waiting, at the edge of Hell itself. And I intend to say my bit into it.”

William forgot his note-taking and looked up. “Why in Hell would you do such a thing? Have you any idea what lives in those Wastelands? Have you – “

Houdini interrupted him with a wave of his hand. “I made a promise, Bill. I will keep that promise.”

“You... *we*... may never reach it. And if we do, it may be for nothing. And, regardless, we may never return to tell anyone.” He felt fear now and agitation, hungry hands grabbing at him.

“It doesn’t matter if I return.” Houdini’s eyes hardened. “It only matters that I go.” He raised his glass to his mouth and gulped. He stood, somehow towering larger than life despite his lack of height. “There will be much time for questions on the way. We leave at dawn.”

Deliberate in his step, Houdini strode from the room. And William sat for a long time after he left.

It took nearly a week to reach the Wasteland’s edge. The film crew waited for them there, a scattering of tents, two large trucks and a bullet-riddled biplane. Over the days and nights of walking, William had found an unexpected depth in his traveling companion along with answers to the questions. At night, in his tent, he scribbled his notes by candlelight, shaping a story that came so close to fiction that his spelling faltered and his pencils broke. Still, he pressed on, filling half of his notebook.

Surprisingly, he’d found similarities between them and that identification led to the beginnings of admiration. He himself had been the son of an Anglican priest; Houdini was the son of a rabbi. Both had committed themselves to a life of physical exercise. Both had written strange tales of fancy. At first, it had unsettled him, recalling that night long ago and the contempt they’d had for one another. But with time, that bled away.

Now, they stood on a rise, the film crew camped immediately below and the Wasteland stretching out towards a line of broken-toothed mountains. William raised a questioning eyebrow at Houdini’s smile. “What’s this about, Ehrich?”

Houdini chuckled. “I arranged it with His Lordship. It was really more of a suggestion but the old bugger jumped on it. Did you know that in all of Hell there are but three aeroplanes?”

William was not surprised. He hadn’t seen one since the War.

“I thought it would do nicely to capture the moment for posterity’s sake.”

A man in khaki saw them, barked orders, and waved. He walked quickly up the hill towards them, out of breath as he arrived.



“Ah,” he said. “There you are.” He ignored William, shoving his hand into Houdini’s and pumping it furiously. “Albert Maxwell the third.”

“Ehrich Weiss. And William Hopewell of the *Gazette*.”

The director glanced at William briefly, then shifted his attention back to his star. “No need for modesty. You are Harry Houdini.”

Houdini shrugged. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. We’ve all the necessary precautions. We’ll follow behind in the trucks, out of the way of course. We’ll use the plane to hop ahead, shoot the scenes, and back to camp before nightfall.”

“Precautions?” William knew a little about the Wastelands. The nights there belonged to the Shriekers and Howlers... the days belonged to the Abandoned.

“I’ll show you.” Maxwells turned and started down the hill. Shouldering their packs, the two travelers followed.

A mixed crew awaited. Several Hindis, a few Arabs and a scattering of Irish-looking scrawny men. Maxwell was American. The men looked up as they approached, then went back to their work. They were disassembling a vast array of vacuum tubes and unhooking wires from a gas generator.

Shock grabbed William as his memories played out the past. An electric pentacle, he realized. Something his imagination had cooked up for stories he’d written long ago. “Where did you get this?”

Maxwell shrugged. “It was provided. Along with these.” He uncovered a tarp on one of the trucks, then pried open a long wooden crate. It contained a dozen Enfield rifles. He opened another box and dug out a handful of shells. “Blessed by some Damned priest in Graytown.” He lowered his voice. “Doesn’t mean much, but it should be enough to stop a Howler.”

He saw the look that must have been on William’s face. Houdini saw it too. “Not for us, Bill. Part of the contract, I’m afraid.” He offered a reassuring, sympathetic smile. “We’ll be fine without them. Trust me.”

They spent the remainder of the day in camp, Houdini and Maxwell off to the side excitedly discussing logistics and filming techniques. They pitched their one-man tents on the edge of the Wasteland, struggling to sleep as the night desert came alive with unbearable noise.

In the morning, after a brief session in front of the camera, they set out alone.

True to his word, Maxwell and the cameraman flew ahead in the two-seater, landing, shooting film, leaving, returning and departing again as the sky grayed towards night. William lost track of how many trips were made, and gradually lost track of how many days had passed in this dead, shattered place. Somewhere behind, the caravan crawled slowly along. Some nights, he could see it glowing miles back.

Twilights, as they stopped to make camp, Houdini always drew away, mouth working silently as he etched signs and symbols into the hard-packed ground. William avoided asking where he’d learned the protective ward-making. The first night, he’d lain awake terrified as the screaming pummeled his ears and shook the tent. But the wards had held each night and the days had passed without incident or encounter.

Eventually, the mountains loomed above them, casting long shadows that overtook them as they trudged along. They could just make out the smallest speck of a gated cave when they encountered their first Abandoned. Only they didn’t know it at first.

A speck became a figure became a child, sitting alone with its head in its hands. The little boy looked up as they approached. His eyes were red from crying. He wore a tattered overcoat and knickers.

“Papa?”

Houdini took a step forward; William caught his arm. “Careful, Ehrich.”

He shot William an angry glance. “It’s a child, Bill.” Houdini moved closer and knelt before the boy.

William felt danger but didn’t know what to do with it. “It can’t be. No child could survive out here alone.” He swallowed, tasting the dust. “It’s bait. Or worse.”

Houdini ignored him and stretched a hand out to the boy. "What's your name? What are you doing here?"

The child's lip trembled. "I'm... lost." William saw something, a darkly intelligent light, behind the child's eyes. "My name is Mayer Weiss."

William saw Houdini flinch and then tense. "Mayer?"

The child began to change. Its mouth stretched and elongated, jagged teeth filling a gaping hole. The eyes became black and it lunged forward with a deep growl. It tackled Houdini, its claws grappling for a hold.

William couldn't move. He willed himself to act but his rebellious legs held fast. Houdini rolled in the sand, yelling, pushing and kicking at the creature.

Even in the burning Wasteland, he felt the temperature shift upwards. There was a dark flash and suddenly Ehrich lay still and alone. The creature had flown thirty feet to land heavily in the sand. Another flash and it began to shriek. Flash after flash, the Abandoned was torn apart and strewn onto the desert floor.

Fascinated, William forgot to prostrate himself. When it had finished, the Fallen glared at them, hissed disgust, and vanished.

William went to Houdini and offered him a hand up. "Are you okay?"

Houdini nodded, shaken, staring at the pieces of meat. "I wondered..." The words drifted off. He brushed off his clothes. "I *thought* it had been too easy."

William watched him without a word. A knot of dread grew in his stomach.

"They're protecting us," Houdini muttered. "As if They want us to succeed."

Yes, William thought. And he knew that no good could come of it.

The carved words above the gate were Latin.

"Broken dreams, eh?" Houdini said, smiling. "It's not far now, Bill. Not far at all." He pointed to the dark opening. "Just beyond the caves." He turned and smiled to the camera, giving a thumbs-up sign.

Maxwell nodded excitedly. "We'll see you

on the other side boys." He'd briefed them that morning. The caravan would stop here and they would make several trips flying gear over the mountains to set up a small camp. There would even be champagne.

Houdini handed Bill an electric torch. He clicked it on and its tongue of light probed the cave. The hair on his neck stood up. With a firm clap on the back, his companion brushed past and into the cave. William followed.

The difference in temperature was uncanny. Outside, the desert baked. Inside, coolness prevailed. The cavern stretched deep into the mountain, straight and wide enough for three to go abreast. They walked side by side, Houdini whistling a circus tune as they went.

Behind them, the iris of light gradually closed as they made their way.

"No broken dreams as yet," Houdini said.

William shrugged. He thought back to the relative ease of the wasteland crossing and the Fallen's intervention. "Maybe They've come ahead of us."

"Maybe." Houdini paused. "Did you hear that?"

William stopped as well and leaned forward. "No."

An hour later, the straight, broad cavern spilled into a massive room. Easily two dozen openings marked the opposite wall. Houdini rubbed his chin. "I *thought* it was too easy."

A drowsy fog settled onto William.

Then Houdini's eyes went wide. "Papa?" He moved towards one of the openings.

William caught his arm. "Ehrich?"

Panic laced Houdini's voice. "Surely you heard that?"

He shook his head. He'd heard nothing. At first.

Then he heard the crying from another opening at the far end of the room. He turned towards it, the voice familiar. He opened and closed his mouth, then turned back to where Houdini had stood. Houdini was already disappearing into the opening, following a voice that William could not hear.

"Oh William, why?" the distant voice said

between sobs. He turned away from his companion.

“Mother?” He broke into a trot.

“Oh William.”

He ran blindly, the light bouncing over the narrowing walls as he followed the twisting and turning passageway. After what felt like hours, he stumbled into a small chamber. His mother knelt in the center, hands folded imploringly, clutching a crumpled letter.

“Oh my boy. My precious boy.”

“Mother?” He stopped and crouched beside her, reaching for her. “I’m here.” Somewhere in the back of his mind a nagging tickle tried to tell him that this could not be his mother. But he could see her, hear her voice, smell the lavender soap from her skin.

She looked up at him. “You can’t be here. You’re dead.”

As he reached for her, she pulled away. “Mother, I’m here.”

She thrust the letter under his nose. “No. Dead. It’s all right here. You couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?” She sneered and then spat at him, the warm, dry phlegm splattering his cheek.

Frustration tightened his throat in preparation for tears. “No Mother. I’m...” Another voice, further away, called to him and something outside of himself forced him to his feet.

“My Lord,” the voice said, “Why have you forsaken me?”

“Father?”

“He’s dead too,” the old woman spat.

“Dead and in Hell, God Damn him.”

As he raced from the chamber, she cackled wordlessly after him.

He found his father in another room, trying to drink dust from a hollow in the floor. “Son? Is that you?”

“Father, what are you doing here?”

The old man looked up. His clergy collar hung open at the neck of his ripped black shirt. “You could’ve saved me.”

William moved closer but another voice

caught him. The frustration became despair and the despair vented itself in his cry. “No.”

The voice was that of his wife. Then another joined it. And another. Until it seemed that a multitude surrounded him. The voices coalesced into a litany of his misdeeds and good intentions gone wrong, every dream or hope another had attached to him, every disappointed expectation. He fell onto his side and clutched his head.

One more voice joined the choir. A voice like nails on slate. “Enough.”

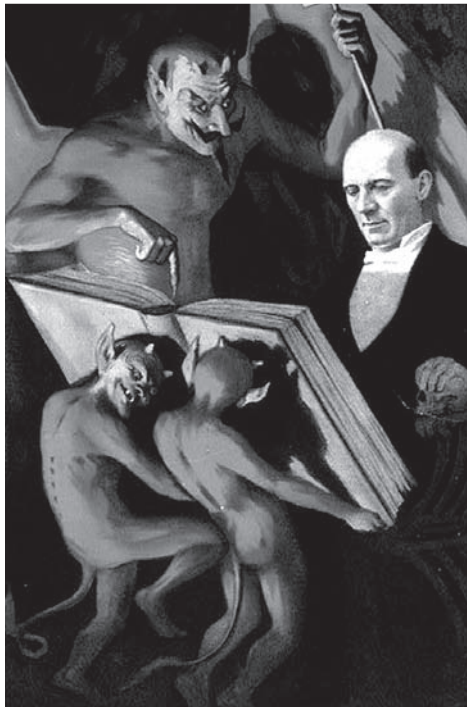
He sucked in hot air and fought to control his breathing. He could not force his eyes open.

The voice spoke again. “You are the one called Hodgson.”

The heat became unbearable. A rough hand grabbed at his arm and tore it away from his face.

“You will speak.”

William finally looked. The Fallen stood over him glaring down, its black eyes burning into him. “Y-yes,” he whispered. “I am Hodgson.”



The creature nodded. "Your time is nearly come. On the third day you will bind the one called Houdini. Is the meaning of this clear?"

William sat up, cowering. Memories of that stage long ago leaped back to him. The Fallen anticipated his question.

"This binding will hold. This is what Hell has chosen for him."

He swallowed. He wanted to say no, wanted to strike back, to cry out to some God for deliverance and bring down this demon. He swallowed again, trembling with fear.

The Fallen dropped a small black box. It landed with a thud and the creature turned its back. "When you have bound him, this will be yours."

William took the box and fumbled it open. The pen inside was blindingly beautiful, even in the dim cave. It shone with a sharp clarity like nothing he'd ever seen in this place and he knew in a moment that it was not *of* this place. He stroked it, feeling its power, and knew that with this pen his curse would be lifted. With this pen, Hell could become Heaven for him.

"Close the box. I can not bear the blasphemy it contains."

He closed it and the Fallen turned, scooping it up.

"Is the meaning of this clear?"

William licked his lips and nodded. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again he sat alone and the caves were silent but for Houdini's sobs somewhere far ahead.

They saw the camp first, three tents pitched near the biplane. Two figures worked at connecting the electric pentacle. Twilight was not far off.

William had found Houdini and dragged him from the caves two days before. Neither man spoke of what they had encountered, but Houdini showed it in his eyes. They had been bright and dauntless before. Now, loss swam in them from time to time. Silence settled between the two more frequently as they neared the end of their journey.

Now with the camp in sight, Houdini grinned. They stopped, catching their

breath. "There it is, Bill. By God, there it is." He pointed.

The desert became scrub and then transformed into a patch of bright green. Centered in the lawn, a large object sparkled and threw back light.

The horizon stood close here at the edge of the Ring. Behind them, the mountains crawled upward. Ahead of them, the Wasteland evaporated into a sheet of blank gray just past the Ear. This, William knew, was the edge of Hell itself.

He couldn't share Houdini's joy. Tomorrow would be the third day and since the caves, he'd realized exactly why their journey had been so easy.

They entered the camp and the small crew applauded as the camera rolled on. Maxwell broke out a case of champagne and they drank it warm from the bottles.

Houdini raised his bottle in the direction of the lawn and its large crystalline ear. The light had already gone but they'd seen it, massive and shining, set into the ground and leaning slightly so that one could climb into it and whisper homeward. "Tomorrow at first light," he said loudly.

Always the showman, William thought. Somehow it made him feel better about what he must do.

He slept fitfully, awakening again and again in the tent. At dawn, he climbed into his clothes to meet Houdini and the camera crew outside. The filming commenced without a word and Houdini turned towards the grassy plain. The ear, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, caught pink light and winked at them from the center of the plain.

It's beautiful, William thought. He believed the stories now. The sight of it easily persuaded him.

Houdini started towards the grass, then stopped. A large stake had been driven into the desert floor. Near it, the Fallen stood grinning. Houdini took a step back and in a flash, the Fallen had gripped his arms, holding him tightly.

"Bind him, Hodgson." Its voice was a hiss.



Houdini struggled, then recognized the name. “Hodgson?” He twisted, his face going red with fury and effort. His eyes locked on William’s and went cold. “*You.*”

Someone shoved chains into his hands and the Fallen dragged Houdini to the stake. William began binding him just as he had done on that Blackburn Stage so many years before. Houdini spat and bit, writhing and kicking.

“I should’ve known. Hodgson, you bastard.”

William said nothing and did his best to avoid the showman’s eyes. The accusations they shouted were louder than Houdini’s words. In ten minutes, the strong man was bound, facing the grass and the ear. Maxwell grinned, the crew laughed and pointed. The camera rolled on.

Houdini howled.

The Fallen dropped the box at William’s feet. He picked it up, turned his back on them all, and returned to the tent.

He wrote all day and into the night, nearly oblivious to Houdini’s cries. Gradually, the cursing had become pleading. At one point, William could have sworn he’d invoked the faith of both their fathers, but then the pen grabbed him and dragged him back into his passion.

The stories and poems unfolded like magic onto the page, flowing out in ways they never had during his life. He wrote until the cramping of his hand forced him to stop, and then, he read what he had written.

The stories and poems weaved a tapestry that blended into one monumental message that Hell could not contain, and William’s heart could not contain it either. He broke into tears and threw the pen away from him. He grabbed up the strewn papers from his notebook in fistfuls and shredded them.

He stood, grabbed up the pen, and strode into the early morning. He could feel determination and rage hardening his face and stiffening his limbs as he walked towards the Ear.

Houdini hung limply by his chains. He raised his head weakly. “It’s okay, Bill.”

William ignored him. The Fallen stood nearby. Clutching the pen, William approached. “I’ve changed my mind,” William said.

It hissed. “Take that obscenity from my sight,” it said, waving the pen away, eyes squinting to avoid the golden glare of light from its surface.

Without a word, William sprung forward, bringing the pen up and plunging it into the Fallen’s white chest. It shrieked as the sliver of heaven slid into its skin and black filth plumed out like a swarm of gnats. The Fallen clutched at it and William kept his grip as he came down on top of the demon.

Behind him, Houdini’s voice took on new life. “The grass, Bill, by God in Heaven, the grass!”

William’s body translated the words before his mind could. Hand firmly on the pen, driving it deeper, arms locked around the Fallen, he scrambled with his feet to drag the creature onto the lawn. It screamed and bucked against him, then melted into dust. William lay still, panting, feeling the cool of the grass enfold him.

He sat up. Maxwell and his crew stood in silence. Standing, he picked up the golden pen.

“I could use that,” Houdini said with a tired grin.

He took it to him and crouched beside him while the escape artist did his trick. He watched as Ehrich took the pen apart by touch, stripping it down to its basic parts before selecting the piece best suited for picking the locks that held him.

The film crew continued shooting.

When Houdini finished, he stood, rubbing his wrists. He winked at William. “I’m glad you figured it out, Bill.”

William nodded. The tapestry within the stories and poems he’d written. “It was never about the Ear.”

“No.”

Maxwell stepped forward. His face looked pale. Before he could speak, Houdini pounced and spun him into a human shield. “The rifles?” he asked.

At last they approached the Ear. Now armed, William and Ehrich cautiously watched the lone cameraman that followed. They had tied the others up.

"It's too big of news to not film it," Houdini had said, giving in to Maxwell's pleas despite William's misgivings.

The ear stood before them now and Houdini leaned his rifle against its base. Then, he leapt into the air and caught the rim, pulling himself up and onto the crystalline lobe. He climbed a bit, then looked down. "I think this is it," he said. His voice carried perfectly.

William put his attention back on the cameraman while Houdini spoke slowly above him.

"The message I want to sent back to my wife is..." Houdini paused, then spoke clearly and firmly: "Rosabelle. Answer. Tell. Pray. Answer. Look. Tell. Answer. Answer. Tell."

He climbed down. The tears ran freely down his face. "You're sure you have nothing to say?"

William nodded. "I'm sure."

They left the cameraman untied and climbed into the waiting plane.

"Now for my last escape." Houdini re-

leased the brake and the sent them bouncing towards the expanse of gray ahead. William heard Maxwell shouting for the single man standing to keep shooting and then the voice was lost in the roar of the engine.

They lifted into the air and were swallowed by nothingness.

They flew in silence, flew on for hours long after the fuel became vapor. A random line of verse from his past floated to the surface of William's mind. *Into the blank where life is hurled.* He didn't realize he'd said it aloud until Houdini asked.

"Something I wrote a long time ago," he shouted.

Now the engine coughed and sputtered. Now the plane shuddered and bucked in the wind. Now the gray around them took on tinges of blue. Now a green cliff soared ahead of them and two waiting figures waved. A rabbi and a priest, he knew, watching their prodigal sons come Home.

Houdini laughed. William laughed with him.

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# TIDELINE

By Elizabeth Bear

CHALCEDONY WASN'T BUILT FOR crying. She didn't have it in her, not unless her tears were cold tapered glass droplets annealed by the inferno heat that had crippled her.

Such tears as that might slide down her skin over melted sensors to plink unfeeling on the sand. And if they had, she would have scooped them up, with all the other battered pretties, and added them to the wealth of trash jewels that swung from the nets reinforcing her battered carapace.

They would have called her salvage, if there were anyone left to salvage her. But she was the last of the war machines, a three-legged oblate teardrop as big as a main battle tank, two big grabs and one fine manipulator folded like a spider's palps beneath the turreted head that finished her pointed end, her polyceramic armour spiderwebbed like shatterproof glass. Unhelmed by her remote masters, she limped along the beach, dragging one fused limb. She was nearly derelict.

The beach was where she met Belvedere. Butterfly coquinas unearched by retreating

breakers squirmed into wet grit under Chalcedony's trailing limb. One of the rear pair, it was less of a nuisance on packed sand. It worked all right as a pivot, and as long as she stayed off rocks, there were no obstacles to drag it over.

As she struggled along the tideline, she became aware of someone watching. She didn't raise her head. Her chassis was equipped with targeting sensors which locked automatically on the ragged figure crouched by a weathered rock. Her optical input was needed to scan the tangle of seaweed and driftwood, Styrofoam and sea glass that marked high tide.

He watched her all down the beach, but he was unarmed, and her algorithms didn't deem him a threat.

Just as well. She liked the weird flat-topped sandstone boulder he crouched beside.

The next day, he watched again. It was a good day; she found a moonstone, some rock crystal, a bit of red-orange pottery and some sea glass worn opalescent by the tide.

“Whatcha picken up?”

“Shipwreck beads,” Chalcedony answered. For days, he’d been creeping closer, until he’d begun following behind her like the seagulls, scabbling the coquinas harrowed up by her dragging foot into a patched mesh bag. Sustenance, she guessed, and indeed he pulled one of the tiny molluscs from the bag and produced a broken-bladed folding knife from somewhere to prize it open with. Her sensors painted the knife pale colours. A weapon, but not a threat to her.

Deft enough – he flicked, sucked, and tossed the shell away in under three seconds – but that couldn’t be much more than a morsel of meat. A lot of work for very small return.

He was bony as well as ragged, and small for a human. Perhaps young. She thought he’d ask what shipwreck, and she would gesture vaguely over the bay, where the city had been, and say there were many. But he surprised her.

“Whatcha gonna do with them?” He wiped his mouth on a sandy paw, the broken knife projecting carelessly from the bottom of his fist.

“When I get enough, I’m going to make necklaces.” She spotted something under a tangle of the algae called dead man’s fingers, a glint of light, and began the laborious process of lowering herself to reach it, compensating by math for her malfunctioning gyroscopes.

The presumed-child watched avidly. “Nuh uh,” he said. “You can’t make a necklace outta that.”

“Why not?” She levered herself another decimeter down, balancing against the weight of her fused limb. She did not care to fall.

“I seed what you pick up. They’s all different.”

“So?” she asked, and managed another few centimetres. Her hydraulics whined. Someday, those hydraulics or her fuel cells would fail and she’d be stuck this way, a statue corroded by salt air and the sea, and the tide would roll in and roll over her. Her carapace was cracked, no longer water-tight.

“They’s not all beads.”

Her manipulator brushed aside the dead man’s fingers. She uncovered the treasure, a bit of blue-gray stone carved in the shape of a fat, merry man. It had no holes. Chalcedony balanced herself back upright and turned the figurine in the light. The stone was structurally sound.

She extruded a hair-fine diamond-tipped drill from the opposite manipulator and drilled a hole through the figurine, top to bottom. Then she threaded him on a twist of wire, looped the ends, work-hardened the loops, and added him to the garland of beads swinging against her disfigured chassis.

“So?”

The presumed-child brushed the little Buddha with his fingertip, setting it swinging against shattered ceramic plate. She levered herself up again, out of his reach. “I’s Belvedere,” he said.

“Hello,” Chalcedony said. “I’m Chalcedony.”

By sunset when the tide was lowest he scampered chattering in her wake, darting between flocking gulls to scoop up coquinas-by-the-fistful, which he rinsed in the surf before devouring raw. Chalcedony more or less ignored him as she activated her floods, concentrating their radiance along the tideline. A few dragging steps later, another treasure caught her eye. It was a twist of chain with a few bright beads caught on it – glass, with scraps of gold and silver foil embedded in their twists. Chalcedony initiated the laborious process of retrieval –

Only to halt as Belvedere jumped in front of her, grabbed the chain in a grubby broken-nailed hand, and snatched it up. Chalcedony locked in position, nearly overbalancing. She was about to reach out to snatch the treasure away from the child and knock him into the sea when he rose up on tiptoe and held it out to her, straining over his head. The flood lights cast his shadow black on the sand, illuminated each thread of his hair and eyebrows in stark relief.

“It’s easier if I get that for you,” he said, as her fine manipulator closed tenderly on the tip of the chain.



She lifted the treasure to examine it in the floods. A good long segment, seven centimetres, four jewel-toned shiny beads. Her head creaked when she raised it, corrosion showering from the joints.

She hooked the chain onto the netting wrapped around her carapace. "Give me your bag," she said.

Belvedere's hand went to the soggy net full of raw bivalves dripping down his naked leg. "My bag?"

"Give it to me." Chalcedony drew herself up, akilter because of the ruined limb but still two and a half meters taller than the child. She extended a manipulator, and from some disused file dredged up a protocol for dealing with civilian humans. "Please."

He fumbled at the knot with rubbery fingers, tugged it loose from his rope belt, and held it out to her. She snagged it on a manipulator and brought it up. A sample revealed that the weave was cotton rather than nylon, so she folded it in her two larger manipulators and gave the contents a low-wattage microwave pulse.

She shouldn't. It was a drain on her power cells, which she had no means to recharge, and she had a task to complete.

She shouldn't – but she did.

Steam rose from her claws and the coquinas popped open, roasting in their own juices and the moisture of the seaweed with which he'd lined the net. Carefully, she swung the bag back to him, trying to preserve the fluids.

"Caution," she urged. "It's hot."

He took the bag gingerly and flopped down to sit crosslegged at her feet. When he tugged back the seaweed, the coquinas lay like tiny jewels – pale orange, rose, yellow, green and blue – in their nest of glass-green Ulva, sea lettuce. He tasted one cautiously, and then began to slurp with great abandon, discarding shells in every direction.

"Eat the algae, too," Chalcedony told him. "It is rich in important nutrients."

When the tide came in, Chalcedony retreated up the beach like a great hunched crab with

five legs amputated. She was beetle-backed under the moonlight, her treasures swinging and rustling on her netting, clicking one another like stones shivered in a palm.

The child followed.

"You should sleep," Chalcedony said, as Belvedere settled beside her on the high, dry crescent of beach under towering mud cliffs, where the waves wouldn't lap.

He didn't answer, and her voice fuzzed and furred before clearing when she spoke again. "You should climb up off the beach. The cliffs are unstable. It is not safe beneath them."

Belvedere hunkered closer, lower lip protruding. "You stay down here." "I have armour. And I cannot climb." She thumped her fused leg on the sand, rocking her body forward and back on the two good legs to manage it.

"But your armour's broke."

"That doesn't matter. You must climb." She picked Belvedere up with both grabs and raised him over her head. He shrieked; at first she feared she'd damaged him, but the cries resolved into laughter before she set him down on a slanted ledge that would bring him to the top of the cliff.

She lit it with her floods. "Climb," she said, and he climbed.

And returned in the morning.

Belvedere stayed ragged, but with Chalcedony's help he waxed plumper. She snared and roasted seabirds for him, taught him how to construct and maintain fires, and ransacked her extensive databases for hints on how to keep him healthy as he grew – sometimes almost visibly, fractions of a millimetre a day. She researched and analysed sea vegetables and hectored him into eating them, and he helped her reclaim treasures her manipulators could not otherwise grasp. Some shipwreck beads were hot, and made Chalcedony's radiation detectors tick over. They were no threat to her, but for the first time she discarded them. She had a human ally; her program demanded she sustain him in health.

She told him stories. Her library was vast – and full of war stories and stories about sailing ships and starships, which he liked best for some inexplicable reason. Catharsis, she thought, and told him again of Roland, and King Arthur, and Honour Harrington, and Napoleon Bonaparte, and Horatio Hornblower and Captain Jack Aubrey. She projected the words on a monitor as she recited them, and – faster than she would have imagined – he began to mouth them along with her.

So the summer ended.

By the equinox, she had collected enough memorabilia. Shipwreck jewels still washed up and Belvedere still brought her the best of them, but Chalcedony settled beside that twisted flat-topped sandstone rock and arranged her treasures atop it. She spun salvaged brass through a die to make wire, threaded beads on it, and forged links which she strung into garlands.

It was a learning experience. Her aesthetic sense was at first undeveloped, requiring her to make and unmake many dozens of bead combinations to find a pleasing one. Not only must form and colour be balanced, but there were structural difficulties. First the weights were unequal, so the chains hung crooked. Then links kinked and snagged and had to be redone.

She worked for weeks. Memorials had been important to the human allies, though she had never understood the logic of it. She could not build a tomb for her colleagues, but the same archives that gave her the stories

Belvedere lapped up as a cat laps milk gave her the concept of mourning jewellery. She had no physical remains of her allies, no scraps of hair or cloth, but surely the shipwreck jewels would suffice for a treasure?

The only quandary was who would wear the jewellery. It should go to an heir, someone who held fond memories of the deceased. And Chalcedony had records of the next of kin, of course. But she had no way to know if any survived, and if they did no way to reach them.

At first, Belvedere stayed close, trying to tempt her into excursions and explorations. Chalcedony remained resolute, however. Not only were her power cells dangerously low, but with the coming of winter her ability to utilize solar power would be even more limited. And with winter the storms would come, and she would no longer be able to evade the ocean.

She was determined to complete this last task before she failed.

Belvedere began to range without her, to snare his own birds and bring them back to the driftwood fire for roasting. This was positive; he needed to be able to maintain himself. At night, however, he returned to sit beside her, to clamber onto the flat-topped rock to sort beads and hear her stories.

The same thread she worked over and over with her grabs and fine manipulators – the duty of the living to remember the fallen with honour – was played out in the war stories she still told him, though now she'd finished with fiction and history and related him her own experiences.



She told him about Emma Percy rescuing that kid up near Savannah, and how Private Michaels was shot drawing fire for Sergeant Kay Patterson when the battle robots were decoyed out of position in a skirmish near Seattle.

Belvedere listened, and surprised her by proving he could repeat the gist, if not the exact words. His memory was good, if not as good as a machine's.

One day when he had gone far out of sight down the beach, Chalcedony heard Belvedere screaming.

She had not moved in days. She hunkered on the sand at an awkward angle, her frozen limb angled down the beach, her necklaces in progress on the rock that served as her impromptu work bench.

Bits of stone and glass and wire scattered from the rock top as she heaved herself onto her unfused limbs. She thrashed upright on her first attempt, surprising herself, and tottered for a moment unsteadily, lacking the stabilising of long-failed gyroscopes.

When Belvedere shouted again, she almost overset.

Climbing was out of the question, but Chalcedony could still run. Her fused limb plowed a furrow in the sand behind her and the tide was coming in, forcing her to splash through corroding sea water.

She barrelled around the rocky prominence that Belvedere had disappeared behind in time to see him knocked to the ground by two larger humans, one of whom had a club raised over its head and the other of which was holding Belvedere's shabby net bag. Belvedere yelped as the club connected with his thigh. Chalcedony did not dare use her microwave projectors.

But she had other weapons, including a pinpoint laser and a chemical-propellant firearm suitable for sniping operations. Enemy humans were soft targets. These did not even have body armour.

She buried the bodies on the beach, for it was

her program to treat enemy dead with respect, following the protocols of war. Belvedere was in no immediate danger of death once she had splinted his leg and treated his bruises, but she judged him too badly injured to help. The sand was soft and amenable to scooping, anyway, though there was no way to keep the bodies above water. It was the best she could manage.

After she had finished, she transported Belvedere back to their rock and began collecting her scattered treasures.

The leg was sprained and bruised, not broken, and some perversity connected to the injury made him even more restlessly inclined to push his boundaries once he partially recovered. He was on his feet within a week, leaning on crutches and dragging a leg as stiff as Chalcedony's. As soon as the splint came off, he started ranging even further afield. His new limp barely slowed him, and he stayed out nights. He was still growing, shooting up, almost as tall as a Marine now, and ever more capable of taking care of himself. The incident with the raiders had taught him caution.

Meanwhile, Chalcedony elaborated her funeral necklaces. She must make each one worthy of a fallen comrade, and she was slowed now by her inability to work through the nights. Rescuing Belvedere had cost her more carefully hoarded energy, and she could not power her floods if she meant to finish before her cells ran dry. She could see by moonlight, with deadly clarity, but her low-light and thermal eyes were of no use when it came to balancing colour against colour.

There would be forty-one necklaces, one for each member of her platoon-that-was, and she would not excuse shoddy craftsmanship.

No matter how fast she worked, it was a race against sun and tide.

The fortieth necklace was finished in October while the days grew short. She began the forty-first – the one for her chief operator Platoon Sergeant Patterson, the one with the gray-blue Buddha at the bottom – before sunset.

She had not seen Belvedere in several days, but that was acceptable. She would not finish the necklace tonight.

His voice woke her from the quiescence in which she waited the sun. "Chalcedony?"

Something cried as she came awake. Infant, she identified, but the warm shape in his arms was not an infant. It was a dog, a young dog, a German shepherd like the ones teamed with the handlers that had sometimes worked with Company L. The dogs had never minded her, but some of the handlers had been frightened, though they would not admit it. Sergeant Patterson had said to one of them, Oh, Chase is just pretty much a big attack dog herself, and had made a big show of rubbing Chalcedony behind her telescopic sights, to the sound of much laughter.

The young dog was wounded. Its injuries bled warmth across its hind leg. "Hello, Belvedere," Chalcedony said.

"Found a puppy." He kicked his ragged blanket flat so he could lay the dog down.

"Are you going to eat it?"

"Chalcedony!" he snapped, and covered the animal protectively with his arms. "S`hurt."

She contemplated. "You wish me to tend to it?"

He nodded, and she considered. She would need her lights, energy, irreplaceable stores. Antibiotics and coagulants and surgical supplies, and the animal might die anyway. But dogs were valuable; she knew the handlers held them in great esteem, even greater than Sergeant Patterson's esteem for Chalcedony. And in her library, she had files on veterinary medicine.

She flipped on her floods and accessed the files.

She finished before morning, and before her cells ran dry. Just barely. When the sun was up and young dog was breathing comfortably, the gash along its haunch sewn closed and its bloodstream saturated with antibiotics, she turned back to the last necklace. She

would have to work quickly, and Sergeant Patterson's necklace contained the most fragile and beautiful beads, the ones Chalcedony had been most concerned with breaking and so had saved for last, when she would be most experienced.

Her motions grew slower as the day wore on, more laborious. The sun could not feed her enough to replace the expenditures of the night before. But bead linked into bead, and the necklace grew – bits of pewter, of pottery, of glass and mother of pearl. And the chalcedony Buddha, because Sergeant Patterson had been Chalcedony's operator.

When the sun approached its zenith, Chalcedony worked faster, benefiting from a burst of energy. The young dog slept on in her shade, having wolfed the scraps of bird Belvedere gave it, but Belvedere climbed the rock and crouched beside her pile of finished necklaces.

"Who's this for?" he asked, touching the slack length draped across her manipulator.

"Kay Patterson," Chalcedony answered, adding a greenish-brown pottery bead mottled like a combat uniform.

"Sir Kay," Belvedere said. His voice was changing, and sometimes it abandoned him completely in the middle of words, but he got that phrase out entire. "She was King Arthur's horse-master, and his adopted brother, and she kept his combat robots in the stable," he said, proud of his recall.

"They were different Kays," she reminded. "You will have to leave soon." She looped another bead onto the chain, closed the link, and work-hardened the metal with her fine manipulator.

"You can't leave the beach. You can't climb."

Idly, he picked up a necklace, Rodale's, and stretched it between his hands so the beads caught the light. The links clinked softly.

Belvedere sat with her as the sun descended and her motions slowed. She worked almost entirely on solar power now. With night, she would become quiescent again. When the storms came, the waves would roll over her,



and then even the sun would not awaken her again. "You must go," she said, as her grabs stilled on the almost-finished chain. And then she lied and said, "I do not want you here."

"Who's this'n for?" he asked. Down on the beach, the young dog lifted its head and whined. "Garner," she answered, and then she told him about Garner, and Antony, and Javez, and Rodriguez, and Patterson, and White, and Wosczyzna, until it was dark enough that her voice and her vision failed.

In the morning, he put Patterson's completed chain into Chalcedony's grabs. He must have worked on it by firelight through the darkness. "Couldn't harden the links," he said, as he smoothed them over her claws.

Silently, she did that, one by one. The young dog was on its feet, limping, nosing around the base of the rock and barking at the waves, the birds, a scuttling crab. When Chalcedony had finished, she reached out and draped the necklace around Belvedere's shoulders while he held very still. Soft fur downed his cheeks. The male Marines had always scraped theirs smooth, and the women didn't grow facial hair.

"You said that was for Sir Kay." He lifted the chain in his hands and studied the way the glass and stones caught the light.

"It's for somebody to remember her," Chalcedony said. She didn't correct him this time. She picked up the other forty necklaces. They were heavy, all together. She wondered if Belvedere could carry them all. "So remember her. Can you remember which one is whose?"

One at a time, he named them, and one at a time she handed them to him. Rogers, and Rodale, and van Metier, and Percy. He spread a second blanket out – and where had he gotten a second blanket? Maybe the same place he'd gotten the dog – and laid them side by side on the navy blue wool. They sparkled.

"Tell me the story about Rodale," she said, brushing her grab across the necklace. He did, sort of, with half of Roland-and-Oliver mixed in. It was a pretty good story anyway, the way he told it. Inasmuch as she was a fit judge.

"Take the necklaces," she said. "Take them. They're mourning jewellery. Give them to people and tell them the stories. They should go to people who will remember and honour the dead."

"Where'd I find all these people?" he asked, sullenly, crossing his arms. "Ain't on the beach."

"No," she said, "they are not. You'll have to go look for them."

But he wouldn't leave her. He and the dog ranged up and down the beach as the weather chilled. Her sleeps grew longer, deeper, the low angle of the sun not enough to awaken her except at noon. The storms came, and because the table rock broke the spray, the salt water stiffened her joints but did not – yet – corrode her processor. She no longer moved and rarely spoke even in daylight, and Belvedere and the young dog used her carapace and the rock for shelter, the smoke of his fires blackening her belly.

She was hoarding energy.



By mid-November, she had enough, and she waited and spoke to Belvedere when he returned with the young dog from his rambling. “You must go,” she said, and when he opened his mouth to protest, she added “It is time you went on errantry.”

His hand went to Patterson’s necklace, which he wore looped twice around his neck, under his ragged coat. He had given her back the others, but that one she had made a gift of. “Errantry?”

Creaking, powdered corrosion grating from her joints, she lifted the necklaces off her head. “You must find the people to whom these belong.”

He deflected her words with a jerk of his hand. “They’s all dead.”

“The warriors are dead,” she said. “But the stories aren’t. Why did you save the young dog?”

He licked his lips, and touched Patterson’s necklace again. “Cause you saved me. And you told me the stories. About good fighters and bad fighters. And so, see, Percy woulda

saved the dog, right? And so would Hazel-rah.”

Emma Percy, Chalcedony was reasonably sure, would have saved the dog if she could have. And Kevin Michaels would have saved the kid. She held the remaining necklaces out. “Who’s going to protect the other children?”

He stared, hands twisting before him. “You can’t climb.”

“I can’t. You must do this for me. Find people to remember the stories. Find people to tell about my platoon. I won’t survive the winter.” Inspiration struck. “So I give you this quest, Sir Belvedere.”

The chains hung flashing in the wintry light, the sea combed gray and tired behind them. “What kinda people?”

“People who would help a child,” she said. “Or a wounded dog. People like a platoon should be.”

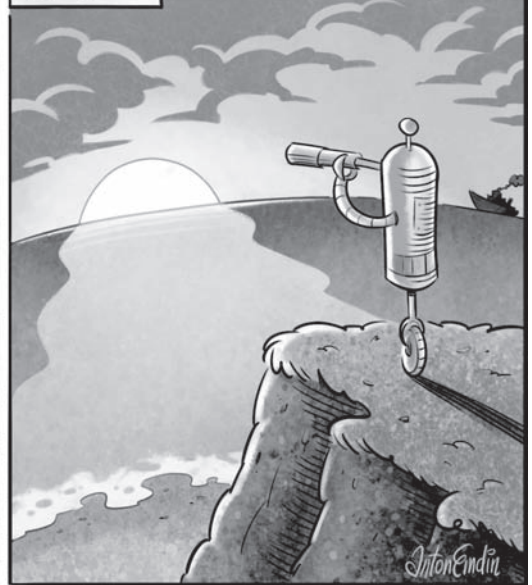
He paused. He reached out, stroked the chains, let the beads rattle. He crooked both hands, and slid them into the necklaces up to the elbows, taking up her burden.

# Weather Forecasting

then...



now...



Anton Emdin



# VINEGAR PEACE (OR, THE WRONG-WAY, USED-ADULT ORPHANAGE)

By Michael Bishop

ON THURSDAY EVENING, YOUR DOORbell rings. Two small men in off-white shirts and black trousers, like missionaries of a dubious religious sect, stand outside your threshold giving you scary pitying looks.

Are you Ms K——? they ask.

When you assent, they say they've come to transport you to the Vinegar Peace Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage thirty minutes north of your current residence in a life-help cottage of the Sour Thicket Sanatorium, where your father died seven years ago.

But you don't wish to be transported anywhere.

The smaller of the two small men, seizing your arm above the elbow, says that an *order* has come down and that they must establish you, before 8:30PM, in a used-adult orphanage – upon penalty of demotion for them and unappealable eviction for you. If you don't cooperate, they will ransack your cottage and throw you out on the street with your musty belongings.

Why now? you ask. Neither stooge manifests a glimmer of humanity. After all,

you've been an *orphan* – as they insist on terming your condition – since you were a vigorous fifty-nine. They should show some respect.

The man holding your bicep smirks. That's why they call it a *Wrong-Way; Used-Adult Orphanage*, he says. You get into one not because you've lost a parent. Your last living child has to die.

Jesus, blurts the other man. That goes against all our training.

You say nothing. You feel as if someone has opened a trap in your stomach and shoved in a package of wet cement. You sink to your knees, but not all the way because the smaller small man refuses to release your arm.

You feel you've just climbed twelve sets of stairs. Someone has injected stale helium into your head, inflating it to beach-ball size.

*O God*, you cry: *O God, O God*.

Even to yourself you sound like a scared puppy, not a woman. Your only living offspring, one of only two who bore your genes, has just died in the interminable War on Worldwide Wickedness, probably in a snowy province of R—.

Because Elise and her earlier-lost brother died childless years after Mick, your husband, passed away, you have passed from a state of natural, late-life orphanhood to the sad, wrong-way orphanacy of the issue-shorn. Only someone similarly bereft can know your devastation.

Put your stuff in two plastic duffels, the cruel stooge says: Only two.

Please don't make me leave my home, you beg of him. Just give me a knock-me-out so I can die.

Your lightheadedness persists: your dead daughter swims before your eyes like a lovely human swan, but the rock in your stomach keeps you from taking pleasure in her shock-generated image.

Against your will, you must say goodbye to Elise forever, as you once did to Mick and later to your darling son Brice.

Eventually, despite your protests, you cram clothing and toiletries into a duffel bag and

some file discs and image cubes into another. Then the cruel stooge and his only slightly kinder partner escort you out to the van for transport to Vinegar Peace.

Mr Weevil, director of this Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage looks maybe twenty-six, with slicked-back hair you've seen before on leading men in old motion pictures, but he greets you personally in the rotunda-like foyer, points you to a chair, and triggers a video introduction to the place. His head, projected on a colossal screen at gallery level, spiels in a monotone:

*The death of your last surviving child (good riddance) in the War on Worldwide Wickedness makes you too valuable (unfit) to continue residing among the elder denizens (constipated old fools) of your life-help cottage (costly codger dump). So we've brought you here to shelter (warehouse) you until our Creator calls you to an even more glorious transcendent residency above (blah-blah, blah-blah).*

The talking head of Mr Weevil – whose living self watches *with* you, his hands clasped above his coccyx – remarks that you can stroll inside the orphanage anywhere, but that you can *never* leave – on pain of solo confinement (for a first violation) or instant annihilation (for any later misstep).

The building has many mansions (rooms), viz., 1) Cold Room, 2) Arboretum, 3) Mail Room, 4) Guest Suite, 5) Chantry, 6) Sleep Bay, 7) Refectory, 8) Furnace Room, and 9) Melancholiarium. Orphans will, and *should*, visit all nine rooms at some point, for every room will disclose its significance to its visitors, and these elucidations will charge any resident's stay with meaning.

*Don't be alarmed*, the director's talking head concludes, *if I haven't mentioned a room you view as necessary. The existence of restrooms, closets, offices, kitchens, servant quarters, attics, basements, secret nooks, and so forth, goes without saying.*

A young woman dressed like the men who snatched you from your lodgings takes your elbow – gently – and escorts you from the rotunda. And as Mr Weevil's body glides



smoothly away, his face fades from the gallery-level screen.

Where are we going? you ask the woman.

She smiles as she might at an infant mouthing a milk bubble.

Where are the other residents? Will I have my own room?

That the director included a dormitory in his list of mansions suggests otherwise, but you have to ask. Still, you have begun to think you're in a reeducation camp of some sort. Your stomach tightens even as you tighten your hold on the duffels, which now feel as heavy as old lead sash weights.

*Miss*, you plead. Why am I here? Where are we going?

She stops, stares you in the eye, and says: Oldsters who've lost children in the war often make trouble. Hush. It isn't personal. We're sheltering all orphaned adults in places like this, for everybody's benefit. You'll meet other orphans soon, but now Mr Weevil'd like you to visit the refrigorium.

*What?*

The Cold Room. Relax, Ms K——. It's nice. It's a surprise, sort of.

It's a surprise, all right, and no *sort of* about it. Your escort has abandoned you inside the Cold Room, which drones like a refrigerator but sparkles all about you as if you were its moving hub. Ice coats the walls in ripples and scales, each its own faintly glowing color.

Effigies of frozen liquid occupy shallow niches about the walls, and you soon find that three of these, interleaved with simulacra of unfamiliar persons, commemorate your dead: Mick, Brice, and Elise.

As if over a skin of crushed Ping-Pong balls, you totter gingerly to each beloved ice figure in turn.

Tears spontaneously flow, only to harden on the planes of your face. You clutch your gut and bend in agony before each image of loss. You sob into the chamber's dull hum, stupidly hopeful that no one's wired it for video or sound, and that your pain has no commiserating spies.

You've done this before. Must you indulge again? Have you no shame?

Over time your tears re-liquefy, and the ice effigies glisten *more* wetly. The Cold Room has grown imperceptibly warmer. The ice on its walls stays solid, but the statues – by design or accident, but more likely the former – begin to shimmer and melt. Do they stand on hotplates or coil about intricate helices of invisible heating wires? Whatever the case, they dissolve. They go. And there's no reversing the process.

So much water collects – from your tear ducts and the de-solidifying statues – that puddles gather in the floor. Even the ceiling drips.

If you stay here out of a misbegotten desire to honor your treasured dead, you'll wind up drenched, ill, and soul-sick.

Freezing, sweating, weeping, you back away. You must.

You have a slick card in hand: a floor diagram of the Vinegar Peace Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage. YOU ARE HERE, it asserts in a box next to the blueprint image of the Cold Room, BUT YOU *COULD* BE HERE.

An arrow points to Room 2, the Arboretum. Well, you could use a sylvan glade about now – an orchard or a grove – and because you walk purposefully, the room pops up just where the arrow indicates.

Like the Cold Room, the Arboretum is unlocked. Unlike the Cold Room, it soars skyward four or more floors, although its dome has an ebony opaqueness that hides the stars. You gape. Willows stretch up next to sycamores, oaks shelter infant firs and pines, disease-free elms wave in the interior breeze like sea anemones in a gnarl of current, and maples drop whirling seeds, in windfalls lit like coins by the high fluorescents.

Twilight grips the Arboretum.

Out of this twilight, from among the pillars of the trees, figures in cloaks of pale lemon, lime, lavender, ivory, blue, pink, orange, and other soft hues emerge at intervals. They amble forward only a little way, find a not-

too-nearby tree, and halt: they decline to impose themselves.

None of these persons qualifies as a wrong-way orphan because all are too young: between thirty and forty. All stand on the neat margins of this wood like passengers with tickets to bleak destinations. Although none seems fierce or hostile – just the opposite, in fact – you prepare yourself to flee, if your nerve fails you. Your heart bangs like an old jalopy engine.

Pick one of us, a woman in a lavender cape tells you. She speaks conversationally from under a willow in the middle distance, but you hear her just fine. The acoustics here are excellent: maybe she's been miked.

Pick one of you for what?

Condolence and consolation: as a sounding board for whatever feeds your angst. The woman advances one tree nearer.

You snort. You've had more sounding boards than a cork-lined recording room. Why take on another?

The people in coats and capes approach in increments, picking new trees much nearer you. They appear devoid of menace, but you think again about fleeing. Even in this twilight, their pastel garments are tinged by the shade thrown by overarching foliage: a disquieting phenomenon.

Pastel shades, you think. These people are *pastel shades*.

Soon your gaze picks up a man approaching steadily through a sycamore copse, a figure in grey twill pants and a jacket the pale ash of pipe dottle. He has boyish features, but crow's feet at his eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard lift him out of the crib of callow naïfs. He wears a mild don't-patronize-me smile and doesn't stop coming until he stands less than an arm's length away.

Ah, Ms K——, I'm delighted to see you, despite the inauspicious circumstances that bring you here. His elevated vocabulary satirizes itself, deliberately. Call me Father H——. He gives his hand, which you clasp, aware now the pastel holograms beneath the trees have retreated. Their withdrawal has proceeded without your either ignoring or fully remarking it.

You're not wearing colors, you tell Father H——.

Tilting his head, he says: *Colors?*

A host of pastel shades besieged me just now, but you, well, you wear heartsick grey. To illustrate, you pinch his sleeve.

Father H—— laughs. Grey's the pastel of black, and I'm a child of the cloth who *always* wears this declension.

If you say so, you reply skeptically.

He chuckles and draws you – by his steps rather than his hand – into the nearest glimmering copse. Tell me about Elise, he says. Tell me all about Elise.

Later, drained again, you return to the entry clearing still in the father's company, unsure of the amount of time that has passed but grateful for the alacrity with which it has sped. Twilight still reigns in the Arboretum, but the clock-ticks in your heart hint that you have talked with Father H—— forever. You touch his shoulders and yank him to you in an irrepressible hug.

Thank you, you tell him. Thank you. I may be able to sleep now.

The grey-clad pastor separates from you and smiles through his beard. I've done nothing, Ms K——.

You've done everything.

His smile turns inward: But I *feel* like a little boy who makes mud pies and carries them to the hungry.

Padre H—— takes your plastic card, which he calls a crib sheet, and accompanies you to the Mail Room.

If you use this thing – he fans himself with the card, like some dowager aunt in an airless August sanctuary – you'll look like a clueless newbie. He chuckles and shakes his head.

Am I the only one?

Hardly. Soldiers die every hour. But try to look self-assured – as if you belong.

The corridor now contains a few used-adult orphans, some walking in wind suits, some pushing mobile IVs, some hobbling on canes or breathing through plastic masks as they enter lifts or try the stairs. None looks

self-assured, but all appear to know their way about. None wears an institutional gown, but beiges, browns, and sandy hues characterize the garments they do wear.

Raw depression returns to knot your stomach and redden your eyes. One or two residents glance toward you, but no one speaks.

Friendly bunch, you mumble.

They just don't trust anyone they haven't met, says Father H—. And who can blame them? You could be a security creep or an insurance snoop.

Carrying these bags?

What better way to insinuate yourself among them?

You enter the Mail Room by a door near the screen on the second gallery. This shadowy chamber teems with ranks of rainbow-colored monitors, not with persons, and Father H— bids you goodbye. (Where is he going? Maybe to hear the confession of a sinful yew?)

A young person in a milky-orange vest approaches. You can't really tell if she's male or female, but you decide to think of her as a woman.

May I help you?

I don't know. I've just come. You hoist your duffels, aware now that they prove absolutely nothing.

Tell me your name, ma'am.

You do, and she takes you to a monitor, keyboards briefly, and summons a face-on portrait of Elise in her battle regalia. Several other people sit in this room (you realize now) before pixel images of *their* dead, trying to talk with them, or their spirits, through arthritic fingertips. You touch the liquid shimmer of the screen with an index finger, and Elise's skin blurs and reshapes after each gentle prod. Your guide asks if you would like to access any family messages in her unit file, for often soldiers leave private farewells in their unclassified e-folders.

You murmur a supplicating Please.

A message glows on the monitor: either Elise's last message or the message that she *arranged* to appear last.

Dear Mama,

Do you remember when Brice died? (Well, of course you do.) I recall you telling somebody after they'd shipped Brice's body home, *Elise was Mick's and Brice was mine; now I'm forever bereft*. You didn't see me in the corner, you had no idea I'd heard.

From that day on, Mama, I began thinking, *What can I do to become yours, if I'm not yours now?*

Then it hit me: I had to change myself into the one you claimed—without betraying Dad or Brice or my own scared soul. So I tried to *become* Brice without pushing away Dad or undoing myself.

As soon as I could, I enlisted. I trained. I went where they sent me. I did everything you and they said, just like Brice, and you sent me messages about how proud you were — but also how scared.

If you're reading this, your fears have come true, and so has my wish to do everything just like Brice, even if someone else had to undo me for me to *become* just what you loved. With all my heart, I wish you pleasant mourning, Mama, and a long bright day.

Love,  
Elise

You read this message repeatedly. You must wipe your eyes to do so, also using the linen tail of your blouse to towel the keyboard and your hands.

Upsettingly, you have something else to tell Father H— about Elise, and indeed about yourself.

The young woman, or young man, from the Mail Room gives you directions to your next stop. You ride a slow glass-faced elevator up two gallery levels to the Guest Suite, which has this legend in tight gold script across its smoky door:

*Grief is a species of prestige.* —  
*Wm. Matthews*

A bellhop — or an abrupt young man in the

*getup* of a bellhop – takes your duffels. I'll take these to the Sleep Bay, ma'am, he says. Stow them there later, under your cot or whatever. And he swings away.

Old people in brown evening clothes stand at the bar sipping whiskey or imported dusky beer. A gaunt pretty woman detaches herself from the bar and moves insouciantly into your space. Her nose tip halts only inches from your own.

It's terrible when a child dies, she declares, but people *treat* you so well, at least for a while.

You take a step back. Is that right?

Didn't you find that to be true after your son was killed?

I suppose. I didn't know much of anything then. I just sort of – You stop, stymied by the task of saying *exactly* what you found to be true.

An IED transformed *our* son into rain. It fell red, you understand, but he scarcely suffered. And afterward – afterward, everyone was very sweet. For as long as they could stand to be, of course.

You gape at the woman.

To save him from an IED, I could have used an IUD – but that occasion was so long ago I never imagined *a* child of mine facing such danger. You just don't think.

That's true, you reply, because *You just don't think* rings with more truth than any other utterance out of her mouth.

(And, by the way, has she just equated an Improvised Explosive Device with an intra-uterine contraceptive?)

And, she continues, people's kindness toward the bereaved merits our notice and gratitude. She waves at the bar – at the banks of flowers, an alcove of evening clothes, the teeming buffet, a table of architecturally elaborate desserts.

You say: I'd prefer people rude and my children still alive.

Come now, the woman counters. Bereavement bestows glamour. Pick out a gown, have a dry martini.

No, you say. You plant a dismissive kiss on the woman's papery brow and weave your way back to the door.

The nearby glass-faced elevator drops you into the mazelike basement of the Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage, where you sashay, as if by instinct, to the Chantry. The Chantry now accommodates Father H—— and several old-looking women, virtual babushkas, so unlike the denizens of the Guest Suite that they appear to belong to a different species.

These women groan on kneelers before the altar at which Father H—— stands, his arms spread like those of the military effigy impaled on an olivewood cross hanging overhead. They wear widows' weeds, which strain at the seams about their arms, waists, and hips. Maybe the father has shrived them. Now, though, he blesses a monstrosity of tiny spoiled rice cakes and a syringe of red-wine vinegar, and moves along the altar rail to dispense these elements.

Ms K——, he says upon noticing you: 'S great to see you again.

You stand inside the door, appalled and humbled by the warrior Christ floating in shadow above the altar. It wears Brice's face, but also Elise's, and surely the faces of all the babushkas' lost children. You see that two or three of these wrong-way orphans have stuffed their smocks with tissues or rags, and that a few, whatever their burdens of flesh, look barely old enough to have *babies*, although they wouldn't be kneeling here – would they? – if that were true. They gaze up raptly, not at the padre but at the suspended effigy: Sacrificer and Sacrificed.

The father nods a welcome. Care to join these communicants?

I'm not of your creedal persuasion, Father.

Oh, but you are, Ms K——. He gestures welcomingly again. The Church of the Forever Bereft. Come. I've got something better than mud pies. He lifts the chalice and nods at the monstrosity: *A little* better, anyway.

You walk to the front and kneel beside a woman with a heart-shaped face and the eyes of a pregnant doe. She lays her hand on your wrist.

Our kids didn't deserve to die, she says. Them dying before us turns everything upside-down. And when our high and mighty mucky-mucks aren't having whole towns blown up, they spew bunkum to keep us quiet.

*Bunk cum?* you ask yourself, too confused to take offense. But maybe you should tell the father how you slew Elise.

Says Father H——: The more the words the less they mean.

– Yeah, say several women. – We know that’s *scriptural*. – You said a throat’s worth. – Selah to that, padre. And so on.

Let me give you vinegar peace, he interrupts their outburst. Take, eat; take, drink: the flesh and blood of your offspring in remembrance of a joy you no longer possess; in honor of a sacrifice too terrible to share.

He lays a rice cake on each tongue and follows it with a ruby squirt of vinegar.

You can hardly keep your head or your eyelids up. The evening – the devastating news – your exile from your life-help cottage – have exhausted you beyond mere fatigue, and you collapse over the altar rail. Father H—— lifts your chin and pulls your lip to give you the elements.

The babushka with the heart-shaped face braces you to prevent your rolling to the floor. You behold her from one bloodshot eye, knowing you must seem to her a decrepit old soul: a fish with fading scales and a faint unpleasant smell.

The Eucharist *clicks* in: You see Brice and Elise as preschool children. In stained shorts and jerseys, they dangle a plump Siamese kitten between them and grin like happy little jack-o-lanterns. *Click*. In some adolescent year they are videotaping each other with recorders long since obsolete. Then – *click* – you’re gaping at a ticket stub, drawn months later from a jacket pocket, from a ballgame you attended the day before you got word of Brice’s death. *Click*. Elise poses saucily in an ice-green gown with a long-stemmed rose between her teeth. *Click*. Much too soon: Elise in khaki.

*O God*, you say under the floating soldier Christ. Forgive, my children, my failure to march ahead of you...

Who helps you to the Sleep Bay on an upper gallery you cannot, in your febrile state, tell.

But when you arrive, you find this space larger than the fenced-in confines of a refugee camp, with so many *used adults* milling about that it seems, also, a vast carnival lot. TVs on poles rest at intersections amidst the ranks and files of cots and pallets, most of these showing black-and-white military sitcoms from your girlhood, with a smattering in color from more recent years:

There’s *Rin Tin Tin*. There’s *F Troop*. There’s *Hogan’s Heroes*. There’s *Sergeant Bilko*. There’s *McHale’s Navy*. There’s *Gomer Pyle, USMC*. There’s *M\*A\*S\*H*. There’s *China Beach Follies*. There’s *My Mama, the Tank*. There’s *I Got Mine at Gitmo*. There’s *Top Gun, 2022*. There’s... but they just go on and on, the noise of gunshots, choppers *thwup-thwuping*, IEDS exploding, and combatants crying out in frustration, anger, or pain punctuating almost every soundtrack.

The young woman – anyway, the young *person* – from the Mail Room waves at you across an archipelago of pallets.

Ms K——! she shouts. Over here, over *here!*

And you stagger toward her through the crowds, past heaped and denuded cots, past old folks and younger folks: some blessedly zonked, some playing card games like Uno, Old Maid, pinochle, or Cut Throat, and some gazing ceiling-ward as if awaiting the Voice of God the Freshly Merciful. One bearded old guy chunks invisible missiles at the actors in *I Got Mine at Gitmo*.

Barely upright, you make it to the person who called to you.

These are your duffels, she says. This is your pallet – unless you’d like to look for something nearer a wall.

Where are the restrooms?

She points. Through there, Ms K——. You peer down a crooked aisle of bedding at a wall of wrong-way, used-adult orphans obstructing any view of the lavatories she has tried to point out. I know, I know: Just walk that way and ask again.

No, you say. No. You crawl onto the raised pallet – it’s resting on a pair of empty ammo crates – and curl up in a fetal hunch between your duffels.



The woman, the *person*, touches your shoulder gently, and departs.

Before you can fall asleep, a line of people forms in the aisle. Your pallet rests at its head while its tail snakes back into the depths of the bay like a queue from Depression Era newsreels.

Everybody has photographs or image cubes of their slain warrior children, and as the line advances the people in it squat, kneel, or sit to show them to you, even though you see in each face either Brice's or Elise's, no matter how minimal the resemblance or how weary your vision.

– Very pretty. – Very handsome. – A smart-looking fella. – What a shame you've lost her. – How can he be gone? – Golly, what a smile!...

You compliment ten or twelve orphaned parents in this way until your tiredness and the faces of Brice and Elise, rising through the images of these other dead children, make it impossible to go on. Still horizontal, you press your palms to your eyes and shake like a storm-buffed scarecrow.

Leave her alone, somebody says. For Pete's sake, let the woman rest.

A hand shoves your head down into your rough olive-green blanket, but the voice that you attach to the hand's body roars, *Heal, O Lord, heal! Take her hurt away tonight, and torment her no more!*

But you don't want that. You don't. All you want is sleep and the honest-to-God resurrection of three particular persons, but sleep is all you're likely to get. Somebody big perches on the pallet edge and lullabies in a guttural whisper *All the Pretty Little Horses*; he kneads your spine with fingers that feel more like metal bolts than flesh and bone. And despite the Sleep Bay's din and stench (and despite the hole in the middle of your chest), you drift down into a Lost Sea of Consciousness and let go of all pain but a last acrid fuse of heartbreak...

A twin rumble ghosts through the Sleep Bay, an outer one from the old orphans waking to face their pain afresh and an inner one from your

complaining gut. You sit up and peer about at this new Reality.

The lavatories have to be packed – so, casting about for a solution, you find a wide-mouthed jar inside one of the crates supporting your pallet. After shaping a tent with your blanket, you relieve your bladder – no easy task – into the jar and stand there amidst the chaos wondering how to proceed.

*Slops! Slops!* cries an electronic voice, and a simulacrum of a person, smaller than the small cruel man who helped transport you from your life-help cottage, rolls through the crowd with a slotted tray hooked to its midsection.

It takes jars, bottles, beakers, and suchlike from other bleary residents and rattles them into the partitioned tray going before it like an antique cowcatcher. You hand over yours uncertainly.

The simulacrum – a *dormitron* or a *refectorian*, depending on its duty de jour – asks what you'd like for breakfast. You recoil at taking anything edible from this rolling slops collector, but say, Some toast, I guess, it really doesn't matter, to keep from stalling it by saying nothing. It rolls on.

Another *refectorian* – for at mealtimes the Sleep Bay becomes the Refectory – cruises up behind a serving cart, the cart a part of its own fabricated anatomy, and lets you fumble at its topmost shelf for a cup of tea and a slice of toast and persimmon jam. Other such simulacra tend to others there in the bay, sometimes dropping plastic crockery or spilling sticky liquids. From a few pallets away, a woman as thin as a spaghetti strap sidles into your space.

What did your children like to eat? she asks.

Ma'am?

Your dead kids – what'd they like to eat? You can get it here, whatever it was. I always do – what mine ate, I mean. I eat it for them and feel connected to them the rest of the hideous day.

Our son liked cold pizza, our daughter even colder fresh fruit.

Want me to get you tidbits of those things? You hesitate.

The strap-thin woman mumbles into a diamond of perforations on her inner wrist. They're on their way, she tells you afterward.

And so you wind up with two slices of cold garbage-can pizza and a bowl of even colder cantaloupe, pineapple, muskmelon, and kiwi wedges, which you down between bites of pizza. Your benefactor watches in approval, then asks you to tell a breakfast story about Brice and Elise.

*A breakfast story!*

You think first of a morning on which teenager Brice sat slumped at the table, his eyes lazing in their sockets like gravid guinea pigs. Mick directed him to have some juice and cereal, to clean up afterward, and to take his sister to school, but Brice dawdled. Stop dicking around, Mick cried. Then, infuriated, he wrestled Brice from his chair, apparently to frog-march him to the cupboard, but Brice flopped deadweight to the floor; and though Mick twisted, prodded, and even tried to *snatch* him erect, neither his body nor his smirk budged, and he remarked, dryly, that Mick's parenting skills had gone so far south that he'd just resorted to all-out *child abuse*. Stunned, Mick let Brice go and stormed outside. You and Elise exchanged stunned looks of your own.

Come on, the woman prompts again: Every mama has a breakfast story.

So you tell about the time when Brice and Elise, then nine and five, got up early one morning and made Mick and you breakfast in bed: mounds of toast, two eggs each, orange juice, and so on. But thinking it olive oil, they had scrambled the eggs in rancid tuna juice, and despite their hard work and the eggs' lovely sunrise yellowness, you had to throw them out.

The eggs, you say, *not* the kids. Mick and I felt like total Egg Benedict Arnolds. Just like I feel now.

The woman laughs and then purses her lips in sympathy. Good story, Ms K——. Just remember: You'll *always* feel like that. She grimaces grotesquely, as much for her sake as yours, and places a call via her wrist

perforations to somebody in another part of the Refectory.

Meanwhile, the servitors roll on.

Feeling each of your years as a blood-borne needle of sleet, you ride a glass-faced lift to the Chantry level and follow the wives of two sick old men to the Furnace Room, which turns out to be an intensive care unit (ICU) for last-leggers and a crematory for those who don't make it. Indeed, when you arrive, an orderly slouches past pushing a sheeted figure on a gurney toward an oven down a claustrophobia-inducing tributary corridor. You think about following this gurney but instead continue to tag along behind the ICU widows and at length reach the care unit's hub.

The arc of the hub's perimeter is lined with windowed rooms in which you can see the orphans in extremis. They lie here in weirdly tilted beds, attended by dormitrons and tightlipped RNs. Tubes and electrodes sprout from their bodies like odd mechanical fungi. All of them seem to be equipped with oxygen masks, tracheotomies, or respirators. Even over the machines laboring to sustain them, you can hear them breathing from fifty or sixty feet away.

Father H——, a grey silhouette against a luminous white backdrop, stands at the bedside of one such person. His posture tells you he is listening to the patient's whispers or measuring his or her laggard unassisted breaths. The TV set in this room, muted, runs through a succession of familiar images from the War on Worldwide Wickedness: statues toppling, buildings dropping in cascades of dust and smoke, warriors on patrol through rubble-strewn courtyards or past iced-over stone fountains.

The patient couldn't care less. Neither could you, if this enterprise had not also devoured Brice and Elise, many thousands of their contemporaries, and so many civilian *slammies* — as the media now insists on calling civilian natives of foreign war zones — that not even the Pan Imperium can number them.

Mr Weevil, the director, enters from an outer

corridor with several cronies, five or six small men and women, wearing ivory smocks and sneakers. They float past you to a treatment unit. Mr Weevil slides the glass door open and calls the doctor and his team to the portal to report on the patient's condition.

Dr S——, a cadaverous Dravidian with lemur eyes, flatly and loudly says that his patient is a near goner whose lungs need help, whose liver has badly deteriorated, whose kidneys have failed, and whose blood, despite a full course of antibiotics, still teems with pernicious microbes.

None of this person's organs retains its original life-sustaining function, says Dr S——, and he must soon die. I say *must* in the sense of an eminent inevitability, not as a Hippocratic recommendation.

The doctor might just as well have spoken over a PA system. His words echo through the hub like the pronouncement of a god.

Helplessly, you step forward. I'll bet he can still *hear*, you say.

Everybody turns to look. You bear their gazes as the Incredible He-She at an old-time freak show would bear those of a paying crowd.

*What?* Mr Weevil says. What did you say?

I said I'll bet he can still hear. Hearing is the last of the senses to go, so even this patient may still be able to hear you.

Dr S——'s mouth quirks sourly. And what good does *that* do him? None. No good at all.

The director and his cronies agree, as do the RNS and the promoted dormitrons at the doctor's back. You dwindle before them like a melting ice statue in a time-lapse video. Amazingly, not one of these obtuse brains gets the poignant underlying import of your observation.

Mr Weevil turns to address the doctor: Every life has huge merit, of course, but we *really* need that bed. CARRY ON! He and his smock-clad retinue exit the intensive care hub while Dr S—— and *his* team fall back into the treatment unit to await the convenient inevitable.

Appalled, you walk about the hub in rings of increasing size until Father H—— comes

out and hails you as he might a lost friend. Ah, Ms K——, what a surprise and a treat to see you!

What day is it, Padre?

Friday – another *good* Friday – why do you ask?

You hear the stress on *good*, but not the Easter-designating capital G that would turn your fugue into an enacted allegory. You note that it's been little more than twelve hours since two cruel stooges informed you of Elise's death.

And a little over two years since you learned of Brice's, he says gently.

You smile and ask after the women who journeyed to the Furnace Room to visit their spouses.

Their hearts will grow heavier soon, Father H—— says. Given their ages, how could they not?

They'll die without seeing the war's end.

*War Is Peace*, Orwell said. Besides, who will? Who sees anything well finished, even one's own life? It's little different from those medieval stonemasons who worked on cathedrals.

I don't like your analogy, you tell him.

Father H—— laughs heartily. Of course you don't: it stinks.

Moments later, he leads you to the mouth of a nearby tunnel.

Care to visit the ovens, Ms K——?

You like this question less than you did his cathedral analogy because it suggests an analogy even more distasteful. But what else do you have to do?

Okay.

As you walk, the father offers you a rice cake and an ampoule of red-wine vinegar from a communion kit sewn into his jacket lining. For your spiritual sustenance, he says, but you bemusedly shake your head.

Two gurneys trundle up behind you, one pushed by a dormitron, the other by a young woman in uniform. To let them pass in tandem, you press your backs to opposite walls of the tunnel. The first gurney takes a corridor to the left; the second, bearing not only a body but a casket draped in a flag of the nation's newly

adopted colors, swings right. You raise an eyebrow at the father.

Vinegar Peace cremates our war dead as well as wrong-way orphans, he explains. Which way would you like to go?

You answer by angling right. Far down this corridor you see a wide brick apron before double crematory doors and ranks of scarlet-draped caskets before these doors. An honor guard in full-dress stands at formal ease to one side of the tunnel; a military choir on crepe-decorated risers, to the other.

Both contingents await you in this incarnadine cul-de-sac; in fact, when you have almost drawn close enough to read the soldiers' nametags, they crack to attention and a pitch pipe sounds. They then begin to sing, the expanded honor guard and the choir, as if triggered by your arrival as auditors. You recognize the melody as a halt-footed variation on an old hymn's tune:

*If we were ever sorry,  
Oh, we would never tell –  
We're gravely in a hurry  
To sleep at last in hell.*

**'Pro patria mori'**

*Is our true warrior's cry:  
We never, ever worry;  
We boldly spit and die.*

*Out for patriot glory;  
Brave maid and gallant stud,  
We all revere Bold Gory –  
Its Red, its Wine, its Blood!*

The choristers conclude fortissimo and stand at ease again. The Red, Wine, and Blood – Bold Gory – has recently replaced the Red, White, and Blue – Old Glory – , and these soldiers gladly hymn the new banner's praises.

Two members of the honor guard open the double doors of the oven, and Father H—— nods you forward, as if accustomed to this ritual.

Go in? you ask him. Really?

Just for a look-see. You might not think so,

but it's an honor, their approving you for an impromptu tour.

Why me?

Most young enlistees have living parents. You're a proxy.

A soldier yanks the scarlet banner from a coffin and brings it to you as if to throw it over your shoulders. Its stars and stripes are mutedly visible as different shades of red. You lift a hand, palm outward. No thank you.

Our dead would wish us to robe you in it, the soldier says.

You count sixteen coffins – one of them minus its patriotic drapery. Who are your dead today? you wonder aloud.

Sixteen trainees in a reconstructed Osprey Vertical Takeoff/Landing Aircraft, he says. It crashed a half mile from camp, the third bird this year. He again offers the scarlet flag.

No, I can't. I'm partial to the old version, even at its foulest.

The soldier courteously withdraws, to re-drape the naked coffin.

Father H—— takes your arm and leads you straightway into the oven.

The Cold Room had ice effigies. The Furnace Room – or this part of its crematory extension – has a cindery floor and dunes of ash. When its doors close behind you, you stand in the grey hemisphere like snow-globe figures, lit by thin skylights. Black scales etch continents and islands on the walls, and the sooty dunes, when you move, suck at you like whirlpools. The furnace scares you. It seems both an execution chamber and a tomb, full of drifting human fallout.

I thought the ash and bone fragments were collected to give to the families, and that everything else went up the smokestack.

Some ovens work more efficiently than others, the father replies.

You walk deeper into this peculiar space and kneel before an ashen dune. You run your hands into it and let its motes sift through your fingers like desiccated rain. You rub your wrists and arms with it. You pour its greyness over your head in a sort of baptism, a dry baptism befitting your age and orphanhood. You scrub

it into your clothes and run your tongue around your mouth to taste its grit.

Father H—— breaks a dozen ampoules of red-wine vinegar over the ashes before you and stirs the bitter into the bleak. He shapes a pie from this mixture and urges you to follow suit. You obey. After a while, you've made a dozen or so together, but still must make a dozen more for the unfed soldiers in the tunnel. Kneeling, you work side by side to accomplish that task.

Weeks go by before you visit the Melancholiarium.

Father H—— has told you that it's a memory room that only two people at a time may enter: an orphaned couple, or the only surviving orphan and a person of his or her choice. No one may enter alone, or in a party of three or more. None of these rules makes much sense, but little about Vinegar Peace ever does, even if it sometimes seems to have a coherent underlying principle of organization that you can't fathom owing to an innate personal failing.

Meanwhile, you've grown used to the noisy Sleep Bay, learned when to visit the crowded jakes, perfected the art of getting servitors to do your bidding, and made enough *friends* to feel – well, if not *connected*, at least not entirely estranged from the protocols of what passes for normal life here. You no longer bolt up when bombs go off at Fort Pugnucose (where many of the recruits for the War on Worldwide Wickedness train), or when air-raid sirens wail in the galleries, or when some of the older orphans sidle up to your cot at night and plead, *Take me home, take me home*. Even the twilight influx of dispossessed oldsters, addle-wits with confusion writ large in their pupils, has ceased to faze you. After all, they'll adjust... maybe.

Then a dormitron sporting Henry Kissinger glasses and nose gives you a pass to visit the Melancholiarium.

The name itself sabotages the place. Just hearing it, who'd want to go there? You, indeed, would rather return to your life-help cottage in Sour Thicket. Vinegar Peace isn't a

concentration camp, but neither is it a Sun City spa. It's a training facility for people with little time to make use of that training in the Real World, which in your opinion no longer exists.

Choose somebody to go with you, the dormitron says.

You pick Ms B——, the strap-thin woman who asked you to tell her a breakfast story, and one morning in your second month of residency, the two of you ride a lift to the fifth level and walk together to a tall cylindrical kiosk where a familiar-looking young person, probably female, seats you next to each other at a console and fits you both with pullover goggles.

You walk side by side into the Melancholiarium. Now, though, Ms B—— is no longer Ms B—— but your late husband Mick, whose hand you hold as you approach the gurney on which Elise lies in a pair of jeans and a blue chambray shirt open at the collar. Her clothing is so blatantly neither a gown nor a full dress uniform that the simplicity of her look – her sweet girlishness – briefly stops your breath, as hers is stopped. You reach to touch her. Mick seizes your wrist, not to prevent you but instead to guide your fingers to Elise's arm, which you both clutch for as long as you have now endured in this grand human depository. Or so it oddly seems.

Elise's red-tinged hair, which the military cut short, now hangs behind her off the gurney. It sparkles like a sequined veil. The expression on her face suggests neither terror nor pain, but serenity; and if you addressed her, saying, Elise, it's time to get up, come out to the porch to see the sun shining on the spider webs in the grass, you believe with the same soft ferocity that you once believed in God that she will obey – that she'll open her eyes, sit up, and embrace you briefly before striding out of the Melancholiarium into the stolen remainder of her life.

You kiss Elise's brow. Leaning across her, you give her the hug that she'd give you if only the same green power seethed there. Her body has a knobby hardness that would estrange you from her if you didn't love her so much. All your pity re-collects and flows



from your bent frame into her unyielding one. She has the frail perdurability of Cold Room effigies – but none of their alienness – and so she has finally become yours, although neither you nor anybody else can own her now. When her smoke rises through the crematory flue, it won't dissipate until your smoke also rises and clasps her last white particles to yours. Then both clouds will drift away together.

You step back. Mick gives you room. You want to freeze this tableau and visit it like a window decorator, keeping its centerpiece – Elise – intact but endlessly rearranging the furniture and flowers. You kiss her brow again, hold her hands, and finger the runnels in her jeans.

You undo the buttons next to her heart to confirm a report that three high-caliber rounds inflicted her *non-sustainable* injuries. You find and examine them with a clinical tenderness. You must know *everything*, even the worst, and you rejoice in the tameness of her fatal mutilation.

*Joyce*, Mick says, the first time anyone has spoken your given name in so long that it jars like a stranger's. Are you okay?

You embrace, leaning into each other. Of course, it isn't really Mick holding you upright in the vivid deceit of the Melancholiarium, but so what, so what?

You pull back from his image and murmur, *Mick, her hands ...*

*What about them?*

*They're so cold, colder than I thought possible.*

Yes, Mick says, smiling, *but if you rub them, they warm up.*

On your journey back to the Sleep Bay, you tell Ms B——, Mick would never have said that. That was you.

Ms B—— says, Well, I've never seen such a pretty kid.

You should have seen Brice.

Stop it. I was just being polite. *You* should've seen *mine*: absolute lovelies fed into the chipper by tin-men with no guts or gadgets.

You don't reply because you notice a short tunnel to a door with a red neon sign flashing over it: EXIT and then the same word inside a circle with a slash through it. You think about detouring down this tunnel and even try to pull Ms B—— along with you. She resists.

Stop it, she says. You can check out whenever you feel like it. Just don't try to leave. Don't you know that by now?

I've heard there's an escape, you say. A way to get out alive.

*That's* not it, Ms B—— says, nodding at the flashing EXIT/DON'T EXIT sign.

Don't you even want to hear?

Enlist? Is that it? Sign up to wage war on the wicked? Well, that's a crock too.

I'm sure it is.

Okay, then – what is it, your secret way to get out?

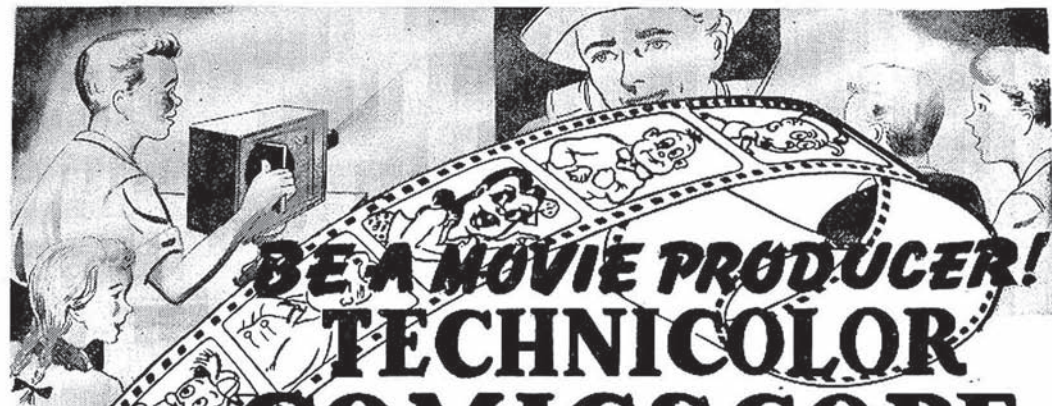
Adoption, you tell her. The padre says that if a soldier with six tours adopts you, you're no longer a wrong-way orphan and you can leave.

Ms B—— regards you as if you've proposed sticking nasturtiums down the barrel of an enemy soldier's rifle. Oh, I've heard that too, it's a fat load of bunkum.

You don't reply, but you also don't go down the tunnel to try the door with the contradictory flashing messages. You return with your *friend* to the Sleep Bay without raising the subject again.

But it makes sense, doesn't it? A decent orphanage adopts out its charges. If you believe, just believe, somewhere there's a compassionate Brice or Elise, a person who's survived six tours and wants nothing more than to rescue some poor wrong-way orphan from terminal warehousing. Such people do exist. They exist to lead you from Vinegar Peace to a place of unmerited Milk and Honey.

That night, huddled on your cot amid the hubbub in the Sleep Bay, you envision a woman very like Elise sitting with you on a porch in late autumn or early winter. You sit shivering under scarlet lap robes, while this person whispers a soothing tale and tirelessly rubs your age-freckled hands.



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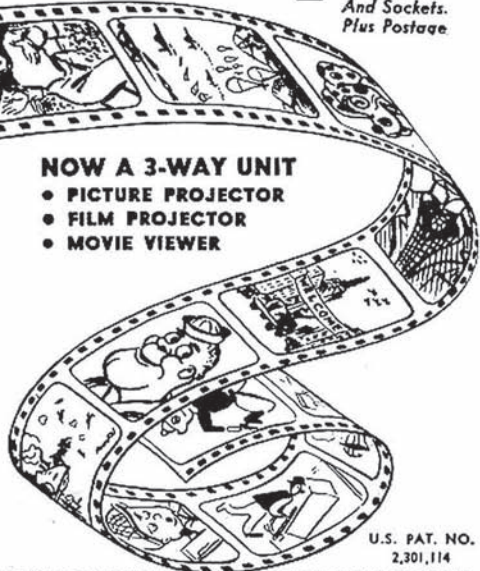
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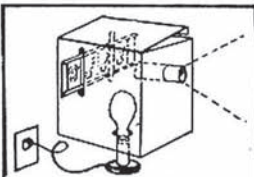
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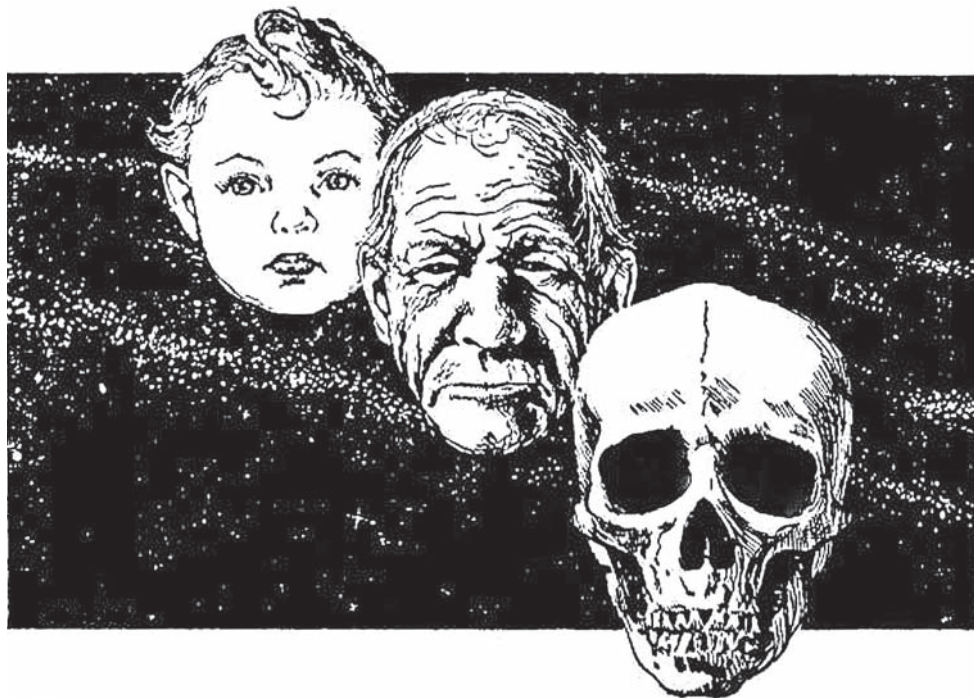
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# IN THE OLDEN DAYS

By SPIDER ROBINSON

**G**EORGE MAUGHAM RETURNED HOME from work much later than usual, and in a sour frame of mind. He was tired and knew that he had missed an excellent home-cooked meal, and things had not gone well at work despite his extra hours of labour. His face, as he came through the door, held that expression that would cause his wife to become especially understanding.

“Light on in the kids’ window,” he said crankily as he hung his coat by the door and removed his boots. “It’s late.”

Luanna Maugham truly was an extraordinary woman. With only a minimal use of her face and the suggestion of a shrug and the single word “Grandpa,” she managed to convey amusement and irony and compassion and tolerant acceptance, and thereby begin diffusing his potential grumpiness. He felt the last of it bleed from him as she put into his hands a cup of dark sweetness which he knew perfectly well would turn out to be precisely drinking temperature. He understood how much she did for him.



But he still felt that he should follow up the issue of their children's bedtime. "I wish he wouldn't keep them up so late," he said, pitching his voice to signal his altered motivation.

"Well," she said, "they can sleep in tomorrow morning – no school. And he does tell fairy tales so well, dear."

"It's not the fairy tales I mind," he said, faintly surprised to feel a little of his irritation returning. "I just hope he's not filling their heads with all that other garbage." He sipped from his cup, which was indeed the right temperature. "All those hairy old stories of his. About the Good Old Days When Men Were Men and Women Knew Their Place." He shook his head. Yes, he was losing his good humour again.

"Why do his stories bother you so?" she asked gently. "Honestly, they seem pretty harmless to me."

"I think all that old stuff depresses them. Nightmares and that sort of thing. Confuses them. Boring, too, the same old stuff over and over again."

Mrs. Maugham did not point out that their two children never had nightmares, or permitted themselves to be bored. She made, in fact, no response at all, and after a sufficient pause, he shook his head and continued speaking, more hesitantly. "I mean... there's something about it I can't..." He glanced down at his cup, and perhaps he found there the words he wanted. He sipped them. "Here it is: if the Good Old Days were so good, then I and my generation were fools for allowing things to change – then the world that WE made is inferior – and I don't think it is. I mean, every generation of kids grows up convinced that their parents are idiots who've bugged everything up, don't they, and I certainly don't want or need my father encouraging the kids to feel that way." He wiped his lip with the heel of his hand. "I've worked hard, all my life to make this a better world than the one I was born into and... and it is, Lu, it is."

She took his face in her hands, kissed him, and bathed him in her very best smile. "Of course it is," she lied.

"And that," Grandpa was saying just then, with the warm glow of the storyteller who knows he has wowed 'em again, "is the story of how Princess Julie rescued the young blacksmith Jason from the Dark Tower, and together they slew the King of the Dolts." He bowed his head and began rolling his final cigarette of the night.

The applause was, considering the size of the house, gratifying. "That was really neat, Grandpa," Julie said enthusiastically, and little Jason clapped his hands and echoed, "Really neat!"

"Now, tomorrow night," he said, and paused to lick his cigarette paper, "I'll tell you what happened NEXT."

"Oh God, yes," Julie said, smacking her forehead "the Slime Monster, I forgot, he's still loose."

"The Slime Monster!" Jason cried. "But that's my favourite PART! Grampa tell NOW."

"Oh yes, please, Grampa," Julie seconded. In point of fact, she was not really all that crazy about the Slime Monster – he was pretty yucky – but now he represented that most precious commodity any child can know: a few minutes more of after-bedtime awakesness.

But the old man had been braced for this. "Not a chance, munchkins. Way past your bedtimes, and your folks'll –"

A chorus of protests rained about his head.

"Can it," he said, in the tone that meant he was serious, and the storm chopped off short. He was mildly pleased by this small reflection of his authority, and he blinked, and when his eyes opened Julie was holding out the candle to light his cigarette for him, and little Jason was inexpertly but enthusiastically trying to massage the right knee which, he knew (and occasionally remembered), gave Grandpa trouble a lot, because of something that Jason understood was called "our fright us." How, the old man wondered mildly, do they manage an instant one-eighty without even shifting gears?

"You can tell us tomorrow, Grampa," Julie assured him, with the massive nonchalance that only a six-year-old girl can lift, "I don't

matter about it.” She put down the candle and got him an ashtray.

“Yeah,” Jason picked up his cue. “Who cares about a dumb old Slime Monster?” He then attempted to look as if that last sentence were sincere, and failed; Julie gave him a dirty look for overplaying his hand.

Little con artists, Grandpa thought fondly, there’s hope for the race yet. He waited for the pitch, enjoying the knee-massage.

“I’ll make you a deal, Grampa,” Julie said.

“A deal?”

“If I can ask you a question you can’t answer, you have to tell about the Olden Days for ten minutes.”

He appeared to think about it while he smoked. “Seven minutes.” There was no timepiece in the room.

“Nine,” Julie said at once.

“Eight.”

“Eight and a half.”

“Done.”

The old man did not expect to lose. He was expecting some kind of trick question, but he felt that he had heard most, perhaps all, of the classic conundrums over the course of his years, and he figured he could cobble up a trick answer to whatever Julie had up her sleeve. And she sideswiped him.

“You know that poem, ‘Roses are red, violets are blue?’” she asked.

“Which one? There are hundreds.”

“That’s what I mean,” she said, springing the trap. “I know a millyum of ‘em. Roses are red, violets are blue – ”

“– outhouse is smelly and so are you,” Jason interrupted loudly, and broke up.

She glared at her younger brother and pursed her lips. “Don’t be such a child,” she said gravely, and nearly caught Grandpa smiling. “So that’s my question.”

“What?”

“Why do they always say that?”

“You mean, ‘Roses are red, violets – ?’”

“When they’re NOT.”

“Not what?”

She looked up at the ceiling as though inviting God to bear witness to the impossibility

of communicating with grown-ups. “BLUE,” she said.

The old man’s jaw dropped.

“Violets are VIOLET,” she amplified.

He was thunderstruck. She was absolutely right, and all at once he could not imagine why the question had not occurred to him decades earlier. “I’ll be damned. You win, Princess. I have no idea how that one got started. You’ve got me dead to rights.”

“Oh boy,” Jason crowed, releasing Grandpa’s knee at once and returning to his bed. “You kids nowadays,” he prompted as Julie crawled in beside him.

Grandpa accepted the inevitable.

“You kids nowadays don’t know nothin’ about nothin’,” he said. “Now in the Olden Days...”

Grimming triumphantly, Julie fluffed up her pillow and stretched out on the pallet, pulling her blanket delicately up over her small legs, just to the knees. Jason pulled his own blanket to his chin, uncaring that this bared his feet, and stared at the ceiling.

“...in the Olden Days it wasn’t like it is these days. Men were men in them days, and women knew their place in the world. This world has been going straight to hell since I was a boy, children, and you can dip me if it looks like getting any better. Things you kids take for granted nowadays, why, in the Olden Days we’d have laughed at the thought. Sometimes we did.

“F’rinstance, this business of gettin’ up at six in the goddam morning and havin’ a goddam potato pancake for breakfast, an’ then walkin’ twenty goddam kilometers to the goddam little red schoolhouse – in the Olden Days there wasn’t NONE of that crap. We got up at eight like civilized children, and walked twenty goddam meters to where a BUS come and hauled us the whole five clicks to a school the likes of which a child like you’ll never see, more’s the pity.”

“Tell about the bus,” Jason ordered.

“It was big enough for sixty kids to play in, and it was warm in the winter, sometimes TOO warm, and God Himself drove it, and it smelled



wonderful and just the same every day. And when it took you home after school, there was none of this nonsense of grabbing some refried beans and goin' off to haul rock and brush for the goddam road crew for fifty cents a week, I'll tell you that. Why, if a feller had tried to hire me when I was your age, at a good salary, mind you, they'd have locked him up for EXPLOITIN' me! No sir, we'd come home after a hard day of learning, and we'd play ball or watch TV or read a book, whatever we felt like – ah Christ, we lived like kings and we never even knew it!

“You, Julie, you'll have children before you're sixteen, and a good wife and mother you'll be – but in the Olden Days you might have been an executive, or a doctor, or a dancer. Jason, you'll grow up to be a good farmer – if they don't hang you – but if you'd been born when I was, you could have made movies in Thailand, or flown airliners to Paris, or picked rocks off the goddam face of the Moon and brought 'em home. And before any of that, you both could have had something you're never going to know – a mysterious, terrible, wonderful thing called adolescence.

“But my generation, and your father and mother's, we threw it all away, because it wasn't perfect. The best I can explain it is that they all voted themselves a free lunch, democratic as hell, and then tried to duck out when the cheque arrived. They spent every dime they had, and all of your money besides, and they STILL had to wash some dishes. There was two packs of idiots, you see. On one side you had rich sons of bitches, excuse my language, and they were arrogant. Couldn't be bothered to build a nuclear power plant to specs or a car that worked, couldn't be bothered to hide their contempt. Why, do you know that banks actually used to set out, for the use of their customers, pens that didn't work – and then chain them in place to prevent their

theft? Worse than that, they were the dumbest aristocrats in the history of man. They couldn't be bothered to take care of their own peasants. I mean, if you want a horse to break his back for you, do you feed him... or take all his hay to make yourself pillows and mattresses?

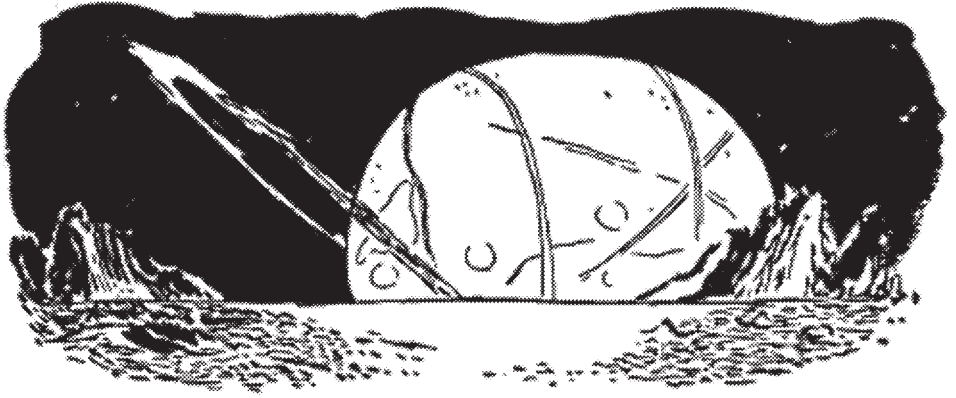
“And then on the other side you had sincere, well-meanin' folks who were even dumber than the rich. Between the anti-teckers and the no-nukers and the stop-fusion people and the small-is-beautiful types and the appropriate-technology folks and the back-

to-the-landers they managed to pull the plug, to throw away the whole goddam Solar System. The car might have got us all to a gas station, running on fumes and momentum – but now that they shut the engine down there ain't enough gas left to get it started again...

“They let the space program die – they let all of high tech society die, because it wasn't perfect – and now the planet just hasn't got the metals or the power or the technology to bring it back; we're damn lucky to feed ourselves. Now there really IS Only One Earth – and it never was big enough...”

The old man's cigarette was too short to keep smoking. He pinched it out between two fingers, salvaged the unburnt tobacco, and began to take up his tale again. Then he saw that the children were both fast asleep. He let his breath out, covered them, and blew out the candle. He thought about going downstairs to ask his son-in-law how things had gone in the fields, whether the crop had been saved... but the stairs were hard on the old man's our fright us, and he really did not want to risk hearing bad news just now. Instead he went to the window and watched the moon, lonely now for several decades, and after a time he cried. For the children, who could never hope that one day their grandchildren might have the stars...





# LESTER YOUNG AND THE JUPITER'S MOONS' BLUES

By Gord Sellar

**H**IS FIRST NIGHT BACK ON EARTH After his gig on the Frogships, Bird showed up at Minton's cleaner than a broke-dick dog, with a brand new horn and a head full of crazy-people music. He'd got himself a nice suit somewhere, and a fine new Conn alto. Now, this was back in '48, when everyone – me included – was crazy about Conn and King and only a few younger cats were playing on Selmer horns.

But it wasn't just that big-shouldered suit and the horn; the cat was clean. I mean *clean*, no more dope, no more liquor, no more fried chicken. Hell, he was always called Bird – short for Yardbird – on account of how much fried chicken he liked to eat. This was like a whole different Charlie Parker. He was living clean as a monk. He was walking straight and

talking clear. His eyes weren't all fucked-up and scary anymore, either.

To be honest, I didn't recognize him when he walked into Minton's. It was about three AM, and the regular jam session had been going for a long time, and all these cats from Philly had shown up, you know, dressed up like country negroes on Sunday morning and playing all that Philadelphia grandpa-swing they liked used to like to play. Smooth and all, but old-fashioned, especially for 1948. Even in New York City, the hotbed of bebop and the only place where the Frogs were taking jazz musicians on tour, there was still a lotta old guys dressed up in Zoot suits cut for them five years before, trying to play like Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges and Lester Young used to in the old days, before they

all disappeared. Bebop was huge, but a lot of ignorant cats, they were trying to resist it, still disrespecting us, calling what we played “Chinese music” and shit.

But Bird, he was clean like I said, but he played some shit like I never heard before, like nobody never heard before. I’m telling you, when he went up on the bandstand and brought that horn up to his mouth, the music that came out of it was... well, it made us crazy. Back in those days, we were like mad scientists when it came to sounds. We’d be taking a leak at the same time and one of us would break wind and we all knew what note it was. We’d call it together, turn to one another laughing and shit, and say, “E-flat, Jack, you just farted an E-flat.” And that night we’d play every third tune in E-flat.

But them tunes Bird was playing, man, I ain’t never heard nobody put notes together like that. The rhythms were so tangled up that even I had to listen close to catch them all. He was playing 37 notes evenly spaced across a four-beat bar in fast swing, crazy licks like that, and he was playing all these halfway tunings, quarter tones and multiphonics and all kinds of craziness. And even so, he was *swinging*.

Everyone went crazy, it was just too much. And Bird just grinned like a goddamn king and said, in that snooty British gentleman accent he used to like to put on sometimes, “Ladies and gents, this music is the wave of the future. It received its *début* off the rings of Saturn, and if you don’t like it, you can come right on up here and kiss my royal black ass.”

Them old guys, the Zoot suit cats, they didn’t like that, but they didn’t say nothing. Everyone remembered how Bird never took no shit off nobody back before he went off touring the solar system.

Man, all that scared me a little, but I still wanted to get onto one of them Frogships and hear what kind of music everyone was playing up there. They were hiring cats, everyone knew that, but that was all I knew about it. Now, I hadn’t never met Bird before, and I knew he wasn’t going to talk to me, but Max Roach, Max was drumming there that night, and I’d

met Max one time before there at Minton’s, so I figured I could talk to him.

Max, he’d gone up onto the Frogships a year or two back. Well, he looked at me like he knew what I wanted, what I was gonna ask about, but he sat down to talk to me anyway. I told him I wanted onto the ships, wanted to know how to get in.

“You audition, same as for anything else,” he said, shrugging. “Who knows what they like? Don’t ask me.”

“But you been on the ships...”

“Uh-huh,” Max said, nodded, but didn’t say no more.

“What kind of music they hire *you* to play?”

“Oh, man, you just need to play whatever,” he said in that quiet, calm voice of his. He was a really cool, soulful cat most of the time. “Some of the time, they take cats who swing the old way, real old-fashioned; like what Duke’s band used to play in the old days, or Billy Eckstine’s. Hell, sometimes they want New Orleans funeral songs, or some cat who plays like Jelly Roll Morton. Other times they only take cats who play real *hard* bebop, man. You can’t never know what they want. But anyway, you don’t need to go on up to the ships. It messes a cat up, man.” He tapped the tablecloth with his drumsticks, hit my glass of bourbon with one of them. *Ting*.

I know better now, but then I just thought he was stonewalling me. Figured maybe there were only limited spaces, and he was bullshitting me, trying to keep gigs open for cats he knew better.

“What do you mean?” I said. “Look at Bird! Remember when he left? Cat *went up there* looking like death on a soda cracker, and look at him now!” I glanced over and saw him sitting at a table with Diz and Miles and Monk and Art Blakey and Fat Girl Navarro and a couple of them white women who used to hang around at Minton’s. They were laughing like a bunch of old women, like someone had just told a joke a second before. Bird, he wasn’t fat no more, he was lean, and real clear-headed and healthy-looking, nothing like when they let his

ass out of Camarillo. He looked like a cat with a long life ahead of him.

"Bird's been different, *always*, man," Max said. "He's just that kind of cat. Plus, they *fixed* him up. They wanted him bad, so they took him apart and then put him back together out there. A lot of cats, they just..." Then he stopped, like he didn't know what to say, and his eyes went a little scary, the way Bird's used to be, and he looked at me like he could see through my skin or something, and said, "Look, cats almost never come back like he did. The things that go on... you can't even imagine," he said.

The room went quiet sometime while we were talking, and I could tell Max was relieved. He didn't like talking about the Frogships, didn't want to recommend them to nobody. We both looked around and saw other people were all staring at the back of the club, at the entrance, and what do you know but this big tall-assed Frog had come on in the back and was standing there watching us all.

These days there ain't a lot of cats who remember what the Frogs looked like, really. It's been so long since they moved on, and let me tell you, the pictures don't show not even the half of it. They were like these big frogs who stretched their skin over a real tall man, but they had more eyes and weird-assed hands. No fingers, just some tentacles on the ends of their goddamned arms, man, and they walked on two legs. Now, this Frog, he was fat, and he wore a Zoot suit tailored specially for him, hat and all, which just made him look totally *out*, man, just crazy. He came in with three or four guys, white hipsters, and they sat themselves down at a table in the front of the club that was set out for them in a hurry.

That Frog, he was smoking long, black cigarettes, four or five of them at once, on these long jade cigarette holders. He was looking around, too, with all these eyes on his face, as if to say, *Where's the goddamn music?* I looked at him closely, and noticed that his skin, his face and hands, even his suit, it was all a little blurry, like a badly-shot photograph. He puffed on his cigarettes and looked around.

Nobody said nothing.

But all these cats, especially them sad Philly boys, they all thought it was their big chance. They hurried on up onto the bandstand, and they started to play their jumped-up jive-ass swing. That old Frog just leaned on back in its chair and kept on smoking those slow-burning black cigarettes, sticking its long blue tongue up into the smoke as it puffed it out. There were little black eyes all over its tongue, too, and they swiveled toward the bandstand.

I couldn't tell if it was bored or enjoying the show, but I do know that finally, after they finished a few tunes, Bird had finally had enough. He tapped Thelonious Monk on the shoulder, and Monk nodded, and stood up, and went up to the bandstand. Everyone had heard about what had happened that night at the Three Deuces back in January in 1946; everyone knew how these Frog cats felt about Monk's music.

Man, Thelonious, he just went on up to the piano and sat down, and everyone else on the bandstand just watched him, every one of them quiet and thinking, *Oh shit*. Monk, he lifted up his hands, all dramatic like he was about to play a Beethoven sonata or whatever, like that, you know what I mean, and when everyone shut up he started playing.

"*Straight, No Chaser*." That was a fine tune, just a little jagged and twisted up. He played the head real simple, melody with his right hand, old-fashioned blues stride with the left. The alien leaned forward. Everyone knew how much they liked Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, granddaddy music like that.

But when Monk finished out the head the second time, and started improvising on the changes, man, you could see him sitting with this big-assed grin on his face up there at the piano. He started playing some of his really Monkish shit, all that weird, tangled up melody, banging out tone clusters over and over and plunking out his crooked little comping rhythms.

The Frog, when it heard Monk start up with all that, it stood itself up, dropped its cigarettes on the ground and slapped one hand over its huge front face-eyes and the other behind the back of its head. It was moaning

– with three or four voices at once – and this blue stuff starting leaking out of its nose. Then it decided it was time to get the hell out.

It wobbled but finally made it out the door, shaky like a junkie dying to shoot himself up. All them hipster cats it came in with, they all followed it out, making out like they were all nervous and worried. Teddy Hill, who was running Minton's Playhouse back then, he followed them all out with a scared face on, too. Bird, he laughed like a fucking maniac when he saw all that.

"Damn Frogs never could handle Monk," Max said, laughing. "Man, that was beautiful!"

A few weeks later, my buddy J.J. came by with this poster he'd found on some lamppost nearby. He read it out to me while I brushed my teeth one morning.

"Now hiring jazz musicians of all instrumental specialties... the intergalactic society of entertainers and artists' guild... Colored Americans only please, special preference currently given to aspiring bebop players. No re-hires from previous tours please. One-year (possibly renewable) contracts available. See the solar system! Play blues on the moons of Jupiter! Go someplace where The Man won't be breathing down your neck! Press *HERE* for more information!"

I spat out the foam from my toothpaste, put down my electrobrush, and asked, "So? Where's the audition?"

He pressed his finger on the word *HERE* and the sheet went blank for a second. Then a map appeared on it. "Over on West 52nd, at the Onyx."

"*What?*" I was shocked. Going to the Onyx for an audition, man, that was like going on a tour of Mississippi with a busload of negroes, women and children and all. Over at the Onyx, man, it was all what my father used to call ofays – white men – running the joint, every last one of them motherfuckers so goddamned racist it wasn't even funny.

"You heard me. *The Onyx.*"

"Shit. What time?"

"The *Onyx?*!" That was my woman, Francine. She'd been cooking and she'd come up behind J.J. so quiet we hadn't heard her till it was too late. She looked at J.J. and man, it was like, *No bacon for you this morning, motherfucker* –

She pushed past him, put her hands on her hips, and said, "What are you gonna do? Go on up in space, and leave me alone with this baby?" she said, putting her hands under her big belly.

"Francine," I said.

"No, Robbie, don't try to sweet talk me," she said, shaking her head like she was having none of this. "Goddamn! My mama told me I should stay away from you. Said musicians weren't nothing but trouble."

I looked up at J.J. and tilted my head in the direction of the door, and he just nodded and left us alone. She didn't say nothing till the screen door clicked shut.

"Robbie, baby," she said, looking up at me with those sweet brown eyes of hers. "You are *not* going to that audition at the Onyx," she said.

Man, it just about broke my heart, but I knew that I was done, completely done with her. I knew she'd be a good mama, but not to my babies. It was all over right then.

So I looked at her, and I said, "I seen those letters you got all wrapped-up. Up in your sock drawer."

"What letters?" she said, and it was almost believable, except I could see she was pretending. Lying.

"Francine, come on, girl. I wasn't born yesterday. Maybe last week, but not yesterday, baby. I know about you and Thornton. And don't be telling me it's some one-sided thing, because I seen how you wrapped them letters up in a ribbon and hid them and all. And I seen the dates on them, too."

She slumped a little, and said, "Baby, I..." and then she stopped. She couldn't lie to me no more, and she knew it. She was tired of lying to me, too, I think. She was a good enough woman, Francine.

"Now listen, baby," she said, and her voice cracked but she tried to sound strong just the same. "It ain't like I never heard about you



running around with those other women. I know I ain't the only one of us who been unfaithful."

"Francine, you and I *both* know that baby probably ain't mine, the way you been rationing me around here – which is why I *been* with other women, since you don't give me what I need. Did I complain to you? Have I been nagging your ass? No, that's fine, I understand. But this... look, you want that baby to have a daddy, you better go marry the man who done gave it to you."

"This is bullshit," she said. "You can run around as much as you want, but *you* can't never get pregnant. Me, I do it once or twice behind your back, and look what I get."

"I know," I said, and I tried to put my arms around her, but she pushed me away. "Life ain't fair, is it, girl?" I said, and tried again. This time she let me hug her. It was breaking my heart, those brown-sugar eyes all full of tears, her arms shaking a little as she hugged me back. But I wasn't gonna have no other man's baby calling *me* daddy, and I wasn't gonna stay with no woman who been going behind my back with no other cat, so it was probably a mistake, me being so nice to her just then like that.

She started crying, saying, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry." Begging and pleading, and kissing on me. She told me she wouldn't never do it again.

"That's good. You learned your lesson. Like you gonna be a good wife to Teddy Thornton," I said. He was the one who'd written her the letters. Used to play drums around town, though I heard his granddad died and he went into business of the money he inherited.

And I tell you, when I said that, it was like the werewolf in them movies, you know, how he changes shape in a second? That was Francine, man. *Bam*. "What, you mean you ain't staying, now, after all that?" Her eyes were full of a kind of fire only a woman can fill up with.

I shook my head. "I'm gonna get this gig, girl. Damn, Bird, and Hawk, and... all those cats who gone up there, they come back richer than Rockefeller. You damn *right* I'm going up there."

"You son of a *bitch!*" she yelled, tears still running down her cheeks, and she grabbed a lamp from the hallway just outside the bathroom. "You was gonna run off to space no matter what, wasn't you? God-*damn* you!"

Then she threw the lamp at me, but I was quick and jumped sideways, so it hit the floor and broke into a million pieces. Man, *that* pissed me off like a motherfucker. It was *my* goddamn lamp, I'd bought it with the money I'd made off gigs, and I knew it'd be good as new in a few hours – it was the new foreign kind that was just coming out then, the kind that could fix itself – but this shit was still just a pain in the ass. I never did like being disrespected by no women.

But I just nodded my head. Didn't matter what she broke, long as it wasn't my horns. I wouldn't need no lamp where I was going.

The Onyx was a nice place, inside. Fancy, I mean. Every cat I knew was in there, plus a few I wished I knew. Sonny Rollins was in there, Red Dog, and Art Tatum, and Hot Lips Bell, and some other cats I recognized too.

We were all outside the green room, waiting. *Green room*, that shit was funny: it'd always been called that, but at the Onyx, during these auditions, it was really the *green* room, with real green Frogs inside. That was where cats went in to play their auditions, and the Frogs would listen and decide whether they wanted them on the ships.

I waited my turn. Everyone was real quiet, more than you'd expect, and through the wall we could hear drums and bass start up every once in a while after guys went in. The bass sounded like one of those expensive self-amplified ones, the kind that looked like a regular bass but got real loud all on its own, except you had to plug it into the wall at night.

Cat after cat went in, played for five or ten minutes, and then left. I sat there with my buddies, Back Pocket and J.J. and Big Jimmy Hunt, and we all just cradled our instruments and watched the TV in the corner of the room, no sound, just color picture, and waited without talking.

Finally, after a few hours of listening and waiting, it was my turn. The door opened, and this skinny white hipster came out and called my name: “Robbie Coolidge?”

“That’s me,” I said, and I followed him into the room.

There were a couple of Frogs sitting on a couch in there, both of them smoking bouquets of the same damned cigarettes on long metal cigarette holders. They were wearing shades and black suits that didn’t hide the bumps they had all over their bodies, and they didn’t say nothing to me at all. On the other side of the room, a couple more of them hipsters sat there at a small table with piles of old-fashioned paper on it. Nobody bothered to stand or shake my hand, but one of them hipsters started talking to me. Didn’t introduce himself or nothing, just started talking.

“Tenor player.” It wasn’t no question.

“Yes sir. I can also play the alto and the flute, a little,” I said, just as cool as I could.

“You got a manager?”

“Uh, no sir. I, uh... I manage myself.” I wanted to sound cool, but I felt like a damn country negro right then.

“Well, that’s just fine,” he said, grinning that white hipster grin of his. “Why don’t you play us a song, then?”

So I called the tune, counted it off, and launched into it. The tune I played was one of Bird’s, “Confirmation”, and I guess their machine knew it, because as soon as I started playing it, bass and drums were piped in from nowhere. They wanted bebop, so I played my best bebop tune.

“Not bad,” the hipster said, and the Frogs were agreeing, nodding. “Can you play anything sweet?” he asked, and I played them a chorus of “Misty” as soulful and pretty as I could.

“That was just fine, Mr Coolidge. Please leave us your phone number and we’ll call you soon. Thanks,” the boss man hipster said when I handed him my name card, and one of his sidekicks showed me out. After that, I waited around while my buddies all auditioned, and they all said it’d gone pretty much the same.

I wondered whether that was a good sign or a bad one, but a few weeks later, I was on the subway when my pocket phone rang. I fished it out of my pants pocket, and dialed in my access number on the rotary dial to open the connection.

Looking at the face on the little screen for a second, I wondered why this slick, pale-assed young hipster was calling me, until I realized that it was that same hipster from the Onyx.

“Mr Coolidge,” he said, “I have some good news for you.”

And that was how I ended up touring the solar system with Big C.

The space elevator, that blew me away. It was a fucking gas, man. I only ever rode up it once, and I swear it was smooth as Ingrid Bergman’s skin, or Lena Horne’s smile, even though it was going faster than anything I’d ever been in before.

J.J. Wilson was the only one of my friends who also got a gig up on the Frogships, and he and I sat there side by side with our seat belts around our waists, looking down through the glass floor – it wasn’t really glass but we could see through it – at the Earth and everything we were leaving behind. It seemed so strange to be looking at the whole world like that. I could see South America, the ocean, some of Africa. Clouds, and ice on north pole and south pole. I could see places I’ve never gone in all the years since then, and probably will never go.

Only a few hours before, J.J.’s wife had driven us up into the Catskills where the Frogs’ launchpad had been. She’d cried a little, but soon she was making jokes and small talk. Francine, on the other hand: the first time she called, she was crying, and she pleaded with me on my pocket phone till I hung up on her. Then she called back screaming, and made me listen to her break plates and windows and shit. I’d felt a little lonely on the way up, and a little bad for her, but after that, I was glad she hadn’t come along for the ride, and I was sure I’d done the right thing by leaving her.

It was strange, that trip, because I hadn’t never seen the Catskills before. Right there by

New York, but I never went and saw them till I was leaving to go to outer space. Can you believe it?

We caught us a jet up there, one that flew on up almost into space, but then come down again in some mountains up in north Brazil somewhere. I was hoping we might stop by in the city, so we could try out some Brazilian chicks. I heard good things about them, Brazilian girls, I mean. But we didn't have time for that – it was straight up to the ships for us.

We weren't the only ones strapped down into chairs in the elevator, though. There were all kinds of interesting people in there. There were a couple of skinny Chinese girls with some kind of weird musical instruments, what you might call a zither; and there were a bunch of Mexican and white guys dressed like cowboys with spurs and lassos and all that shit, just like in the Hollywood westerns. There was also this Russian cat in a suit who tried to talk to us through some kind of translator machine, but we couldn't understand him at all. He had a satchel of books with him.

And I swear there were about fifteen French girls in there with us, too. Cute, with fine cheekbones and low asses and long-assed legs, dressed up in their can-can outfits. I caught one of them looking at me a few times, and I just smiled and reminded myself to look her up sometime. French women, you know, sometimes they're less racist than American women. They're *ladies*. But you know, women always bring too much shit along with them when they travel. Those can-can girls each had a big stack of suitcases strapped onto the ground beside them, every last one of them.

Me, I just brought my horns, a couple of extra suits, and my music collection, some on vinyl and some on crystal.

When the elevator got to where it was going, we all unstrapped ourselves, got out of our seats, and stepped out into what looked like an airport. I had pulled on my big old herringbone winter coat, thinking it'd be cold in space, but it wasn't. It was like a train station, and as soon as we were in it, I started hearing a beeping sound. The card they'd given me to hang around my neck was

beeping. A glowing red arrow pointed to my left, and same for J.J., too. We went off in that direction, following the can-can girls, full of hope and dreams of long legs.

Turned out we'd all been sent up for the same ship. J.J. and me and the can-can girls arrived together in a small waiting room, and the cowboys came a while later. We figured that once the Russian guy showed up, and the Chinese girlies, maybe someone would come and get us, so we just chatted for a while. Turned out the cowboys were rodeo heroes, you know, the guys who ride bulls and catch cows with lassos and shit like that. They'd been hired as entertainers, just like us, one-year contract. Same pay and everything.

Man, ain't nobody in the world back then who paid a black man and a white man and a Mexican and a woman the same money for the same gig – not before them Frogs done it.

So finally, when the Russian and them Chinese chicks showed up, it was because this big tall-assed Frog in a white suit and tie brought them to the waiting room. Like the Frogs I'd seen on Earth, this one was smoking a few black cigarettes on long cigarette holders, all of them poking out of one side of its mouth. It stuck its tongue out and looked at us slowly, one by one, with all of its gigantic eyes on its face and the little ones on its tongue, as if it was checking us against a memorized list of faces.

"Welcome aboard the space station. This way, please, to the ship that will be your home for the next year." It wasn't the Frog itself speaking; the voice came from a speaker on the collar of the Frog's suit. It waved its three-tentacled hand at the wall of the waiting room, and the wall slid open. There was a hallway on the other side, and at the far end of the hallway was another door, far away, slowly opening in the same way.

We went down the hall in little groups, staying close to the people we'd come with. Walking down that hallway, we all looked like old dogs, walked with our heads down, bracing for some bad shit to come down onto us.

But at the end of that hallway, when we came through the second door, you know what we found? Can you guess?

The whole place was done up like a big-assed hotel or cruise ship or something. There was this huge-assed lobby and ballroom, and main stairs leading up and down. One whole wall of the lobby was transparent, you could see right through it to the stars. Frogs wandered every which way, a few cats and fine skinny women of every color here and there, all of them dressed bad, *real* hip.

“Welcome on board The *Mmmhuh-hunah!*” Ship name sounded something like that, like how people would talk if they had socks in their mouth or something. That was what the Frogs’ language sounded like to me, at least at first. He tried to make it sound like we were guests. “Your navigation stubs should guide you to your places of accommodation. Should you have any questions, please feel free to ask any passing staff member, who can be identified by the subordinate rank uniforms they are required to wear, and which have been modeled on uniforms denoting similar positions in your culture. We will begin preparations tomorrow, and the tour will commence a week henceforth.”

“What’s he talking about, man?” J.J. asked. His eyes were wide, like he’d seen his grandmama’s ghost.

“Follow the little arrow thing to your room,” I explained. “If you need help with your bass, ask a bellboy. First rehearsal’s tomorrow.”

“And please give me your instruments,” added the Frog. “They need to be treated specially to withstand both repeated decoherence and space travel.”

“Deco-*what?*” J.J. was very protective of Big Mama, which was what he liked to call his bass. “Hey, can you put one of them self-amplifiers into her?”

“Yes, of course, that was already planned,” the alien said, and its eyes went round in circles. “Everyone else, also, we must collect your instruments. They will be returned to you tomorrow.”

“Awright,” J.J. said, twisting his head to one side and the other as he leaned on Big Mama in her carrying case, gave the bass one last hug.

I handed them my tenor sax, but I wasn’t happy about it. I didn’t know what the hell they was going to do to it, but it was a Conn and had cost me an arm and a leg to get. But I handed it over. I already had the serial numbers written on a piece of paper in my shoe, just in case.

Now, listen up: I know me some drugs. I seen what heroin does to a cat, how it robs him of his soul, turns him into a pathetic junkie. I even tried it once or twice. And I know how spun-around a cat can get on bennies, cause I’ve done lots of them too. I’ve drunk every goddamn thing a man can drink, a lot of drinks at the same time, even. I’ve been so fucked up I didn’t know what planet I was on. But nothing fucks you up like the drugs they gave us on the ships.

I first tried them at that first rehearsal, day after we arrived on the cruise ship, but before we got our own horns back. Me and J.J. showed up at the same time, and met the cat who was running the music program. He was a fat old brother with a trumpet style nobody ever copied right, nobody ever beat, and his name was Carl Thorton, but everyone called him Big C. He gave us these pills to swallow. Three of them, each one a different color.

“Yellow one’s so you can blur, the way they like. Blue one fixes you up with a better memory, so you can call up everything you ever heard. That one takes a while to kick in. Last one, the green one, that one’s for programming memory of all those licks you memorize into your muscles and shit, instant super-chops. That one comes in real quick. You gotta take these sons-a-bitches every day for six months. Don’t forget, or you’ll turn your own ass so inside-out it ain’t even funny. Got it?”

“Uh huh,” me and J.J. said, and took the pills with a big glass of water. Water didn’t taste quite right, wasn’t nice and a little sweet like back in New York.

Big C, he had a bunch of us new guys – enough to play in a big band. He had us all sit down and listen to the old band, outgoing band, who wouldn’t be leaving for a couple of days, so we could listen to them and get the hang of things.

He told us big bands only went on tour on the Frogships for a year at a time, most times. Man, I didn't know they was looking to make a big band. I hadn't played in one for years, but whatever. I sat and listened. Didn't figure I could back out then, it was too late.

Well, they started to play – some old Basic tune, I think it was, but they were playing it so fast I couldn't tell which one. Bad-ass, these cats – they didn't drop a beat, not a squeak anywhere. They played the head perfectly at what was definitely 300 beats a minute or more.

But when the solo section came, I rubbed my eyes and starting worrying about them drugs Big C had gave us. Big C, I could see him fine and clear, but the lead alto saxman, when he stood up and started playing a solo, he started to blur, and he wasn't playing one solo, it was two solos at once. And then four solos, and five, all of them going in different directions at the same time. He had his horn all the way up, leaning back and screeching *alissimo*, and he was hunched forward and honking at the low end of his horn. All of that at the same time, fast lines and slow lines together. He was like a dozen saxophonists in one.

The drummer was slowly going out of sync with himself, blurring into a smear of sticks and flashing cymbals, and when I looked close, I could see the cymbals moving, and staying still, all at the same time. It was one hell of a sight to see, believe me. I tapped J.J. on the shoulder, told him to check that shit out, and he nodded, so I knew I wasn't crazy. It was like ten drummers all playing at once, almost all the same thing, but a little bit off, each one a little bit different. Different cymbal crashes at different times, the downbeat pushed a little forward and a little back all at the same time. But if you listened, in a way, it all fit together somehow. That blew me away.

The rest of the band started playing backgrounds, but they weren't blurry, so the shout chorus came in together – a few beats quiet, then, in unison, *bop!*, then a few bars, then *ba-doo-BOP!* The alto player was playing three-octave unisons with himself. I swear I could see his right hand on the bottom keys, fingers moving and totally still at the same time.

And then the head of the tune came back, but the whole band was a blur, and everything was craziness, like ten, twenty, a hundred big bands trying to play together and coming close but never lining up the downbeats, pushing them forward and back all at the same time, clashing and smashing – it was something else!

It was a new kind of music, man. Real out. Like hearing bebop again for the first time, but multiplied by all the dope in the world.

"Them pills we took, they gonna let us play like that?"

"I suppose so, J.J."

"Goddamn!" he hollered, and "Sheeeeeeeeee-it!" and "Check these cats out!" all at once, in three different voices, and he started clapping his hands and not-clapping his hands all at the same time.

"Brother, I been living with these Frog-head bastards a long goddamn time, and trust me, shit ain't right with them. You ever look at one closely?" That was Big C.

"Well, yeah," I answered, looking around his room. "They're blurry. Too many eyes."

"Too many eyes? You ever stop and think that we don't have *enough* eyes?" He squinted at me the way Monk used to do to people. "But that blur...! Now, *that's* what I'm talking about!" he said, waving his hands at me. "They're all blurred up, it's like there's a hundred Frogs inside every one of them cats, walking around, doing things. They can't squash themselves into just one person, the way we all just do naturally."

He wiggled his fingers in front of his face like he was showing me what he meant. "And if they're listening to a band, they need the band to blur too, or they just get bored. That's why they like jazz so much! Best goddamn music in the world. 'Cause we make shit up – we improvise. Can't do that with no goddamn Mozart, now can you? Classical music, that just bores these Frogs to death, everything all written out and the same every time, the same even when you blur it."

I was staring at my hands, watching them blur and unblur. It was kind of like taking a piss, you could control it just by thinking about it. Except I was like a little kid, I didn't know



exactly how to control it yet, just that I could kind of make it happen.

"You're getting it, Robbie, just relax into it, man. It'll be like natural soon."

"So how long you been on these ships, Big C?" I asked.

He scratched under his chin, back up where his beard was shaved off, and made a face at me. "What year's it now?"

"Nineteen forty-eight."

"Goddamn," he said, "God-damn!" And he got real quiet, and turned his head away so I wouldn't see him cry.

Our schedule for those first few weeks was crazy, all day practicing and then all night jamming our asses off and hanging out in one another's rooms, horns in our hands, LPS going.

One of the craziest things the drugs did was they let us memorize any kind of music we heard. Hearing it was all it took to program it into our heads, well, except it was more like your fingers would remember the tune.

So we would sit there listening to all kinds of LPS, bebop and swing and ragtime and Bach and Stravinsky and Indian music and whatever, and since we all had good ears, and since we could blur ourselves, each blurred self could listen to a different part of the music – the bass line, harmony lines, and the solo on top of it all – so we could come to the end of a record with the whole thing in our heads.

Now, this wasn't so new: I could listen to a solo a couple of times and hold it in my head, but what was strange was that, after a couple of weeks on them alien drugs, I found I could remember any damn tune I wanted, note-for-note. I could call up any one of Bird's recorded solos on "Anthropology"; I could call up a big band playing Monk's arrangement of "Epistrophy" and play the second trombone line on my sax if I wanted. Every line was right there in my head, and in the muscles of my arms and fingers and lips, and if I blurred out and played back that line even once, I could play it again and again, forever, just by deciding to, without even having to think it through.

In other words, them alien drugs made each and every one of us into one-man jazz record machines.

That was why we spent so much time sitting around listening to everyone else's LPS and crystals, a bunch of us cats blurred out of our minds, laughing and telling ourselves to shut up and soaking that shit up, all of it. There were some bootlegs, too, and man, some of them were amazing: "Bird on Mars," one of them was labeled, and that was some crazy, hip, *bad* music. I could listen to that shit all day long.

But you know, eventually, a cat gets tired of just being around musicians, and he starts wanting himself some jelly. Me, I never had no problem getting me some, women like me and I like them, but it had been a couple of weeks since I'd gotten any, so I decided to go look up them can-can girls and get me some.

I took the elevator down a floor at a time, wandered around till I found them. I saw some crazy-assed sights on the way, too: in one room, there was some kind of Russian circus with these huge blurred-up clowns juggling fire-sticks on the backs of blurry elephants who were dancing to the beat of the some scary Russian music. There were all these bears, too, just as blurred as anything, marching around them all. In another room, I saw those rodeo cowboys again, too, riding on blurred-up horses and swinging lassos in a hundred directions at once. But this one guy I saw, he wasn't just blurred, he split from himself, ran in ten different directions at once after a bull that blurred and split up in the same damn way. Some of him caught the bull and roped it, and some of him got stomped by it. One of him even got gored in the stomach by its horns, poor bean-eating bastard.

But finally, I got down about ten floors below our floor, which was under the big-assed lobby. All the signs there were in French, so I knew I was in the right place. I went from room to room, saw a bunch of them blurry Frogs in these salons, smoking their cigarettes and talking in their weird voices while skinny East Indian girls in old-fashioned oriental clothing served them dainty little white teacups full of funky tea and whatever else Frogs drank.

But finally, I found the auditorium where the girls danced the can-can. That was the orchestra's night off, so the girls were practicing to these crazy recordings of blurred-up can-can music. When I walked in, they were dancing, those French can-can girls, and they was *fine*, all long strong legs going up and down, arms on each others' shoulders. Ain't nothing in the world turns a cat on like seeing women touch each other, except seeing their legs up in the air.

So I sat there and watched their legs go up and down, down and up, scissoring blurs, and I blurred myself too so I could see them clearly. I scanned up and down the line of them, until I found the one I remembered from the elevator, and let her faces burn into my mind.

After they finished, I went and found my way backstage. There was a bunch of green rooms. It was crazy – every girl had her own little green room on that floor. But I didn't know which one she was in, that fine-built woman I picked out from the can-can lineup, so I blurred myself and went up to all the green rooms I could, knocked on every one of them at once.

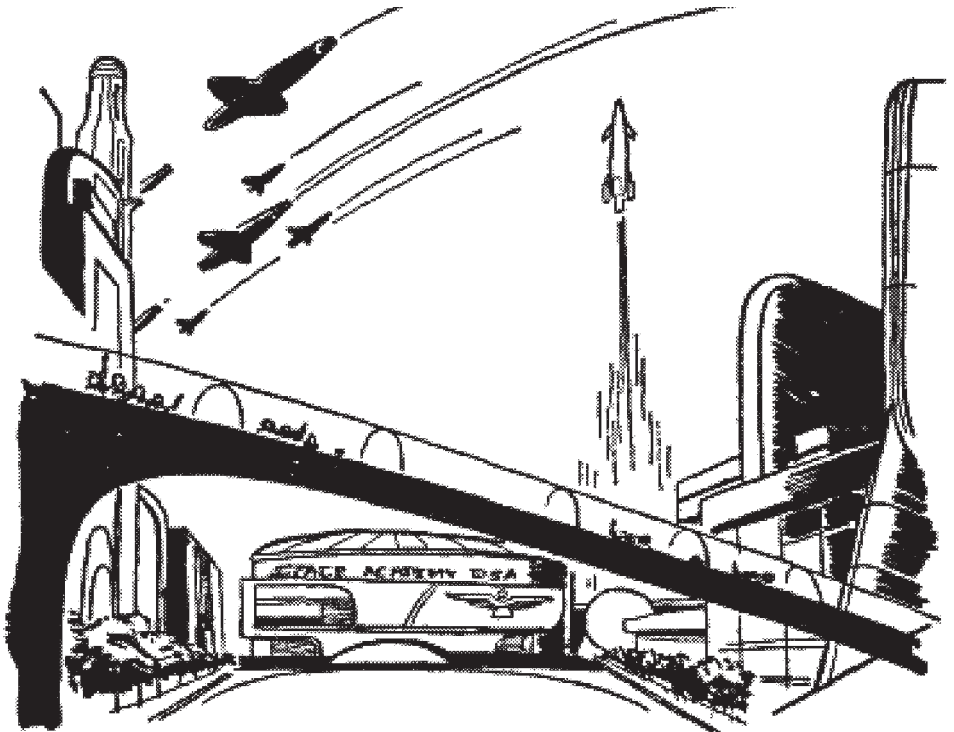
The door where she answered, I unblurred myself over to that one, and smiled at her with that innocent-country-boy smile like I always used to use on women. She was wearing some kind of silk kimono, you know, one of them Japanese-type housecoats, and her hair was down, and I could hear jazz wafting out from behind. Heard that jazz and I knew that I was *in*.

"You're the one I 'ave seen in the elevator, *oui*? The one who kept looking at me? But why 'ave you come 'ere?"

"Well, I thought about it, and decided I missed you."

She mumbled something in French, something that sounded a little like I'd be needing to try some other can-can girl next, but then she opened the door wide and smiled at me. "Come in, Monsieur..."

"Coolidge," I said, and took off my fedora to bow to her, all charming, the way women like when you first meet them. "Robbie Coolidge." I stepped into the room, and could hear the music clearly: it was Nat King Cole, "Stardust." Her can-can outfit was draped over the makeup



mirror with the light bulbs all around it, huge peacock feathers sticking up above our heads, and I could smell mentholated smoke in the air.

"I am called Monique," she said. No last name then, just Monique. Then she asked, "You would like some coffee?"

"Mmm, yeah, coffee sounds good."

She excused herself for a minute, and when she came back, she had two cups of coffee in her hands.

"You 'ave cigarette?" she asked.

I nodded. "Got a whole pack," I said, and I fished it out of my coat pocket and set it on the table with a pack of matches on top. They were Mercury Barron's Ultras, the new kind that were supposed to make you live longer if you smoked three a day. "Want one?"

"Non," she said, and smiled. "Maybe later."

The coffee was fine, really good French coffee, steaming. Even the goddamn *steam* smelled good. I held the cup and breathed deep and looked at her sipping from her own cup.

"So where you from?" I asked, and she stared at me for a few minutes. She rubbed an eyelid, and a little of the makeup smudged.

"I don't t'ink you really care, do you?" she asked, and sipped her coffee.

"Sure, girl, I care," I lied, and she leaned forward, and blurred herself, and a million breathy whispsers of gay *Pa-ree* tickled in my ear.

That ended up being the night the ship took off for Mars, though Monique and I were too busy to notice. We only found out later, when one of the guys in the band ended up wandering into the lobby and noticing the stars were moving, nice and slow, but still moving.

It was a couple of weeks before Monique was in the habit of coming up and listening to the band play, and some of the guys didn't like it. That was when some of the cats in the band were starting to act all high-and-mighty, turning into what my father used to call "political negroes," and taking it upon themselves to tell everyone else how a black man oughtta live.

What made me real sad was that J.J. had fallen in with that pack of nuts. He used to be real nice, real cool and thoughtful. He'd always

been a soulful kind of cat, but when he was with them space-Muslim gum-flappers, talking all that nonsense about how the black man was supposed to colonize the solar system for Allah's glory and to show the devil white man and all that, I couldn't stand to be around him. I hated it when he talked that bullshit.

So this one day, between sets, I'm sitting there at one of the tables with Monique and having a nice time. She's drinking wine and I'm having a cigarette and we're talking, and J.J. comes up with this look on his face. I knew it was trouble, that look, and I stood up before he got close, and said, "J.J., I already got one daddy, and he's in Philly, so I don't need you to..."

"Robbie, goddamn it, you *listen* to me," he said, and glanced at Monique as if she might leave if he glanced at her the right way.

"Who is 'e?" she asked, standing up.

"Sit *down*, Monique," I said firmly, and she instantly got that look on her face. You know the look: the one women get when you tell them what to do for their own good.

"Robbie, something's going on round here! We gotta cut out, brother! Them Frogs, they been in my room, man! They put something inside my stomach. Like a worm. No, a woman. Yeah, a *woman worm*! She been crawling inside my stomach, screamin', like, '*J.J.! J.J.! Gimme some ice cream!*' Help me, Robbie! I'm fuckin' dying here, man!" he screamed and blurred before my eyes, all his voices screaming at me at once. Poor cat was scared shitless, and he scared the shit out of me, too.

I pushed Monique off to the side and blurred myself, and each of me reached out to one of them blurs of J.J.

"J.J.," each of me said, all together, "Listen, J.J., you sick or something, man. You need to cool it. Cool it *right now*."

He screamed louder, each of him started to shake, and his blurred selves started moving farther and farther apart. I didn't want him to pull me apart like that too, so I quickly unblurred myself, relaxed back into one, and stepped back from him.

A couple of big old bad-assed Frog bouncers smeared themselves out into an army, and

rushed around the room in pairs, grabbing all his blurred selves and hauling them, every last one of J.J.'s selves screaming at the top of its lungs, out one of the exits of the room.

The room went tense and quiet, and many eyes, Frog and human alike, were on me and Monique. Whispering started, and I caught Big C's eye. *Set-break's over*, his look said. *Back on the goddamn bandstand. Now.*

So I tried to kiss Monique on the cheek – she pulled away a little, but I still got her for a second – and hurried back up with my tenor in hand.

“Apologies everyone!” Big C said into the microphone with a big fake smile on his face. “Show must go on, like they say. Luckily for us, we got a *Mphmungi* in the house who's proficient at bass.” *Mphmungi*, that was what the Frogs called themselves. Then Big C started saying some bizarre sounds, and I thought he was going crazy too, until some stank old Frog in a tight black suit stood up and bowed his big old froggy head at Big C. Then I realized those weird-assed sounds were this Frog's name.

“Come on up and join us!” Big C said, and the Frog came up on stage, picked up J.J.'s bass with his three-tentacled hands, and strummed the strings to check the tuning.

“Goddamn shame,” said Winslow Jackson, the alto player who sat beside me on the bandstand. He and Big C were almost the only guys who had toured before. “Seen too many guys end up like that.”

“How's that?” I asked, wondering if maybe some of outer space had got into the ship, and fucked with J.J.'s head.

“Must've forgot to take his pills,” Jackson said, shaking his head. “It's a damn shame.”

Not taking your pills for one day would make you go crazy like that? I ain't never heard of no drug like that, and to this day I'm not so sure it was the pills at all. What if I had took my pills every day and ended up the same as him *anyway*? Poor J.J. I didn't know whether I'd ever see him again, but I didn't have any time to worry about that: Big C was talking to the crowd again, and I had to get ready to play.

“Before we dig into the music, I'd like to share some important news with you! We have

arrived at Mars orbit!” Big C hollered into the mike, and behind him, a big piece of wall just suddenly went transparent. Everyone turned to look at the red planet out there, except Big C, who kept talking about how exciting it was to be playing at Mars again, how much he enjoyed it every time.

Mars. We were at *Mars*. That shit blew my mind.

“And now, we have another special guest who's going to join us,” Big C said into the microphone.

A short, weird-assed looking Frog got up, a long black bassoon under his arm, and started walking toward us. He was wearing a fine brown suit, tight as a motherfucker, and a brown fedora hat that matched his fern-colored Frog skin. He waved his little tail behind him as he went up to the stage.

“Everyone please welcome Heavy Gills Mmmhnhngn,” Big C said. The names were starting to be more and more pronounceable to me, a fact I didn't exactly appreciate.

Big C turned from the microphone and faced us, snapping his fingers on two and four, and loudly whispered, “Stardust.” We all got our horns ready, and he nodded and the rhythm section started us off with a mild blur. We usually played it as a tenor lead tune, meaning it was usually my solo, but of course, when you have a guest feature sitting in, the melody gets played by the guest, so I just improvised harmonies with the other saxes.

The bassoon was awful, like a dog being beat down by a drunk master. It wasn't music. Ain't no other way to say it. He played the whole time blurred up so bad that not a damn thing fit together. The tunes didn't line up right, there was no fugue or harmony or counterpoint that I could find. It was just like a bunch of jumbles laid up on top of one another. I swear, I got dizzy just hearing it. He ended the tune by playing a high E and a high F-natural and a high D-sharp all together, this ugly dissonant sustained cluster that went all through the outro and kept going for two minutes after the rest of the band had stopped playing.

At the end of it, all the Frogs in the audience

cheered and groaned and waved their tentacled hands in the air, which was their way of clapping, and I hunkered down for a long night of bullshit.

So J.J., he came back a week later. I saw him drinking coffee in one of the open bars when I came back from window-shopping with Monique in the station dome on Mars. Not that there was anything for me to buy, or that I had any money – that was all waiting for me back on Earth. But there was a lot to see on the station at Mars in those days, and I even picked myself up a real live Mars rock. Still got it, too, at my house.

“Hi,” I said to J.J..

He looked up at me and blinked, sniffed the air. “Hello. How are you? I’ll see you at rehearsal tomorrow.” And then he turned back to his coffee, as if I’d already walked away.

Still, weird as that was, I didn’t quite believe it when Big C told me he wasn’t J.J. no more. “Might seem like it, might talk like it, but he ain’t J.J.,” Big C said. “They made some kind of living copy of him, fixed it up all wrong – fixed it up to think more like them than like us – and now he just plain ain’t J.J. no more. Just accept it.”

Me, I figured that Big C had been on the ships long enough to have lost his mind too. But thinking back on that conversation, I could see that J.J. *was* different. He talked like some kind of white lawyer or something, for one, his voice all stiff and polite. And when time came for the next rehearsal, his playing was dead. There wasn’t nothing original in it, no spark. I’d listen along to his bass lines and then go back to my room and listen to my LPs and I’m telling you, there wasn’t a single line he played after he came back that wasn’t lifted out of some someone else’s playing.

But I really knew it wasn’t him because of the time I finally saw how he got himself off. He’d been dropped hints, every once in a while, but I never figured it out until one night, when I went to get back some Mingus LP I’d loaned him. I banged on his door, I knew he was in there, but he didn’t answer.

So finally I opened the door myself, and

there he was on his bed with two frogs on top of him, tentacles stuck down his throat and wrapped round his legs, slithering their eyed-tongues all over his balls and shit. I slammed the door and just about threw up.

J.J., he had been always as much of a sex-freak as any other cat in any band I played with, and maybe he was so pent-up with all that celibate living that the space Muslims got him thinking he had to do. Maybe his balls got so blue that he lost his mind. But he’d never, ever talked about screwing no Frogs. That was what convinced me, finally, that J.J. was gone.

I found Monique in the lobby a few days after that, staring out the window at the stars. I hadn’t seen her around in week and a half, hadn’t gone down to the French floor, but we were already on our way to Jupiter. It was supposed to take a month or two to get out there, and we’d stay for a week or so, or that was what Big C told us. There was a lot to see and do on all the moons, and some shows not to be missed.

“Where you been, girl?” I asked her.

“Busy,” she said. “Very busy.”

“Doin’ what?” I asked her, as innocently as I could.

“One of our girls, she is sick. She was taken away by *les grenouilles*,” she said, and made a face.

“Must’ve forgot to take her pills,” I said, almost to myself.

“*Euh? Quoi?*” Monique said. She surprised me. I looked at her. “*Que dis-tu?*”

“I said, she must have forgotten to take her pills. Like what happened to J.J.”

“*Non*,” she said. “One of the alligator...”

“Frogs...” I corrected her.

“Frog, oui, *les grenouilles*, one of the ‘frog’, ‘e ask ‘er to come to ‘is rooms, and she say *non*, and next day she become very sick.” Suddenly I could see J.J. in my head with those tentacles in his mouth and wrapped around his legs. I couldn’t stand to think about all that again.

“But baby, you’re okay, right?” I took her hand.

She turned and looked at with those eyes of hers, green like Chinese jade. “I want to go ‘ome,” she said, and squeezed my hand. “I don’t



know 'ow you can t'ink you are falling in love on a Frog ship. I don't know 'ow anyone can believe in love in a 'orrible place like this."

"Baby, come with me," I said to her.

"Oui, I will come with you. But I will not love you, Robbie," she said, and squeezed my hand a little. "And *you* must not love *me*, either," she said.

And then she turned her head and looked out at all them stars for a little while more.

The month we spent traveling out to Jupiter passed so goddamn fast, all blurred awkward sex and blurred awkward music and J.J. all sad and serious up there on his bass, and that dumb, stank-ass Frog Heavy Gills Mmmhnhngn sitting in on his sad-assed bassoon at least once a week. The band still played like a well-oiled machine, still hit every note exactly right, but there was something going wrong, and I think we all could feel it.

And then one day, right in the middle of our show, Big C does that hamming-up thing that he was always so good at, and the wall went all transparent and I swear, Jupiter – fucking *Jupiter* – was right there in front of us covering the whole window. It looked like a giant bowl of vanilla ice cream and caramel and chocolate sauce all melted together and mixed up, with a big red cherry in the middle of it. It was big, man, biggest thing I ever saw, with these little moons floating around it. I couldn't breathe for a second. I looked out into the audience for Monique, but she wasn't at the table I'd left her at. Too bad, she would have loved to see Jupiter like that, right *there* in front of us.

"Now, as you all know, the orbit of Jupiter is a special place, a place where many people travel and choose to stay because it's so beautiful. While you're here, you should all go down to Io and use this opportunity to see some of the greats of jazz, people like Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Johnny Hodges... don't miss them." When I heard that, I couldn't believe my ears. Bird? How could they have Bird up here, when I'd seen him in New York? Had he come back for another tour? I had no idea how that could be. I didn't think it

through so good, though, then. My mind went right on back to that *other* name: Lester Young.

"Now," Big C said, "in honor of the jazz mecca that we're at, we're going to play a little tune called 'The Jupiter's Moons' Blues'."

He counted us in, four, five, four five six seven, and what do you know but that damn Frog's bassoon started up again with the head. By then I swear I would have broken the thing over Heavy Gills Mmmhnhngn's head if I ever got the chance, I'd heard so much of it.

There was all kinds of cool shit to do on them moons, submarine trips on Europa and Ganymede, volcano jumps on Io; they even let us humans ride along in these special ships that could drop down into the atmosphere of that bad-ass old Jupiter himself and see the critters that the Frogs had transplanted there from some planet near where they came from.

But none of that interested me. Some of the cats in the band, they told me, "Robbie, man, what you doing missing a chance to see all this fine shit?"

"Man, all I wanna see," I told them, "is Lester Young. I'm gonna go see the Prez."

The club on Io was small, quiet. The Frogs didn't get interested in jazz until sometime after they'd checked out everything else that their people had done on Jupiter and the moons, and since ours was the only cruiser to show up for a while, right away was the best time to go in and check out the Prez.

That's what we called Lester Young, "Prez", because he used to be – and according to me up till that day, still was – the President of the Tenor Saxophone. Man, that sound. I'd seen him in New York a few times, and a bunch of times in Philly too, and he always had it, that thing, what Monique always called *je ne sais quoi*, which means *who the fuck knows what?* Man, before the war, Prez always had that up there in his sweet, sweet sound.

So anyway, Monique and me, we ended up in this little club in a bubble floating over Io. There were these big windows all over where you could look out onto the volcanoes spitting

fire and smoke and shit. There was even one of them windows in the club, and Monique kept looking out of it.

Prez wasn't playing when we got there, it was too early so some other cats were on the bandstand. Trio of cats, didn't know their names but I was pretty sure I'd met the pianist before. They were alright. Sometimes guys like Prez, man, they did even better with those plain bread-and-butter rhythm sections, playing that kind of old swing style. It was all about *his* beautiful voice, *his* sound. Waiting for Prez, I could hear his tenor sound, man, that touch of vibrato, that strong gentle turn in his melody riding his own beat, just a little off of the bass, you know what I mean.

Monique started to get bored. I could tell. She fiddled with her hair, looked out at the volcanoes.

"Baby, Prez should be on soon," I told her.

She frowned at me, that sexy baby-I'm-pissed-off kind of frown. "I want to go for a walk. See the bubble." We'd passed some nice shop windows and cafes out there, and I guessed she really just wanted to go shopping. But it also felt a little bit like a test, and I never in my life let no woman test me.

"You go on and go shopping if you want, but me, I ain't gonna miss Prez for the world. Not a tune, not a single damn note."

"Fine," she said, and adjusted her purse. "I'll be back later. Maybe," she added with a pout, and turned on her high heel and marched out, adjusting her hair as she went, and wiggling her ass because she knew I was checking it.

I didn't give a shit, man. French can-can girls you can get any old time if you really want one, but there wasn't nowhere to see Lester Young except on Io. This was my last chance to see him in my life, unless he came back to Earth, and he'd been in bad shape the last time I'd seen him.

Well, I ended up sitting there through a half hour of mediocre rhythm section ad lib, sipping my Deep Europa Iced Tea – that's what they called a Long Island Iced Tea in that

place, the only drink I could afford – when finally Prez showed up.

Now, seeing Prez that time, hearing him play, it was kind of like the first time you had sex. I don't mean waking up from a dirty dream and finding your bed's all sticky, neither. I mean the first time you're with some girl a year ahead of you in junior high school, and you go on upstairs in her house when her mama's out and maybe you kiss on her a little and then you put it in her, and a minute or two later you're wondering what just happened and is that it and why everyone is always making a big deal about that shit?

It was a shame and a huge motherfucking letdown, is what I'm trying to say.

Prez, he used to be a *little* fucked-up. Not when he was younger, before the war. Back then, that cat had some kind of magic power, man. People always wanted him to play like Hawk, I mean Coleman Hawkins, but he didn't listen to nobody, he played his own sound, and it was beautiful. He had this way of making melodies just *sing*, so sweet it'd break your heart in half.

But then they sent him to war, and seeing as he was he was black, they never put him in the army band. *Just who exactly do you think you are, boy? Glenn Miller? Off to the front line with you, nigger*, that's how it was. Folks said it wasn't surprising, him not having his head on straight after all that happened to him: being sent to fight in Europe, and what he saw in Berlin after the Russians dropped that bomb they got from the Frogs onto the city. How he got stuck in a barracks in Paris for all that time after, fighting the local reds, and what happened after we pulled out of Europe, where they court-martialed his ass because his wife was a white woman and didn't take shit off the other soldiers for it. After all that, they said that something inside him was broke, broke in a way that couldn't never be fixed.

Well, you know, I was hoping that maybe that the Frogs had somehow fixed him up, like they'd done with Bird. When I seen him, standing tall, cleanest cat you ever seen, with a big old smile and a fine suit and the same old porkpie hat he always wore, I started to think

maybe they'd done the world a service, brought back the President of the tenor saxophone.

So anyway, he lifted that horn of his up to his lips, with the neck screwed in a little sideways, so that the body of the horn was lifted up off to the side the way he always used to do, and as he started to blow "Polkadots and Moonbeams", my heart sank.

It didn't sound like the real Lester Young, not the Prez I knew. It sounded like some kind of King Tut mummy Lester Young sound. Like the outside *shape* of his sound was still there, but that something important inside it had been took out. I'm sure nobody else there could hear it, but I could. I knew it right away.

I could feel my heart splitting in two as I just sat there and watched the Prez, the man who'd been the Prez, drift his way through tune after tune. It was all right, that floating sound of his, the way he always waltzed loose with the rhythm, the sweet tone, the little bursts forward and then the cool, leaning-back thing he'd do after it. But there was something missing.

Then it hit me what was wrong. I knew every last one of the solos he was playing. Not the tunes, I mean, not just the heads and changes. I mean I knew every goddamn note he played. He wasn't improvising at all. Everything, every lick, was from his old recordings. "My Funny Valentine"; "I Cover the Waterfront"; "Afternoon of a Basieite"... Every goddamn note was off one of his old pre-war LPs. He was playing it all exactly the way he'd played it in the studio, at live shows, anywhere he'd been recorded. I knew, because I had all them same recordings up in my head, too, every last one of them.

So I just sat there staring at him with tears in my eyes, and waited for it to be over.

But you know, during the first set break, he came over and sat with me. Of all the people he could have sat with, all the people who'd come to Io just to see him, he came and sat with me, probably the only cat in the place who was disappointed with what he'd heard.

"You're a saxophone player, aren't you, young man?" he said, suave as ever but a bit too cool. He must've seen me eyeing his fingers on the horn.

"Yes sir, I am. I'm from Philadelphia, and my name's Robbie Coolidge."

"Might you happen to be a tenor player by any chance?"

"Yes sir," I said, nodding.

"Mind if I join you here? Seeing as you lost your hat and all," he said, hand on the back of a chair. By 'hat,' he meant Monique. Everyone knew that was the way Prez talked, funny names for everything. 'Hat' was a new one, though. "My 'people' are in need of a little rest, is all," he said, and wiggled his fingers. That was what he called his fingers, his 'people'.

And of course I told him I didn't mind, and offered to buy him a drink and he laughed and said now that all the drinks were free for him, he didn't want no liquor no more. And then he just started talking to me. Asked me how old I was, asked me if I missed my mama's cooking – I didn't, my mama was a terrible cook, she used food as a kind of weapon when she was mad at me, but I didn't tell him that – and then he told me about his own mama's cooking.

I don't remember exactly what he said, honestly; what I remember was his careful, quiet smile and his bright big eyes lit by some exploding volcano out the big dome window, and how goddamned happy he seemed to be remembering his mama in the kitchen, the smells and the flavors coming back to him across all those years and all those miles from when he'd sat at the kitchen table waiting for dinner.

And don't ask me how I knew, but right then, I realized that they'd done to him whatever they'd done to J.J. and to Bird, and that Lester Young, whoever he was, he was gone from the world, same as J.J. and maybe same as Bird, even. All that was left of the Prez was a shell, filled with something that was supposed to be him but wasn't. That was what I was talking to, and it was all I could do not to cry in his face.

At the end of the set break, when he got up to play again, he told me, "Get off the ships, son. Get yourself on back to the Apple Core," which was what he'd started calling Harlem after the war. "You're way too young for this kind of life."

A little while after he started to play again, Monique came in, and I just took her by the hand and we left.

“Listen, you jive-assed negroes, just listen to me for a minute! This shit they got us playing, man, it ain’t jazz! I don’t know what the fuck it is, but it ain’t human music. Jazz is for *humans*, my brothers!”

Some of them Muslim brothers were nodding their heads as I said this, but I knew one or two of them who wasn’t going to go along with this so easy.

“Boy, you all wet. You signed a god-damned contract.” It was Albert Grubbs, just like I expected. I forget the Muslim name he’d gone and taken for himself, but anyway, I knew him as Albert Grubbs, and sure enough, a few years later, everyone else did too, once he dropped all that religious bullshit. But right then, he was dead against us doing anything to upset relations with the Frogs, because he was still big on the whole space Muslim thing at the time. They figured if we was good enough Uncle Toms, the Frogs might give us some ships of our own, and let us fly around the solar system, so we could brag about beating white people to it. He looked about ready to start quoting the Koran or Mohammed or something like that, so I stood up. I wasn’t gonna rehearse no more till we talked it all out.

“Yeah, *I* signed a contract. *You* signed a contract, too. You know who *else* signed a him a contract? *J.J.* – and look at him now!”

Everyone turned and looked at him. And he was just polishing his bass, oblivious, and he turned and said, “What?”

“Everyone *knous* he ain’t the same. Don’t matter if you never met him before he got on this ship. He used to be goofy and funny and clean, man, took care of his ass. Now look at him,” I said, and cleared my throat. “Hey, J.J.,” I called out, “What’s your favorite movie? What’s your favorite kind of ice cream?”

“Shut up, man,” he said. His voice sounded deader than the worst junkie’s. “Leave me alone.”

Grubbs had a sour look on his face, and he was shaking his head, but some of the other space

Muslims, they were nodding and mumbling to one another. Wasn’t none of them gonna colonize nothing if they all ended up like J.J.

“See? See that? I’m telling you,” I said. “The longer we stay on...”

“...the more of us end up like J.J.” It was Big C, nodding his fat bald head. “The kid’s got a point. I done something like six tours of the solar system, and one quick trip out to Alpha Centauri, too, and you know, there’s always one or two guys who get messed up like that, sometimes more. Lately, it’s been more like three or four guys a trip. I’ve been starting to wonder when my time’s gonna come.”

This started the guys murmuring, discussing, disagreeing.

Grubbs and this other older guy, another space Muslim I remember was calling himself Yakub El-Hassan, one of the trombone players, they stood up to start preaching. I knew had to do something quick.

“Hey, Big C,” I said. “Tell me, you know anything about what happened to Charlie Parker?” Not even Grubbs had the guts to interrupt Big C.

And that was the story that turned the tide. Bird, man, Bird had been right there on that same ship as we were on, at least that was how Big C told it. He’d gone off dope but was still drinking like a fish, whiskey and wine, still eating fried chicken by the five-pound serving, still smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, all of which, especially the liquor, was killing him.

“They took him away, and some of what they done to him, some of it gave him back what he lost back in Camarillo, that’s for sure. But what they did to him was even worse, killed off whatever was left from before Camarillo. Bird, man, he was ruined, all busted up inside. All he could to was play shit off records. Now, he played it crazy and slant. It was beautiful for what it was. But still, that was all he could do anymore. And to tell the truth, I heard they got copies of him. Extras, so they could have him around later. That whatever they took out of him, they kept it for the copies.”

Theguyswereallscared,then,allconfused,and I knew finally I could maybe change their minds.

Even Grubbs looked like he was starting have his doubts, starting to feel like maybe we did have to make a stand.

“Man, you gotta think about it this way. They ain’t gonna copy nobody who don’t play what they like,” I said. “I mean, is this any better than slavery? Having your body copied and the most important part of you carried out into space? Your *soul*?” I said, hoping space Muslims believed in souls.

“Okay, so what can we do? Stop playing?” asked Yakub, still defiant, and though even Grubbs finally looked like he was ready to do something, he was nodding as if to say, *Yeah, what can we do?*

“Nuh-uh,” I said. “We stop playing, maybe they leave us on Jupiter or something. So we keep the contract. We play, but we play shit they *don’t* like. You never know, they might even drop us off at home early. And the only thing I ever promised when I signed up for this was that I’d play *jazz*, man.”

“I’m liking the sound of this,” Big C said, nodding his head. “Anything in mind?”

“Oh yeah, I got something in mind. Let’s go back to my place,” I said. “I got some LPs for us listen to, some new tunes to learn.”

Big C grinned his big old emcee grin and looked out into the crowd of Frogs. “Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, and whatever else you might happen to be. We’re glad to be back on the bandstand after our week off at Jupiter. We’ve got a whole new repertoire lined up for you, which we’ve worked hard to get ready, and we just know it’s gonna make a big splash. Welcome back, and remember: *we’re* the house band for the rest of this tour.”

Then he turned and faced the band, snapping his fingers one, two, one two three four, and then Jimmy Roscoe started the tune with a solo on the piano. “Straight, No Chaser,” it was, that night; my favorite Monk tune.

The band came in after a couple of bars, and not a goddamned one of us blurred. It wasn’t just that we were playing Monk, but we didn’t even blur when we played it. That made them crazy. The arrangement was lifted right off a

Monk piano performance, the brass clanging out the tone clusters, and the saxes singing out his jagged solo in unison.

I never saw a roomful of Frogs clear out so fast, man. Not at first, of course; most of them waited until we segued into “Trinkle Tinkle” and they couldn’t stand it no longer. When aliens got sick off Monk, sometimes they even *puked*. It wasn’t pretty. Man, one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my life was old Heavy Gills slipping on some purple alien puke on the way out, falling right on his bassoon and snapping it in half. I still don’t know what it was about Monk that always turned them upside down like that. Even Monk didn’t know. Later, after I got back, I told him – Monk – about that night, and it cracked him up. He said some scientist had come and seen him, with some kind of theory, equations and charts and numbers, but he told me he figured the answer was a whole lot simpler than that. “It’s just a gift,” he said, and he winked.

Anyway, the trip home, man, it was a lot quicker than we expected. We just played a few Monk tunes at the start of every set, and the few Frogs who even bothered to show up left quick and then we had the ballroom to ourselves. For a while, we started playing around with what we could do in music without blurring. We could still make our fingers remember anything, could still remember any music we’d heard since going on board. I’m still that way, all these years later. I got so many goddamn tunes in my head, it’s like a music library, even now.

But of course we didn’t just work all the time. We jammed, and most of us (except the few who were still trying to be space Muslims) drank all night, and started bringing in the can-can girls – I’d talked Monique into stirring them up, and you know, they were French. They love their revolutions. So they was refusing to blur during their can-can dances, and their auditorium was just as empty as our ballroom, and they had all the time in the world to come drink and hang around with us. All those French girls around, tempting our Muslims from their righteous path and fooling around with the rest of us, it was like heaven for a while.



I think the only people who blurred anymore were the cowboys, because most of them were having the times of their lives chasing those blurred-up cows around all blurred up themselves like that. And some of the animals in the Russian circus, because they didn't know any better. And maybe that Russian guy, too, though him and the Chinese chicks I never did see again.

So anyway, we were supposed to have gone out to Pluto, but a few days off Jupiter, the complaints got so bad that Big C. was called up to go see the man – I mean the Frogs running the ship – but when he came back, he said the Frogs agreed we was playing jazz, just like in the contract, and the contract didn't say nothing about no Monk, so there was nothing they could do. I half expected them to start lynching our asses, but they didn't. The ship went ahead and turned around, headed for Earth just as fast as it fucking could. Me and Monique, we had a fine old time partying the nights away, night after night, but we knew this trip wasn't gonna last forever.

"Marry me," I said to her one night when we were lying in bed, both of us smoking. I wasn't sure I meant it, wasn't sure I wanted to marry anyone at all, but it sounded like the thing to say.

"Robbie," she said, "I know you. You are *musicien*. You don't need a *wife*. You are like a bluebird in the sky."

I puffed on the cigarette. "I guess you're right, baby."

"Let's enjoy the time we 'ave, and when we get 'ome, we don't say goodbye, only 'See you around the later.'"

I laughed a little. "Naw, you mean, 'See you later.' Or 'See you around,' baby. Not..."

"Whatever," she said, and yanked the sheets off me.

You know, when we got to Earth, we landed in Africa.

Africa, man, the motherland, the place where all our music started. I was in Africa and the funny thing was, I didn't give a shit. I wanted to get back to New York, to the clubs on West 52nd, to Minton's.

But it took time. We came down an elevator near some city whose name I can't remember, in

what was then still Belgian Congo, which was lousy with wealthy Belgian refugees by then, and we rode down into town in jeeps. Monique sat with me, held my hand, but I couldn't see her face through the sunglasses she wore. She had this big sun hat on, too, huge thing I'd never seen before, and she kept looking out across the hillsides.

Finally, when we got into the city, that was it. I lifted her suitcase out of the back of the jeep, and there we were, the guys from the band off to one side, waiting for me so we could all catch a flight back to New York, and all them can-can girls off to the other side waiting for her so they could all go back to Paris.

And there we were in the middle.

"What you gonna do?" I said.

"I am not coming to New York," she said.

"I know. What *are* you gonna do?"

"I am going to go to Paris," she said, but the French way, *Parée*. "I'm going to tell people what I 'ave seen, and ask the everyone to stop cooperating wit' *les grenouilles*." Which was exactly what she did, too, on and on until the Frogs finally just up and left. Not that they left because of her, I don't think, but she never stopped fighting them.

"That sounds good," I said, and I looked at her hands.

"Ow about you?" she said, a little more softly.

"Me? I'm a musician, Monique. I'm gonna go home and play me some music."

I kissed her, and I wanted that kiss to be magic, like in the stories your folks read you when you're a little kid. When a kiss wakes up a princess or saves the world, that kind of shit. But all that happened was that she kissed me back for a little while, and then she was gone.

It was a hell of a thing, getting back to New York like that. Not just all the new buildings, or them new flying cars zipping around like they owned the place, crashing into one another. The goddamned Frogs, they were pissed at all of us from that tour. Those sons of bitches over at the Onyx, they had already tore up all the contracts, and I didn't ever see more than a few thousand dollars from the whole thing,

which was bullshit, really, since I'd signed up for a cool million, and been gone for almost half the time I'd signed up for.

But you know, in the end, I didn't give a shit. Those pills I took, none of them had worn off yet. (Most of them still haven't, even now, and it'd been decades.) My mama, she used to say, "Take whatever lemons you get in life, boy, and you go on and make yourself some lemonade." My mama, she couldn't cook to save her life, but she knew something, alright.

So I started making lemonade. I got myself one of those new typewriter-phones that everyone was buying, and sent a phone-letter to my buddies from the band, and on Monday nights, we started meeting down under the 145th Street Bridge.

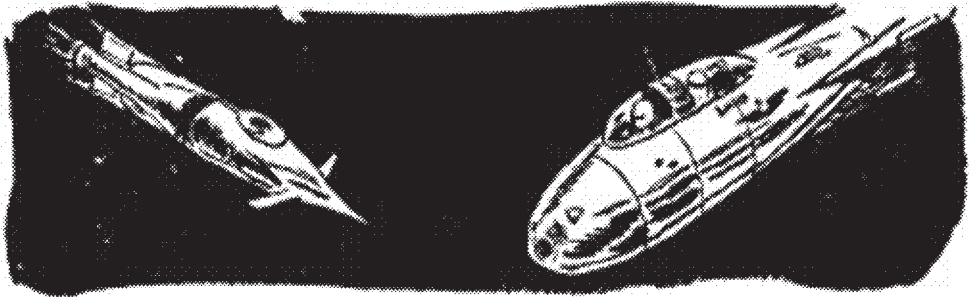
Man, down under that bridge, with them new flying cars buzzing overhead, we invented a new kind of music. It was all about playing together, at the same time, like in old-fashioned Dixieland music, except that we were swinging it hard, *real* hard, and half of it was made of chunks of music from the libraries in our heads. Everyone who showed up there, we'd been up on the ships, so we all had libraries in our heads. Our fingers were programmed, you know, so we could play anything back that we wanted. You could start with a little Monk, then switch over to Bird, throw in a little Prez, and of course there was room for whatever else you wanted to play up in there, too, and *man* did we play.

All that memory and all those programmable chops that they gave us to make up for the fact that playing blurred was so hard, we used all of that. After a few months, we found none of us

could blur anymore even if we wanted to, but we didn't even care. We were doing something new, man, and all the music that's come after, you can hear some of what we did right in there, still!

Time came years later when all of that would start to sound old-fashioned, when people would start talking shit about us for that, criticizing us for ever having gone onto them Frogships and even blaming us for what happened in Russia and Europe, which is just crazy. Man, when we were fighting back, that was the first time ever where anything like that had been done, at least with the Frogs. It was all new. It's easy to disrespect people making mistakes before you were born, way easier than worrying about not making your own mistakes. That's just bullshit, trying to fill us up with regret for what's all long gone now, like the Frogs.

Shit, maybe there *are* things I regret, like leaving Francine the way I did, or how I totally stopped visiting J.J. in the asylum after we got back. But most my regrets are for things that ain't my fault. I regret seeing Prez the way he ended up, for instance, and I regret never seeing Big C again, and Monique for that matter. I used to think about all that a lot, after I first got back. Man, I remember lots of times when I used to stand there under the bridge while everyone was playing back all their favorite lines from old records we all knew, and I'd look up into the sky and find Jupiter. It's easy, you know, just look up. It looks like a star, a bright old star up there. I'd stare on up at Jupiter, back then, and think of Prez, and blow a blues on my horn, the baddest old motherfucker of a blues that anybody anywhere ever heard in the world.









# LITTLE GIRL DOWN THE WAY

By Lawrence Santoro

*Illustrated by Jouni Koponen*

*WARNING: Contains scenes of a disturbing nature that some may find offensive.*

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**E**RIN WAS DEAD; DEAD, AND HER little body buried in the narrow alley where the rainspout spilled dirty water over the new concrete. The burial hadn't been a good job.

Erin stayed in the basement, the same basement she'd lived in the last years of her life. Mommy loved her. That's why Erin was here,

because Mommy loved her, always loved her. Must have been her bad Dwarves, Erin knew, because day after day, all days alike, Erin slipped back into this small place in the basement. Day after day, all alike, she flopped face first into a growling rock grinder of lumpy pain; each day she fell, *plop*, into a sea of boiling do-do, got flushed, was snuffed and smothered, drowned in thick pee-pee, stinky diarrhoea pumping up her nose. Every day she got tossed, heaved onto the broken coke bottle rocks of sharp light that caught, hooked and hung her, held her

dangling, slipping by her gently tearing flesh, *rip, rip, rrrrip*, over the blazing hole of always.

That was just eye-openers and she was already dead.

She tried to cry. She couldn't. The dead cannot. Every day, all days the same, her eyes had no wet for it, chest hurt too much to heave, crying.

Even dead, she was hungry. Hunger made her stomach puff. Every now and then she caught something, something dead that scrambled across her face or arms in the cellar dark, scabbled up her legs. Caught 'em, sucked 'em down, *slurp*, the dead things fed her. Good the dead could feed the dead. *Mmm*.

Unless she puked, Mommy wouldn't know.

Right now, she had mice chunks and a hundred squirts of oozy bug in her belly. There was also most of a sock down there. There it had been, a long stretch outside her dog cage. It must have been from a time ago, something dropped in a corner, then, one day, kicked and left near enough for her to reach it.

She'd reached and reached and reached then taken it. It was small, so very small. Oh, maybe it had been her brother's *oh, ohhh, ohhhhhhh, Baby's*. She held it for a while, loving it, touching her face with it. Finally, hunger took her and she took it, a few threads at a time soaked in her nose blood. She let the strands trickle down her throat until: *allllll gone*.

That was long ago. And in truth she couldn't remember if that was when she was alive or not. There were other things, a few dirty things, down inside her, but not a lot, not so much that Mommy'd care.

What she fed on, she slurped. Jaw wouldn't let her chew. When she'd been alive, Jaw wouldn't let her cry, either. When she tried, Jaw made her feel like she was chewing sharp pieces of herself. Jaw was – she counted with her tongue – one, two, three, four – four places jaw was broken. Tongue could touch and gently shift the broken ends, the bone beneath the skin; ear could hear it *grate, grate, grate* and make the shivering hot chill chatter all through her head. When she did, when she moved her bones like that, her shattered teeth

bit, bit, bit, the swelling lips, shredded cheeks and gnawed-on tongue.

Jaw minded her for Mommy. Mommy had made Jaw from her mouth. *Wham, wham, wham, wham* and there was Jaw.

That'll show me, she'd say to herself as jaw snapped *gnyang, gnyang, gnyang*, down hard and pointy on all the soft places in her mouth. That'll show me Mommy, she'd say as each bite slammed a hammerfall of agony against the back of her eyeballs! *See Mommy*; she'd say very, very quietly and very, very fast? *That'll show me! That'll show me!* She whispered it aloud; maybe Mommy'd hear and like her more. She'd think it to herself, and maybe Mommy wouldn't hear and wouldn't hate her more. Jaw watched and minded for Mommy. Even when she died, Jaw watched Erin for Mommy.

None of it – pain, fear, missing her Mommy – helped her cry, though. She was dead. The dead don't cry.

Except for not being able to cry, being dead wasn't so bad. She'd hung on so to being alive! Mommy was right, she was a stupid bitch. And when it finally swallowed her, death was just the same as life. Same basement. Same Mommy. Same pain. What had she been so scared of? She was still safe down there. She just hadn't known.

When she'd been alive, she couldn't eat. Not the last few weeks. Once, when the cellar window had been left open in a dark wind, *just to air the stink out of the goddamned place for Jesus' sake*, and the rains had splashed down so hard, the mud had spattered and flowed thick dribbles down the wall, she'd caught some and sucked it down. The mud was cool on her lips, gritty. She could swallow it so smooth and it felt full and heavy in her tummy.

Mommy didn't like that! She found out and she didn't like that!

Today Erin puked a little snot and *ooooo* that hurt. The hundred Nasty Dwarves she knew were in her, inside her everywhere, started scraping, *ruff, ruff, ruff*, like that and got to kicking, kicking her with hard, sharp feet, wham, wham, wham, wham like that. They grabbed parts of her insides, her heart, her tummy, lungs, bones and throat. They pulled and bent and hung, they



stretched and bit and tore and made her hurt like she couldn't believe. They jabbed with knives and touched with fire and ran electric all through her. She'd hated the numb chatters of electric, how it made her go loose and poopy when Mommy'd run it through her, hated the way it made her, *slam*, go whack onto the floor or against the wall, her head going *boom, boom, boom*. The Dwarves that lived in her had it all – fire, knife, and electric pain.

When Erin yelled, it was a tiny silent scream. She could hear it and that's what counted. Her broken bits poked her here, there, everywhere, tore out her cheek, her side, her arm. Bloody stuff ran out her poopy hole, but she screeched it to herself. She knew how much Mommy hated, just *hated*, that – when the bones showed, sticking out. But she couldn't, really, really couldn't shove the bloodred pointy things back inside, not again, not and keep the screaming to *her-Goddamn-self*.

So there she sat: forcing stillness, forcing her mouth to stop; Erin made it stop working against the jagged bony things that stuck out of her face the last couple of weeks, months, years.

She was dead and still she sat still. She remembered: Mommy didn't like a noise from her, mornings. She forced the silence of the grave over everything, willing herself to be dead again today as she had every day for days, weeks, months, years.

Even dead, she needed to breathe. Short pants did it. Deep breath hurt too much, made funny cracking pains inside. Little breaths – a lot of them – worked almost as good and didn't hurt as much. She took her first little sniffs of the day.

That accomplished, morning was underway.

Every now and then she knew a little light. Haze drifted through her like white air. Light hurt different than memory of life and the reality of this place, this Heaven, was it?

In the silent place she kept around her, she still stank. In the *thank-the-Jesus* dark, she still stank while she waited to be all the way dead again later, later – at night, maybe it was, when she was really dead. Like being asleep when she'd been alive. But when she was awake, she stank.

She felt the stinky dress still on her. Aw, it was still there. She still wore the dress she'd worn for weeks, months, years. The dress Mommy'd given her. The same old *new dress from Sears* that she wore forever, that her body was buried in out where the dirty water washed the crumbling concrete.

She remembered. Remembered the time when Mommy had come to see her and seen “what the fuck you done to that!” Mommy had seen the “Jesus Christ I paid good god-damned money for and look what you done to it now” dress.

Now and then a living person would come, come to the basement, would turn on the light from upstairs and Erin would squint against the screaming shards the hanging bulb sprayed through her like spitting grease from a hot stove. That hurt, light did, but different from the day-by-day *whap, bam, bong* Mommy'd bring by later.

The person would move across the basement, do those things the living did. And when the person left, sometimes he'd leave the bulb on and the brightness would boil her away, day and night, until someone turned it off.

Sometimes, the living person would sniff, as though he smelled her stinky self all the way from the grave down by the rainspout. When this happened, the live one would shiver, hug himself, move quickly, finish in a rush what had to be done, trot up the steps, slam the door, and leave a silent chill behind as the lamp swung back and forth in the dark.

It was hard to see the living – they were little more than vapour – and even though their light and mist brought pain, Erin liked the times they came. Hard to see, impossible to touch. She could barely tell if these living ones were boys or girls, big people or kids. She had no idea what the living did, why they did it. Even when she'd been alive, she didn't know. Now...?

Every now and then, one of them walked right through her and dragged a little piece of her upstairs, stuck to their shoe maybe or soaked into the hem of a skirt or caught like a burr on a pants leg. That little piece of Erin

would move with the living, up in the day and light. She'd feel the outside day, just a little, like a splendid single note of a really pretty song. Then the note faded, whitened, died, and then the missing part crawled back to her, dirty dark and stinky, while she slept. When she woke another day, that little piece of her was sticking out, just a morsel of that day's pain.

That's how she thought of it anyway.

Every now and then something would scream past the high narrow window that looked outside, something so alive, something with small legs and shrill voices. Kids. Like Baby brother had been. As with all the living, she could hardly see these children, but they made her basement vibrate. What they did... they made her remember.

She remembered, back to before she'd come here, remembered when Baby So Sweet had first come home. Not like her. No. She'd seen Baby sleeping dearly, all the world quiet around him he slept so sweet. She went on tippytoes to Baby brother. She leaned over and kissed. Kissed his cheek. He smelled like milk. His cheek was warm and soft, something she wanted to taste, like something she'd remembered from long ago and she wanted now to taste him but all she did, all she ever did, was kiss his head and kiss his nose and kiss his cheek.

Then Mommy grabbed her arm and swung her around and around and smacked her on the wall, picked her up and told her *good thing she come before she'd dropped Baby*; told her *good thing or she'd go out with the trash*.

Even though Erin promised, promised Mommy never to come near Baby ever, never again, *that was it, Mommy had had it with her. Mommy WAS planning to send her to school that year, Mommy said. But now? Not on her life. She WAS going to let her outside. But not now. She WAS going to let her have friends. But not not not not NOW.* And she *whomped* her again on the wall and her arm bone, sharp and white, came through her skin and *made a mess a Goddamned mess*.

Then she went to live in the basement.

It was a long time 'till she saw Baby again. She almost didn't know him. He was almost as

big as she was and he flickered by the window. His little legs flew by, a flickered blur of bright and shadow, but somehow she felt him pass. She shoved as close to the light as the dog cage let her. Squeezing her face against the cold metal, she could see one piece of sky and part of the wall of the house next door. The day was bright. A puddle of light soaked the floor and caught the corner of her cage. The heat of the beam licked her face.

Then the legs thudded past again and she almost felt the wind of their going. Like thunder. Like pounding pain, they ran.

After a silence, and all of a sudden, there was a face. It flashed into a corner of the window, clipping off her measure of sky. Her brother's face blocked most of the light and his shadow fell across her. She felt the cool of his shadow and could almost smell the memory of his cheek. But he was *sooooo* big now. She stared at the giant Baby and his eyes, oh his eyes, were so black in his big round head, his eyes got *sooooo* wide and he shaded them with both his sweet little hands.

She stunk.

He yelled and yelled and in a moment he was whipped up and out of the frame.

Then there was Mommy, and Erin skittered into the dark corner of the cage and *no, no, no, no*, she knew she'd hurt. She knew she wouldn't know why *fucking Jesus fucking Christ why was she so Goddamned bad? Why was she so...?* She could feel it now...

This was when she was still alive, when she was the rat in the basement. Mommy told her that was what she was. To her, to Baby: the big, bad rat in the basement. What Baby'd called her.

Even after Mommy'd punished her for letting Baby see her, she'd remembered when Baby had first come home and she had touched him with her lips. She remembered the time when she had first, and for the only time, felt the cool life of his shadow across her eyes.

Ever after, once a week maybe, just once a week, she'd touch her own hand to her lip and close her eye for a moment, trying to imagine it was Baby's hand she kissed.

A long, long time later, the door to the cellar opened and it wasn't Mommy.

She'd been sitting. That's what she did most days. Then the cellar door opened and she scooted to the cagedoor so Mommy didn't have to get down and crawl to catch hold of her for Jesus's sake.

The cellar door opened and nothing happened.

A foot sounded on the stair but the light didn't come. In a little while the foot stepped on the squeaky tread. It didn't squeak like when Mommy stepped on it, no, it squeaked different.

It was gray outside and the world didn't make much light around her, but in the shadow on the stairs there was a small person. She had never seen a small person and she covered herself with her piece of blanket.

"Come out," the voice of the small person said. "I see you. You come out."

She peeked. The small person was near the cage. He was bigger than she was, but she knew he was Baby. Baby alone. She slipped her head out of the blanket and looked at him.

A beam of yellow light smacked her dead on the eyeballs. It felt like toothache exploding in her face. She screamed and her own voice scared her. It was like nothing she'd ever heard. It was just her but it was a ghost, a monster, a rat, yes a rat in the basement, and she was screaming from fear of herself.

Then Baby was screaming and the light fell from his hands and rolled on the floor. He ran. He clamoured up the steps one at a time and the wooden door above slammed.

She screamed for a few minutes. Through Baby banging on the door, above, and his screaming and crying. She screamed into the silence that followed. She screamed for a little, and then she was quiet again because she knew Mommy would come.

Mommy came later that night. And that was the last day she lived. Before Mommy reached her Erin began whispering, telling Mommy she was really bad and she would never make another sound ever again. She wouldn't really, really wouldn't. She didn't sit by the door of the cage;

she drew as far away from it as she could. She knew it was bad, but she was afraid.

Mommy was quiet, coming. She wasn't saying *Jesus's sake* and *fucking Christ* and *Goddamn rat*. She walked down and picked up the flashlight that had gone dark on the floor in the hours since Baby'd been down to see where rat lived.

She clicked the dead flashlight and put it on the bench behind her. She came to the cage and unlocked the gate. She got on her hands and knees and reached inside. Erin pressed against the farthest corner, saying, "no Mommy, no Mommy, no Mommy," but Mommy squeezed further and further in, caught her leg, and drew Erin forth.

Erin whimpered. She whispered no, no, no, no, no, no. She would never ever ever say anything again.

Mommy picked her up. She looked at her. Mommy was so big, so much bigger every day. Now she was the biggest thing in all the world. And Mommy put her hands around Erin's middle and pressed. Erin took a last breath and tasted Mommy's perfume and said, no, no, no. Then Mommy pressed more and more and Erin felt herself break inside, felt herself crack, felt sharp things stab her and stab her. Then she couldn't breathe, not even a little and in a short time, held close to Mommy, in Mommy's hands, she died.

That wasn't too bad, Erin remembered. There had been worse. When she'd spilled on the new dress from the Sears. That'd been worse. That had been a day! A *whap, whap, whap*, picked by the feet and spun, day. A *wheee*, and her face went *wham-bong* against the metal pole that held up the house from down in the basement day. That day, Mommy'd dropped her, "little fucker," Mommy'd called her, "crawl out of me, will you," she said. Then she'd shoved a rolled up newspaper down her throat until she nearly choked.

"You'll wear that thing until you wear it out," Mommy'd said, letting her go, letting her pull the paper out of her mouth.

Mommy sat on her for a while and hit her with a piece of coal from the bin. She hoped

that showed her, Mommy'd said. *She'd have to learn*, Mommy said. And hit her. *Learn to take care of things I give you*. And hit her. *Cost good money; these things*. And hit her. *She'd wear that dress*. And hit her. *Wear that fucking dress until Christ Jesus took it off her*. Oh the dress was a wreck after that.

And Mommy had left Jaw to watch out what she did down there.

Then Mommy was gone, the door slammed and she didn't eat ever after. She didn't make any more fuss after that. Now that was a day.

Except Baby'd come down and she screamed and Mommy came and Erin died. That was another day.

Mommy took her body and put it outside with the trash. Just like she said, except she buried her where the rainspout poured. Nobody knew. Nobody had known she ever was; they knew less of her now that she wasn't.

Erin stayed in the basement. After a while she got used to being dead.

People came later, living people whom she could hardly see. They took all the things out of the basement. They took the dog cage and Erin had no place to be. In a little bit, Mommy came down and stood in the dark.

Erin wanted to cry, but the dead didn't do that. Mommy looked so beautiful. She was dressed for going. Erin knew it. Mommy looked around the empty basement. Finally she found Erin after looking long and hard, looked right at her.

"You better stay right here young lady," Mommy said quietly. "You stay here or I'll be back for you. You hear?"

Then Mommy was gone.

How long ago?

Now, every day, all days alike, Erin came into the world, sat in the pain and waited.

The basement filled, then emptied, more people came, more things went.

One day, the basement was gone. Big machines rumbled through. The house fell. The machines rolled right through her. Light pounded down, dirt filled her and she rose to the surface. All her pains remained, pieces of her hung to the iron, to the men who walked right

through her in daylight. She watched as her body was unearthed. She watched as people came and looked. She watched, sitting as close as she could to where the little dog cage had been, as people lifted her from the ground and put her in a bag.

"Bye-bye," she said as her body went away. "Bye-bye."

Night. She waited.

Day. The living came with more machines. They dug out her basement again and she found the old spot where she'd lived and waited the years for Mommy. The living built.

Days went along. All days alike. The new basement was bright. The ceiling was white and smooth. Bright tube lights lit the place.

The living came and went. They passed through her like light through a window.

Then one night Mommy came.

Erin didn't recognize her at first. First, she was a shadow, something in the dark. The shadow was stick-thin, but Erin knew her Mommy.

Mommy was acting funny, too. Nobody was with them here in the basement but Mommy was struggling, fighting against something and losing the fight. Mommy never lost a fight. That was funny and Erin almost laughed. Somebody forcing Mommy! Despite her fear, Erin giggled a little.

Mommy screamed. Not words, a jagged something poured out of her.

The giggle dried up in Erin. She hid in the dark corner where the dog cage had been. The new basement was different, but she knew where it had been all those years. It felt so good to be in this place with Mommy again.

After the scream, Mommy didn't say a word. Not one word. That was not like her, either. Erin heard noises crawling around down inside her Mommy. Sobbing snuffles and gulps burped out. Mommy came forward, dragged, shoved, pushed, one shaking foot at a time. She was not moving on her own. It was as though people invisible where moving her like a big dolly. Erin wanted to go to her, to help her, but she couldn't, just couldn't. Oh, Mommy! Tears formed in the eyes of the little dead girl. Tears she'd not been able to shed since her death.

As the Mommy shadow wobbled toward Erin, thin moonlight from the window touched her. It didn't brighten but cut right through her and she staggered on. When she reached the place where the old light bulb had hung overhead for so many years, so many years ago, a hard streak of yellow light poured across Mommy's face. Mommy was hard and solid. Her skin hung in spotty folds. Her nose was a hook, thin skin over thin bone. Her beautiful green eyes were milk-cloudy marbles bulging from her pointy face. And her hair! Oh, her hair was stringy, gray. Mommy'd never been like this. Mommy was pretty. Mommy'd always loved her hair, her thick red hair, and would never let it go like that. And she was scared. Mommy was never scared. Her eyes were big. Mommy's eyes were steady and cool. When she got mad, her green eyes went dark and squinty. But Erin had never seen them wide like this.

*Ohhhh!* Mommy is dead, Erin knew.

Erin looked and, oh my, dissolving into being above Mommy, there was the bulb, there was the electric wire from which the bulb had hung, there was the old ceiling, the boards, beams and pipes. It all faded into being above Mommy and spread out above them both, spread to the corners. Then down the old walls flowed, down from where the ceiling ended, the old basement ran like spilled honey, oozing, covering. Erin remembered. Oh Mommy was mad when she had spilled honey at breakfast. Mommy had showed her! Face pressed to the pancake griddle showed her. She never spilled that *Goddamn* honey again, no sir.

The old basement reached the floor and crept across the new concrete, under Mommy's feet, the change washed over to where Erin cuddled with the corner's darkness. It rippled under her and when she looked again, there it was: Home. As it always had been and was always meant to be. Like loving arms, the cage spread up and around Erin, embraced her in its cool metal bars.

Erin peeked between the fingers she held over her eyes. Beyond the cage, there was Mommy and she was, oh, God, real as always and growing younger and younger. The red steeped

through the grey hair that hung like weeds from Mommy's head. In a few moments, she was as Erin remembered. The thin body filled, became round and firm. Her face moulded itself into the old shape Erin had always, always loved. The wrinkles around her eyes, above her lips, the loose skin tightened, fleshed the bones. She was growing pretty all over again.

Crunches came from Mommy, like tiny twigs breaking, like little bones snapping. Erin knew those sounds. And there were slurpy squishes as the old beauty blew her up like a beautiful Mommy balloon.

Mommy screamed all the while, then it was done. All done. All done and Mommy stopped screaming forever. The dead didn't scream.

Erin wondered. Had she been a bad little fucker again? She wasn't sure. Mommy was hurting and when Mommy hurt, it was Erin's fault, dirty little cunt.

Mommy stood under the old yellow bulb. Erin skittered toward the cage door, remembered what Mommy'd done the last time she'd come looking and her bad little bastard had tried to keep away. Erin waited by the door now, waited for Mommy.

"I was good, Mommy," Erin tried to say. Her mouth was broken though so she could only whisper. "I was good. I waited," she whispered.

Mommy tried to scream, but couldn't. Above the gurgles that she could get out came the sound of tearing cloth. *Swish, swish, rip, rip, rip*. Mommy's beautiful blouse, her skirt, everything she wore shredded and flew to pieces and she stood naked under the bulb.

Mommy's pretty little titties were all big now and sagging full. Her belly was swelling just like before Baby had come.

Oh, Mommy's going to bring home another Baby, Erin just knew it. She hoped, this time, she'd be allowed to hold Baby and kiss him and give Baby his bottle. Now that she was dead and now that Mommy knew what a good girl she could be.

The invisible people dragged one Mommy foot forward, then the other, then the first. They walked her like a rag doll, a beautiful, beautiful big rag doll, toward the cage in the corner.



Mommy pressed back, as if leaning against the people who weren't there, the ones who were dancing her out of the light and toward the cage. Her titties flopped; her hairy dirty-parts went open and shut, open and shut, open and shut as her legs quivered into the shadows.

Then, *wham!* Mommy slammed to her knees in front of Erin, the invisibles shoved her face down on top of the cage. Mommy looked big-eyed down on Erin from overhead. Mommy made a strangled gulping, burping sound again as her bones and skin tried to flow around and through the bars. Her titties pressed against the cage door right at Erin's face. And they were so pretty. So warm and soft, so rich looking.

Erin wanted Mommy to stop hurting, wanted the invisibles to stop making Mommy hurt. She reached out and touched Mommy's breast. Mommy moaned and the breast strained against the wire bars. The brown titty tip grew firm, swelled; it reached toward Erin.

Mommy tried to scream.

"No!" Erin yelled in her dusty broken-Jaw whisper. "Don't hurt Mommy!"

Erin leaned forward and pressed her lips against the straining titty and ohhh my, it felt so good to touch Mommy with her burning mouth. The nipple slipped so easy in between her shredded lips. Erin's jagged teeth massaged her Mommy's flesh and oh, her Mommy flowed, flowed so warm and sweet and thick into her, the Mommy milk surrounded her thick tongue, broken palate, shredded cheeks.

Erin closed her eyes. So good to suckle there again. She remembered. That's what she did, the little girl who was dead, she remembered. She remembered this very nipple from so many years ago. She remembered Mommy's hand supporting her heavy little head, cradling her body against her Mommy warmth and Mommy smell.

Erin's twisted little claws reached for the warm, fragrant breast. They closed softly around it. Oh, and it seemed so right for them to be there, the broken little fingers.

Erin wasn't aware, but now she leaned back. Mommy and her breast came with her. The little girl drew Mommy through the bars. The cold steel tore through the ghostly flesh,

sending electric fires through every dead organ of Mommy's body. She tried to scream. Being dead, she couldn't.

Finally, the steel bars flowed through her and Mommy was in the cage with her little girl.

To Erin, the titty had a will. It knew how to feed and comfort her and her mouth bubbled with good milk, soothing, easing every part that ever hurt.

Soon, Mommy's arms embraced her once again. She felt herself grow smaller and smaller. That felt so good.

Erin's eyes closed. Through her lids the light bulb was red and sparkly black. Soon the light went away and all was dark. She felt mother heaving under her but that was fine. She felt her mother might be screaming, but no. Both were dead now and wasn't that nice? Both of them, mother, daughter, dead together.

The oozy things in Erin's belly, mouse chunks and thick bug jellies sucked from things in the dark, the nose snot she'd swallowed, the dirt, mud, the pieces of herself, the bone bits and teeth parts, the Baby's sock she'd taken one thread at a time, all that now flowed from her. When it started to come, it burned a little. But then the hurt stopped. It flowed and flowed and flowed from her from every part. For a moment, Erin worried that the stuff had gotten on Mommy. Then she stopped worrying. If it had, Mommy would have let her sure as shit know about it...

When it stopped, Erin was clean inside. Just Mommy's sweet, sweet milk still streamed into her from that pretty, pretty titty.

Mommy stiffened, then began to buck like a wild thing. Erin's eyes stayed shut and she soothed Mommy with her little hands and mouth.

"Mommy's dead. Mommy's dead," Erin said quietly to the invisibles making Mommy do these dumb and twitchy things. "She can't cry. Don't make her cry!"

Erin was still hungry. Erin got smaller. She felt herself snuggle so close and warm to Mommy, Mommy's flesh felt so nice and soft and warm. Erin pressed her mouth fully around the big, big nipple then she flowed inside. She flowed inside

her Mommy where it all was dark and soft and warm and smelled so like food and goodness.

Erin laid her head on a softness in the dark. It was sooo easy. It didn't hurt to breathe anymore because she didn't have to breathe. Mommy breathed for her. Erin sighed so sweet and felt her mother try to scream again

"No, no, Mommy. It's okay. We're good. We're good."

Even then, Erin was hungry. A good hungry because food was there. She pressed her mouth to the fragrant Mommy flesh by her cheek and she kissed

it, kissed it and licked it. With the kiss she felt her belly fill. It felt so much better. Later, she'd eat and eat and eat some more, eat until forever was over.

Mommy tried to scream.

"No, no Mommy, we're together now. And this is heaven." Mommy tried to scream.

Erin had always loved her Mommy. That's why Erin was here for her now. Because she loved her Mommy.

Mommy tried to scream.

Erin slept. Soon she'd be awake and the rest of forever could begin.

# STAMP-O-GRAMS

## ODD NAMES

U.S. POSTAL GUIDE SHOWS THE FOLLOWING POST OFFICES

"CYCLONE" IN WYOMING-COUNTY

"HURRICANE" IN PUTNAM-COUNTY

"TORNADO" IN KANAWHA-COUNTY

"WINDY" IN WIRT COUNTY  
ALL IN WEST VIRGINIA

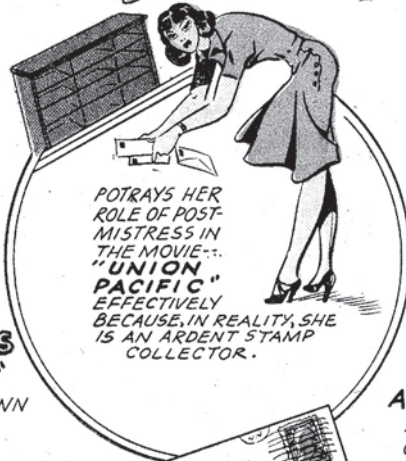
## STAMP ODDITIES

"ROUGH AN READY" IS THE NAME OF A TOWN IN CALIFORNIA.

DURING THE WORLD WAR U.S. SECRET SERVICE OPERATIVES PRINTED COUNTERFEIT GERMAN STAMPS FOR USE ON THEIR SPY CORRESPONDENCE.

THE UNITED STATES POST OFFICE ISSUED ONLY ONE \$3 AND ONE \$4 POSTAGE STAMP. (COLUMBIAN-ISSUE IN 1893.)

BARBARA STANWYCK



POTRAYS HER ROLE OF POST-MISTRESS IN THE MOVIE--"UNION PACIFIC" EFFECTIVELY BECAUSE, IN REALITY, SHE IS AN ARDENT STAMP COLLECTOR.

## DO YOU KNOW?

IRELAND  
IS IN NORTH CAROLINA.

SCOTLAND  
IS IN NORTH CAROLINA.

ENGLAND  
IS IN ARKANSAS

MEXICO  
IS IN MAINE

ROME  
IS IN FLORIDA

ATHENS  
IS IN TEXAS

## STAMP COLLECTORS MENU

### APPETIZERS

MELON (KAN)  
OYSTER (PA)

### SOUP

TURTLE (MO)  
RICE (ARIZ)

### FISH

CARP (MINN)  
HADDUCK (GA)

### GAME

QUAIL (TEXAS)  
SQUIRREL (IDAH)

### ROAST

CHICKEN (ALASKA)  
TURKEY (TEXAS)

### VEGETABLES

POTATO (TEXAS)  
LIMA (OKLA)

### DESSERTS

PECAN (MISS)  
PEANUT (CAL)

### FRUIT

APPLE (KY)  
ORANGE (CONN)

### DRINKS

CHAMPAIN (ILL)  
RYE (N.Y)

### CIGARS

CORONA (N.Y)  
CREMO (W.VA)

To AND CHICAGO ILL.

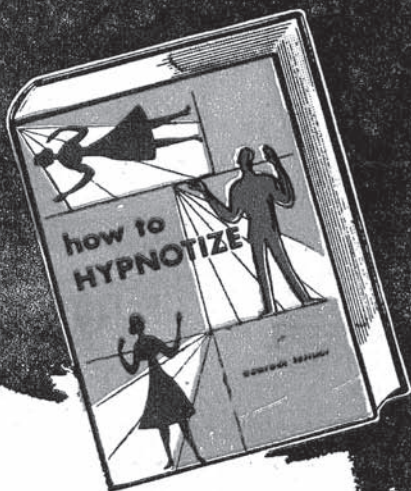
Amos AND Andy

RECEIVED THIS LETTER PROMPTLY.

SOME MORE NEXT ISSUE!



# HOW TO HYPNOTIZE



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# THE VAMPIRE KISS

By Gene Wolfe

*Illustrated by Bob Byrne*

**T**HIS STORY I HAD FROM ONE OF MY boys. The boys – boys I find on the streets and boys who are sent to me by others – are a queer lot. Most have no education, which is good. A few others, of which Tommy is one, were someone’s darling child not so long ago. They will keep themselves clean, when they can, and speak as properly as any page at court. His sort is the best, when they are not over-timid.

He came to me one evening while I was frying sausages, and sat for a minute or two by

the fire before he said, “It reminds me of a way they said I might kill her, though I never did, even when I found her grave.”

I looked around at him, as you may imagine, and I asked whether he had been advised to kill a lady with sausages.

“No, sir,” he said, “with fire.” This is the tale, as near as I remember it.

We lodged near the Green, sir. I could show you the place. There was a shop below us, a dusty little shop, but on my honour it is the



most interesting shop I was ever in, for there are all sorts of things in there. Watches, sir, and rings such as you have here, silver teapots, too, and games with the kings and queens and castles and things all carved of ivory. There was a set of false teeth, sir, that came and went like a ghost. One day it would be there, and on the next it would be gone. In a day or two it would be back again. There were fire-irons and pistols and everything you could imagine. Many you couldn't. A glass walking stick full of sweets. I used to stare at it when it was hungry, but I never asked the old man for a sweet. I knew he wouldn't give me one, though he was kind now and then and would give me a cup of tea or a bun. His wife made the tea, sir, in a big canister sort of thing bigger than any pot. It didn't taste like our tea either, but I would put in a lot of sugar, you know, and I liked it well enough.

They were foreign, the old man and his wife, and talked to each other in a way I couldn't understand. Kind, though. Only they were old and almost dead, and they knew it. I don't think they thought about life much any more, sir, if you follow me. They knew they hadn't much claim to it left, and would lose what they had soon enough.

My father was nearer dying than they were, but he wasn't like them about it. He was holding on. You could see it even when he slept. He fought for every breath, and he was tired, sir, oh, so tired, but brave. His heart wasn't tired, if you take my meaning, only his body. He wanted to live.

No, sir, he was too sick to work. Too sick to walk, almost. His skin was the colour of paper, or the handkerchiefs after we've washed them. Mother worked in a shop another woman owned, selling tea. The other woman paid her, and gave her a little tea, too, every day. Loose tea, you know, that she'd put in her pocket and bring home. That was how we had tea, and good tea it was, though we wouldn't have sugar to put in, or milk.

Then she was taken sick too, with the thing my father had. I didn't know what it was, only that she couldn't work and there was nothing

to eat. One day the old foreign woman from the ground floor, the one that made the tea, came up to get the rent. Father was a little stronger then and tried to get out of bed. Mother wouldn't let him and begged him to lie down, and went to the door herself though she was almost too weak to walk.

The old woman saw how bad she was, and sat her down, and me with her, and talked to us. She went back to her kitchen, too, and got some meat rolled up in leaves and gave it to us. And we ate it. My mother got three, I remember, and brought two in to Father, and said the old woman had given her five. I'll never forget that. My mother had just one, after that, and I had two; but I cut one of mine in two and gave her half. The taste was strange but so good I was sorry afterward that I had done it.

The old woman told us a ghost was drinking Mother's blood, and Father's too. It happened a lot in the country she had been born in, she said. The ghost would fix upon a person, and drink from him until he died, and find another after that. They were like a woman who always went to the same greengrocer, she said, until he closed and retired to the seaside. Then she would go to another. But sometimes they fixed on a certain family instead of a person. They would drink the blood of that family until it was wiped out. She talked about crosses and told my mother to get one, and gave her some garlic on a string that she put around my father's neck after the old woman had gone. Those would keep them off sometimes, for a while. That was what the old woman had said.

But the only way to put an end to them forever was to find the body and stake it down so it could not rise again, or else burn it. You could tell who they were because they looked so healthy in the grave.

She didn't get the rent because we didn't have it. That worried me after, and a dozen times I wanted to ask the old man if he would make us go, though I never did.

What I did – one thing I did – was to make a cross. I made it of two sticks, and tied them together with string, and I put it over their bed,



in the little cabinet there where they wouldn't see it. I got mother's scissors too, and opened them to make a cross, and put them under their bed. That was another thing the old woman had said to do, and I did it. My mother didn't sew any more anyway.

After that I would say I was going out to play with the other boys on our street and go looking for the grave. There were three cemeteries close enough to the Green for me to walk to. I went to them one after another, and walked all around in them looking for a grave that looked like the body climbed out of it sometimes. No one ever bothered me for doing it, and I'm sure the people who saw me thought I was mourning someone. My clothes were dark, and I'm sure I looked sad enough. At times the other boys would tease me about it, but not often.

One night I saw her. I was lying in the little bed mother'd make for me on the floor. I had been asleep, but something woke me. I remember hearing the bells strike twelve in Saint James' steeple. How slow they rang and how sad they sounded, and counting the strokes until I got to twelve and knew it was midnight.

Then I went to a window and looked out. It was October or November, I don't remember which, but it was cold outside, so cold, and papers blowing down the street. It was cold in our lodging, too. I started to shiver, and thought I'd get back into bed, and or else go sit by what was left of our little fire.

It was coal I'd found, you know, sir, in the alleys. The collier's carts would come and unload coal down the chutes and into the coal cellars of the houses, and sometimes some would spill. It wasn't stealing – nobody wanted it but me. I'd pick up whatever pieces there were, and put them in my pockets to take home. Anyway, I turned around to go to the fire, and there she was.

She was beautiful, sir, and licked her lips as if she were hungry. Those are the things I recall best. I'd seen beautiful ladies before, going into shops and coming out, sometimes in the one where my mother used to clerk. Only

they never did look hungry, as this one did. She had a bonnet with black ribbons flying off it, and a big wide skirt.

Yes, sir. A crinoline. That's what they call them. She went into the bedroom, and I got back into bed and pretended to sleep. I would have liked to close my eyes as well – to close them completely, you know, sir. I could not. Each time I tried, I felt that she was bending over me, about to do something terrible. I had to keep them open, just a little.

When she came out, she didn't look hungry any more, or it seemed to me she didn't. She glanced at me and smiled, perhaps because she had seen I was awake. Her face looked flushed, I thought, as a lady's will if she sits too near the fire. In the morning I tried to believe it was a dream. I tried so hard and so often that there were times when I nearly believed it, but in my heart I knew it wasn't true.

My father died. One day it seemed as if he were recovering, and the next he was dead. Death takes people so, sometimes. I know that. We sold the furniture to bury him, and had no table or chairs after, and my mother slept on the floor, sir, just as I had been doing all along. I would go to the neighbors, trying not to go to any one too often, and ask for a bite to eat. I'd like to say now that I brought it back to Mother and we ate it together, but it wouldn't be true. I ate there, so they could see me, and sometimes I ate it all. But when I could I brought some back, and told her I'd already eaten, which was true. The old man and his wife had us to dinner, too, most Thursdays, which helped a lot.

One day I was out in the street with some other boys. There was one who stole apples, sometimes, from the stalls. I had been trying to get him tell me about it, how to do it without being caught, you know, sir, for it would have killed my mother. I said so, and George Peters said there had been a lady in our house who had killed herself already, years and years ago. Poisoned herself, he said, but some of the others said no, it was her husband who murdered her, and her body was never found. Only they hanged him for it anyway is what

they said. Then another said he had buried her in the cellar, and they found her there, and that was why they hanged him. I said what did she look like, and they all said she was beautiful, though there wasn't even one who had seen her himself then.

After that I went into the cellar and looked. I had a stub of candle, you know, and when I went down the cellar seemed quite ordinary. There were dusty boxes and some old shelves with rubbish on them, but that was all.

Only that night as I lay in bed, it seemed to me I had intended to look behind one particular box, and had forgotten about it before I did. It bothered me so much I couldn't sleep, sir. I got up and lit my candle-stub at the fire, and went back down.

It was different at night. I knew that right away. Bigger somehow, and the air was different. I went down the steps anyway, though I was very frightened. It was hard to make myself do it, but I did. And I walked over to the box that I had been thinking about when I ought to have slept, and peered behind it. There was nothing there; and when I saw that there wasn't, I felt wonderful.

But when I turned around to go back up to my bed, there was grave, a deep one, in the middle of the cellar floor. It hadn't been there before, sir. I know it hadn't, for I couldn't have missed it. I suppose I went over to look in, though I have never remembered going there. But I did, and crouched, and held my candle-stub down to look down deep, and there she was. I stared and stared until she opened her eyes and saw me.

Oh, I knew what I ought to do, sir. I ought to have got a stake and staked her down. But I could not face it, I was that afraid. *Yellow* is what Jack would say. I'm shamed now, shamed to own myself a coward; but I slept with my mother that night and trembled at every little sound.

In the morning I thought I would find something for us to eat, and afterward find a stake and borrow a mallet to drive it with, but when I came back with some crusts a kind lady had given me, Mother was dead.

I wept and told the old woman downstairs why, and she said I must tell the beadle, and he would see to the burial. So I did, and he did, but he took an unconscionably long time about it. I ate those crusts while waiting for her grave to be dug, I remember that. They had been hers, and my plan had been to throw them into the grave after the coffin was put in. Only I ate them instead, and I'll not forgive myself for it.

The street-lamps were lit by the time I got back home, but there were still boys in the street, boys I knew, mostly. They wanted to talk, and said they were sorry, and had I touched her after she was dead? I was trying to get past them, for I didn't want to talk, when the lady I had seen in the grave came out of the house just like she lived there. She had a parasol and that gown we spoke of, sir, and she looked ever so lovely.

I froze when I saw her. I couldn't have moved or spoken for anything. And she bent down and kissed me, right there on the street, and said, "Poor, poor child!"

Then she was gone. I blinked, you know, and looked around at the other boys, and saw they were envious. It was the strangest thing, sir, but they were. They wished they had been me, every one of them. I felt proud when I saw it. Proud and bad at the same time.

Before long Bob Perkins said, "She ain't a dab beauty is she? Oh, no! Not a bit of it." And a dozen more started talking the same. I couldn't believe it. I just could not, sir. I wanted to be gone from the Green that moment. Then George said, "Had a spot o' tallow on her bodice though. Candle dripped, I reckon."

Tommy fell silent after he had told me that. I gave him a sausage in the hope it would persuade him to open up a bit more, but it was to no avail. He said, "Thank you, Mister Fagin," as nice as you please; but that was all. When he had finished it, he wiped his hands on my hearthrug as boys will, and went outside to rejoin Jack Dawkins.

He has been taken now, poor Tommy has, and transported as we hear. His tale has remained with me, however; thus I set it down.



# THE ANT KING: A CALIFORNIA FAIRY TALE

By Benjamin Rosenbaum

*Illustrated by Steve Boehme*

SHEILA SPLIT OPEN AND THE AIR WAS filled with gumballs. Yellow gumballs. This was awful for Stan, just awful. He had loved Sheila for a long time, fought for her heart, believed in their love until finally she had come around. They were about to kiss for the first time and then this: yellow gumballs.

Stan went to a group to try to accept that Sheila was gone. It was a group for people whose unrequited love had ended in some kind of surrealist moment. There is a group for everything in California.

After several months of hard work on himself with the group, Stan was ready to open a shop and sell the thousands of yellow gumballs. He did this because he believed in capitalism, he loved capitalism. He loved the dynamic surge and crash of Amazon's stock price, he loved the great concrete malls spreading across America like blood staining through a handkerchief, he loved how everything could be tracked and mirrored in numbers. When he closed the store each night he would count the gumballs sold, and he would determine his gross revenue,

his operating expenses, his operating margin; he would adjust his balance sheet and learn his debt-to-equity ratio; and after this exercise each night, Stan felt he understood himself and was at peace, and he could go home to his apartment and drink tea and sleep, without shooting himself or thinking about Sheila.

On the night before the IPO of gumballs.com, Sheila came to Stan in a dream. She was standing in a kiddie pool; Stan and his brothers and sisters were running around splashing and screaming; she had managed to insert herself into a Super 8 home movie of Stan's family, shot in the late seventies. She looked terribly sad.

"Sheila, where are you?" Stan said. "Why did you leave me, why did you become gumballs?"

"The Ant King has me," Sheila said. "You must rescue me."

Stan woke up, he shaved, he put on his Armani suit, and drove his Lexus to his appointment with his venture capitalists and investment bankers. But the dream would not leave him. "Ant King?" he asked himself. "What's this about a goddamn Ant King?"

On the highway, near the swamp, he pulled his Lexus over to the shoulder. The American highway is a self-contained system, Stan thought. Its rest stops have video games, bathrooms, restaurants, and gas stations. There's no reason ever to leave the interstate highway system, its deadness and perfection and freedom. When you do reach your exit, you always have a slight sense of loss, as when awakening from a dream.

Stan took off his shiny black shoes and argyle socks, cuffed his Armani suit pants above the knees, and waded through the squidgy mud and tall reeds of the swamp. He saw a heron rise, flutter, and soar into the midmorning sky. Ant King, Ant King, he thought.

Miles underground, the Ant King was watching an old episode of *Charlie's Angels* on cable.

"Which one do you identify with?" he asked Sheila. "The blonde one, or the pretty brunette one, or the perky, smart brunette one?"

"Stan may come rescue me, you know," Sheila said.

"I like how you never see Charlie. And how Boswell – is that his name, Boswell? – how he's kind of a foil and audience for the girls. There's all this unrealized desire – Boswell desires the girls, but he's got no chance, and I think they desire Charlie, but Charlie's invisible."

Sheila picked at a seam in the orange sofa. "It is possible. He might come rescue me."

The Ant King blinked and tried to smile reassuringly. "Sure. No, yeah, definitely. I think the two of you are just going through a phase, maybe. You know, it took him a while to deal with, ah, what he's going through."

Sheila glared at him. "You are so full of shit!" she said.

The Ant King threw his bag of Doritos at her. "Fine! I was just trying to be nice!" he shouted. "I'm full of shit? I'm full of shit? What about your dorky boyfriend?" He grabbed the remote and changed the channel, showing Stan, sitting in his Lexus with the door open, toweling off his muddy feet. "He's a lost cause, baby. You want me to respect a guy like that?"

"I hate it here," said Sheila.

The Ant King smoothed his antennae and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm sorry about throwing the Doritos. Maybe I overreacted. Okay?"

"I hate you, too," said Sheila.

"Fine," said the Ant King, savagely snatching up the remote control and turning back to *Charlie's Angels*. "Be that way."

"Gumballs are more than candy, isn't that right, Stan?" said Monique, smiling broadly.

Stan nodded. His feet were still wet, inside his argyle socks. "Yes, gumballs have a lot of, ah, a lot greater significance than just candy."

Monique paused and looked at Stan brightly, waiting for him to go on. Across the table, the three Credit Suisse First Boston underwriters – Emilio Toad, Harry Hornpecker, and Moby Pfister – sat stone-faced and unreacting in their gray double-breasted suits.

Stan tried to remember the gumballs.com business plan. "They have hard shells," he said. "People, ah, they want challenge... the hardness, the gumminess..."

Monique broke in smoothly. Monique, all seven post-gender-reassignment-surgery feet of her; Monique, always dressed to the nines and tens; Monique was a Valley legend for her instincts, her suavity, her rapacious, exemplary greed. Stan had sold Monique on the idea of gumballs.com, and she had invested – found him the right contacts, the right team – and here they were at the Big Day, the Exit Strategy.

“Stan!” she cried joyously, fixing him with a penetrating stare. “Don’t be shy! Tell them about how gumballs are sex! Tell them about our top-gun semiotics professors, tell them about gumballs as a cultural trope! You see,” she said, swooping onto Hornpecker, Pfister & Toad, “you can’t think of this as a candy thing, a food & bev thing, a consumer cyclic thing; no way, José! Think *Pokémon*. Think World Wide Wrestling. Think *Star Wars!*”

“Could we get back to the numbers,” said Emilio Toad in a voice that sounded like a cat being liquefied in an industrial-strength mixer. The gray faces of Harry Hornpecker and Moby Pfister twitched in relief.

Later, after the deals were signed and the faxes were faxed, Monique and Stan took a taxi to a cigarillo bar to celebrate.

“What, like, is up with you today?” said Monique, crouched somewhat uncomfortably in the taxicab, her knees almost touching her chin, but exuding her usual sense of style and unflappability.

“Um... just IPO jitters?” said Stan hopefully.

“Cut the crap,” said Monique.

“I had a dream about Sheila,” Stan blurted out.

“Oh goddess,” said Monique. “Not this again.”

“It seemed so real,” Stan said. “She said I had to rescue her from the Ant King.”

“Well, you’re not my only weirdo CEO,” Monique said, giving him a manly, sidearm hug, “but I think you’re the weirdest.”

The next morning, nursing a cognac hangover and a throat raw from cigarillo smoke, Stan stood bewildered in front of a two-story building in downtown Palo Alto. It looked a lot like

where he worked. There on the signboard were the other companies in his building: Leng Hong Trading; Trusty & Spark, patent attorneys; the Bagel Binge, marketing department; *MicroChip Times*, editorial. But no gumballs.com, Inc.

“I thought you might be here, sir,” said Pringles, his secretary, appearing at his elbow.

“Huh? Pringles!” said Stan. The day before, Pringles had been dressed in a black T-shirt reading “Your Television Is Already Dead” and twelve earrings, but now she was in a smart ochre business suit, carried a mahogany-colored briefcase, and wore pearls.

“We’ve moved, sir,” she said, leading the way to the limousine.

On the highway to Santa Clara, something occurred to Stan. “Pringles?” he said.

“Yes, sir?”

“You didn’t use to call me sir – you used to call me Stan.”

“Yes, sir, but we’ve gone public now. SEC regulations.”

“You’re kidding,” said Stan.

Pringles stared out the window.

The Gumballs.com Building was thirty stories of mirrored glass windows with its own exit off Highway 101. A forty-foot cutout of the corporate animated character, Mr Gumball, towered over Stan, exuding yellow hysteria. Pringles escorted Stan to his office suite on the thirtieth, after giving him a building pass.

“Wow,” said Stan, looking at Pringles across his enormous glass desktop. “Nice work, Pringles.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“So what’s my schedule for today?”

“Nothing lined up, sir.”

“Nothing?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh. Could I look at the numbers?”

“I’ll order them from Accounting, sir.”

“Can’t I just ask Bill?”

“Sir, Bill is the CFO of a public company now. He doesn’t have time to look at the numbers.”

“Oh. Shouldn’t I have a staff meeting with the department heads or whatever?”

“Vic is doing that, sir.”



“Vic? Who’s Vic?”

“Vic is our Executive Vice President for Operations, sir.”

“He is?”

“Yes, sir.”

Stan looked at his desk. There were gold pens, a golden tape dispenser, a framed picture of Sheila, and a glass jar full of yellow gumballs. They were the last of the Sheila gumballs.

“Pringles?” Stan said.

“Yes, sir?”

“I don’t have a computer.”

“That’s right, sir.”

There was a pause.

“Anything else, sir?”

“Um, yeah. Pringles, what do you suggest I do today?”

Pringles turned and walked across the expanse of marble floor to a teak closet with a brass doorknob. She opened it and returned with a leather golfing bag, which she leaned against the glass desk.

“Pringles, I don’t golf,” said Stan.

“You need to learn, sir,” said Pringles, and left.

Stan took a gumball from the glass jar and looked at it. He thought about biting into it, chewing it, blowing a bubble. Or at least sucking on it. I really should try one of these sometime, he thought. He looked at Sheila’s picture. He put the gumball in the pocket of his Armani suit jacket.

Then he went to look for Vampire.

“Hi,” said Stan, looking around a corner of a cubicle on the seventeenth floor. “I’m Stan.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said the occupant of the cubicle, not looking away from her monitor.

“No, really, I’m Stan, I’m the CEO here.”

“Yeah, I believe you, so? What do you want, a medal?”

“Well, uh,” Stan said. “So what are you up to?”

“I’m storyboarding the Mr Gumball Saturday morning cartoon pilot, and I’m past deadline, and I’m paid shit, Mr CEO.”

“Oh, okay,” said Stan. “I won’t bug you then.”

“Great,” said the cartoon storyboardist.

“Hey, by the way, you don’t know where the sysadmins and stuff are, though, do you?” Stan asked.

“I thought you weren’t going to bug me then.”

After many such adventures, Stan found himself in the third sub-basement of the gumballs.com building, close to despair. It was 8PM, and his building pass expired at nine.

Suddenly, faintly, from far off, Stan heard the sound of horrible, ghostly shrieking and rhythmic pounding.

Thank God, Stan thought, heading toward the sound. And indeed, as he got closer, he could tell he was listening to one of Vampire’s thrash goth trance doom CDs.

Stan had feared that, like Pringles, Vampire might suddenly be wearing a suit, but as he emerged into Vampire’s blacklit cavern, he saw that Vampire was wearing knee-length jet-black hair, a black trenchcoat, fingerless studded leather gloves, and giant surgical-steel ear, nose, lip, and tongue piercings, as always. Perhaps he was surrounded by an even larger array of keyboards, monitors, and machines than yesterday, but it was hard to tell.

“Vampire!” Stan shouted over the music. “Am I glad to see you!”

“Hey, man,” said Vampire, lifting a hand in salutation but not looking away from his monitor.

“So, hey, what are you up to?” said Stan, looking for somewhere to sit down. He started to take a broken monitor off a folding metal chair.

“DON’T TOUCH THAT!” Vampire shouted.

“Oops, oops, sorry,” said Stan, backing off.

“No problem,” said Vampire.

“So, ah, you were saying?” Stan said hopefully.

“Lotta new machines coming in,” said Vampire. “What do you know about NetBSD 2.5 routing across multiple DNS servers?”

“Absolutely nothing,” said Stan.

“Okay,” said Vampire, and nodded.

Stan waited a little while, looking around.

Finally he spoke again. “Ah, Vampire, ever heard of a, the – this is going to sound silly but – the Ant King?”

“Nope,” said Vampire. “I knew an AntAgonist once, on the Inferno BBS.”

“Oh,” said Stan. “But, um, how would you go about finding out about the Ant King?”

“What search engines have you tried?” asked Vampire.

“Well, none,” said Stan.

“Well, try Google, they’re good.”

“Okay,” said Stan. “Um, Vampire?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t have a computer anymore.”

Vampire turned and looked at Stan. “You poor bastard!” he said, and pointed. “Use that one.”

The Ant King was sound asleep on the sofa, cans of Dr Pepper littered around him. Sheila got up gingerly, took off her sneakers, and held them in one hand as she crept for the door, clutching a Dorito in the other.

It was a lucky moment. Sheila passed several of the Ant King’s henchmen (who were all bald and stout and wore identical purple fedoras) asleep at their desks, and threaded her way through the dark rooms of the Ant King’s lair to the tunnels at the edge of it. She stopped at the mouth of the biggest tunnel. Far off, she could hear running water.

Something moved in the darkness beyond, a great hulking shape. Sheila moved cautiously forward. With a horrible dry clicking and rustling, the gigantic Black Roach of Death scuttled forward.

With trembling hands, Sheila fed it the Dorito, as she had seen the Ant King do, and reached up to pat its enormous antennae. Then she slid past it into the passageway.

She walked forward, into the darkness. Ten steps; twenty. Nervously she chewed, and blew a bubble. The bubble popped, echoing loudly in the tunnel. Sheila froze. But there was no movement from behind. Carefully she spat the wad of gum into her hand and pressed it into the wall. Then she moved forward. Thirty steps. I can do this, she thought. Forty.

Suddenly Sheila was terribly hungry.

I’ll eat when I get out, she thought grimly. But that didn’t seem quite right.

She searched her pockets and found another Dorito. She lifted it to her lips and stopped. No. No, not that. Something was troubling her. She let the Dorito fall to the ground.

I didn’t prepare properly for this, she thought. This isn’t the way you escape. You need a plan, you need resources. Anyway, there’s no rush.

She began creeping back down the tunnel.

It’s not so bad here anyway, she thought. I’m all right for now. I’ll escape later. This was just a test run. She stroked the antennae of the Black Roach of Death idly as she passed.

Damn Stan anyway, she thought as she crept back through the dark rooms. Am I supposed to do this all by myself? That guy! Big talker, but no action.

On the TV, some CNN talking head was upset about market valuations. “Ten billion for gumballs? This is the perfect example of market froth! I mean there’s no business model, there are no barriers to entry; only in today’s...”

Sheila switched to MTV and sank into the couch next to the Ant King.

“Hi,” said the Ant King drowsily.

“Hi,” said Sheila.

“Hey, I missed you,” said the Ant King.

“Stick it in your ear,” said Sheila.

“Listen, your ambivalence about me is really getting old, Sheila,” said the Ant King.

“Ambivalence about you? Dream on,” said Sheila. She took a yellow gumball from the dish on the coffee table, popped it in her mouth, and bit down. A crunch, a rush of sweetness, the feeling of her teeth sinking into the gumball’s tough flesh. Sheila smiled and blew a bubble. It popped. She wasn’t hungry anymore. “I hate your guts,” she said.

“Yeah, whatever,” said the Ant King, rolling over and pulling a pillow over his head. “Grow up, Sheila.”

The search on Google.com had returned several bands and music CDs, an episode of the *King of*

*the Hill* cartoon, the “Lair of the Ant King” slide at the local water park, and several video games in which the Ant King was one of the villains to beat. Stan listened to the CDs in his car, watched the cartoon in a conference room with a video projector, and installed the video games on a receptionist’s computer on the fifth floor and played them at night, hiding from the security guards. He popped down to visit Vampire a lot, and avoided Pringles and his office entirely.

“I’m on level 5,” he said, “and I just can’t get past the Roach.”

“And you’ve still got the magic sword?” said Vampire, not looking up.

“No, I lost that to the Troll.”

“You don’t even have to go to the Troll,” said Vampire, who never played video games but read the video game newsgroups religiously. “You can cross the Dread Bridge instead.”

“I always die on the Dread Bridge when it breaks in two.”

“You’re not running fast enough,” said Vampire. “You’ve got to run as fast as you can, and jump at the last moment.”

“It’s tough,” said Stan.

Vampire shrugged.

“How are things with you?” Stan asked.

“The patch for mod-ssl 1.2.4.2 is totally incompatible with the recommended build sequence for Apache on Solaris. Solaris is such crap.”

“Oh,” said Stan. “Okay.”

“Hey, I got you something,” Vampire said.

“What?” said Stan.

“That,” said Vampire, pointing.

On top of a rack of dusty computers Stan saw a four-foot-long sword in a gilded leather sheath. Its ivory handle depicted a spiral of crawling ants. Stan pulled the sword a little out of its sheath, and an eerie blue light filled the room.

“Cool, huh?” said Vampire. “I got it on eBay.”

Holding his magic sword, Stan left the elevator on the thirtieth floor and cautiously approached his office. He hadn’t been there in a week; he felt like he should check in.

Pringles met him at the door. “This isn’t your office anymore, sir,” she said.

“It’s not?” Stan said. He tried to hold the sword at an inconspicuous angle. Pringles ignored it.

“No, sir. We moved Vic in there.”

“Oh, really? Say, when do I get to meet Vic, anyway?”

“I’m not sure, sir. He’s quite busy these days, with our acquisition of Suriname.”

“We’re acquiring Suriname? Isn’t that a country?”

“Yes, sir. Follow me, please.”

“Um, Pringles,” said Stan, hurrying to catch up. “Am I, ah, still CEO?”

Pringles opened the door of his new office. It was a lot smaller.

“I’ll check with HR, sir,” she said, and left.

That afternoon, as Stan sat at his new, smaller desk, Monique stopped by.

“Hey, hey,” she said, “so here’s where they’ve got you, huh?”

“Monique, what’s going on? Have I been, um, usurped?” It seemed like the wrong word.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it, tiger,” she said, sinking into a leather visitor’s chair, and crossing her legs. “Gumballs is doing great. Vic’s doing a good job, you should be proud.”

“But Monique – I don’t do anything anymore.”

“Oh, stop whining,” Monique said. She rolled her eyes. “God, you make such a big deal out of everything. Cool sword.”

“Thanks,” said Stan glumly.

“Look, you’re a startup-stage guy, not an operations-stage guy. Just enjoy the ride.”

“I guess,” said Stan.

“There you go. Listen, you clearly need cheering up. I’m baby-sitting my sister’s kid on the weekend, we’re going to the water park. You wanna come?”

“Sure,” said Stan. “Why not?”

Monique came by Stan’s apartment Saturday morning, and Stan came outside, dressed in a blue oxford and chinos and carrying a bathing suit and towel, and his magic sword. Monique

was wearing a silver blouse, a blue miniskirt, a silk scarf, and sunglasses. Her sister's kid had a shaved head, powdered white skin, black lipstick, and kohl, and was wearing combat boots and a wedding dress adorned with black spiders.

"Stan, this is Corpse, my sister's kid," Monique said.

"Hi," said Stan.

Corpse snarled, like a wolf.

"Great, everybody ready?" said Monique.

In the car, Stan said, "So, Corpse, what's your favorite subject in school?"

"Shop," said Corpse.

"Aha," said Stan.

"And what do you want to do when you grow up?"

"Bring about the violent overthrow of the current political order," said Corpse.

"Really? How come?" asked Stan.

Corpse's eyes rolled back into their sockets, exposing the white.

"Takes after me, don't you, Corpse?" said Monique happily. Corpse said nothing.

"But, Monique," said Stan. "You're a venture capitalist. You are the current political order."

Monique laughed.

"Corpse," said Stan, "I hope you don't mind me asking this, but ah, are you a boy or a girl?"

"You teleological totalitarian!" Corpse shouted. "Your kind will be first up against the wall when the revolution comes!"

"Now, Corpse, be nice," said Monique. But she was grinning.

Stan stood in line for the water slide in his bathing suit, behind Corpse, who was still wearing the wedding dress. He had left his sword in the locker room. He felt naked without it.

Corpse sat in the mouth of the water slide tunnel, waiting for the "Go" light to turn green. Stan looked over at the slide to his left. It was a boat ride; in a puffy inflatable boat, four stout, bald men in business suits and purple fedoras sat waiting for the green light. Behind

them was a Mexican family in bathing suits, waiting with their boat.

That's funny, Stan thought. He looked closer at the fedoraed men.

In their boat was a glass jar filled with perhaps three hundred yellow gumballs.

The lights turned green; Corpse vanished into the slide and the men in the boat slid into their tunnel. Despite the sign reading One At A Time, Wait For The Green Light, Stan jumped in after Corpse.

Halfway through the twists, turns, and splashing chaos of the tunnel, Stan collided

with Corpse. "Hey!" Corpse yelled, and was sucked away again.

Stan was dumped out into a great basin.

He went under and came up spluttering, chlorine stinging his nose. Standing unsteadily, he looked over at the end of the boat ride. There was no sign of the men with the fedoras: The water there flowed peacefully.

"Hey!" said Corpse, splashing him. "You're not supposed to go two at once!"

"I thought you wanted to overthrow the



current political order,” said Stan, still watching the boat ride.

“Oh, right, so let’s start with the water park,” Corpse said.

“Why not?” said Stan. The Mexican family, in their boat, emerged from the boat ride. There was no question: The other boat had vanished while in the tunnel.

Monique was standing next to the basin in her polka-dot bikini, yelling into her pink waterproof cell phone. “No, you idiot, I don’t want you profitable! Because we can’t find backers for a profitable company, that’s why! Well find something to spend it on!” She clicked off the cell phone and shook her head. “Some people are so stuck in the Old Economy.”

“Can I borrow that?” Stan asked.

“Okay,” Monique said, handing him the phone. “Don’t lose it.”

“Meet me at the boat ride in five minutes,” Stan said, and, dialing Vampire, hurried off to get his sword.

The light turned green, and the boat containing Monique, Corpse, and Stan, holding his magic sword, slid into the tunnel.

“Did you get in?” shouted Stan into the pink cell phone over the roar of rushing water. The boat surged through the great pipe, spun into a whirlpool, then rushed on.

“Yeah,” said Vampire, over the cell phone. “It wasn’t easy, but I’m in. Actually, after I cracked the session key it wasn’t that bad, they’ve got a continuous telnet session going over a Pac Bell router, so...”

The boat lurched and heaved to the right and a cascade of water flew over them. Stan shouted, “So, did you, you know, open the secret door or whatever?”

“Oh, right,” said Vampire, and typed a command to the water park’s main computer, setting the “Lair of the Ant King” ride into “real” mode.

The rubber boat rushed into a curve. In front of them, a section of wall swung away and the boat flew out of the pipe, into darkness and space, falling between black canyon walls.

“This ride is cool!” said Corpse, as they fell.

When the boat hit the great subterranean river below, it bucked, and Monique and Corpse grabbed onto the handles set into its sides. Stan thought about whether to drop the pink cell phone or the magic sword, and while he thought about it, he flew out of the boat and disappeared into the icy rapids.

“Stan!” Monique yelled.

“Bummer,” said Corpse.

The surging river slowed as it widened, they glided past massive black cliffs, and at last the rubber boat coasted up to a dock, where several stout men in purple fedoras helped Monique and Corpse onto dry land.

The Ant King bowed, and his antennae bobbed. “Well, this is an unexpected pleasure,” he said.

“Cool lair,” said Corpse.

“Why thank you,” said the Ant King. “You both look soaked. We have robes and changing rooms right over here. Care for an espresso?”

“Sure,” said Monique.

“Got hot chocolate?” said Corpse.

“Why yes we do,” said the Ant King.

“Okay, there’s a little yellow bird here,” Stan said.

“You still got the rod?” said Vampire over the pink cell phone.

Stan looked down at the crook of his arm, where he was uncomfortably carrying a rod, an axe, a loaf of bread, and a key. He was still in his bathing suit, dripping wet, and exhausted from wandering the tunnels for hours. The blue glow of his magic sword dimly illuminated the room, including a small yellow bird, which watched him suspiciously.

“Put the rod down,” said Vampire. Stan let it slide out and clatter to the ground.

“Now catch the bird,” Vampire said.

With the pink cell phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder, and his collection of found objects in the crook of his sword arm, Stan edged toward the bird. It looked at him dubiously, and hopped away.

“I can’t seem to get a hold of it,” Stan said.

“All right, forget the bird. It’s only extra points anyway.”



“Extra points!” shouted Stan. “I’m not trying to get extra points, I’m trying to get Sheila!”

“Okay, Okay, keep your hat on,” said Vampire. “Get the rod again and go north.”

While Stan wandered a maze of twisty little passages, leaving found objects and pieces of bread according to Vampire’s instructions, in order to differentiate the rooms from one another and thus navigate the maze, and Corpse and Monique changed into fuzzy purple terry-cloth bathrobes, and Sheila watched Comedy Central and felt inexplicably restless, the Ant King logged onto a network and sent a message, which appeared in the corner of Vampire’s screen.

Think you’re pretty smart, huh? it said.

“Okay,” said Stan, “uh, I’m in the room with the axe again.”

“Hold on,” said Vampire. “Message.” He did some tracking to find out where the message had come from, but no luck: he found a circular trail of impossible addresses.

I know I’m pretty smart, he typed back at it.

Not as smart as you think, the Ant King typed back at him. You think I would leave sendmail running on an open port on my real proxy server? As if I didn’t know about the security hole in that baby.

“Okay, I think I see the way out here,” said Stan. “This is the room with the two pieces of bread – have I gone east from here?”

“Hold on a sec,” muttered Vampire.

“I don’t think I have,” said Stan.

Okay, I’m stumped, typed Vampire. If that’s not your real proxy server, what is it?

It’s my PalmPilot, the Ant King typed back. With a few tweaks to the OS. And you’re hogging a lot of memory on it, so I’d appreciate it if you logged off, Vampy.

Hey, hold on, Vampire typed. Is this AntAgonist?

Used to be. Not anymore, typed the Ant King.

“Hey, I’m out!” Stan said. “It’s opening up into a large cavern. Wow, this is great, Vampire!”

No shit! typed Vampire. How have you been, man?

I’ve been great, but I can’t say the same for you, typed the Ant King. You are rusty as hell. What are you doing selling gumballs for a living anyway?

“Oh, shit,” said Stan. “Oh, shit!”

“What?” said Vampire curtly, typing furiously in the chat window.

“Vampire, it’s the bridge. It’s the Dread Bridge! I always die at the Dread Bridge.”

“I told you, man,” Vampire said absently, as he chatted with the Ant King. “You’ve just gotta run fast enough.”

Cell phone in one hand, sword in the other, Stan began to run. His bare feet slapped against the planks of the Dread Bridge; the bridge swung crazily over the chasm, and he fought for balance. As he neared the middle he threw the sword ahead of him, and it clattered onto the ground beyond the bridge. He stuffed the cell phone into the waistband of his bathing suit, and ran on. Suddenly he heard a snap behind him, and he jumped. The bridge broke beneath his weight, and swung away. Stan flew through the air, but not nearly far enough; he fell, and barely managed to grab the planks of the bridge beneath him. He hung on as the ropes strained; he thought they were going to break, and he screamed in terror. But the ropes held. Stan swung over the dark canyon, clutching the planks.

“Hey, are you okay?” Vampire said.

“Yeah,” Stan panted. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Great,” Vampire said. “Listen, I know this is kind of a bad time, but there’s something we need to talk about.”

“Huh?” said Stan. “What?”

“Well, this is kind of awkward for me, but, you know, I haven’t really been feeling fulfilled professionally here lately...”

“What?” said Stan.

“So, well, I’ve decided to accept another offer of employment, basically.”

“You’re kidding,” said Stan. “From whom?”

“From the Ant King, actually. I’m pretty excited about it; it’s a whole different level of responsibility, and – ”

"The Ant King?!" yelled Stan. "The Ant King?!"

"Yeah, actually it turns out I know him from way back and –"

"But, Vampire!" yelled Stan. "Listen, aren't we in this together?"

"Hey, Stan," Vampire said. "Let's not make this hard on ourselves, okay? This is just the career move I think is right for me right now..."

"Vampire, we can give you more responsibility!" Stan could feel the cool air of the endless chasm blowing against his feet. "More stock! Whatever you want!"

"That's great of you to offer, Stan, really," said Vampire. "But, you know, it's getting really corporate here, and that's just not my scene. I think I'll be happier in a more entrepreneurial climate."

"But, Vampire!" Stan shouted, and just then the ropes above him groaned and one snapped, and the planks he was holding onto twisted and spun. Stan was slammed against the wall, and the pink cell phone popped out of his waistband and fell into the darkness. He waited, but he never heard it reach the ground.

Crap, he thought, and began to climb the planks, toward the ledge above.

"Yes!" said the Ant King. "Exactly! Wile E. Coyote is the only figure of any integrity in twentieth-century literature."

"Totally," said Corpse.

"Come on," said Monique. "What about Bugs Bunny?"

"An amateur!" said the Ant King. "A dilettante! No purity of intention!"

"Pinky and the Brain?"

"Losers! Try to take over the world indeed!"

Sheila cleared her throat. "Um, does anyone want some more pretzels?" she asked.

"Are you the one we're here to rescue?" Corpse asked. Sheila blanched.

"Yeah, she's the one," said the Ant King. "So listen – *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*?"

"Oh, please," said Corpse. "*Babylon 5*!"

"Excellent choice!" said the Ant King.

"I like *Star Wars*. Particularly Darth Vader," said Monique.

"I'll just go for some more pretzels then," Sheila said.

"But then he bails on the Dark Side in the end!" the Ant King said. "See? No integrity!"

Cold and angry, clutching his magic sword in both hands, Stan stood before the gigantic Black Roach of Death.

"Come on, big boy," he yelled. "Make my day! Meet my sword, Roach Motel! You're gonna check in, but you're not gonna check –"

With a lazy swipe of its great claws, the roach batted the magic sword out of Stan's hands. It flew away and clattered into the darkness. Then the roach grabbed Stan around the throat and lifted him high into the air.

"Eek!" Stan screamed in terror.

"He's a friend of mine," yelled Sheila, sprinting out of the darkness.

"Sheila!" choked Stan.

"Here, c'mon, boy, put him down, here's a Dorito," Sheila said.

Reluctantly the roach dropped Stan, ate a Dorito, allowed itself to be petted, and crawled back into the tunnel.

"Thanks," croaked Stan, as Sheila helped him up.

Hand in hand, Sheila and Stan made their way through the tunnels leading away from the Ant King's lair.

"Don't look back," Stan kept saying. "Okay? Don't look back."

"Okay already," Sheila said.

Suddenly Sheila stopped.

"What?" said Stan, careful not to look back at her.

"I'm, um, I'm hungry," said Sheila.

"Me, too," said Stan. "Let's go."

"But listen, we could just sneak back and grab a bite to eat, right? I mean, I ran out here because I heard you were finally coming, but I would've packed a sandwich if I'd –"

"Sheila, are you nuts?" said Stan.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Sheila.

Stan felt in his pockets. The left one was empty. The right one had something in it – a gumball. Dry. He pulled it out and squinted at it in the dimness. He remembered putting a gumball into the pocket of his suit jacket, but...

“Okay, so I’m going back,” Sheila said.

“Quick, chew this,” Stan said, handing the gumball back to her without looking back.

She chewed the gumball, and they walked onward through the tunnel.

“I never thought I’d say this,” said the Ant King, stirring his espresso nervously. “Sheila will be angry, but – well, how can I put this – ”

“Spit it out already,” Monique said.

“Yeah,” Corpse said.

“Corpse, I just – I feel like you really get me, you know?”

“Yeah,” Corpse said softly. “I feel the same way.”

Monique whistled.

“Would you...” The Ant King blushed. “Would you like to stay underground with me forever and help me rule the subterranean depths?”

“Wow, that would be totally awesome!” Corpse said.

“Oh god, your mother’s going to kill me,” Monique said.

“Oh come on, Aunt Monique, don’t turn into a hypocrite on me! You always told me to follow my heart! You always say it’s better to get into trouble than to be bored!”

“I didn’t say you can’t do it,” said Monique. “I just said your mother’s going to kill me.”

“So does that mean I can?” asked Corpse.

“How about if we do this on a trial basis at first,” Monique said. “Okay? And you – ” she pointed a menacing finger at the Ant King. “No addictive gumball crap, okay?” His antennae stiffened in surprise. “Yeah, Aunt Monique knows more than you think. You watch your step, buddy.” She turned to Corpse. “You have one month,” she said. “I’ll talk to your mom. Then you come back up and we talk it over.”

“Oh gosh, thank you, Aunt Monique!”

“You have my word,” said the Ant King. “Corpse will enjoy life here thoroughly. And it will be very educational.”

“I bet,” said Monique.

“Hey, can we violently overthrow the current political order?” Corpse asked.

“Sure,” said the Ant King. “That sounds like fun.”

—EPILOGUE—

Stan sat across the desk from Lucy the HR person, who smiled at him brightly. “So what are your skills?” she asked.

“I founded this company,” he said.

“We try to be forward-looking here,” she said. “Less progressive organizations are focussed on past accomplishments, but our philosophy is to focus on current skills. What languages can you program in?”

“None,” said Stan. “I can use Microsoft Word, though.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Lucy said. “Anything else?”

“I’m pretty good at financial analysis,” Stan said.

“We are actually overstaffed in Accounting,” Lucy said.

“I could work in Marketing,” Stan said.

Lucy smiled indulgently. “Everyone thinks they know how to do Marketing. What about Customer Service?”

“I think I’ll pass,” said Stan.

“Okay,” Lucy said brightly. “Well, I’ll let you know as soon as something else opens up. Gumballs.com cares about you as an employee. We want you to know that, and we want you to enjoy your indefinite unpaid leave. Can you do that for me, Stan?”

“I’ll try,” said Stan, and he left.

Stan finally met Vic at the company Christmas party in San Francisco. As he expected, Vic was tall, blond, and athletic, with a tennis smile.

“Stan!” Vic said brightly. “Good to finally meet you. And this must be Sheila.”

“Hi!” said Sheila, shaking hands.

“Hi, Vic,” said Stan. “Listen, I...”

“Great dress,” Vic said to Sheila.

“Thanks!” Sheila said. “So what’s running the show like?”

Stan said, “I wanted to...”

“It’s actually quieted down a bunch,” Vic said. “I’m starting to have time for a little golf and skiing.”

Stan said, “I was wondering if we could...”

“Wow!” said Sheila. “Where do you ski?”

“Tahoe,” said Vic.

“Of course,” laughed Sheila.

Stan said, “Maybe if we could take a few minutes...”

“So is your wife here?” Sheila asked.

Vic laughed. “No, I’m afraid I’m single.”

“Wow, are you gay?” Sheila asked.

“About 80–20 straight,” Vic said.

“Hey, me, too!” Sheila said.

Stan said, “It’s about my job here at...”

“But really, I just haven’t found anyone I’ve clicked with since moving to the Bay Area,” Vic said.

“I know what you mean!” Sheila said.

Stan said, “Because I have some ideas about how I could...”

“So where were you before the Bay Area?” Sheila asked.

Later Sheila came up to Stan at the punch bowl.

“Stan, you know, things haven’t been going so great for us lately.”

“Uh huh,” Stan said.

“I want you to know, I really appreciate you rescuing me...”

“Hey, no problem,” Stan said.

“But since then, it just seems like we aren’t going anywhere, you know?”

“Sheila, I love you,” said Stan. “I’d give my life for you. I’ve never found anything in my life that means anything to me, except you.”

“I know, Stan,” she said. “I know. And maybe I’m being a bitch, but you know, that’s kind of hard to live up to. You know? And I’m just not there yet.” She put her arms

around him. He stiffened. She let go and sighed. “I just think...”

“Are you going to run off with Vic?” Stan said. “Just give it to me straight.”

Sheila sighed. “Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I guess I am. I’m sorry.”

“Me, too,” Stan said.

Stan left the party and walked to the Bay Bridge. He looked down into the black water. He thought about jumping, but he didn’t really feel like dying. He just didn’t feel like being him anymore.

He decided to become a bum and walked to South of Market, where he traded his suit, shoes, and wallet for an army jacket, a woolen cap, torn jeans, sneakers, a shopping cart, three plastic sacks, and a bottle of Night Train in a paper bag. But he wasn’t a good bum. He was too polite to panhandle, he didn’t like the taste of Night Train, and at campfires he felt alienated from the other bums – he didn’t know any of the songs they liked, and they didn’t want to talk about Internet stocks. He was hungry, cold, lonely, tired, and sober when Monique found him.

“You look like shit,” she said.

“Go away, Monique,” he said. “I’m a bum now.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Monique. “And how’s that working out?”

“Lousy,” Stan admitted.

Monique got out of her BMW and squatted down next to where Stan lay. The other bums moved away, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads in disgust.

“I’ve lost everything I love,” Stan said.

“Aren’t you the guy who loved the dramatic surge and crash of Amazon’s stock ticker? The concrete malls spreading across America like blood staining a handkerchief? How everything can be tracked and mirrored in numbers – numbers, the lifeblood of capitalism?”

“Well, yeah,” Stan said.

“Get in the car,” Monique said. “You’re hired.”

Stan got in the car.

— ONE: HONEST WORK —

**G**ODZILLA, ON HIS WAY TO WORK AT the foundry, sees a large building that seems to be mostly made of shiny copper and dark, reflecting solar glass. He sees his image in the glass and thinks of the old days, wonders what it would be like to stomp on the building, to blow flames at it, kiss the windows black with his burning breath, then dance rapturously in the smoking debris.

One day at a time, he tells himself. One day at a time.

Godzilla makes himself look at the building hard. He passes it by. He goes to the foundry. He puts on his hard hat. He blows his fiery breath into the great vat full of used car parts, turns the car parts to molten metal. The metal runs through pipes and into new molds for new car parts. Doors. Roofs. Etc.

Godzilla feels some of the tension drain out.

# GODZILLA'S TWELVE STEP PROGRAMME

By Joe R. Lansdale





— TWO: RECREATION —

After work Godzilla stays away from downtown. He feels tense. To stop blowing flames after work is difficult. He goes over to the BIG MONSTER RECREATION CENTER.

Gorgo is there. Drunk from oily seawater, as usual. Gorgo talks about the old days. She's like that. Always the old days.

They go out back and use their breath on the debris that is deposited there daily for the centers use. Kong is out back. Drunk as a monkey. He's playing with Barbie dolls. He does that all the time. Finally, he puts the Barbies away in his coat pocket, takes hold of his walker and wobbles past Godzilla and Gorgo.

Gorgo says, "Since the fall he ain't been worth shit. And what's with him and the little plastic broads anyway? Don't he know there's real women in the world?"

Godzilla thinks Gorgo looks at Kong's departing walker-supported ass a little too wistfully. He's sure he sees wetness in Gorgo's eyes.

Godzilla blows some scrap to cinders for recreation, but it doesn't do much for him, as he's been blowing fire all day long and has, at best, merely taken the edge off his compulsions. This isn't even as satisfying as the foundry. He goes home.

— THREE: SEX AND DESTRUCTION —

That night there's a monster movie on television. The usual one. Big beasts wrecking havoc on city after city. Crushing pedestrians under foot.

Godzilla examines the bottom of his right foot, looks at the scar there from stomping cars flat. He remembers how it was to have people squish between his toes. He thinks about all of that and changes the channel. He watches twenty minutes of Mr Ed, turns off the TV, masturbates to the images of burning cities and squashing flesh.

Later, deep into the night, he awakens in a cold sweat. He goes to the bathroom and quickly carves crude human figures from bars of soap.

He mashes the soap between his toes, closes his eyes and imagines. Tries to remember.

— FOUR: BEACH TRIP  
AND THE BIG TURTLE —

Saturday, Godzilla goes to the beach. A drunk monster that looks like a big turtle flies by and bumps Godzilla. The turtle calls Godzilla a name, looking for a fight. Godzilla remembers the turtle is called Gamera.

Gamera is always trouble. No one liked Gamera. The turtle was a real asshole.

Godzilla grits his teeth and holds back the flames. He turns his back and walks along the beach. He mutters a secret mantra given him by his sponsor. The giant turtle follows after, calling him names.

Godzilla packs up his beach stuff and goes home. At his back he hears the turtle, still cussing, still pushing. It's all he can do not to respond to the big dumb bastard. All he can do. He knows the turtle will be in the news tomorrow. He will have destroyed something, or will have been destroyed himself.

Godzilla thinks perhaps he should try and talk to the turtle, get him on the twelve-step program. That's what you're supposed to do. Help others. Maybe the turtle could find some peace.

But then again, you can only help those who help themselves. Godzilla realizes he can not save all the monsters of the world. They have to make these decisions for themselves. But he makes a mental note to go armed with leaflets about the twelve-step program from now on.

Later, he calls in to his sponsor. Tells him he's had a bad day. That he wanted to burn buildings and fight the big turtle. Reptilicus tells him it's okay. He's had days like that. Will have days like that once again.

Once a monster always a monster. But a recovering monster is where it's at. Take it one day at a time. It's the only way to be happy in the world. You can't burn and kill and chew up humans and their creations without paying the price of guilt and multiple artillery wounds.

Godzilla thanks Reptilicus and hangs up. He feels better for awhile, but deep down he wonders just how much guilt he really harbors. He thinks maybe it's the artillery and the rocket-firing jets he really hates, not the guilt.

———— FIVE: OFF THE WAGON ————

It happens suddenly. He falls off the wagon. Coming back from work he sees a small doghouse with a sleeping dog sticking halfway out of a doorway. There's no one around. The dog looks old. It's on a chain. Probably miserable anyway. The water dish is empty. The dog is living a worthless life. Chained. Bored. No water.

Godzilla leaps and comes down on the doghouse and squashes dog in all directions. He burns what's left of the doghouse with a blast of his breath. He leaps and spins on tip-toe through the wreckage. Black cinders and cooked dog slip through his toes and remind him of the old days.

He gets away fast. No one has seen him. He feels giddy. He can hardly walk he's so intoxicated. He calls Reptilicus, gets his answering machine. "I'm not in right now. I'm out doing good. But please leave a message, and I'll get right back to you."

The machine beeps. Godzilla says, "Help."

———— SIX: HIS SPONSOR ————

The doghouse rolls around in his head all the next day. While at work he thinks of the dog and the way it burned. He thinks of the little house and the way it crumbled. He thinks of the dance he did in the ruins.

The day drags on forever. He thinks maybe when work is through he might find another doghouse, another dog.

On the way home he keeps an eye peeled, but no doghouses or dogs are seen.

When he gets home his answering machine light is blinking. Its a message from Reptilicus. Reptilicus's voice says, "Call me."

Godzilla does. He says, "Reptilicus. Forgive me, for I have sinned."

SEVEN: DISILLUSIONED. DISAPPOINTED.

Reptilicus's talk doesn't help much. Godzilla shreds all the twelve-step program leaflets. He wipes his butt on a couple and throws them out the window. He puts the scraps of the others in the sink and sets them on fire with his breath. He burns a coffee table and a chair, and when he's through, feels bad for it. He knows the landlady will expect him to replace them.

He turns on the radio and lies on the bed listening to an Oldies station. After a while, he falls asleep to Martha and the Vandellas singing "Heat Wave."

———— EIGHT: UNEMPLOYED ————

Godzilla dreams. In it God comes to him, all scaly and blowing fire. He tells Godzilla he's ashamed of him. He says he should do better. Godzilla awakes covered in sweat. No one is in the room.

Godzilla feels guilty. He has faint memories of having awakened to go out and destroyed part of the city. He really tied one on, but he can't remember everything he did. Maybe he'll read about it in the papers. He notices he smells like charred lumber and melted plastic. There's gooshy stuff between his toes, and something tells him it isn't soap.

He wants to kill himself. He goes to look for his gun, but he's too drunk to find it. He passes out on the floor. He dreams of the devil this time. He looks just like God except he has one eyebrow that goes over both eyes. The devil says he's come for Godzilla.

Godzilla moans and fights. He dreams he gets up and takes pokes at the devil, blows ineffective fire on him.

Godzillariseslatethenextmorning,hungover. Heremembersthedream.Hecallsintoworksick. Sleeps off most of the day. That evening,

he reads about himself in the papers. He really did some damage. Smoked a large part of the city. There's a very clear picture of him biting the head off of a woman.

He gets a call from the plant manager that night. The managers seen the paper. He tells Godzilla he's fired.

————— NINE: ENTICEMENT —————

Next day some humans show up. They're wearing black suits and white shirts and polished shoes and they've got badges. They've got guns, too. One of them says, "You're a problem. Our government wants to send you back to Japan."

"They hate me there," says Godzilla. "I burned Tokyo down."

"You haven't done so good here either. Lucky that was a colored section of town you burned, or we'd be on your ass. As it is, we've got a job proposition for you."

"What?" Godzilla asks.

"You scratch our back, we'll scratch yours." Then the men tell him what they have in mind.

————— TEN: CHOOSING —————

Godzilla sleeps badly that night. He gets up and plays the monster mash on his little record player. He dances around the room as if he's enjoying himself, but knows he's not. He goes over to the BIG MONSTER RECREATION CENTER. He sees Kong there, on a stool, undressing one of his Barbies, fingering the smooth little slot between her legs. He sees that Kong has drawn a crack there, like a vagina. It appears to have been drawn with a blue ink pen. He's feathered the central line with ink-drawn pubic hair. Godzilla thinks he should have got someone to do the work for him. It doesn't look all that natural.

God, he doesn't want to end up like Kong. Completely spaced. Then again, maybe if he had some dolls he could melt, maybe that would serve to relax him.

No. After the real thing, what was a Barbie? Some kind of form of Near Beer. That's what the debris out back was. Near Beer. The foundry. The Twelve Step Program. All of it. Near Beer.

————— ELEVEN: WORKING FOR THE GOVERNMENT —————

Godzilla calls the government assholes. "All right," he says. "I'll do it."

"Good," says the government man. "We thought you would. Check your mailbox. The map and instructions are there."

Godzilla goes outside and looks in his box. There's a manila envelope there. Inside are instructions. They say: "Burn all the spots you see on the map. You finish those, we'll find others. No penalties. Just make sure no one escapes. Any rioting starts, you finish them. To the last man, woman and child."

Godzilla unfolds the map. On it are red marks. Above the red marks are listings: Nigger Town. Chink Village. White Trash Enclave. A Clutch of Queers. Mostly Democrats.

Godzilla thinks about what he can do now. Unbidden. He can burn without guilt. He can stomp without guilt. Not only that, they'll send him a check. He has been hired by his adopted country to clean out the bad spots as they see them.

————— TWELVE: THE FINAL STEP —————

Godzilla stops near the first place on the list: Nigger Town. He sees kids playing in the streets. Dogs. Humans looking up at him, wondering what the hell he's doing here.

Godzilla suddenly feels something move inside him. He knows he's being used. He turns around and walks away. He heads toward the government section of town. He starts with the governor's mansion. He goes wild. Artillery is brought out, but it's no use, he's rampaging. Like the old days.

Reptilicus shows up with a megaphone, tries to talk Godzilla down from the top of

the Great Monument Building, but Godzilla doesn't listen. He's burning the top of the building off with his breath, moving down, burning some more, moving down, burning some more, all the way to the ground.

Kong shows up and cheers him on. Kong drops his walker and crawls along the road on his belly and reaches a building and pulls himself up and starts climbing. Bullets spark all around the big ape.

Godzilla watches as Kong reaches the summit of the building and clings by one hand and waves the other, which contains a Barbie doll.

Kong puts the Barbie doll between his teeth. He reaches in his coat and brings out a naked Ken doll. Godzilla can see that Kong has made Ken some kind of penis out of silly putty or something. The penis is as big as Ken's leg.

Kong is yelling, "Yeah, that's right. That's right. I'm a C/D, you sons of a bitches."

Jets appear and swoop down on Kong. The big ape catches a load of rocket right in the teeth. Barbie, teeth and brains decorate the greying sky. Kong falls.

Gorgo comes out of the crowd and bends over the ape, takes him in her arms and cries. Kong's hand slowly opens, revealing Ken, his penis broken off.

The flying turtle shows up and starts trying to steal Godzilla's thunder, but Godzilla isn't having it. He tears the top off the building Kong had mounted and beats Camera with it. Even the cops and the army cheer over this.

Godzilla beats and beats the turtle, splattering turtle meat all over the place, like

an overheated poodle in a microwave. A few quick pedestrians gather up chunks of the turtle meat to take home and cook, 'cause the rumor is it tastes just like chicken.

Godzilla takes a triple shot of rockets in the chest, staggers, goes down. Tanks gather around him.

Godzilla opens his bloody mouth and laughs. He thinks: If I'd have gotten finished here, then I'd have done the black people too. I'd have gotten the yellow people and the white trash and the homosexuals. I'm an equal opportunity destroyer. To hell with the twelve-step program. To hell with humanity.

Then Godzilla dies and makes a mess on the street. Military men tip-toe around the mess and hold their noses.

Later, Gorgo claims Kong's body and leaves.

Reptilicus, being interviewed by television reporters, says, "Zilla was almost there, man. Almost. If he could have completed the program, he'd have been all right. But the pressures of society were too much for him. You can't blame

him for what society made of him."

On the way home, Reptilicus thinks about all the excitement. The burning buildings. The gunfire. Just like the old days when he and Zilla and Kong and that goon-ball turtle were young.

Reptilicus thinks of Kong's defiance, waving the Ken doll, the Barbie in his teeth. He thinks of Godzilla, laughing as he died.

Reptilicus finds a lot of old feelings resurfacing. They're hard to fight. He locates a lonesome spot and a dark house and urinates through an open window, then goes home.







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# THE SLEDGE- MAKER'S DAUGHTER

By Alastair Reynolds

SHE STOPPED IN SIGHT OF TWENTY Arch Bridge, laying down her bags to rest her hands from the weight of two hogs' heads and forty pence worth of beeswax candles. While she paused, Kathrin adjusted the drawstring on her hat, tilting the brim to shade her forehead from the sun. Though the air was still cool, there was a fierce new quality to the light that brought out her freckles.

Kathrin moved to continue, but a tightness in her throat made her hesitate. She had been keeping the bridge from her thoughts until this

moment, but now the fact of it could not be ignored. Unless she crossed it she would face the long trudge to New Bridge, a diversion that would keep her on the road until long after sunset.

"Sledge-maker's daughter!" called a rough voice from across the road.

Kathrin turned sharply at the sound. An aproned man stood in a doorway, smearing his hands dry. He had a monkeylike face, tanned a deep liverish red, with white sideboards and a gleaming pink tonsure.

"Brendan Lynch's daughter, isn't it?"

She nodded meekly, but bit her lip rather than answer.

"Thought so. Hardly one to forget a pretty face, me." The man beckoned her to the doorway of his shop. "Come here, lass. I've something for your father."

"Sir?"

"I was hoping to visit him last week, but work kept me here." He cocked his head at the painted wooden trademark hanging above the doorway. "Peter Rigby, the wheelwright. Kathrin, isn't it?"

"I need to be getting along, sir..."

"And your father needs good wood, of which I've plenty. Come inside for a moment, instead of standing there like a starved thing." He called over his shoulder, telling his wife to put the water on the fire.

Reluctantly Kathrin gathered her bags and followed Peter into his workshop. She blinked against the dusty air and removed her hat. Sawdust carpeted the floor, fine and golden in places, crisp and coiled in others, while a heady concoction of resins and glues filled the air. Pots simmered on fires. Wood was being steamed into curves, or straightened where it was curved. Many sharp tools gleamed on one wall, some of them fashioned with blades of skydrift. Wheels, mostly awaiting spokes or iron tyres, rested against another. Had the wheels been sledges, it could have been her father's workshop, when he had been busier.

Peter showed Kathrin to an empty stool next to one of his benches. "Sit down here and take the weight off your feet. Mary can make you some bread and cheese. Or bread and ham if you'd rather."

"That's kind sir, but Widow Grayling normally gives me something to eat, when I reach her house."

Peter raised a white eyebrow. He stood by the bench with his thumbs tucked into the belt of his apron, his belly jutting out as if he was quietly proud of it. "I didn't know you visited the witch."

"She will have her two hogs' heads, once a month, and her candles. She only buys them from the Shield, not the Town. She pays for the hogs a year in advance, twenty four whole pounds."

"And you're not scared by her?"

"I've no cause to be."

"There's some that would disagree with you."

Remembering something her father had told her, Kathrin said, "There are folk who say the sheriff can fly, or that there was once a bridge that winked at travellers like an eye, or a road of iron that reached all the way to London. My father says there's no reason for anyone to be scared of Widow Grayling."

"Not afraid she'll turn you into a toad, then?"

"She cures people, not put spells on them."

"When she's in the mood for it. From what I've heard she's just as likely to turn the sick and needy away."

"If she helps some people, isn't that better than nothing at all?"

"I suppose." She could tell Peter didn't agree, but he wasn't cross with her for arguing. "What does your father make of you visiting the witch, anyway?"

"He doesn't mind."

"No?" Peter asked, interestedly.

"When he was small, my dad cut his arm on a piece of skydrift that he found in the snow. He went to Widow Grayling and she made his arm better again by tying an eel around it. She didn't take any payment except the skydrift."

"Does your father still believe an eel can heal a wound?"

"He says he'll believe anything if it gets the job done."

"Wise man, that Brendan, a man after my own heart. Which reminds me." Peter ambled to another bench, pausing to stir one of his bubbling pots before gathering a bundle of sawn-off wooden sticks. He set them down in front of Kathrin on a scrap of cloth. "Off cuts," he explained. "But good seasoned beech, which'll never warp. No use to me, but I am sure your father will find use for them. Tell him that there's more, if he wishes to collect it."

"I haven't got any money for wood."

"I'd take none. Your father was always generous to me, when I was going through lean times." Peter scratched behind his ear. "Only fair, the way I see it."

"Thank you," Kathrin said doubtfully. "But I don't think I can carry the wood all the way home."

"Not with two hogs' heads as well. But you can drop by when you've given the heads to Widow Grayling."

"Only I won't be coming back over the river," Kathrin said. "After I've crossed Twenty Arch Bridge, I'll go back along the south quayside and take the ferry at Jarrow."

Peter looked puzzled. "Why line the ferryman's pocket when you can cross the bridge for nowt?"

Kathrin shrugged easily. "I've got to visit someone on the Jarrow road, to settle an account."

"Then you'd better take the wood now, I suppose," Peter said.

Mary bustled in, carrying a small wooden tray laden with bread and ham. She was as plump and red as her husband, only shorter. Picking up the entire gist of the conversation in an instant, she said, "Don't be an oaf, Peter. The girl cannot carry all that wood and her bags. If she will not come back this way, she must pass a message on to her father. Tell him that there's wood here if he wants it." She shook her head sympathetically at Kathrin. "What does he think you are, a pack mule?"

"I'll tell my father about the wood," she said.

"Seasoned beech," Peter said emphatically. "Remember that."

"I will."

Mary encouraged her to take some of the bread and meat, despite Kathrin again mentioning that she expected to be fed at Widow Grayling's. "Take it anyway," Mary said. "You never know how hungry you might get on the way home. Are you sure about not coming back this way?"

"I'd best not," Kathrin said.

After an awkward lull, Peter said, "There is something else I meant to tell your father. Could you let him know that I've no need of a new sledge this year, after all?"

"Peter," Mary said. "You promised."

"I said that I should probably need one. I was wrong in that." Peter looked exasperated.

"The fault lies in Brendan, not me! If he did not make such good and solid sledges, then perhaps I should need another by now."

"I shall tell him," Kathrin said.

"Is your father keeping busy?" Mary asked.

"Aye," Kathrin answered, hoping the wheelwright's wife wouldn't push her on the point.

"Of course he will still be busy," Peter said, helping himself to some of the bread. "People don't stop needing sledges, just because the Great Winter loosens its hold on us. Any more than they stopped needing wheels when the winter was at its coldest. It's still cold for half the year!"

Kathrin opened her mouth to speak. She meant to tell Peter that he could pass the message onto her father directly, for he was working not five minutes walk from the wheelwright's shop. Peter clearly had no knowledge that her father had left the village, leaving his workshop empty during these warming months. But she realised that her father would be ashamed if the wheelwright were to learn of his present trade. It was best that nothing be said.

"Kathrin?" Peter asked.

"I should be getting on. Thank you for the food, and the offer of the wood."

"You pass our regards on to your father," Mary said.

"I shall."

"God go with you. Watch out for the jangling men."

"I will," Kathrin replied, because that was what you were supposed to say.

"Before you go," Peter said suddenly, as if a point had just occurred to him. "Let me tell you something. You say there are people who believe the sheriff can fly, as if that was a foolish thing, like the iron road and the winking bridge. I cannot speak of the other things, but when I was boy I met someone who had seen the sheriff's flying machine. My grandfather often spoke of it. A whirling thing, like a windmill made of tin. He had seen it when he was a boy, carrying the sheriff and his men above the land faster than any bird."

"If the sheriff could fly then, why does he need a horse and carriage now?"

“Because the flying machine crashed down to Earth, and no tradesman could persuade it to fly again. It was a thing of the old world, before the Great Winter. Perhaps the winking bridge and the iron road were also things of the old world. We mock too easily, as if we understood everything of our world where our forebears understood nothing.”

“But if I should believe in certain things,” Kathrin said, “should I not also believe in others? If the sheriff can fly, then can a jangling man not steal me from my bed at night?”

“The jangling men are a story to stop children misbehaving,” Peter said witheringly. “How old are you now?”

“Sixteen,” Kathrin answered.

“I am speaking of something that was seen, in daylight, not made up to frighten bairns.”

“But people say they have seen jangling men. They have seen men made of tin and gears, like the inside of a clock.”

“Some people were frightened too much when they were small,” Peter said, with a dismissive shake. “No more than that. But the sheriff is real, and he was once able to fly. That’s God’s truth.”

Her hands were hurting again by the time she reached Twenty Arch Bridge. She tugged down the sleeves of her sweater, using them as mittens. Rooks and jackdaws wheeled and cawed overhead. Seagulls feasted on waste floating in the narrow races between the bridge’s feet, or pecked at vile leavings on the road that had been missed by the night soil gatherers. A boy laughed as Kathrin nearly tripped on the labyrinth of crisscrossing ruts that had been etched by years of wagon wheels entering and leaving the bridge. She hissed a curse back at the boy, but now the wagons served her purpose. She skulked near a doorway until a heavy cart came rumbling along, top-heavy with beer barrels from the Blue Star Brewery, drawn by four snorting dray-horses, a bored-looking drayman at the reins, huddled down so deep into his leather coat that it seemed as if the Great Winter still had its icy hand on the country.

Kathrin started walking as the cart lumbered past her, using it as a screen. Between the stacked beer barrels she could see the top level of the scaffolding that was shoring up the other side of the arch, visible since no house or parapet stood on that part of the bridge. A dozen or so workers – including a couple of aproned foremen – were standing on the scaffolding, looking down at the work going on below. Some of them had plumb lines; one of them even had a little black rod that shone a fierce red spot wherever he wanted something moved. Of Garret, the reason she wished to cross the bridge only once if she could help it, there was nothing to be seen. Kathrin hoped that he was under the side of the bridge, hectoring the workers. She felt sure that her father was down there too, being told what to do and biting his tongue against answering back. He put up with being shouted at, he put up with being forced to treat wood with crude disrespect, because it was all he could do to earn enough money to feed and shelter himself and his daughter. And he never, ever, looked Garret Kinnear in the eye.

Kathrin felt her mood easing as the dray ambled across the bridge, nearing the slight rise over the narrow middle arches. The repair work, where Garret was most likely to be, was now well behind her. She judged her progress by the passage of alehouses. She had passed the newly painted Bridge Inn and the shuttered gloom of the Lord’s Confessor. Fiddle music spilled from the open doorway of the Dancing Panda: an old folksong with nonsense lyrics about sickly sausage rolls.

Ahead lay the Winged Man, its sign containing a strange painting of a foreboding figure rising from a hilltop. If she passed the Winged Man, she felt she would be safe.

Then the dray hit a jutting cobblestone and the rightmost front wheel snapped free of its axle. The wheel wobbled off on its own. The cart tipped to the side, spilling beer barrels onto the ground. Kathrin stepped nimbly aside as one of the barrels ruptured and sent its fizzing, piss-coloured contents across the roadway. The horses snorted and strained. The drayman spat out a greasy wad of chewing tobacco and started down from his chair, his face a mask of impassive resignation,

as if this was the kind of thing that could be expected to happen once a day. Kathrin heard him whisper something in the ear of one of the horses, in beast-tongue, which calmed the animal.

Kathrin knew that she had no choice but to continue. Yet she had no sooner resumed her pace – moving faster now, the bags swaying awkwardly, than she saw Garret Kinnear. He was just stepping out of the Winged Man's doorway.

He smiled. "You in a hurry or something?"

Kathrin tightened her grip on the bags, as if she was going to use them as weapons. She decided not to say anything, not to openly acknowledge his presence, even though their eyes had met for an electric instant.

"Getting to be a big strong girl now, Kathrin Lynch."

She carried on walking, each step taking an eternity. How foolish she had been, to take Twenty Arch Bridge when it would only have cost her another hour to take the further crossing. She should not have allowed Peter to delay her with his good intentions.

"You want some help with them bags of yours?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him move out of the doorway, tugging his mud-stained trousers higher onto his hip. Garret Kinnear was snake thin, all skin and bone, but much stronger than he looked. He wiped a hand across his sharp beardless chin. He had long black hair, the greasy grey colour of dishwater.

"Go away," she hissed, hating herself in the same instant.

"Just making conversation," he said.

Kathrin quickened her pace, glancing nervously around. All of a sudden the bridge appeared deserted. The shops and houses she had yet to pass were all shuttered and silent. There was still a commotion going on by the dray, but no one there was paying any attention to what was happening further along the bridge.

"Leave me alone," Kathrin said.

He was walking almost alongside her now, between Kathrin and the road. "Now what kind of way to talk is that, Kathrin Lynch? Especially after my offer to help you with them bags. What have you got in them, anyways?"

"Nothing that's any business of yours."

"I could be the judge of that." Before she could do anything, he'd snatched the bag from her left hand. He peered into its dark depths, frowning. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry with this?"

"Give me back the bag."

She reached for the bag, tried to grab it back, but he held it out of her reach, grinning cruelly.

"That's mine."

"How much would a pig's head be worth?"

"You tell me. There's only one pig around here."

They'd passed the mill next to the Winged Man. There was a gap between the mill and the six-storey house next to it, where some improbably narrow property must once have existed. Garret turned down the alley, still carrying Kathrin's bag. He reached the parapet at the edge of the bridge and looked over the side. He rummaged in the bag and drew out the pig's head. Kathrin hesitated at the entrance to the narrow alley, watching as Garret held the head out over the roiling water.

"You can have your pig back. Just come a wee bit closer."

"So you can do what you did last time?"

"I don't remember any complaints." He let the head fall, then caught it again, Kathrin's heart in her throat.

"You know I couldn't complain."

"Not much to ask for a pig's head, is it?" With his free hand, he fumbled open his trousers, tugging out the pale worm of his cock. "You did it before, and it didn't kill you. Why not now? I won't trouble you again."

She watched his cock stiffen. "You said that last time."

"Aye, but this time I mean it. Come over here, Kathrin. Be a good girl now and you'll have your pig back."

Kathrin looked back over her shoulder. No one was going to disturb them. The dray had blocked all the traffic behind it, and nothing was coming over the bridge from the south.

"Please," she said.

"Just this once," Garret said. "And make



your mind up fast, girl. This pig's getting awfully heavy in my hand."

Kathrin stood in the widow's candlelit kitchen – it only had one tiny, dusty window – while the old woman turned her bent back to attend to the coals burning in her black metal stove. She poked and prodded the fire until it hissed back like a cat. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry?" she asked.

"Aye," Kathrin said. The room smelled smoky.

"That's too far for anyone, let alone a sixteen year old lass. I should have a word with your father. I heard he was working on Twenty Arch Bridge."

Kathrin shifted uncomfortably. "I don't mind walking. The weather's all right."

"So they say. All the same, the evenings are still cold, and there are types about you wouldn't care to meet on your own, miles from Jarrow."

"I'll be back before it gets dark," Kathrin said, with more optimism than she felt. Not if she went out of her way to avoid Garret Kinnear she wouldn't. He knew the route she'd normally take back home, and the alternatives would mean a much longer journey.

"You sure about that?"

"I have no one else to visit. I can start home now." Kathrin offered her one remaining bag, as Widow Grayling turned from the fire, brushing her hands on her apron.

"Put it on the table, will you?"

Kathrin put the bag down. "One pig's head, and twenty candles, just as you wanted," she said brightly.

Widow Grayling hobbled over to the table, supporting herself with a stick, eyeing Kathrin as she opened the bag and took out the solitary head. She weighed it in her hand then set it down on the table, the head facing Kathrin in such a way that its beady black eyes and smiling snout suggested amused complicity.

"It's a good head," the widow said. "But there were meant to be two of them."

"Can you manage with just the one, until I visit again? I'll have three for you next time."

"I'll manage if I must. Was there a problem with the butcher in the Shield?"

Kathrin had considered feigning ignorance,

saying that she did not recall how only one head had come to be in her bags. But she knew Widow Grayling too well for that.

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Of course." The widow hobbled around the table to one of the rickety stools and dragged it out. "Are you all right, girl?"

Kathrin lowered herself onto the stool.

"The other bag was taken from me," she answered quietly.

"By who?"

"Someone on the bridge."

"Children?"

"A man."

Widow Grayling nodded slowly, as if Kathrin's answer had only confirmed some deep-seated suspicion she had harboured for many years. "Thomas Kinnear's boy, was it?"

"How could you know?"

"Because I've lived long enough to form ready opinions of people. Garret Kinnear is filth. But there's no one that'll touch him, because they're scared of his father. Even the sheriff tugs his forelock to Thomas Kinnear. Did he rape you?"

"No. But he wanted me to do something nearly as bad."

"And did he make you?"

Kathrin looked away. "Not this time."

Widow Grayling closed her eyes. She reached across the table and took one of Kathrin's hands, squeezing it between her own. "When was it?"

"Three months ago, when there was still snow on the ground. I had to cross the bridge on my own. It was later than usual, and there weren't any people around. I knew about Garret already, but I'd managed to keep away from him. I thought I was going to be lucky." Kathrin turned back to face her companion. "He caught me and took me into one of the mills. The wheels were turning, but there was nobody inside except me and Garret. I struggled, but then he put his finger to my lips and told me to shush."

"Because of your father."

"If I made trouble, if I did not do what he wanted, Garret would tell his father some lie about mine. He would say that he caught him sleeping on the job, or drunk, or stealing nails."

"Garret promised you that?"

"He said, life's hard enough for a sledge-maker's daughter when no one wants sledges. He said it would only be harder if my father lost his work."

"In that respect he was probably right," the widow said resignedly. "It was brave of you to hold your silence, Kathrin. But the problem hasn't gone away, has it? You cannot avoid Garret forever."

"I can take the other bridge."

"That'll make no difference, now that he has his eye on you."

Kathrin looked down at her hands. "Then he's won already."

"No, he just thinks that he has." Without warning the widow stood from her chair. "How long have we known each other, would you say?"

"Since I was small."

"And in all that time, have I come to seem any older to you?"

"You've always seemed the same to me, Widow Grayling."

"An old woman. The witch on the hill."

"There are good witches and bad witches," Kathrin pointed out.

"And there are mad old women who don't belong in either category. Wait a moment."

Widow Grayling stooped under the impossibly low doorway into the next room. Kathrin heard a scrape of wood on wood, as of a drawer being opened. She heard rummaging sounds. Widow Grayling returned with something in her hands, wrapped in red cotton. Whatever it was, she put it down on the table. By the noise it made Kathrin judged that it was an item of some weight and solidity.

"I was just like you once. I grew up not far from Ferry, in the darkest, coldest years of the Great Winter."

"How long ago?"

"The sheriff then was William the Questioner. You won't have heard of him." Widow Grayling sat down in the same seat she'd been using before and quickly exposed the contents of the red cotton bundle.

Kathrin wasn't quite sure what she was looking at. There was a thick and unornamented

bracelet, made of some dull grey metal like pewter. Next to the ornament was something like the handle of a broken sword: a grip, with a crisscrossed pattern on it, with a curved guard reaching from one end of the hilt to the other. It was fashioned from the same dull grey metal.

"Pick it up," the widow said. "Feel it."

Kathrin reached out tentatively and closed her fingers around the crisscrossed hilt. It felt cold and hard and not quite the right shape for her hand. She lifted it from the table, feeling its weight.

"What is it, widow?"

"It's yours. It's a thing that has been in my possession for a very long while, but now it must change hands."

Kathrin didn't know quite what to say. A gift was a gift, but neither she nor her father would have any use for this ugly broken thing, save for its value to a scrap man.

"What happened to the sword?" she asked.

"There was never a sword. The thing you are holding is the entire object."

"Then I don't understand what it is for."

"You shall, in time. I'm about to place a hard burden on your shoulders. I have often thought that you were the right one, but I wished to wait until you were older, stronger. But what has happened today cannot be ignored. I am old and weakening. It would be a mistake to wait another year."

"I still don't understand."

"Take the bracelet. Put it on your wrist."

Kathrin did as she was told. The bracelet opened on a heavy hinge, like a manacle. When she locked it together, the join was nearly invisible. It was a cunning thing, to be sure. But it still felt as heavy and dead and useless as the broken sword.

Kathrin tried to keep a composed face, all the while suspecting that the widow was as mad as people had always said.

"Thank you," she said, with as much sincerity as she could muster.

"Now listen to what I have to say. You walked across the bridge today. Doubtless you passed the inn known as the Winged Man."

"It was where Garret caught up with me."

"Did it ever occur to you to wonder where the name of the tavern comes from?"

“My dad told me once. He said the tavern was named after a metal statue that used to stand on a hill to the south, on the Durham road.”

“And did your father explain the origin of this statue?”

“He said some people reckoned it had been up there since before the Great Winter. Other people said an old sheriff had put it up. Some other people...” But Kathrin trailed off.

“Yes?”

“It’s silly, but they said a real Winged Man had come down, out of the sky.”

“And did your father place any credence in that story?”

“Not really,” Kathrin said.

“He was right not to. The statue was indeed older than the Great Winter, when they tore it down. It was not put up to honour the sheriff, or commemorate the arrival of a Winged Man.” Now the widow looked at her intently. “But a Winged Man did come down. I know what happened, Kathrin: I saw the statue with my own eyes, before the Winged Man fell. I was there.”

Kathrin shifted. She was growing uncomfortable in the widow’s presence.

“My dad said people reckoned the Winged Man came down hundreds of years ago.”

“It did.”

“Then you can’t have been there, Widow Grayling.”

“Because if I had been, I should be dead by now? You’re right. By all that is natural, I should be. I was born three hundred years ago, Kathrin. I’ve been a widow for more than two hundred of those years, though not always under this name. I’ve moved from house to house, village to village, as soon as people start suspecting what I am. I found the Winged Man when I was sixteen years old, just like you.”

Kathrin smiled tightly. “I want to believe you.”

“You will, shortly. I already told you that this was the coldest time of the Great Winter. The sun was a cold grey disk, as if it was made of ice itself. For years the river hardly thawed at all. The Frost Fair stayed almost all year round. It was nothing like the miserable little gatherings you have known. This was ten times bigger, a

whole city built on the frozen river. It had streets and avenues, its own quarters. There were tents and stalls, with skaters and sledges everywhere. There’d be races, jousting competitions, fireworks, mystery players, even printing presses to make newspapers and souvenirs just for the Frost Fair. People came from miles around to see it, Kathrin: from as far away as Carlisle or York.”

“Didn’t they get bored with it, if it was always there?”

“It was always changing, though. Every few months there was something different. You would travel fifty miles to see a new wonder if enough people started talking about it. And there was no shortage of wonders, even if they were not always quite what you had imagined when you set off on your journey. Things fell from the sky more often in those days. A living thing like the Winged Man was still a rarity, but other things came down regularly enough. People would spy where they fell and try to get there first. Usually all they’d find would be bits of hot metal, all warped and runny like melted sugar.”

“Skydrift,” Kathrin said. “Metal that’s no use to anyone, except barbers and butchers.”

“Only because we can’t make fires hot enough to make that metal smelt down like iron or copper. Once, we could. But if you could find a small piece with an edge, there was nothing it couldn’t cut through. A surgeon’s best knife will always be skydrift.”

“Some people think the metal belongs to the jangling men, and that anyone who touches it will be cursed.”

“And I’m sure the sheriff does nothing to persuade them otherwise. Do you think the jangling men care what happens to their metal?”

“I don’t think they care, because I don’t think they exist.”

“I was once of the same opinion. Then something happened to make me change my mind.”

“This being when you found the Winged Man, I take it.”

“Before even that. I would have been thirteen, I suppose. It was in the back of a tent in the Frost Fair. There was a case holding a hand made of metal, found among skydrift near Wallsend.”

"A rider's gauntlet."

"I don't think so. It was broken off at the wrist, but you could tell that it used to belong to something that was also made of metal. There were metal bones and muscles in it. No cogs or springs, like in a clock or tin toy. This was something finer, more ingenious. I don't believe any man could have made it. But it cannot just be the jangling men who drop things from the sky, or fall out of it."

"Why not?" Kathrin asked, in the spirit of someone going along with a game.

"Because it was said that the sheriff's men once found a head of skin and bone, all burned up, but which still had a pair of spectacles on it. The glass in them was dark like coal, but when the sheriff wore them, he could see at night like a wolf. Another time, his men found a shred of garment that kept changing colour, depending on what it was lying against. You could hardly see it then. Not enough to make a suit, but you could imagine how useful that would have been to the sheriff's spies."

"They'd have wanted to get to the Winged Man first."

Widow Grayling nodded. "It was just luck that I got to him first. I was on the Durham road, riding a mule, when he fell from the sky. Now, the law said that they would spike your head on the bridge if you touched something that fell on the sheriff's land, especially skydrift. But everyone knew that the sheriff could only travel so fast, even when he had his flying machine. It was a risk worth taking, so I took it, and I found the Winged Man, and he was still alive."

"Was he really a man?"

"He was a creature of flesh and blood, not a jangling man, but he was not like any man I had seen before. He was smashed and bent, like a toy that had been trodden on. When I found him he was covered in armour, hot enough to

turn the snow to water and make the water hiss and bubble under him. I could only see his face. A kind of golden mask had come off, lying next to him. There were bars across his mask, like the head of the Angel on the tavern sign. The rest of him was covered in metal, jointed in a clever fashion. It was silver in places and black in others, where it had been scorched. His arms were metal wings, as wide across as the road itself if they had not been snapped back on themselves. Instead of legs he just had a long tail, with a kind of fluke at the end of it. I crept closer, watching the sky all around me for the sheriff's whirling machine. I was fearful at first, but when I saw the Winged Man's face I only wanted to do what I could for him. And he was dying. I knew it, because I'd seen the same look on the faces



of men hanging from the sheriff's killing poles."

"Did you talk to him?"

"I asked him if he wanted some water. At first he just looked at me, his eyes pale as the sky, his lips opening and closing like a fish that has just been landed. Then he said, 'Water

will not help me.' Just those five words, in a dialect I didn't know. Then I asked him if there was anything else I could do to help him, all the while glancing over my shoulder in case anyone should come upon us. But the road was empty and the sky was clear. It took a long time for him to answer me again."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Thank you, but there is nothing you can do for me.' Then I asked him if he was an angel. He smiled, ever so slightly. 'No,' he said. 'Not an angel, really. But I am a flier.' I asked him if there was a difference. He smiled again before answering me. 'Perhaps not, after all this time. Do you know of fliers, girl? Do any of you still remember the war?'"

"What did you tell him?"

“The truth. I said I knew nothing of a war, unless he spoke of the Battle of the Stadium of Light, which had only happened twenty years earlier. He looked sad then, as if he had hoped for a different answer. I asked him if he was a kind of soldier. He said that he was. ‘Fliers are warriors,’ he said. ‘Men like me are fighting a great war, on your behalf, against an enemy you do not even remember.’”

“What enemy?”

“The jangling men. They exist, but not in the way we imagine them. They don’t crawl in through bedroom windows at night, clacking tin-bodied things with skull faces and clockwork keys whirring from their backs. But they’re real enough.”

“Why would such things exist?”

“They’d been made to do the work of men on the other side of the sky, where men cannot breathe because the air is so thin. They made the jangling men canny enough that they could work without being told exactly what to do. But that already made them slyer than foxes. The jangling men coveted our world for themselves. That was before the Great Winter came in. The flier said that men like him – special soldiers, born and bred to fight the jangling men – were all that was holding them back.”

“And he told you they were fighting a war, above the sky?”

Something pained Widow Grayling. “All the years since haven’t made it any easier to understand what the flier told me. He said that, just as there may be holes in an old piece of timber, one that has been eaten through by woodworm, so there may be holes in the sky itself. He said that his wings were not really to help him fly, but to help him navigate those tunnels in the sky, just as the wheels of a cart find their way into the ruts on a road.”

“I don’t understand. How can there be holes in the sky, when the air is already too thin to breathe?”

“He said that the fliers and the jangling men make these holes, just as armies may dig a shifting network of trenches and tunnels as part of a long campaign. It requires strength

to dig a hole and more strength to shore it up when it has already been dug. In an army, it would be the muscle of men and horses and whatever machines still work. But the flier was talking about a different kind of strength altogether.” The widow paused, then stared into Kathrin’s eyes with a look of foreboding. “He told me where it came from, you see. And ever since then, I have seen the world with different eyes. It is a hard burden, Kathrin. But someone must bear it.”

Without thinking, Kathrin said, “Tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want to know.”

“That bracelet has been on your wrist for a few minutes now. Does it feel any different?”

“No,” Kathrin said automatically, but as soon as she’d spoken, as soon as she’d moved her arm, she knew that it was not the case. The bracelet still looked the same, it still looked like a lump of cold dead metal, but it seemed to hang less heavily against her skin than when she’d first put it on.

“The flier gave it to me,” Widow Grayling said, observing Kathrin’s reaction. “He told me how to open his armour and find the bracelet. I asked why. He said it was because I had offered him water. He was giving me something in return for that kindness. He said that the bracelet would keep me healthy, make me strong in other ways, and that if anyone else was to wear it, it would cure them of many ailments. He said that it was against the common law of his people to give such a gift to one such as I, but he chose to do it anyway. I opened his armour, as he told me, and I found his arm, bound by iron straps to the inside of his wing, and broken like the wing itself. On the end of his arm was this bracelet.”

“If the bracelet had the power of healing, why was the Winged Man dying?”

“He said that there were certain afflictions it could not cure. He had been touched by the poisonous ichor of a jangling man, and the bracelet could do nothing for him now.”

“I still do not believe in magic,” Kathrin said carefully.



"Certain magics are real, though. The magic that makes a machine fly, or a man see in the dark. The bracelet feels lighter, because part of it has entered you. It is in your blood now, in your marrow, just as the jangling man's ichor was in the flier's. You felt nothing, and you will continue to feel nothing. But so long as you wear the bracelet, you will age much slower than anyone else. For centuries, no sickness or infirmity will touch you."

Kathrin stroked the bracelet. "I do not believe this."

"I would not expect you to. In a year or two, you will feel no change in yourself. But in five years, or in ten, people will start to remark upon your uncommon youthfulness. For a while, you will glory in it. Then you will feel admiration turn slowly to envy and then to hate, and it will start to feel like a curse. Like me, you will need to move on and take another name. This will be the pattern of your life, while you wear the flier's charm."

Kathrin looked at the palm of her hand. It might have been imagination, but the lines where the handles had cut into her were paler and less sensitive to the touch.

"Is this how you heal people?" she asked.

"You're as wise as I always guessed you were, Kathrin Lynch. Should you come upon someone who is ill, you need only place the bracelet around their wrist for a whole day and – unless they have the jangling man's ichor in them – they will be cured."

"What of the other things? When my father hurt his arm, he said you tied an eel around his arm."

Her words made the widow smile. "I probably did. I could just as well have smeared pigeon dung on it instead, or made him wear a necklace of worms, for all the difference it would have made. Your father's arm would have mended itself on its own, Kathrin. The cut was deep, but clean. It did not need the bracelet to heal, and your father was neither stupid nor feverish. But he did have the loose tongue of all small boys. He would have seen the bracelet, and spoken of it."

"Then you did nothing."

"Your father believed that I did something. That was enough to ease the pain in his arm and perhaps allow it to heal faster than it would otherwise have done."

"But you turn people away."

"If they are seriously ill, but neither feverish nor unconscious, I cannot let them see the bracelet. There is no other way, Kathrin. Some must die, so that the bracelet's secret is protected."

"This is the burden?" Kathrin asked doubtfully.

"No, this is the reward for carrying the burden. The burden is knowledge."

Again, Kathrin said, "Tell me."

"This is what the flier told me. The Great Winter fell across our world because the sun itself grew colder and paler. There was a reason for that. The armies of the celestial war were mining its fire, using the furnace of the sun itself to dig and shore up those seams in the sky. How they did this is beyond my comprehension, and perhaps even that of the flier himself. But he did make one thing clear. So long as the Great Winter held, the celestial war must still be raging. And that would mean that the jangling men had not yet won."

"But the Thaw..." Kathrin began.

"Yes, you see it now. The snow melts from the land. Rivers flow, crops grow again. The people rejoice, they grow stronger and happier, skins darken, the Frost Fairs fade into memory. But they do not understand what it really means."

Kathrin hardly dared ask. "Which side is winning, or has already won?"

"I don't know; that's the terrible part of it. But when the flier spoke to me, I sensed an awful hopelessness, as if he knew things were not going to go the way of his people."

"I'm frightened now."

"You should be. But someone needs to know, Kathrin, and the bracelet is losing its power to keep me out of the grave. Not because there is anything wrong with it, I think – it heals as well as it has ever done – but because it has decided that my time has grown sufficient, just as it will eventually decide the same thing with you."

Kathrin touched the other object, the thing that looked like a sword's handle.

"What is this?"

"The flier's weapon. His hand was holding it from inside the wing. It poked through the outside of the wing like the claw of a bat. The flier showed me how to remove it. It is yours as well."

She had touched it already, but this time Kathrin felt a sudden tingle as her fingers wrapped around the hilt. She let go suddenly, gasping as if she had reached for a stick and picked up an adder, squirming and slippery and venomous.

"Yes, you feel its power," Widow Grayling said admiringly. "It works for no one unless they carry the bracelet."

"I can't take it."

"Better you have it, than let that power go to waste. If the jangling men come, then at least someone will have a means to hurt them. Until then, there are other uses for it."

Without touching the hilt, Kathrin slipped the weapon into her pocket where it lay as heavy and solid as a pebble.

"Did you ever use it?"

"Once."

"What did you do?"

She caught a secretive smile on Widow Grayling's face. "I took something precious from William the Questioner. Banished him to the ground like the rest of us. I meant to kill him, but he was not riding in the machine when I brought it down."

Kathrin laughed. Had she not felt the power of the weapon, she might have dismissed the widow's story as the ramblings of an old woman. But she had no reason in the world to doubt her companion.

"You could have killed the sheriff later, when he came to inspect the killing poles."

"I nearly did. But something always stayed my hand. Then the sheriff was replaced by another man, and he in turn by another. Sheriffs came and went. Some were evil men, but not all of them. Some were only as hard and cruel as their office demanded. I never used the weapon again, Kathrin. I sensed that its power was not limitless, that it must be used sparingly, against

the time when it became really necessary. But to use it in defence, against a smaller target... that would be a different matter, I think."

Kathrin thought she understood.

"I need to be getting back home," she said, trying to sound as if they had discussed nothing except the matter of the widow's next delivery of provisions. "I am sorry about the other head."

"There is no need to apologise. It was not your doing."

"What will happen to you now, widow?"

"I'll fade, slowly and gracefully. Perhaps I will see things through to the next winter. But I don't expect to see another thaw."

"Please. Take the bracelet back."

"Kathrin, listen. It will make no difference to me now, whether you take it or not."

"I'm not old enough for this. I'm only a girl from the Shield, a sledge-maker's daughter."

"What do you think I was, when I found the flier? We were the same. I've seen your strength and courage."

"I wasn't strong today."

"Yet you took the bridge, when you knew Garret would be on it. I have no doubt, Kathrin."

She stood. "If I had not lost the other head... if Garret had not caught me... would you have given me these things?"

"I was minded to do it. If not today, it would have happened next time. But let us give Garret due credit. He helped me make up my mind." "He's still out there," Kathrin said.

"But he will know you will not be taking the bridge to get back home, even though that would save you paying the toll at Jarrow Ferry. He will content himself to wait until you cross his path again."

Kathrin collected her one remaining bag and moved to the door.

"Yes."

"I will see you again, in a month. Give my regards to your father."

"I will."

Widow Grayling opened the door. The sky was darkening to the east, in the direction of Jarrow Ferry. The dusk stars would appear shortly, and it would be dark within the hour.

The crows were still wheeling, but more languidly now, preparing to roost. Though the Great Winter was easing, the evenings seemed as cold as ever, as if night was the final stronghold, the place where the winter had retreated when the inevitability of its defeat became apparent. Kathrin knew that she would be shivering long before she reached the tollgate at the crossing, miles down the river. She tugged down her hat in readiness for the journey and stepped onto the broken road in front of the widow's cottage.

"You will take care now, Kathrin. Watch out for the janglies."

"I will, Widow Grayling."

The door closed behind her. She heard a bolt slide into place.

She was alone.

Kathrin set off, following the path she had used to climb up from the river. If it was arduous in daylight, it was steep and treacherous at dusk. As she descended she could see Twenty Arch Bridge from above, a thread of light across the shadowed ribbon of the river. Candles were being lit in the inns and houses that lined the bridge, tallow torches burning along the parapets. There was still light at the north end, where the sagging arch was being repaired. The obstruction caused by the dray had been cleared, and traffic was moving normally from bank to bank. She heard the calls of men and women, the barked orders of foremen, the braying of drunkards and slatterns, the regular creak and splash of the mill wheels turning under the arches.

Presently she reached a fork in the path and paused. To the right lay the quickest route down to the quayside road to Jarrow Ferry. To the left lay the easiest descent down to the bridge, the path that she had already climbed. Until that moment, her resolve had been clear. She would take the ferry, as she always did, as she was expected to do.

But now she reached a hand into her pocket and closed her fingers around the flier's weapon. The shiver of contact was less shocking this time. The object already felt a part of her, as if she had carried it for years.

She drew it out. It gleamed in twilight, shining where it had appeared dull before. Even if the widow had not told her of its nature, there would have been no doubt now. The object spoke its nature through her skin and bones, whispering to her on a level beneath language. It told her what it could do and how she could make it obey her. It told her to be careful of the power she now carried in her hand. She must scruple to use it wisely, for nothing like it now existed in the world. It was the power to smash walls. Power to smash bridges and towers and flying machines. Power to smash jangling men.

Power to smash ordinary men, if that was what she desired.

She had to know.

The last handful of crows gyred overhead. She raised the weapon to them and felt a sudden dizzying apprehension of their number and distance and position, each crow feeling distinct from its brethren, as if she could almost name them.

She selected one laggard bird. All the others faded from her attention, like players removing themselves from a stage. She came to know that last bird intimately. She could feel its wingbeats cutting the cold air. She could feel the soft thatch of its feathers, and the lacelike scaffolding of bone underneath. Within the cage of its chest she felt the tiny strong pulse of its heart, and she knew that she could make that heart freeze just by willing it.

The weapon seemed to urge her to do it. She came close. She came frighteningly close.

But the bird had done nothing to wrong her, and she spared it. She had no need to take a life to test this new gift, at least not an innocent one. The crow rejoined its brethren, something skittish and hurried in its flight, as if it had felt that coldness closing around its heart. Kathrin returned the weapon to her pocket. She looked at the bridge again, measuring it once more with clinical eyes, eyes that were older and sadder this time, because she knew something that the people on the bridge could never know.

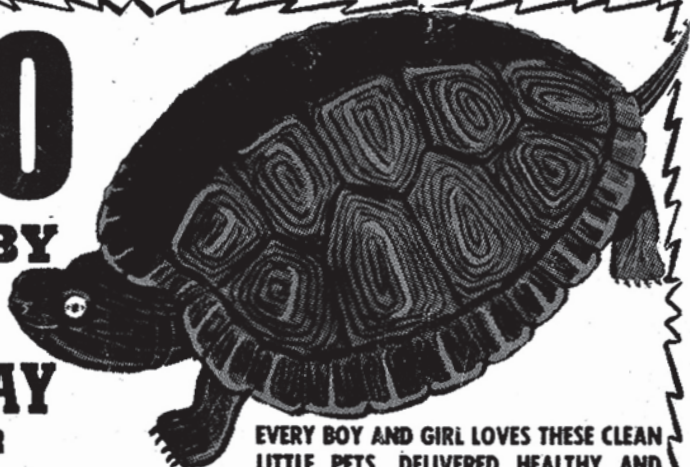
"I'm ready," she said, aloud, into the night, for whoever might be listening.

Then resumed her descent.

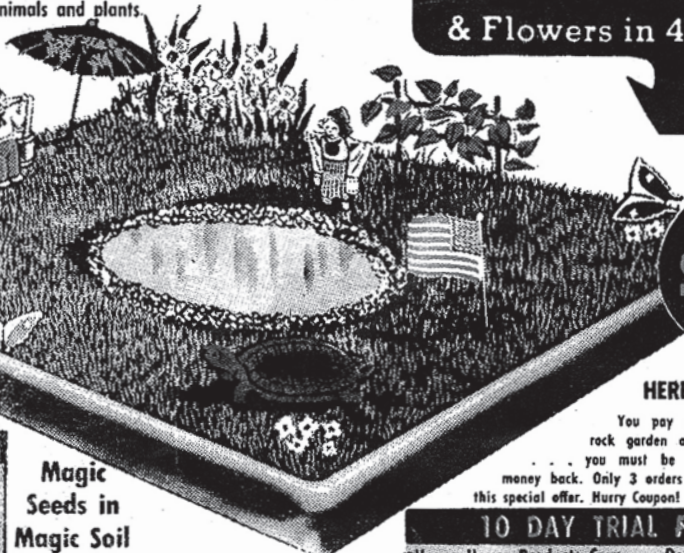
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# JESUS CHRIST, REANIMATOR

By Ken MacLeod

**T**HE SECOND COMING WAS SOMETHING of a washout, if you remember. It lit up early-warning radar like a Christmas tree, of course, and the Israeli Air Force gave the heavenly host a respectable F-16 fighter escort to the ground, but that was when they were still treating it as a UFO incident. As soon as their sandals touched the dust, Jesus and the handful of bewildered Copts who'd been caught up to meet him in the air looked about for the armies of the Beast and the kings of the earth. The only soldiers they could see were a

few terrified guards on a nearby archaeological dig. The armies of the Lord hurled themselves at the IDF and were promptly slaughtered. Their miraculous healings and resurrections created something of a sensation, but after that it was detention and Shin Bet interrogation for the lot of them. The skirmish was caught on video by activists from the International Solidarity Movement, who happened to be driving past the ancient battlefield on their way to Jenin when the trouble started. Jesus was released a couple of months after the Meggido debacle, but most



of the Rapture contingent had Egyptian ID, and the diplomacy was as slow as you'd expect.

Jesus returned to his old stomping ground in the vicinity of Galilee. He hung around a lot with Israeli Arabs, and sometimes crossed to the West Bank. Reports trickled out of a healing here, a near-riot there, an open-air speech somewhere else. At first the IDF and the PA cops gave him a rough time, but there wasn't much they could pin on him. It's been said he avoided politics, but a closer reading of his talks suggests a subtle strategy of working on his listeners' minds, chipping away at assumptions, and leaving them to work out the political implications for themselves. The theological aspects of his teaching were hard to square with those previously attributed to him. Critics were quick to point out the discrepancies, and to ridicule his failure to fulfil the more apocalyptic aspects of the prophecies.

When I caught up with him, under the grubby off-season awnings of a Tiberias lakefront cafe, Jesus was philosophical about it.

"There's only so much information you can pack into a first-century Palestinian brain," he explained, one thumb in a volume of Dennett. "Or a twenty-first-century one, come to that."

I sipped thick sweet coffee and checked the little camera for sound and image. 'Aren't you, ah, omniscient?'

He glowered a little. "What part of 'truly man' don't you people understand?" (He'd been using the cafe's Internet facilities a lot, I'd gathered. His blog comments section had to be seen to be believed.) 'It's not rocket science... to mention just one discipline I didn't have a clue about. I could add relativity, quantum mechanics, geology, zoology. Geography, even.' He spread his big hands, with their carpenter's callouses and their old scars. "Look, I really expected to return very soon, and that everyone on Earth would see me when I did. I didn't even know the world was a sphere – sure, I could have picked that up from the Greeks, if I'd asked around in Decapolis, but I had other fish to fry."

"But *you're* –" I fought the rising pitch

" – the Creator, begotten, not made, wholly God as well as –"

"Yes, yes," he said. He mugged an aside to camera. "This stuff would try the patience of a saint, you know." Then he looked me in the eye. "I am the embodiment of the Logos, the very logic of creation, or as it was said in English, 'the Word made flesh.' Just because I *am* in that sense the entirety of the laws of nature doesn't mean I *know* all of them, or can over-ride any of them. Quite the reverse, in fact."

"But the miracles – the healings and resurrections –"

"You have to allow for some... pardonable exaggeration in the reports."

"I've seen the ISM video from Meggido," I said.

"Good for you," he said. "I'd love to see it myself, but the IDF confiscated it in minutes. But then, you probably bribed someone, and that's... not something I can do. Yes, I can resurrect the recent dead, patch bodies back together and so on. Heal injuries and cure illnesses, some of them not purely psychosomatic. Don't ask me to explain how." He waved a hand. "I suspect some kind of quantum handwave at the bottom of it."

"But the Rapture! The Second Coming!"

"I can levitate." He shrugged. "So? I was considerably more impressed to discover that you people can *fly*. In metal machines!"

"Isn't levitation miraculous?"

"It doesn't break any laws of nature, I'll tell you that for nothing. If I can do it, it must be a human capability."

"You mean any human being could levitate?"

"There are recorded instances. Some of them quite well attested, I understand. Even the Catholic Church admits them."

"You could teach people to do it?"

"I suppose I could. But what would be the point? As I said, you can fly already, for all the good that does you." As if by coincidence, a couple of jet fighters broke the sound barrier over the Golan Heights, making the cups rattle. "Same thing with healing, resurrections of the recent dead, and so on. I can do better in

individual cases, but in general your health services are doing better than I could. I have better things to do with my time.”

“Before we get to that,” I said, “there’s just one thing I’d like you to clear up. For the viewers, you understand. Are you telling us that after a certain length of time has passed, the dead can’t be resurrected?”

“Not at all.” He signalled for another pot of coffee. “With God, all things are possible. To put it in your terms, information is conserved. To put it in my terms, we’re all remembered in the mind of God. No doubt all human minds and bodies will be reconstituted at some point. As for when – God knows. I don’t. I told you this the first time.”

“And heaven and hell, the afterlife?”

“Heaven – like I said, the mind of God. It’s up in the sky, in a very literal sense.” He fumbled in a book-bag under the table and retrieved a dog-eared Tipler. “If this book is anything to go by. I’m not saying you should take *The Physics of Immortality* as gospel, you understand, but it certainly helped me get my head around some of the concepts. As for hell...” He leaned forward, looking stern. “Look, suppose I tell you: if you keep doing bad things, if you keep refusing to adjust your thoughts and actions to reality, you’ll *end up in a very bad place*. You’ll *find yourself in deep shit*. Who could argue? Not one moral teacher or philosopher, that’s for sure. If you won’t listen to me, listen to them.” He chuckled darkly. “Of course, it’s far more interesting to write volumes of Italian poetry speculating on the exact depth and temperature of the shit, but that’s just you.”

“What about your distinctive ethical teaching?”

He rolled his eyes heavenward. “*What* distinctive ethical teaching? You’ll find almost all of it in the rabbis, the prophets, and the good pagans. I didn’t come to teach new morals, but to make people take seriously the morals they had. For some of the quirky bits – no divorce, and eunuchs for the Kingdom and so forth – I refer to my cultural limitations or some information loss in transmission or translation.”

I’d already seen the interrogation transcript, and the log, but I had to ask.

“Could you explain, briefly, the reason for the delay in your return?”

“Where I’ve been all this time?”

I nodded, a little uneasy. This was the big one, the one where even those who believed him could trip up.

“I was on another planet,” he said, flat out. “Where else could I have been? I ascended into heaven, sure. I went up into the sky. Like I said, levitation isn’t that big a deal. Gravity’s a weak force, not well understood, and can be manipulated mentally if you know how. Surviving in the upper atmosphere, not to mention raw vacuum, wearing nothing but a jelebah – now *that’s* difficult. As soon as I got behind that cloud I was picked up by an alien space ship that happened to be passing – you can call it coincidence, I still call it providence – and transported to its home planet. I’m not at liberty to say which, but – assume you can’t go faster than light, think in terms of a two-way trip and a bit of turnaround time, and, well – you do the math.”

“Some people,” I said, trying to be tactful, “find that hard to believe.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “They’ll accept levitation and resurrection, but I mention an extrasolar civilization and I’m suddenly a fraud and a New Age guru and a flying saucer nut. Talk about straining at gnats and swallowing camels.” He shrugged again, this time wincing slightly, as if there was a painful stiffness in one shoulder. “It’s a cross I have to bear, I guess.”

What I was thinking, completely irreverently and inappropriately, was the line *you jammy bastard!* from the scene in *Life of Brian*. I’d stumbled at this point, like so many others. It was all too Douglas Adams, too von Däniken, too much a shaggy god story. Just about the only people who’d swallowed it so far were a few Mormons, and even they were uncomfortable with his insistence that he really hadn’t stopped off in America.

We talked some more, I thanked him and shook hands, and headed back to Lod airport with the interview in the can. When I glanced

back from the corner Jesus was well into a bottle of wine and deep conversation with a couple of off-duty border cops and an Arab-Israeli tart.

I couldn't pitch the interview as it stood – there was nothing new in it, and I needed an angle. I settled on follow-up research, with scientists as well as theologians, and managed to pull together an interdisciplinary meeting in Imperial College, London, held under Chatham House rules – quotes on the record, but no direct attributions. The consensus was startling. Not one of the clergy, and only one of the physicists, thought it at all probable that we were looking at a return of the original Jesus. They all went for the shaggy god story.

"He's a Moravec bush robot," an Anglican bishop told me, confidently and in confidence.

"A what?" I said.

He sketched what looked like a tree, walking. "The manipulative extremities keep sub-dividing, right down to the molecular level," he said. "That thing can handle individual atoms. It can look like anything it wants, walk through walls, turn water into wine. Healing and resurrection – provided decay hasn't degraded the memory structures too far – is a doddle."

"And can it make Egyptian Christians float into the sky?" I asked.

He pressed the tips of his fingers together. "How do we know that *really* happened? His little band of brothers could be – more bush robots!"

"That's a stretch," said the Cambridge cosmologist. "I'm more inclined to suspect gravity manipulation from a stealth orbiter."

"You mean the ship's still up there?" That was the Jesuit, sceptical as usual.

"Of course," said the cosmologist. "We're looking at an attempt to open a conversation, an alien contact, without causing mass panic. Culturally speaking, it's either very clever, or catastrophically inept."

"I'd go for the latter," said the Oxford biologist. "Frankly, I'm disappointed. Regardless of good intentions, this approach can only reinforce religious memes." He glanced around,

looking beleaguered ('like a hunted animal', one of the more vindictive of the clergymen chuckled afterwards, in the pub). "No offence intended, gentlemen, ladies, but I see that as counter-productive. In that part of the world, too! As if it *needed* more fanaticism."

"Excuse me," said the bishop, stiffly, "but we're not talking about fanaticism. Nor is he. He is certainly not *preaching* fanaticism. Personally, I'd almost prefer to believe he *was* the original Jesus come back. It would be quite a vindication, in a way. It would certainly make the African brethren sit up and take notice."

"You mean, shut up about gay clergy," said the Jesuit, rather unkindly.

"You see?" said the Oxford man, looking at me. "It doesn't matter how liberal he sounds, or how any of them sound. It's all about authoritative revelation. And as soon as they start arguing on that basis, they're at each other's throats." He sighed, pushing biscuit crumbs about on the baize with a fingertip. "My own fear is that the aliens, whoever they are, are right. We're too primitive a species, too *mired* in all this, too infected by the mind virus of religion, to be approached in any other way. But I'm still afraid it'll backfire on them."

"Oh, there are worse fears than that," said the computer scientist from Imperial, cheerfully. "They could be hostile. They could be intentionally aiming to cause religious strife."

That statement didn't cause religious strife, exactly, but it came damn close. I waited until the dust and feathers had settled, then tried to get the experts to focus on what they all actually agreed on. As I said, the consensus surprised me. It added up to this:

The supposed Second Coming had no religious significance. The man calling himself Jesus was almost certainly not who he claimed to be. He was very likely an AI entity of some type from a post-Singularity alien civilization. Further interventions could be expected. Watch the skies.

I wrapped all this around the interview, ran a few talking-head soundbites from the meeting through voice-and-face-distorting software filters, and flogged it to the Discovery Channel.

This took a couple of weeks. Then I caught the next El Al flight from Heathrow.

I was sitting in a room with a dozen men, one of them Jesus, all sipping tea and talking. All of them were smoking, except Jesus and myself. I'd caught up with him again in Ramallah. The conversation was in Arabic, and my translator, Sameh, was so engrossed in it he'd forgotten about me. I must admit I was bored.

I was, of course, excited at the idea that this man, if he was a man, represented an alien intervention. I was just as excited by my doubts about it. There was, as the bishop had implied, something quite tempting about the notion that he was who he said he was. The original Jesus had explained himself in terms of the religion of his place and time, and had in turn been explained in terms of contemporary philosophy. It begins in the arcane metaphysics of Paul's letters, and in the Stoic term 'Logos' in John, and it continues all the way to the

baroque Platonic and Aristotelian edifices of theology. So it was perhaps not entirely strange that *this* Jesus should explain himself in modern philosophical terms from the very beginning.

Right now, though, he was trying to explain himself to Muslims. The going wasn't easy. I couldn't follow the conversation, but I could hear the strain in the voices. The names of Allah and the Prophet came up frequently. For Muslims, Jesus is a prophet too, and there were plenty of the faithful who didn't take

kindly to this man's claims. The gathering here, fraught though it was, was the most sympathetic a hearing as he was likely to get.

In terms of publicity Jesus wasn't doing too well. He'd had his fifteen minutes of fame. Religious leaders had refused to meet him – not that he'd asked – and even the scientists who were prepared to speculate publicly that he was an alien were reluctant to do anything about it. I mean, what could they do about it – cut him up? The defence establishment may

have taken seriously these scientists' claims about alien intervention, but there's only so many times you can draw a blank looking for a stealth orbiter before you conclude that there's *no* stealth orbiter. The general feeling was that something odd had happened, but nobody could be sure what, and for all anyone knew it could have been a bizarre hoax. There were photographs, videos, eyewitness accounts, radar traces – but that kind of evidence can be found any month in *Fortean Times* and debunked



every quarter in *Skeptical Inquirer*.

The only people – apart from his own small following, most of it online – who paid close attention to his activities were fundamentalist Christians. Not because they believed him. Oh, no. They believed *me*. That's to say, they believed the religious and scientific experts I'd cited in the documentary. They were quite happy with the notion that he was an alien entity of some kind. To them, an alien meant a demon. Worse, a demon walking around in

human shape and claiming to be Jesus could only mean one thing: the Antichrist.

I only found that out later.

Handshakes all round. Smiles. Frowns. Jesus and two of the men – followers, I'd gathered – went out. I and Sameh accompanied them into the muddy street. Breezblock buildings, corrugated zinc roofs, mud. Ruins here and there. It was nearly dusk. Lights in windows, braziers at stalls, the smell of frying chicken. A big Honda people-carrier drove slowly down the crowded, pot-holed street, conspicuous among old Renaults and VW Polos and Yugos.

We stood about – a moment of uncertainty about where to go next. Some problem with the traffic. Sameh was talking to the followers, Jesus was gazing around, and I was fiddling with the camera.

I saw a flash. That is to say, for a second I saw nothing else. Then I saw nothing but sky. Everything had become silent. I saw two bright lights moving fast, high above. My legs felt wet and warm. I pressed the palms of my hands on damp gravel and pushed myself up to a sitting position. I could see people running around, mouths open, mouths working; cars accelerating away or coming to a halt; everything covered with grey dust; but I could hear nothing. A little way down the street, smoke rose from a flower-like abstract sculpture of bent and twisted metal: the Honda, its wheels incongruously intact.

I saw Jesus run towards it. Sameh and the two followers were face down on the street, hands over the backs of their heads. They didn't see what I saw. I don't know how many people saw it. He leaned into the wrecked Honda and started hauling out the casualties. He dragged out one corpse, whole but charred. He laid it down and pulled out something that might have been a torso. Then he clambered in and started heaving out bits of bodies: an arm, half a leg, a bearded head. More. It was like the back of a butcher's shop.

He vaulted out again and knelt on the road. I saw his hands move, with effort in the arms, as if he was putting the bits together. He stood up. Three men stood up beside him.

They looked down at the rags that clothed them, and then at the wreck of their vehicle. They raised their arms and cried out praise to Allah. Jesus had already turned his back on them and was hurrying towards me. He wore jeans and scuffed trainers, a shirt and sweater under a new leather jacket. He was looking straight at me and frowning.

Sound and pain came in a rush. My ears dinned with yells, car horns, screams. My thighs felt –

I looked down. My thighs felt exactly as you would expect with a chunk of metal like a thrown knife in each of them, stuck right into my femurs. I could see my blood pumping out, soaking into the torn cloth. Everything went monochrome for a moment. I saw his hands grab the bits of metal and tug. I heard the grate of the bones. I felt it, too. I heard a double clatter as the metal shards fell on the road. Then Jesus laid his hands on my legs, and leaned back.

"Up," he said.

He held out a hand. I caught it and stood up. As I got to my feet I saw the pale unbroken skin of my thighs through the ripped fabric. My camera lay crushed on the ground. Sameh and the two followers picked themselves up and brushed themselves off.

"What happened?" I asked Jesus, but it was Sameh who answered.

"Another targeted killing," he said. "That Honda. I knew it had to be a Hamas big shot inside." He stared across at the wreck. "How many?"

I pointed at the men, now the centre of a small crowd.

"None."

"None?"

"They had a miraculous escape," I said.

Jesus just grinned.

"Let's go," he said.

We departed.

Jesus had a knack for making his movements unpredictable. I and Sameh stayed with him and his followers, jammed in the back of a taxi, to Jerusalem. Through the wall, through the



checkpoints. Jesus nodded off. The followers talked to Sameh. I sat bolt upright and replayed everything in my mind. I kept rubbing my thighs, as if I had sweaty hands. When we got out of the taxi at the hotel Jesus seemed to wake up. He leaned forward and said: “Would you like to meet me tomorrow, privately?”

“Yes,” I said. “Where?”

“You know where the tours of the Via Dolorosa start?”

I nodded.

“There,” he said. “Alone.”

I was still struggling for a remark when the taxi door slammed.

I pushed past guides and through coach parties, looking for him. He found me. He had a camera hung from around his neck and a big hat on his head, a white T-shirt under his jacket. We fell in at the back of a dozen or so people following a guide who shouted in English. I think they were Brits. Jesus rubber-necked with the rest of them.

“I saw the Gibson film on DVD,” he said.

“What did you think of it?” I asked, feeling a little smug.

“I liked it better than yours,” he said.

“I just report,” I said.

“You could have done better,” he said.

“Moravec bush robot! I ask you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Do you deny it?”

He looked at me sharply. “Of course I deny it. What use would a robot be to you?”

“And the whole alien intervention hypothesis?”

The crowd stopped. The guide declaimed. Cameras clicked. We shuffled off again, jostling down an alley.

“Yes, I deny that also.”

“And any other natural explanation?”

His lips compressed. He shook his head.

“If you mean a hoax, I deny that too. I am who I say I am. I *am* the natural explanation.”

The man in front of us turned. He wore a baseball cap with a Star of David and his shirt was open at the neck to display a small gold cross on a chain. He reached inside his heavy checked jacket.

“Blasphemer,” he said.

He pulled out a handgun and shot Jesus three times in the chest.

I grabbed Jesus. Two men barged out of the crowd and grabbed the assassin. He’d already dropped the gun and had his hands up. The two men wrestled him to the ground at gunpoint, then dragged him to his feet. Screams resounded in the narrow space.

“Police!” the men shouted. One of them waved a police ID card, like it wasn’t obvious. I learned later that they’d been shadowing Jesus from the beginning.

The assassin held his hands out for the plastic ties. He kept staring at Jesus.

“Save yourself now!” he jeered. One of the undercover cops gave him the elbow in the solar plexus. He doubled, gasping.

Jesus was bleeding all over me. “Lay off him,” he wheezed. “He doesn’t know what he’s done.”

The man strained upright, glaring.

“Play-acting to the end, demon! I don’t want forgiveness from you!”

Jesus waved a hand, two fingers raised, in a shaky blessing, and sagged in my arms. I staggered backwards. His heels dragged along the ground. One of his shoes came off.

It took a long while for the ambulance to nose through the narrow streets. Jesus lost consciousness long before it arrived. I stayed with him to the hospital. The paramedics did their best – they’re good with gunshot wounds in the Holy Land – but he was dead on arrival.

Jesus, DOA.

I couldn’t believe it.

I watched every second of the emergency surgery, and I know he was a man.

The autopsy should have taken place within twenty-four hours, but some procedural dispute delayed it for three days. I managed to attend. It didn’t even take much effort on my part – I was a witness, I had identified the body when it was pronounced dead. On the slab he looked like the dead Che Guevara. The pathologists opened him up, recovered the bullets, removed organs and took tissue samples. Results came back from the labs. He

was human right down to the DNA. So much for the bush robot theory. There was a burial, and no resurrection. No levitation and no infinitely improbable rescue. Some people still visit the grave. One thing I'm sure of: this time, he's not coming back.

There was a trial, of course. The assassin, an American Christian Zionist, disdained the prompting of his lawyer to plead insanity. He proudly pleaded guilty and claimed to be acting to thwart the attempts of the Antichrist to derail the divine plan for the End Times. I was a witness for the prosecution, but I suspect my testimony had as much effect as the rantings of the accused in the eventual ruling: not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. The assassin did six months in a mental hospital. After his release he made a splash on the us fundamentalist lecture circuit as the hero who had shot one of the Devil's minions: the false messiah, the fake Christ. The man he killed wasn't the real Antichrist, it's been decided.

The Antichrist is still to come. Millions still await the real Rapture and the return of the real Jesus.

Perhaps it was some obscure guilt about my own inadvertent part in Jesus's assassination that drove me to research his writings and the live recordings of his sayings and miracles. They're all online, and the authentic ones are carefully kept that way by his followers: online, and authentic. There's enough apocryphal stuff in circulation already, and far more interest in him than when he was alive.

The odd thing is, though, that if you trawl, as I've done, through his blog posts, his devastating put-downs in the comment sections, and the shaky cellphone and home-video recordings of his discourses, it has an effect on how you think. It isn't a question of belief, exactly. It's more a question of examining beliefs, and examining your own actions, even your thoughts, as if under his sceptical eye, and in the echo of his sardonic voice. It works on you. It's like a whole new life.

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# THE SECOND COMING OF JASMINE FITZGERALD

By Peter Watts

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

Not much, at first glance. Blood pools in a pattern entirely consistent with the location of the victim. No conspicuous arterial spray; the butchery's all abdominal, more spilled than spurting. No slogans either. Nobody's scrawled *Helter Skelter* or *Satan is Lord* or even *Elvis Lives* on any of the walls. It's just another mess in another kitchen in another one-bedroom apartment, already overcrowded with the piecemeal accumulation of two lives. One life's all that's left now, a thrashing gory creature screaming her mantra over and over as the police wrestle her away –

“I have to *save* him I have to *save* him I have to *save* him –”

– more evidence, not that the assembled cops need it, of why domestic calls absolutely *suck*.

She hasn't saved him. By now it's obvious that no one can. He lies in a pool of his own insides, blood and lymph spreading along the cracks between the linoleum tiles, crossing,



criss-crossing, a convenient clotting grid drawing itself across the crime scene. Every now and then a red bubble grows and breaks on his lips. Anyone who happens to notice this, pretends not to.

The weapon? Right here: run-of-the-mill steak knife, slick with blood and coagulating fingerprints, lying exactly where she dropped it.

The only thing that's missing is a motive. They were a quiet couple, the neighbours say. He was sick, he'd been sick for months. They never went out much. There was no history of violence. They loved each other deeply.

Maybe she was sick too. Maybe she was following orders from some tumour in her brain. Or maybe it was a botched alien abduction, grey-skinned creatures from Zeta II Reticuli framing an innocent bystander for their own incompetence. Maybe it's a mass hallucination, maybe it isn't really happening at all.

Maybe it's an act of God.

They got to her early. This is one of the advantages of killing someone during office hours. They've taken samples, scraped residue from clothes and skin on the off chance that anyone might question whose blood she was wearing. They've searched the apartment, questioned neighbours and relatives, established the superficial details of identity: Jasmine Fitzgerald, 24-year-old Caucasian brunette, doctoral candidate. In Global General Relativity, whatever the fuck *that* is. They've stripped her down, cleaned her up, bounced her off a judge into Interview Room 1, Forensic Psychiatric Support Services.

They've put someone in there with her.

"Hello, Ms Fitzgerald. I'm Dr Thomas. My first name's Myles, if you prefer."

She stares at him. "Myles it is." She seems calm, but the tracks of recent tears still show on her face. "I guess you're supposed to decide whether I'm crazy."

"Whether you're fit to stand trial, yes. I should tell you right off that nothing you say to me is necessarily confidential. Do you understand?" She nods. Thomas sits down

across from her. "What would you like me to call you?"

"Napoleon. Mohammed. Jesus Christ." Her lips twitch, the faintest smile, gone in an instant. "Sorry. Just kidding. Jaz's fine."

"Are you doing okay in here? Are they treating you all right?"

She snorts. "They're treating me pretty damn well, considering the kind of monster they think I am." A pause, then, "I'm not, you know."

"A monster?"

"Crazy. I've – I've just recently undergone a paradigm shift, you know? The whole world looks different, and my head's there but sometimes my gut – I mean, it's so hard to feel differently about things..."

"Tell me about this paradigm shift," Thomas suggests. He makes it a point not to take notes. He doesn't even have a notepad. Not that it matters. The microcassette recorder in his blazer has very sensitive ears.

"Things make sense now," she says. "They never did before. I think, for the first time in my life, I'm actually happy." She smiles again, for longer this time. Long enough for Thomas to marvel at how genuine it seems.

"You weren't very happy when you first came here," he says gently. "They say you were very upset."

"Yeah." She nods, seriously. "It's tough enough to do that shit to yourself, you know, but to risk someone else, someone you really care about – " She wipes at one eye. "He was dying for over a year, did you know that? Each day he'd hurt a little more. You could almost see it spreading through him, like some sort of – leaf, going brown. Or maybe that was the chemo. Never could decide which was worse." She shakes her head. "Heh. At least *that's* over now."

"Is that why you did it? To end his suffering?" Thomas doubts it. Mercy killers don't generally disembowel their beneficiaries. Still, he asks.

She answers. "Of course I fucked up, I only ended up making things worse." She clasps her hands in front of her. "I miss him already.

Isn't that crazy? It only happened a few hours ago, and I know it's no big deal, but I still miss him. That head-heart thing again."

"You say you fucked up," Thomas says. She takes a deep breath, nods. "Big time."  
"Tell me about that."

"I don't know shit about debugging. I thought I did, but when you're dealing with organics – all I really did was go in and mess randomly with the code. You make a mess of everything, unless you know exactly what you're doing. That's what I'm working on now."

"Debugging?"

"That's what I call it. There's no real word for it yet."

*Oh yes there is.* Aloud: "Go on."

Jasmine Fitzgerald sighs, her eyes closed. "I don't expect you to believe this under the circumstances, but I really loved him. No: I *love* him." Her breath comes out in a soft snort, a whispered laugh. "There I go again. That bloody past tense."

"Tell me about debugging."

"I don't think you're up for it, Myles. I don't even think you're all that interested." Her eyes open, point directly at him. "But for the record, Stu was dying. I tried to save him. I failed. Next time I'll do better, and better still the time after that, and eventually I'll get it right."

"And what happens then?" Thomas says.

"Through your eyes or mine?"

"Yours."

"I repair the glitches in the string. Or if it's easier, I replicate an undamaged version of the subroutine and insert it back into the main loop. Same difference."

"Uh huh. And what would *I* see?"

She shrugs. "Stu rising from the dead."

What's wrong with this picture?

Spread out across the table, the mind of Jasmine Fitzgerald winks back from pages of standardised questions. Somewhere in here, presumably, is a monster.

These are the tools used to dissect human psyches. The WAIS. The MMPI. The PDI. Hammers, all of them. Blunt chisels posing as microtomes. A copy of the DSM-IV sits off to one

side, a fat paperback volume of symptoms and pathologies. A matrix of pigeonholes. Perhaps Fitzgerald fits into one of them. Intermittent Explosive, maybe? Battered Woman? Garden-variety Sociopath?

The test results are inconclusive. It's as though she's laughing up from the page at him. *True or false: I sometimes hear voices that no one else hears.* False, she's checked. *I have been feeling unusually depressed lately.* False. *Sometimes I get so angry I feel like hitting something.* True, and a hand-written note in the margin: Hey, doesn't everyone?

There are snares sprinkled throughout these tests, linked questions designed to catch liars in subtle traps of self-contradiction. Jasmine Fitzgerald has avoided them all. Is she unusually honest? Is she too smart for the tests? There doesn't seem to be anything here that –

Wait a second.

*Who was Louis Pasteur?* asks the WAIS, trying to get a handle on educational background.

A virus, Fitzgerald said.

Back up the list. Here's another one, on the previous page: *Who was Winston Churchill?* And again: a virus.

And fifteen questions before that: *Who was Florence Nightingale?*

A famous nurse, Fitzgerald responded to that one. And her responses to all previous questions on historical personalities are unremarkably correct. But everyone after Nightingale is a virus.

Killing a virus is no sin. You can do it with an utterly clear conscience. Maybe she's redefining the nature of her act. Maybe that's how she manages to live with herself these days.

Just as well. That raising-the-dead shtick didn't cut any ice at all.

She's slumped across the table when he enters, her head resting on folded arms. Thomas clears his throat. "Jasmine."

No response. He reaches out, touches her lightly on the shoulder. Her head comes up, a fluid motion containing no hint of grogginess. She settles back into her chair and smiles. "Welcome back. So, am I crazy or what?"



Thomas smiles back and sits down across from her. "We try to avoid prejudicial terms."

"Hey, I can take it. I'm not prone to tantrums."

A picture flashes across the front of his mind: beloved husband, entrails spread-eagled like butterfly wings against a linoleum grid. *Of course not. No tantrums for you. We need a whole new word to describe what it is you do.*

*'Debugging', wasn't it?*

"I was going over your test results," he begins.

"Did I pass?"

"It's not that kind of test. But I was intrigued by some of your answers."

She purses her lips. "Good."

"Tell me about viruses."

That sunny smile again. "Sure. Mutable information strings that can't replicate without hijacking external source code."

"Go on."

"Ever hear of Core Wars?"

"No."

"Back in the early eighties some guys got together and wrote a bunch of self-replicating computer programs. The idea was to put them into the same block of memory and have them compete for space. They all had their own little tricks for self-defence and reproduction and, of course, eating the competition."

"Oh, you mean *computer* viruses," Thomas says.

"Actually, before all that." Fitzgerald pauses a moment, cocks her head to one side. "You ever wonder what it might be like to be one of those little programs? Running around laying eggs and dropping logic bombs and interacting with other viruses?"

Thomas shrugs. "I never even knew about them until now. Why? Do you?"

"No," she says. "Not any more."

"Go on."

Her expression changes. "You know, talking to you is a bit like talking to a program. All you ever say is go on and *tell me more* and – I mean, Jesus, Myles, they wrote therapy programs back in the *sixties* that had more range than you do! In BASIC even! Register an *opinion*, for Chrissake!"

"It's just a technique, Jaz. I'm not here to get into a debate with you, as interesting as that might be. I'm trying to assess your fitness to stand trial. *My* opinions aren't really at issue."

She sighs, and sags. "I know. I'm sorry, I know you're not here to keep me entertained, but I'm *used* to being able to –

"I mean, *Stuart* would always be so –

"Oh, God. I miss him so *much*," she admits, her eyes shining and unhappy.

*She's a killer*, he tells himself. *Don't let her suck you in. Just assess her, that's all you have to do.*

*Don't start liking her, for Christ's sake.*

"That's – understandable," Thomas says.

She snorts. "Bullshit. You don't understand at all. You know what he did, the first time he went in for chemo? I was studying for my comps, and he stole my textbooks."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he knew I wasn't studying at home. I was a complete wreck. And when I came to see him at the hospital he pulls these bloody books out from under his bed and starts quizzing me on Dirac and the Bekeinstein Bound. He was *dying*, and all he wanted to do was help me prepare for some stupid test. I'd do anything for him."

*Well*, Thomas doesn't say, *You certainly did more than most.*

"I can't wait to see him again," she adds, almost as an afterthought.

"When will that be, Jaz?"

"When do you think?" She looks at him, and the sorrow and despair he thought he saw in those eyes is suddenly nowhere to be seen.

"Most people, if they said that, would be talking about the afterlife."

She favours him with a sad little smile. "This *is* the afterlife, Myles. This is Heaven, and Hell, and Nirvana. Whatever we choose to make it. Right here."

"Yes," Thomas says after a moment. "Of course."

Her disappointment in him hangs there like an accusation.

"You don't believe in God, do you?" she asks at last.

“Do you?” he ricochets.

“Didn’t used to. Turns out there’s clues, though. Proof, even.”

“Such as?”

“The mass of the top quark. The width of the Higgs boson. You can’t read them any other way when you know what you’re looking for. Know anything about quantum physics, Myles?”

He shakes his head. “Not really.”

“Nothing really exists, not down at the subatomic level. It’s all just probability waves. Until someone looks at it, that is. Then the wave collapses and you get what we call *reality*. But it can’t happen without an observer to get things started.”

Thomas squints, trying to squeeze some sort of insight into his brain. “So if we weren’t here looking at this table, it wouldn’t exist?”

Fitzgerald nods. “More or less.” That smile peeks around the corner of her mouth for a second.

He tries to lure it back. “So God’s the observer, is that what you’re saying? God watches all the atoms so the universe can exist?”

“Huh. I never thought about it that way before.” The smile morphs into a frown of concentration. “More metaphoric than mathematical, but it’s a cool idea.”

“Was God watching you yesterday?”

She looks up, distracted. “Huh?”

“Does He – does It communicate with you?”

Her face goes completely expressionless. “Does God tell me to do things, you mean. Did God tell me to carve Stu up like – like – ” Her breath hisses out between her teeth. “No, Myles. I don’t hear voices. Charlie Manson doesn’t come to me in my dreams and whisper sweet nothings. I answered all those questions on your test already, so give me a fucking break, okay?”

He holds up his hands, placating. “That’s not what I meant, Jasmine.” *Liar.* “I’m sorry if that’s how it sounded, it’s just – you know, God, quantum mechanics – it’s a lot to swallow at once, you know? It’s – mind-blowing.”

She watches him through guarded eyes. “Yeah. I guess it can be. I forget, sometimes.” She relaxes a fraction. “But it’s all true. The math is inevitable. You can change the nature of reality, just by *looking* at it. You’re right. It’s mind-blowing.”

“But only at the subatomic level, right? You’re not *really* saying we could make this table disappear just by ignoring it, are you?”

Her eye flickers to a spot just to the right and behind him, about where the door should be.

“Well, no,” she says at last. “Not without a lot of practise.”

What’s wrong with this picture?

Besides the obvious, of course. Besides the vertical incision running from sternum to approximately two centimetres below the navel, penetrating the abdominal musculature and extending through into the visceral coelom. Beyond the serrations along its edge which suggest the use of some sort of blade. Not, evidently, a very sharp one.

No. We’re getting ahead of ourselves here. The coroner’s art is nothing if not systematic. Very well, then: Caucasian male, midtwenties. External morphometrics previously noted. Hair loss and bruising consistent with chemotherapeutic toxicity. Right index and ring fingernails missing, same notation. The deceased was one sick puppy at time of demise. Sickened by the disease, poisoned by the cure. And just when you thought things couldn’t get any worse...

Down and in. The wound swallows the coroner’s rubberised hands like some huge torn vagina, its labia clotted and crystallised. The usual viscera glisten inside, repackaged by medics at the site who had to reel in all loose ends for transport. Perhaps evidence was lost in the process. Perhaps the killer had arranged the entrails in some significant pattern, perhaps the arrangement of the GI tract spelled out some clue or unholy name. No matter. They took pictures of everything.

Mesentery stretches like thin latex, binding loops of intestine one to the other. A bit too

tightly, in fact. There appear to be – fistulas of some sort, scattered along the lower ileum. Loops seem fused together at several spots. What could have caused that?

Nothing comes to mind.

Note it, record it, take a sample for detailed histological analysis. Move on. The scalpel passes through the tract as easily as through overcooked pasta. Stringy bile and pre-fecal lumps slump tiredly into a collecting dish. Something bulges behind them from the dorsal wall. Something shines white as bone where no bone should be. Slice, resect. There. A mass of some kind covering the right kidney, approximately fifteen centimetres by ten, extending down to the bladder. Quite heterogeneous, it's got some sort of *lumps* in it. A tumour? Is this what Stuart MacLennan's doctors were duelling with when they pumped him full of poison? It doesn't look like any tumour the coroner's seen.

For one thing – and this is really kind of strange – it's looking *back* at him.

His desk is absolutely spartan. Not a shred of paper out of place. Not a shred of paper even in evidence, actually. The surface is as featureless as a Kubrick monolith, except for the Sun workstation positioned dead centre and a rack of CDs angled off to the left.

"I *thought* she looked familiar," he says. "When I saw the papers. Didn't know quite where to place her, though."

Jasmine Fitzgerald's graduate supervisor.

"I guess you've got a lot of students," Thomas suggests.

"Yes." He leans forward, begins tapping at the workstation keyboard. "I've yet to meet all of them, actually. One or two in Europe I correspond with exclusively over the net. I hope to meet them this summer in Berne – ah, yes. Here she is; doesn't look anything like the media picture."

"She doesn't live in Europe, Dr Russell."

"No, right here. Did her field work at CERN, though. Damn hard getting anything done here since the supercollider fell through. Ah."

"What?"

"She's on leave. I remember her now. She put her thesis on hold about a year and a half ago. Illness in the family, as I recall." Russell stares at the monitor; something he sees there seems to sink in, all at once.

"She killed her husband? She *killed* him?"

Thomas nods.

"My God." Russell shakes his head. "She didn't seem the type. She always seemed so – well, so cheery."

"She still does, sometimes."

"My God," he repeats. "And how can I help you?"

"She's suffering from some very elaborate delusions. She couches them in a lot of technical terminology I don't understand. I mean, for all I know she could actually be making *sense* – no, no. Scratch that. She *can't* be, but I don't have the background to really understand her, well, *claims*."

"What sort of *claims*?"

"For one thing, she keeps talking about bringing her husband back from the dead."

"I see."

"You don't seem surprised."

"Should I be? You said she was delusional."

Thomas takes a deep breath. "Dr Russell, I've been doing some reading the past couple of days. Popular cosmology, quantum mechanics for beginners, that sort of thing."

Russell smiles indulgently. "I suppose it's never too late to start."

"I get the impression that a lot of the stuff that happens down at the subatomic level almost has quasi-religious overtones. Spontaneous appearance of matter, simultaneous existence in different states. Almost spiritual."

"Yes, I suppose that's true. After a fashion."

"Are cosmologists a religious lot, by and large?"

"Not really." Russell drums fingers on his monolith. "The field's so strange that we don't really *need* religious experience on top of it. Some of the eastern religions make claims that sound vaguely quantum-mechanical, but the similarities are pretty superficial."

“Nothing more, well, Christian? Nothing that would lead someone to believe in a single omniscient God who raises the dead?”

“God no. Oh, except for that Tipler fellow.” Russell leans forward. “Why? Jasmine Fitzgerald hasn’t become a Christian, has she?” Murder is one thing, his tone suggests, but *this*...

“I don’t think so,” Thomas reassures him. “Not unless Christianity’s broadened its tenets to embrace human sacrifice.”

“Yes. Quite.” Russell leans back again, apparently satisfied.

“Who’s Tipler?” Thomas asks.

“Mmmm?” Russell blinks, momentarily distracted. “Oh, yes. Frank Tipler. Cosmologist from Tulane, claimed to have a testable mathematical proof of the existence of God. And the afterlife too, if I recall. Raised a bit of a stir a few years back.”

“I take it you weren’t impressed.”

“Actually, I didn’t follow it very closely. Theology’s not that interesting to me. I mean, if physics proves that there is or there isn’t a god that’s fine, but that’s not really the point of the exercise, is it?”

“I couldn’t say. Seems to me it’d be a hell of a spin-off, though.”

Russell smiles.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got the reference?” Thomas suggests.

“Of course. Just a moment.” Russell feeds a CD to the workstation and massages the keyboard. The Sun purrs. “Yes, here it is: *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*. 1994, Frank J. Tipler. I can print you out the complete citation if you want.”

“Please. So what was his proof?”

The professor displays something akin to a very small smile.

“In thirty words or less,” Thomas adds. “For idiots.”

“Well,” Russell says, “basically, he argued that some billions of years hence, life will incorporate itself into a massive quantum-effect computing device to avoid extinction when the universe collapses.”

“I thought the universe wasn’t *going* to collapse,” Thomas interjects. “I thought they proved it was just going to keep expanding...”

“That was last year,” Russell says shortly. “May I continue?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you. As I was saying, Tipler claimed that billions of years hence, life will incorporate itself into a massive quantum-effect computing device to avoid extinction when the universe collapses. An integral part of this process involves the exact reproduction of everything that ever happened in the universe up to that point, right down to the quantum level, as well as all possible variations of those events.”

Beside the desk, Russell’s printer extrudes a paper tongue. He pulls it free and hands it over.

“So God’s a supercomputer at the end of time? And we’ll all be resurrected in the mother of all simulation models?”

“Well – ” Russell wavers. The caricature seems to cause him physical pain. “I suppose so,” he finishes, reluctantly. “In thirty words or less, as you say.”

“Wow.” Suddenly Fitzgerald’s ravings sound downright pedestrian. “But if he’s right – ”

“The consensus is he’s not,” Russell interjects hastily.

“But *if*. If the model’s an exact reproduction, how could you tell the difference between real life and afterlife? I mean, what would be the point?”

“Well, the point is avoiding ultimate extinction, supposedly. As to how you’d tell the difference...” Russell shakes his head. “Actually, I never finished the book. As I said, theology doesn’t interest me all that much.”

Thomas shakes his head. “I can’t believe it.”

“Not many could,” Russell says. Then, almost apologetically, he adds “Tipler’s theoretical proofs were quite extensive, though, as I recall.”

“I bet. Whatever happened to him?”

Russell shrugs. “What happens to anyone

who's stupid enough to come up with a new way of looking at the world? They tore into him like sharks at a feeding frenzy. I don't know where he ended up."

What's wrong with this picture?

Nothing. Everything. Suddenly awake, Myles Thomas stares around a darkened studio and tries to convince himself that nothing has changed.

Nothing *has* changed. The faint sounds of late-night traffic sound the same as ever. Grey parallelograms stretch across wall and ceiling, a faint luminous shadow of his bedroom window cast by some distant streetlight. Natalie's still gone from the left side of his bed, her departure so far removed by now that he doesn't even have to remind himself of it.

He checks the LEDs on his bedside alarm: 2:35A.

Something's different.

Nothing's changed.

Well, maybe one thing. Tipler's heresy sits on the night stand, its plastic dustcover reflecting slashes of red light from the alarm clock. *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*. It's too dark to read the lettering but you don't forget a title like that. Myles Thomas signed it out of the library this afternoon, opened it at random

...Lemma 1, and the fact that

$$f_{ij} = \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} f_{ij}^{(k)} \leq 1,$$

$$\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} P_{ij}^{(n)} = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \sum_{k=1}^n f_{ij}^{(k)} P_{ij}^{(n-k)} = \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} f_{ij}^{(k)} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} P_{ij}^{(n)}$$

$$= f_{ij} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} P_{ij}^{(n)} \leq \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} P_{ij}^{(n)} < \infty$$

which is just (E.3), and (E.3) can hold only if...

and threw it into his briefcase, confused and disgusted. He doesn't even know why he went to the effort of getting the fucking thing. Jasmine Fitzgerald is delusional.

It's that simple. For reasons that it is not Myles Thomas' job to understand, she vivisected her husband on the kitchen floor. Now she's inventing all sorts of ways to excuse herself, to undo the undoable, and the fact that she cloaks her delusions in cosmological gobbledegook does not make them any more credible. What does he expect to do, turn into a quantum mechanic overnight? Is he going to learn even a fraction of what he'd need to find the holes in her carefully constructed fantasy?

Why did he even bother?

But he did. And now *Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* looms dimly in front of him at two thirty in the fucking morning, and something's changed, he's almost *sure* of it, but try as he might he can't get a handle on what it is. He just feels different, somehow. He just feels...

*Awake. That's what you feel. You couldn't get back to sleep now if your life depended on it.*

Myles Thomas sighs and turns on the reading lamp. Squinting as his pupils shrink against the light, he reaches out and grabs the offending book.

Parts of it, astonishingly, almost make sense.

"She's not here," the orderly tells him. "Last night we had to move her next door."

Next door: the hospital. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Not a clue. Convulsions, cyanosis – we thought she was toast, actually. But by the time the doctor got to her she couldn't find anything wrong."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Tell me about it. Nothing about that crazy b – nothing about her makes sense." The orderly wanders off down the hall, frowning.

Jasmine Fitzgerald lies between sheets tucked tight as a straitjacket, stares unblinking at the ceiling. A nurse sits to one side, boredom and curiosity mixing in equal measures on his face.

"How is she?" Thomas asks.

"Don't really know," the nurse says. "She seems okay now."



“She doesn’t look okay to me. She looks almost catatonic.”

“She isn’t. Are you, Jaz?”

“We’re sorry,” Fitzgerald says cheerfully.

“The person you are trying to reach is temporarily unavailable. Please leave a message and we’ll get back to you.” Then: “Hi, Myles. Good to see you.” Her eyes never waver from the acoustic tiles overhead.

“You better blink one of these days,” Thomas remarks. “Your eyeballs are going to dry up.”

“Nothing a little judicious editing won’t fix,” she tells him.

Thomas glances at the nurse. “Would you excuse us for a few minutes?”

“Sure. I’ll be in the caf if you need me.”

Thomas waits until the door swings shut. “So, Jaz. What’s the mass of the Higgs boson?”

She blinks.

She smiles.

She turns to look at him.

“Two hundred twenty eight GeV,” she says. “All *right*. Someone actually read my thesis proposal.”

“Not just your proposal. That’s one of Tipler’s testable predictions, isn’t it?”

Her smile widens. “The critical one, actually. The others are pretty self-evident.”

“And you tested it.”

“Yup. Over at CERN. So how’d you find his book?”

“I only read parts of it,” Thomas admits.

“It was pretty tough slogging.”

“Sorry. My fault,” Fitzgerald says.

“How so?”

“I thought you could use some help, so I souped you up a bit. Increased your processing speed. Not enough, I guess.”

Something shivers down his back. He ignores it.

“I’m not – ” Thomas rubs his chin; he forgot to shave this morning “ – exactly sure what you mean by that.”

“Sure you do. You just don’t believe it.” Fitzgerald squirms up from between the sheets, props her back against a pillow.

“It’s just a semantic difference, Myles. You’d call it a *delusion*. Us physics geeks would call it a *hypothesis*.”

Thomas nods, uncertainly.

“Oh, just say it, Myles. I know you’re dying to.”

“Go on,” he blurts, strangely unable to stop himself.

Fitzgerald laughs. “If you insist, Doctor. I figured out what I was doing wrong. I thought I had to do everything myself, and I just can’t. Too many variables, you see, even if you access them individually there’s no way you can keep track of ‘em all at once. When I tried, I got mixed up and everything – ”

A sudden darkness in her face now. A memory, perhaps, pushing up through all those careful layers of contrivance.

“Everything went wrong,” she finishes softly.

Thomas nods, keeps his voice low and gentle. “What are you remembering right now, Jaz?”

“You know damn well what I’m remembering,” she whispers. “I – I cut him open – ”

“Yes.”

“He was dying. He was *dying*. I tried to fix him, I tried to fix the code but something went wrong, and...”

He waits. The silence stretches.

“...and I didn’t know what. I couldn’t fix it if I couldn’t see what I’d done wrong. So I – I cut him open...” Her brow furrows suddenly. Thomas can’t tell with what: remembrance, remorse?

“I really overstepped myself,” she says at last.

No. Concentration. She’s rebuilding her defences, she’s pushing the tip of that bloody iceberg back below the surface. It can’t be easy. Thomas can see it, ponderous and massively buoyant, pushing up from the depths while Jasmine Fitzgerald leans down and desperately pretends not to strain.

“I know it must be difficult to think about,” Thomas says.

She shrugs. “Sometimes.” *Going...* “When my head slips back into the old school.

Old habits die hard.” *Going...* “But I get over it.”

The frown disappears.

*Gone.*

“You know when I told you about Core Wars?” she asks brightly.

After a moment, Thomas nods.

“All viruses replicate, but some of the better ones can write macros – *micros*, actually, would be a better name for them – to other addresses, little subroutines that autonomously perform simple tasks. And some of *those* can replicate too. Get my drift?”

“Not really,” Thomas says quietly.

“I really should have souped you up a bit more. Anyway, those little routines, they can handle all the book-keeping. Each one tracks a few variables, and each time they replicate that’s a few more, and pretty soon there’s no limit to the size of the problem you can handle. Hell, you could rewrite the whole damn operating system from the inside out and not have to worry about any of the details, all your little daemons are doing that for you.”

“Are we all just viruses to you, Jaz?”

She laughs at that, not unkindly. “Ah, Myles. It’s a technical term, not a moral judgement. Life’s information, shaped by natural selection. That’s all I mean.”

“And you’ve learned to – rewrite the code,” Thomas says.

She shakes her head. “Still learning. But I’m getting better at it all the time.”

“I see.” Thomas pretends to check his watch. He still doesn’t know the jargon. He never will. But at least, at last, he knows where she’s coming from.

Nothing left but the final platitudes.

“That’s all I need right now, Jasmine. I want to thank you for being so cooperative. I know how tough this must be on you.”

She cocks her head at him, smiling. “This is goodbye then, Myles? You haven’t come *close* to curing me.”

He smiles back. He can almost feel each muscle fibre contracting, the increased tension

on facial tendons, soft tissue stretching over bone. The utter insincerity of a purely mechanical process. “That’s not what I’m here for, Jaz.”

“Right. You’re assessing my fitness.”

Thomas nods.

“Well?” she asks after a moment. “Am I fit?”

He takes a breath. “I think you have some problems you haven’t faced. But you can understand counsel, and there’s no doubt you could follow any proceedings the court is likely to throw at you. Legally, that means you can stand trial.”

“Ah. So I’m not sane, but I’m not crazy enough to get off, eh?”

“I hope things work out for you.” That much, at least, is sincere.

“Oh, they will,” she says easily. “Never fear. How much longer do I stay here?”

“Maybe another three weeks. Thirty days is the usual period.”

“But you’ve finished with me. Why so long?”

He shrugs. “Nowhere else to put you, for now.”

“Oh.” She considers. “Just as well, I guess. It’ll given me more time to practice.”

“Goodbye, Jasmine.”

“Too bad you missed Stuart,” she says behind him. “You’d have liked him. Maybe I’ll bring him around to your place sometime.”

The doorknob sticks. He tries again.

“Something wrong?” she asks.

“No,” Thomas says, a bit too quickly. “It’s just –”

“Oh, right. Hang on a sec.” She rustles in her sheets.

He turns his head. Jasmine Fitzgerald lies flat on her back, unblinking, staring straight up. Her breath is fast and shallow.

The doorknob seems subtly warmer in his hand.

He releases it. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” she says to the ceiling. “Just tired. Takes a bit out of you, you know?”

*Call the nurse*, he thinks.

“Really, I just need some rest.” She looks

at him one last time, and giggles. “But Myles was go before I sleep...”

“Dr Desjardins, please.”

“Speaking.”

“You performed the autopsy on Stuart MacLennan?”

A brief silence. Then: “Who is this?”

“My name’s Myles Thomas. I’m a psychologist at FPSS. Jasmine Fitzgerald is – was a client of mine.”

The phone sits there in his hand, silent.

“I was looking at the case report, writing up my assessment, and I just noticed something about your findings – ”

“They’re preliminary,” Desjardins interrupts. “I’ll have the full report, um, shortly.”

“Yes, I understand that, Dr Desjardins. But my understanding is that MacLennan was, well, mortally wounded.”

“He was gutted like a fish,” Desjardins says.

“Right. But your r – your *preliminary* report lists cause of death as ‘undetermined’.”

“That’s because I haven’t determined the cause of death.”

“Right. I guess I’m a bit confused about what else it could have been. You didn’t find any toxins in the body, at least none that weren’t involved in MacLennan’s chemo, and no other injuries except for these fistulas and teratomas – ”

The phone barks in Thomas’s hand, a short ugly laugh. “Do you know what a teratoma *is*?” Desjardins asks.

“I assumed it was something to do with his cancer.”

“Ever hear the term *primordial cyst*?”

“No.”

“Hope you haven’t eaten recently,” Desjardins says. “Every now and then you get a clump of proliferating cells floating around in the coelomic cavity. Something happens to activate the dormant genes – could be a lot of things, but the upshot is you sometimes get these growing blobs of tissue sprouting teeth and hair and bone. Sometimes they get as big as grapefruits.”

“My God. MacLennan had one of those in him?”

“I thought, maybe. At first. Turned out to be a chunk of his kidney. Only there was an eye growing out of it. And most of his abdominal lymph nodes, too, the ducts were clotted with hair and something like fingernail. It was keratinised, anyway.”

“That’s horrible,” Thomas whispers.

“No shit. Not to mention the perforated diaphragm, or the fact that half the loops of his small intestine were fused together.”

“But I thought he had leukaemia.”

“He did. That wasn’t what killed him.”

“So you’re saying these teratomas might have had some role in MacLennan’s death?”

“I don’t see how,” Desjardins says.

“But – ”

“Look, maybe I’m not making myself clear. I have my doubts that Stuart MacLennan died from his wife’s carving skills because any *one* of the abnormalities I found should have killed him more or less instantly.”

“But that’s pretty much impossible, isn’t it? I mean, what did the investigating officers say?”

“Quite frankly, I don’t think they read my report,” Desjardins grumbles. “Neither did you, apparently, or you would have called me before now.”

“Well, it wasn’t really central to my assessment, Dr Desjardins. And besides, it seemed so obvious – ”

“For sure. You see someone laid open from crotch to sternum, you don’t need any report to know what killed him. Who cares about any of this congenital abnormality bullshit?”

*Congen* – “You’re saying he was born that way?”

“Except he couldn’t have been. He’d never have even made it to his first breath.”

“So you’re saying – ”

“I’m saying Stuart MacLennan’s wife couldn’t have killed him, because physiologically there’s no way in hell that he could have been alive to start with.”

Thomas stares at the phone. It offers no retraction.

“But – he was twenty-eight years old! How could that be?”

“God only knows,” Desjardins tells him. “You ask me, it’s a fucking miracle.”

What’s wrong with this picture?

He isn’t quite certain, because he doesn’t quite know what he was expecting. No opened grave, no stone rolled dramatically away from the sepulchre. Of course not. Jasmine Fitzgerald would probably say that her powers are too subtle for such obvious theatre. Why leave a pile of shovelled earth, an opened coffin, when you can just rewrite the code?

She sits cross-legged on her husband’s undisturbed grave. Whatever powers she lays claim to, they don’t shield her from the light rain falling on her head. She doesn’t even have an umbrella.

“Myles,” she says, not looking up. “I thought it might be you.” Her sunny smile, that radiant expression of happy denial, is nowhere to be seen. Her face is as expressionless as her husband’s must be, two meters down.

“Hello, Jaz,” Thomas says.

“How did you find me?” she asks him.

“FPSS went ballistic when you disappeared. They’re calling everyone who had any contact with you, trying to figure out how you got out. Where you might be.”

Her fingers play in the fresh earth. “Did you tell them?”

“I didn’t think of this place until after,” he lies. Then, to atone: “And I don’t *know* how you got out.”

“Yes you do, Myles. You do it yourself all the time.”

“Go on,” he says, deliberately.

She smiles, but it doesn’t last. “We got here the same way, Myles. We copied ourselves from one address to another. The only difference is, you still have to go from A to B to C. I just cut straight to Z.”

“I can’t accept that,” Thomas says.

“Ever the doubter, aren’t you? How can you enjoy heaven when you can’t even recognise it?” Finally, she looks up at him. “*You should be told the difference between*

*empiricism and stubbornness, doctor.* Know what that’s from?”

He shakes his head.

“Oh well. It’s not important.” She looks back at the ground. Wet tendrils of hair hang across her face. “They wouldn’t let me come to the funeral.”

“You don’t seem to need their permission.”

“Not now. That was a few days ago. I still hadn’t worked all the bugs out then.” She plunges one hand into wet dirt. “You know what I did to him.”

*Before the knife*, she means.

“I’m not – I don’t really – ”

“You know,” she says again.

Finally he nods, although she isn’t looking.

The rain falls harder. Thomas shivers under his windbreaker. Fitzgerald doesn’t seem to notice.

“So what now?” he asks at last.

“I’m not sure. It seemed so straightforward at first, you know? I loved Stuart, completely, without reservation. I was going to bring him back as soon as I learned how. I was going to do it right this time. And I still love him, I really do, but damn it all I don’t love *everything* about him, you know? He was a slob, sometimes. And I hated his taste in music. So now that I’m here, I figure, why stop at just bringing him back? Why not, well, fine-tune him a bit?”

“Is that what you’re going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’m going through all the things I’d change, and when it comes right down to it maybe it’d be better to just start again from scratch. Less – intensive. Computationally.”

“I hope you *are* delusional.” Not a wise thing to say, but suddenly he doesn’t care. “Because if you’re not, God’s a really callous bastard.”

“Is it,” she says, without much interest.

“Everything’s just information. We’re all just subroutines interacting in a model somewhere. Well nothing’s really all that important then, is it? You’ll get around to debugging Stuart one of these days. No hurry. He can wait. It’s just microcode, nothing’s irrevocable. So nothing really *matters*, does it? How could God give a shit about anything in a universe like that?”

Jasmine Fitzgerald rises from the grave and wipes the dirt off her hands. "Watch it, Myles." There's a faint smile on her face. "You don't want to piss me off."

He meets her eyes. "I'm glad I still can."

"*Touché.*" There's still a twinkle there, behind her soaked lashes and the runnels of rainwater coursing down her face.

"So what are you going to do?" he asks again.

She looks around the soaking graveyard. "Everything. I'm going to clean the place up. I'm going to fill in the holes. I'm going to rewrite Planck's constant so it makes *sense.*" She smiles at him. "Right now, though, I think I'm just going to go somewhere and think about things for a while."

She steps off the mound. "Thanks for not telling on me. It wouldn't have made any difference, but I appreciate the thought. I won't forget it." She begins to walk away in the rain.

"Jaz," Thomas calls after her.

She shakes her head, without looking back. "Forget it, Myles. Nobody handed me any miracles." She stops, then, turns briefly.

"Besides, you're not ready. You'd probably just think I hypnotised you or something."

*I should stop her,* Thomas tells himself. *She's dangerous. She's deluded. They could charge me with aiding and abetting. I should stop her.*



*If I can.*

She leaves him in the rain with the memory of that bright, guiltless smile. He's almost sure he doesn't feel anything pass through him then. But maybe he does. Maybe it feels like a ripple growing across some stagnant surface. A subtle reweaving of electrons. A small change in the way things are.

*I'm going to clean the place up. I'm going to fill in the holes.*

Myles Thomas doesn't know exactly what she meant by that. But he's afraid that soon — far too soon — there won't be anything wrong with this picture.

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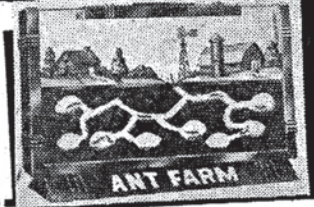
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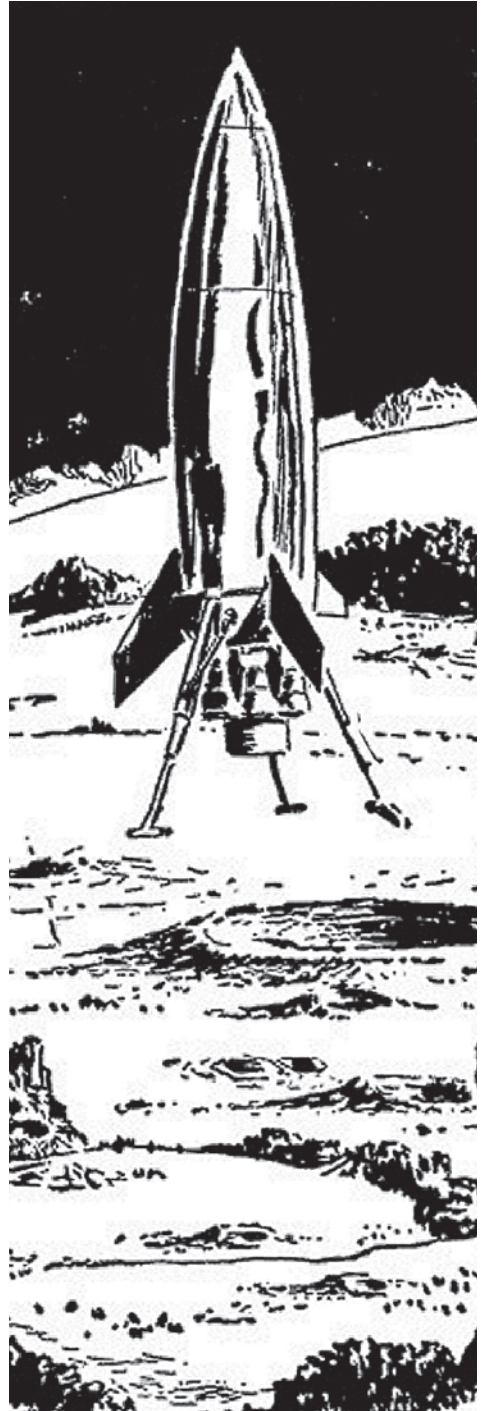
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# MARS: A TRAVELER'S GUIDE

By Ruth Nestvold

**YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “DUST STORMS”:** Dust storms on Mars can encompass the entire planet. Global winds disperse the dust until the entire surface is covered and sunlight is cut off. When sunlight can no longer warm the ground, the effect stops. These storms are connected with the dominant weather patterns and the warmer summers in the southern hemisphere

**YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “WEATHER PATTERNS”:** Weather on Mars consists of storms made of dust rather than rain. Typically, these storms occur during summer on the southern hemisphere, which on average is warmer than the northern hemisphere because it comes appreciably closer to the sun as a result of the elliptical orbit of the planet. The rapid heating of the surface gives rise to the famous “dust devils”: when the temperature difference between lower and higher altitude air is great enough, pockets of warm, rising air expand and turn into whirlwinds that pick up dust. These dust devils can trigger global storms. The dusty air absorbs sunlight, warming the upper atmosphere and



changing wind patterns. The dust particles in the clouds trap infrared energy, helping to make the planet's atmosphere warmer.

Weather patterns are extremely difficult to forecast because the changes are dramatic and can result in abrupt planet-wide swings between dusty and hot and cloudy and cold –

I'M SORRY, I HAVE NO ENTRY IN MY DATABASE FOR "ROVER ACCIDENT."

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT A NEW TOPIC?

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC "PRESSURIZED ROVER": The pressurized rover is especially designed to withstand the stresses of the Martian environment. The passenger compartment is protected by a waffled body tub in order to ensure that the cabin will not lose pressure in case the outer shell is damaged. Radiator fins help control the interior temperature. The rover has two independent hydrogen fuel cell systems, one on each side, and a power transmission grid wired directly into each wheel – a design very resistant to breakdowns –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC "FUEL CELL": The fuel cells in the rover are powered by hydrogen ( $H_2$ ), working through a nanocontrolled catalytic membrane rated for Mars-normal surface conditions. These fuel cells can also provide power to pressure suits, exploration droids, and other Mars excursion implements. Hydrogen is available from a number of sources including subsurface ice deposits, trace amounts in the Martian atmosphere, and ice shipped on low-energy trajectories from Jovian orbit or salvaged from cometary bodies.

IF YOU'D LIKE ME TO REPEAT THIS ENTRY, SAY 'REPEAT.' IF YOU'D LIKE TO EXPLORE A NEW TOPIC, SIMPLY SAY THE NAME OF THE TOPIC. IF YOU'RE DONE USING THE MARS TRAVELER'S GUIDE, SAY 'QUIT' TO SHUT THE SYSTEM DOWN.

RETURN TO THE TOPIC "DUST STORMS": Some dust storms rise up to eight kilometers above the surface of the planet and may carry many tons of fine red dust. Heavy dustfalls can be dumped on areas below the datum plane or within areologically sheltered formations that otherwise experience little or no direct impact from the storm. Major dust storms can cause brownouts, leading to dramatically decreased visibility, which may be so bad that the horizon, landmarks, and nearby safe havens cannot be seen. If this should occur, travelers are advised to use GPS navigational assistance. Martian scientists, however, are rapidly developing the technology to predict dust storms, making it possible to take extra precautions in advance against the danger of dust particles.

IF YOU'D LIKE ME TO REPEAT THIS ENTRY, SAY 'REPEAT.' IF YOU'D LIKE TO EXPLORE A NEW TOPIC, SIMPLY SAY THE NAME OF THE TOPIC –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC "DUST PARTICLES": Dust is one of the biggest dangers to travelers on Mars. Dust devils with wind speeds of over one hundred fifty kilometers per hour can carry the particles into rover engines, bearings, machinery, air-locks, and pressure-suit fittings. Dust may travel at such high velocity that it can have an effect resembling sandblasting on equipment and viewpoints –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC "GPS": GPS is available extensively near the Mars bases and within the planet's equatorial zone thanks to line-of-sight repeaters. At this time, there are not enough satellites deployed for full-time planetwide coverage, but our experts at Red Planet Adventures project that within ten years, satellite coverage will reach 100%.

Availability of navigation services and other kinds of satellite-based communications may be hampered by landforms with an altitude differential sufficient to obscure the satellite footprint or repeater sightlines. In the case of an emergency in which communication is not possible, your tour guide will direct you to the nearest Mars base as quickly as possible.

IF YOU'D LIKE ME TO REPEAT THIS ENTRY, SAY 'REPEAT.' IF YOU'D LIKE –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “MARS BASES”: The bases on Mars at present include Sagan in Kasei Vallis – the first and largest, and also headquarters of Red Planet Adventures – Gagarin in Hebes Chasma in the Valles Marineris system, Armstrong in the Gusev Crater, the most isolated of the Martian bases, –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “ARMSTRONG BASE”: Neil Armstrong Memorial Base is situated north of Ma'adim Vallis in the Aesis region of Mars. The site in the Gusev Crater lies at the mouth of a very long fluvial valley dating from about 3.5 billion years ago. The area has provided some of the earliest evidence for ancient Martian microbes –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “MA'ADIM VALLIS”: Ma'adim Vallis is one of the largest canyons on Mars. Over seven hundred kilometers long, twenty kilometers wide, and two kilometers deep in some places, it offers breath-taking vistas to the Mars adventure tourist. The course of the valley runs from a region of southern lowlands thought to have once contained a large group of lakes north to Gusev Crater near the equator, the location of Armstrong Base. The tour from Armstrong the length of the valley of Ma'adim is one of the most dramatic offered by Red Planet Adventures –

RETURN TO THE TOPIC “ARMSTRONG BASE”: While it does not yet provide the level of amenities available in Sagan or Arestia with their geodesic domes, Armstrong Base has its own picturesque charm for adventure tourists. Its networked habitat is reminiscent of the early days of Mars colonization and provides a feel for authentic history. But even here, tourists need have no fears regarding safety considerations. The individual pods in the habitat are constructed from titanium-reinforced buckyplastic, equipped with double air locks, and connected to each other with inflatable tunnels of neoKevlar. Spacesuits are

provided for all visitors and included in the tour package. However, it is not recommended that tourists attempt to explore Gusev Crater or nearby Ma'adim Vallis without an experienced tour guide.

IF YOU'D LIKE –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS”: Tours with Red Planet Adventures have been optimized for safety –

I'M SORRY, DID YOU SAY 'VACUUM'?

I'M SORRY, I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE PHRASE, “NO EYE SAID FUCK YOU.”

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT A NEW TOPIC?

YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO RETURN TO THE TOPIC “SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS”: Despite the hostile environment of Mars, Red Planet Adventures has never had a fatality in the three years we have been offering our tours. While every effort has been made to ensure the safety of our guests, we would like to remind you to use extreme caution at all times while traveling the red planet. Mars dust is a major potential threat to both machinery and humans: dust devils have been known to disable computers and delicate electronics, interfere with radio communications and even damage pressurized human habitats. It is necessary to keep in mind that despite initial terraforming experiments, the atmosphere, the air temperature, and the barometric pressure are still such that Mars remains uninhabitable for humans outside of the habitats. Pressure suits should be worn in all situations where it is possible that the visitor might be subject to Martian elements –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “PRESSURE SUIT”: The pressure suits provided for guests of Red Planet Adventures are state-of-the-art suit technology, employing mechanical counter-pressure (MCP) for the extremities of Martian exploration. The MCP suit

system consists of a lightweight, elastic bio-suit layer, hard torso shell, portable life-support system, helmet, gloves, and boots. The life-support system attaches to the torso shell. The MCP suit exerts pressure on the body through the form-fitting bio-suit rather than by the breathing gas. The helmet, attached to the life-support system, provides pressurization to the head as well as oxygen for breathing. Tears in a MCP suit can cause symptoms of localized low pressure exposure at the site of the tear (such as bruising and edema), but the rest of the body remains protected: the elastic weave of the bio-suit prevents the tear from propagating.

The power cells running the suit's life-support system can be recharged using standard hydrogen fuel cells, such as those powering a pressurized rover, for a service life of up to twelve hours. Integrated into the suit is a communications module, biosensors, and the computer you are at present accessing –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “COMMUNICATIONS MODULE”: The communications modules of the bio-suits provide a direct connection to the communications systems in the Mars bases via satellite coverage. This ensures that the traveler can easily contact the rover or the nearest base in case he or she gets lost –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “SATELLITE COVERAGE”: Red Planet Adventures does not conduct tours where satellite coverage is unavailable; however, signals may be hampered by land formations such as walls of craters or valleys, or rough chasma terrain, among others. Such areas which are frequently traveled will have GPS and comm repeaters mounted along the rim or higher altitudes at regular intervals. If spotty coverage still occurs, it may be the result of storm damage. In the case of an emergency situation, your tour guide –

I HAVE NO ENTRY IN MY DATABASE FOR “TOUR GUIDE DEAD.”

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT A NEW TOPIC?

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “EMERGENCY”: In the case of an emergency situation, your tour guide –

I HAVE NO ENTRY IN MY DATABASE FOR “FUCK YOU.”

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT A NEW TOPIC?

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “EMERGENCY SITUATION”: A number of accidents qualify as emergency situations according to the Mars Emergency Rescue Statutes (MERS):

- 1) Damage to a habitat that would endanger pressurization or breathable oxygen levels.
- 2) Damage to an oxygen production plant.
- 3) Failure in a wind or solar energy plant.
- 4) Failure in the communications system –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “FAILURE IN THE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM”: In the case of a failure in the communications system, make your way to the nearest relay station or base as quickly as possible and notify the proper authorities of the failure. This transport-based database will provide you with all the information needed for MERS to localize the problem.

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “FAILURE IN GROUND TRANSPORTATION”: In the case of a failure in ground transportation, notify the proper authorities via satellite as quickly as possible.

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “FAILURE IN MULTIPLE SYSTEMS”: In the case of a failure in multiple systems, a number of options are available, including the following:

- 1) Repair of the ground transportation.
- 2) Repair of the communications system.
- 3) Manual signaling to nearby bases or relay stations

If none of these options is feasible, it may be necessary to navigate on foot to the nearest base or relay station. With an undamaged bio-suit and full oxygen reserves in the life-support system,



an experienced Mars explorer can survive for several days in the open environment. It is, however, critical to maintain suit reserve power: the traveler should be careful not to stray too far from the rover's fuel cell capacity in order to ensure that batteries can be recharged –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “FUEL CELL DAMAGE”: Damaged fuel cells can be replaced at all Martian bases. In the event that rover fuel cells are damaged to the extent that return to a base is not possible, notify Mars Emergency Authority immediately.

IF YOU'D LIKE –

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “NOTIFY MARS EMERGENCY AUTHORITY”: In order to notify the Mars Emergency Authority (MEA), use either the communications module in your pressure suit or the communications system of the rover. Give your location, the unit number of your tour, and a precise description of the problem. A rescue team will be to your site within eight hours.

I HAVE NO ENTRY IN MY DATABASE FOR “RESCUE MY ASS.”

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT A NEW TOPIC?

I'M SORRY, THE VOLUME OF YOUR LAST REQUEST WAS TOO HIGH FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND. PLEASE REPEAT.”

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE TOPIC “HELP”:

The Help System of the *Mars Traveler's Guide* is an extensive database covering a wide range of topics, both informational and practical. If you do not find the topic you need, contact user support and make a suggestion. We are always happy to receive feedback.

IF YOU'D LIKE ME TO REPEAT THIS ENTRY, SAY ‘REPEAT.’ IF YOU'D LIKE TO EXPLORE A NEW TOPIC, SIMPLY SAY THE NAME OF THE TOPIC. IF YOU'RE DONE USING THE MARS TRAVELER'S GUIDE, SAY ‘QUIT’ TO SHUT THE SYSTEM DOWN.

YOU HAVE NOT MADE A SELECTION FOR MORE THAN TEN MINUTES. IN ORDER TO ACCESS THE DATABASE, SELECT A TOPIC ON YOUR WRIST UNIT OR VOICE A TOPIC OF YOUR OWN. IF THERE IS NO APPROPRIATE ENTRY IN THE DATABASE, SEARCH FOR A SIMILAR WORD OR TERM. IF YOU ARE NO LONGER IN NEED OF THE HELP SYSTEM, SELECT OR VOICE “QUIT.”

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SELECT A NEW TOPIC?

THE SYSTEM HAS BEEN IDLE FOR MORE THAN THIRTY MINUTES AND WILL GO INTO SLEEP MODE. TO REACTIVATE THE SYSTEM, SIMPLY VOICE YOUR REQUEST.

THE SYSTEM HAS BEEN IDLE FOR MORE THAN SIXTY MINUTES. THIS SYSTEM IS SHUTTING DOWN.





# BUNK!

NOBODY IS JUST "Naturally"

# SKINNY!

Give Me 15 Minutes A Day And I'll  
Give YOU A NEW BODY

WOULD you believe it? I "Dynamic Tension" is the easy, was once a skinny 97-pound NATURAL method that you can weakling. People used to laugh at my spindly build I was ashamed to strip for sports or for a swim. Girls snickered at me behind my back. Folks said I was just "naturally-born" skinny!"

Then I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title, "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

**ARE YOU**  
Skinny and run down?  
Always tired?  
Nervous?  
Lacking in Confidence?  
Constipated?  
Suffering from bad breath?  
Do you want to gain weight?  
**WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT** is told on this page!

practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY—while your scrawny chest and shoulder muscles begin to swell . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel full of zip, ambition, self-confidence, and new energy!

**"Dynamic Tension" Builds You NATURALLY**

Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You simply utilize the dormant muscle-power in your own body. In a very short time, you'll watch it grow and multiply into real, solid, rippling, LIVE MUSCLE.

### WHAT'S MY SECRET?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you—then you'll be astonished at how fast "Dynamic Tension" GETS RESULTS!

**FREE BOOK** Mail coupon now. I'll send my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells about my "Dynamic Tension" method. Shows photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE! Mail coupon to me personally CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 2-J, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.



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Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in an international contest.

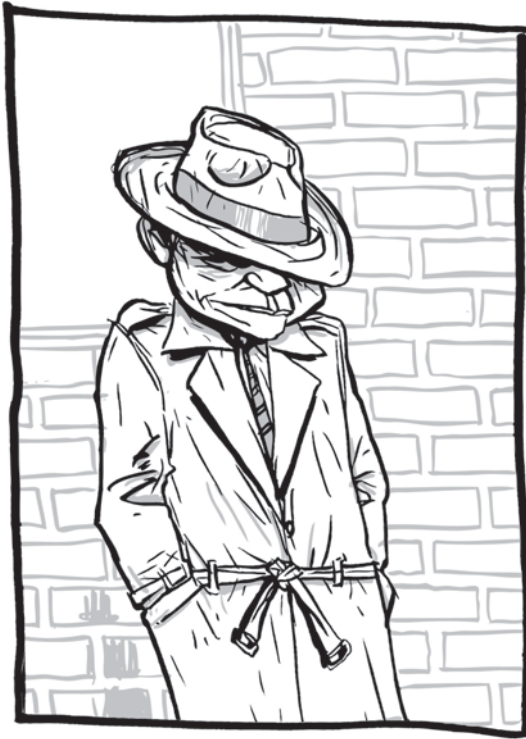
**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 2-J  
115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.**

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please print or write plainly)

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_



# THE EMPIRE OF ICE CREAM

By Jeffrey Ford

*Illustrated by Jouni Koponen*

ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE SCENT of extinguished birthday candles? For me, their aroma is superseded by a sound like the drawing of a bow across the bass string of a violin. This note carries all of the melancholic joy I have been told the scent engenders – the loss of another year, the promise of accrued wisdom. Likewise, the notes of an acoustic guitar appear before my eyes as a golden rain, falling from a height just above my head only to vanish at the level of my solar plexus. There is a certain imported Swiss cheese I am fond

of that is all triangles, whereas the feel of silk against my fingers rests on my tongue with the flavour and consistency of lemon meringue. These perceptions are not merely thoughts, but concrete physical experiences. Depending upon how you see it, I, like approximately nine out of every million individuals, am either cursed or blessed with a condition known as synesthesia.

It has only recently come to light that the process of synesthesia takes place in the hippocampus, part of the ancient limbic system where remembered perceptions – triggered

in diverse geographical regions of the brain as the result of an external stimulus – come together. It is believed that everyone, at a point somewhere below consciousness, experiences this coinciding of sensory association, yet in most it is filtered out, and only a single sense is given predominance in one's waking world. For we lucky few, the filter is broken or perfected, and what is usually subconscious becomes conscious. Perhaps, at some distant point in history, our early ancestors were completely synesthetic, and touched, heard, smelled, tasted, and saw all at once – each specific incident mixing sensoric memory along with the perceived sense without affording precedence to the findings of one of the five portals through which “reality” invades us. The scientific explanations, as far as I can follow them, seem to make sense now, but when I was young and told my parents about the whisper of vinyl, the stench of purple, the spinning blue gyres of the church bell, they feared I was defective and that my mind was brimming with hallucinations like an abandoned house choked with ghosts.

As an only child, I wasn't afforded the luxury of being anomalous. My parents were well on in years – my mother nearly forty, my father already forty-five – when I arrived after a long parade of failed pregnancies. The fact that, at age five, I heard what I described as an angel crying whenever I touched velvet would never be allowed to stand, but was seen as an illness to be cured by whatever methods were available. Money was no object in the pursuit of perfect normalcy. And so my younger years were a torment of hours spent in the waiting rooms of psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists. I can't find words to describe the depths of medical quackery I was subjected to by a veritable army of so-called professionals who diagnosed me with everything from schizophrenia to bipolar depression to low IQ caused by muddled potty training. Being a child, I was completely honest with them about what I experienced, and this, my first mistake, resulted in blood tests, brain scans, special diets and the forced consumption of a

demon's pharmacopoeia of mind-deadening drugs that diminished my will but not the vanilla scent of slanting golden sunlight on late autumn afternoons.

My only-child status, along with the added complication of my “condition,” as they called it, led my parents to perceive me as fragile. For this reason, I was kept fairly isolated from other children. Part of it, I'm sure, had to do with the way my abnormal perceptions and utterances would reflect upon my mother and father, for they were the type of people who could not bear to be thought of as having been responsible for the production of defective goods. I was tutored at home by my mother instead of being allowed to attend school. She was actually a fine teacher, having a Ph.D. in History and a firm grasp of classical literature. My father, an actuary, taught me Math, and in this subject I proved to be an unquestionable failure until I reached college age. Although  $x=y$  might have been a suitable metaphor for the phenomenon of synesthesia, it made no sense on paper. The number 8, by the way, reeks of withered flowers.

What I was good at was music. Every Thursday at 3:00 in the afternoon, Mrs Brithnic would arrive at the house to give me a piano lesson. She was a kind old lady with thinning white hair and the most beautiful fingers – long and smooth as if they belonged to a graceful young giantess. Although something less than a virtuoso at the keys, she was a veritable genius at teaching me to allow myself to enjoy the sounds I produced. Enjoy them I did, and when I wasn't being dragged hither and yon in the pursuit of losing my affliction, home base for me was the piano bench. In my imposed isolation from the world, music became a window of escape I crawled through as often as possible.

When I'd play, I could see the notes before me like a fireworks display of colours and shapes. By my twelfth year, I was writing my own compositions, and my notation on the pages accompanying the notes of a piece referred to the visual displays that coincided with them. In actuality, when I played, I was really



painting – in mid-air, before my eyes – great abstract works in the tradition of Kandinsky. Many times, I planned a composition on a blank piece of paper using the crayon set of 64 colours I'd had since early childhood. The only difficulty in this was with colours like magenta and cobalt blue, which I perceive primarily as tastes, and so would have to write them down in pencil as licorice and tapioca on my colourfully scribbled drawing where they would appear in the music.

My punishment for having excelled at the piano was to lose my only real friend, Mrs Brithnic. I remember distinctly the day my mother let her go. She calmly nodded, smiling, understanding that I had already surpassed her abilities. Still, though I knew this was the case, I cried when she hugged me good-bye. When her face was next to mine, she whispered into my ear, "Seeing is believing," and in that moment, I knew that she had completely understood my plight. Her lilac perfume, the sound of one nearly inaudible B-flat played by an oboe, still hung about me as I watched her walk down the path and out of my life for good.

I believe it was the loss of Mrs Brithnic that made me rebel. I became desultory and despondent. Then one day, soon after my thirteenth birthday, instead of obeying my mother, who had just told me to finish reading a textbook chapter while she showered, I went to her pocketbook, took five dollars and left the house. As I walked along beneath the sunlight and blue sky, the world around me seemed brimming with life. What I wanted more than anything else was to meet other young people my own age. I remembered an ice-cream shop in town where, when passing by in the car returning from whatever doctor's office we had been to, there always seemed to be kids hanging around. I headed directly for that spot while wondering if my mother would catch up to me before I made it. When I pictured her drying her hair, I broke into a run.

Upon reaching the row of stores that contained The Empire of Ice Cream, I was out of breath as much from the sheer exhilaration

of freedom as from the half-mile sprint. Peering through the glass of the front door was like looking through a portal into an exotic other world. Here were young people, my age, gathered in groups at tables, talking, laughing, eating ice cream – not by night, after dinner – but in the middle of broad daylight. I opened the door and plunged in. The magic of the place seemed to brush by me on its way out as I entered, for the conversation instantly died away. I stood in the momentary silence as all heads turned to stare at me.

"Hello," I said, smiling, and raised my hand in greeting, but I was too late. They had already turned away, the conversation resumed, as if they had merely afforded a grudging glimpse to see the door open and close at the behest of the wind. I was paralysed by my inability to make an impression, the realization that finding friends was going to take some real work.

"What'll it be?" said a large man behind the counter.

I broke from my trance and stepped up to order. Before me, beneath a bubble dome of glass, lay the Empire of Ice Cream. I'd never seen so much of the stuff in so many colours and incarnations – with nuts and fruit, cookie and candy bits, mystical swirls the sight of which sounded to me like a distant siren. There were deep vats of it set in neat rows totalling thirty flavours. My diet had never allowed for the consumption of confections or desserts of any type, and rare were the times I had so much as a thimbleful of vanilla ice cream after dinner. Certain doctors had told my parents that my eating these treats might seriously exacerbate my condition. With this in mind, I ordered a large bowl of coffee ice cream. My choice of coffee stemmed from the fact that that beverage was another item on the list of things I should never taste.

After paying, I took my bowl and spoon and found a seat in the corner of the place from which I could survey all the other tables. I admit that I had some trepidations about digging right in, since I'd been warned against it for so long by so many adults. Instead,



I scanned the shop, watching the other kids talking, trying to overhear snatches of conversation. I made eye contact with a boy my own age two tables away. I smiled and waved to him. He saw me and then leaned over and whispered something to the other fellows he was with. All four of them turned, looked at me, and then broke into laughter. It was a certainty they were making fun of me, but I basked in the victory of merely being noticed. With this, I took a large spoonful of ice cream and put it in my mouth.

There is an attendant phenomenon of the synesthetic experience I've yet to mention. Of course I had no term for it at this point in my life, but when one is in the throes of the remarkable transference of senses, it is accompanied by a feeling of "epiphany," a "eureka" of contentment that researchers of the anomalous condition would later term *noetic*, borrowing from William James. That first taste of coffee ice cream elicited a deeper noetic response than I'd ever before felt, and along with it came the appearance of a girl. She coalesced out of thin air and stood before me, obscuring my sight of the group that was still laughing. Never before had I seen through tasting, hearing, touching, smelling, something other than simple abstract shapes and colours.

She was turned somewhat to the side and hunched over, wearing a plaid skirt and a white blouse. Her hair was the same dark brown as my own, but long and gathered in the back with a green rubber band. There was a sudden shaking of her hand, and it became clear to me that she was putting out a match. Smoke swirled away from her. I could see now that she had been lighting a cigarette. I got the impression that she was wary of being caught in the act of smoking. When she turned her head sharply to look back over her shoulder, I dropped the spoon on the table. Her look instantly enchanted me.

As the ice cream melted away down my throat, she began to vanish, and I quickly lifted the spoon to restoke my vision, but it never reached my lips. She suddenly went out like a light when I felt something land softly upon

my left shoulder. I heard the incomprehensible murmur of recrimination, and knew it as my mother's touch. She had found me. A great wave of laughter accompanied my removal from The Empire of Ice Cream. Later I would remember the incident with embarrassment, but for the moment, even as I spoke words of apology to my mother, I could think only of what I'd seen.

The ice-cream incident – followed hard by the discovery of the cigar box of pills I hid in my closet, all of the medication that I'd supposedly swallowed for the past six months – led my parents to believe that heaped upon my condition was now a tendency toward delinquency that would grow, if unchecked, in geometrical proportion with the passing of years. It was decided that I should see yet another specialist to deal with my behaviour, a therapist my father had read about who would prompt me to talk my willfulness into submission. I was informed of this in a solemn meeting with my parents. What else was there to do but acquiesce? I knew that my mother and father wanted, in their pedestrian way, what they believed was best for me. Whenever the situation would infuriate me, I'd go to the piano and play, sometimes for three or four hours at a time.

Dr Stullin's office was in a ramshackle Victorian house on the other side of town. My father accompanied me on the first visit, and, when he pulled up in front of the sorry old structure, he checked the address at least twice to make sure we'd come to the right place. The doctor, a round little man with a white beard and glasses with small circular lenses, met us at the front door. Why he laughed when we shook hands at the introductions, I hadn't a clue, but he was altogether jolly, like a pint-size Santa Claus dressed in a wrinkled brown suit one size too small. He swept out his arm to usher me into his house, but when my father tried to enter, the doctor held up his hand and said, "You will return in one hour and five minutes."

My father gave some weak protest and said that he thought he might be needed to help discuss my history to this point. Here

the doctor's demeanour instantly changed. He became serious, official, almost commanding.

"I'm being paid to treat the boy. You'll have to find your own therapist."

My father was obviously at a loss. He looked as if he was about to object, but the doctor said, "One hour and five minutes." Following me inside, he quickly shut the door behind him.

As he led me through a series of unkempt rooms lined with crammed bookshelves, and one in which piles of paper covered the tops of tables and desks, he said, laughing, "Parents: so essential, yet sometimes like something you've stepped in and cannot get off your shoe. What else is there but to love them?"

We wound up in a room at the back of the house made from a skeleton of thin steel girders and paneled with glass panes. The sunlight poured in, and surrounding us, at the edges of the place, also hanging from some of the girders, were green plants. There was a small table on which sat a teapot and two cups and saucers. As I took the seat he motioned for me to sit in, I looked out through the glass and saw that the backyard was one large, magnificent garden, blooming with all manner of colorful flowers.

After he poured me a cup of tea, the questioning began. I'd had it in my mind to be as recalcitrant as possible, but there was something in the manner in which he had put my father off that I admired about him. Also, he was unlike other therapists I'd been to, who would listen to my answers with complete reservation of emotion or response. When he asked why I was here, and I told him it was because I'd escaped in order to go to the ice-cream shop, he scowled and said, "Patently ridiculous." I was unsure if he meant me or my mother's response to what I'd done. I told him about playing the piano, and he smiled warmly and nodded. "That's a good thing," he said.

After he asked me about my daily routine and my home life, he sat back and said, "So, what's the problem? Your father has told me that you hallucinate. Can you explain?"

No matter how ingratiating he'd been, I had already decided that I would no longer divulge any of my perceptions to anyone. Then he did something unexpected.

"Do you mind?" he asked as he took out a pack of cigarettes.

Before I could shake my head no, he had one out of the pack and lit. Something about this, perhaps because I'd never seen a doctor smoke in front of a patient before, perhaps because it reminded me of the girl who had appeared before me in the ice-cream shop, weakened my resolve to say nothing. When he flicked his ashes into his half-empty teacup, I started talking. I told him about the taste of silk, the various corresponding colours for the notes of the piano, the nauseating stench of purple.

I laid the whole thing out for him and then sat back in my chair, now somewhat regretting my weakness, for he was smiling, and the smoke was leaking out of the corners of his mouth. He exhaled, and in that cloud came the word that would validate me, define me and haunt me for the rest of my life – *synesthesia*.

By the time I left Stullin's office that day, I was a new person. The doctor spoke to my father and explained the phenomenon to him. He cited historical cases and gave him the same general overview of the neurological workings of the condition. He also added that most synesthetes don't experience the condition in such a variety of senses as I did, although it was not unheard of. My father nodded every now and then but was obviously perplexed at the fact that my long-suffered *condition* had, in an instant, vanished.

"There's nothing wrong with the boy," said Stullin, "except for the fact that he is, in a way, exceptional. Think of it as a gift, an original way of sensing the world. These perceptions are as real for him as are your own to you."

Stullin's term for my condition was like a magic incantation from a fairy tale, for through its power I was released from the spell of my parents' control. In fact, their reaction to it was to almost completely relinquish interest in me, as if after all of their intensive care I'd been found out to be an imposter now unworthy of their attention.

When it became clear that I would have the ability to go about my life as any normal child might, I relished the concept of freedom. The sad fact was, though, that I didn't know how to. I lacked all experience at being part of society. My uncertainty made me shy, and my first year in public school was a disaster. What I wanted was a friend my own age, and this goal continued to elude me until I was well out of high school and in college. My desperation to connect made me ultimately nervous, causing me to act and speak without reserve. This was the early 1960s, and if anything was important in high school social circles at the time, it was remaining *cool*. I was the furthest thing from cool you might imagine.

For protection, I retreated into my music and spent hours working out compositions with my crayons and pens, trying to corral the sounds and resultant visual pyrotechnics, odours and tastes into cohesive scores. All along, I continued practising and improving my abilities at the keyboard, but I had no desire to become a performer. Quite a few of my teachers through the years had it in their minds that they could shape me into a brilliant concert pianist. I would not allow it, and when they insisted, I'd drop them and move on. Nothing frightened me more than the thought of sitting in front of a crowd of onlookers. The weight of judgment lurking behind even one set of those imagined eyes was too much for me to bear. I'd stayed on with Stullin, visiting once a month, and no matter his persistent proclamations as to my relative normalcy, it was impossible for me, after years of my parents' insisting otherwise, to erase the fact that I was, in my own mind, a freak.

My greatest pleasure away from the piano at this time was to take the train into the nearby city and attend concerts given by the local orchestra or small chamber groups that would perform in more intimate venues. Rock and roll was all the rage, but my training at the piano and the fact that calm solitude as opposed to raucous socializing was the expected milieu of the symphony drew me in the direction of classical music. It was a relief that most of

those who attended the concerts I did were adults who paid no attention to my presence. From the performances I witnessed, from the stereo I goaded my parents into buying for me, and my own reading, I, with few of the normal distractions of the typical teenager, gathered an immense knowledge of my field.

My hero was J.S. Bach. It was from his works that I came to understand mathematics... and, through a greater understanding of math, came to a greater understanding of Bach – the golden ratio, the rise of complexity through the reiteration of simple elements, the presence of the cosmic in the common. Whereas others simply heard his work, I could also feel it, taste it, smell it, visualize it, and in doing so was certain I was witnessing the process by which all of Nature had moved from a single cell to a virulent, diverse forest. Perhaps part of my admiration for the good cantor of Leipzig was his genius with counterpoint, a practice where two or more distinct melodic lines delicately join at certain points to form a singularly cohesive listening experience. I saw in this technique an analogy to my desire that some day my own unique personality might join with that of another's and form a friendship. Soon after hearing the fugue pieces that are part of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, I decided I wanted to become a composer.

Of course, during these years, both dreadful for my being a laughingstock in school and delightful for their musical revelations, I couldn't forget the image of the girl who momentarily appeared before me during my escape to The Empire of Ice Cream. The minute that Dr Stullin pronounced me sane, I made plans to return and attempt to conjure her again. The irony of the situation was that just that single first taste of coffee ice cream had ended up making me ill, either because I'd been sheltered from rich desserts my whole life or because my system actually was inherently delicate. Once my freedom came, I found I didn't have the stomach for all of those gastronomic luxuries I had at one time so desired. Still, I was willing to chance the stomachache in order to rediscover her.

On my second trip to The Empire, after taking a heaping spoonful of coffee ice cream and experiencing again that deep noetic response, she appeared as before, her image forming in the empty space between me and the front window of the shop. This time she seemed to be sitting at the end of a couch situated in a living room or parlour, reading a book. Only her immediate surroundings, within a foot or two of her body, were clear to me. As my eyes moved away from her central figure, the rest of the couch, and the table beside her, holding a lamp, became increasingly ghostlike; images from the parking lot outside the shop window showed through. At the edges of the phenomenon, there was nothing but the merest wrinkling of the atmosphere. She turned the page, and I was drawn back to her. I quickly fed myself another bit of ice cream and marvelled at her beauty. Her hair was down, and I could see that it came well past her shoulders. Bright green eyes, a small, perfect nose, smooth skin, and full lips that silently moved with each word of the text she was scanning. She was wearing some kind of very sheer, powder blue pyjama top, and I could see the presence of her breasts beneath it.

I took two spoonfuls of ice cream in a row, and, because my desire had tightened my throat and I couldn't swallow, their cold burned my tongue. In the time it took for the mouthful of ice cream to melt and trickle down my throat, I simply watched her chest subtly heave with each breath, her lips move, and I was enchanted. The last thing I noticed before she disappeared was the odd title of the book she was reading – *The Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer*. I'd have taken another spoonful, but a massive headache had blossomed behind my eyes, and I could feel my stomach beginning to revolt against the ice cream. I got up and quickly left the shop. Out in the open air, I walked for over an hour, trying to clear my head of the pain while at the same time trying to retain her image in my memory. I stopped three times along my meandering course, positive I was going to vomit, but I never did.

My resistance to the physical side effects of the ice cream never improved, but I returned to the shop again and again, like a binge drinker to the bottle, hangover be damned, whenever I was feeling most alone. Granted, there was something of a voyeuristic thrill underlying the whole thing, especially when the ice cream would bring her to me in various states of undress – in the shower, in her bedroom. But you must believe me when I say that there was much more to it than that. I wanted to know everything about her. I studied her as assiduously as I did *The Goldberg Variations* or Schoenberg's serialism. She was, in many ways, an even more intriguing mystery, and the process of investigation was like constructing a jigsaw puzzle, reconfiguring a blasted mosaic.

I learned that her name was Anna. I saw it written on one of her sketch pads. Yes, she was an artist, and I believe had great aspirations in this direction, as I did in music. I spent so many spoonfuls of coffee ice cream, initiated so many headaches, just watching her draw. She never lifted a paintbrush or pastel, but was tied to the simple tools of pencil and paper. I never witnessed her using a model or photograph as a guide. Instead, she would place the sketch pad flat on a table and hunker over it. The tip of her tongue would show itself from the right corner of her lips when she was in deepest concentration. Every so often, she'd take a drag on a cigarette that burned in an ashtray to her left. The results of her work, the few times I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse, were astonishing. Sometimes she was obviously drawing from life, the portraits of people whom she must've known. At other times she'd conjure strange creatures or mandalalike designs of exotic blossoms. The shading was incredible, giving weight and depth to her creations. All of this from the tip of a graphite pencil one might use to work a calculation or jot a memo. If I did not adore her, I might've envied her innate talent.

To an ancillary degree, I was able to catch brief glimpses of her surroundings, and this was fascinating for the fact that she seemed to move through a complete, separate world of

her own, some kind of *other* reality that was very much like ours. I'd garnered enough to know that she lived in a large old house with many rooms, the windows covered with long drapes to block out the light. Her work area was chaotic, stacks of her drawings covering the tops of tables and pushed to the sides of her desk. A black-and-white cat was always prowling in and out of the tableau. She was very fond of flowers and often worked in some sun-drenched park or garden, creating painstaking portraits of amaryllis or pansies, and although the rain would be falling outside my own window, there the skies were bottomless blue.

Although over the course of years I'd told Stullin much about myself, revealed my ambitions and most secret desires, I had never mentioned Anna. It was only after I graduated high school and was set to go off to study at Gelsbeth Conservatory in the nearby city that I decided to reveal her existence to him. The doctor had been a good friend to me, albeit a remunerated one, and was always most congenial and understanding when I'd give vent to my frustrations. He persistently argued the optimistic viewpoint for me when all was as inky black as the aroma of my father's aftershave. My time with him never resulted in a palpable difference in my ability to attract friends or feel more comfortable in public, but I enjoyed his company. At the same time, I was somewhat relieved to be severing all ties to my troubled past and escaping my childhood once and for all. I was willing to jettison Stullin's partial good to be rid of the rest.

We sat in the small sunroom at the back of his house, and he was questioning me about what interests I would pursue in my forthcoming classes. He had a good working knowledge of classical music and had told me at one of our earliest meetings that he'd studied the piano when he was younger. He had a weakness for the Romantics, but I didn't hold it against him. Somewhere in the midst of our discussion I simply blurted out the details of my experiences with coffee ice cream and the resultant appearances

of Anna. He was obviously taken aback. He leaned forward in his chair and slowly went through the procedure of lighting a cigarette.

"You know," he said, releasing a cascade of smoke, the aroma of which always manifested itself for me in the faint sound of a mosquito, "that is quite unusual. I don't believe there has ever been a case of a synesthetic vision achieving a figurative resemblance. They are always abstract. Shapes, colours, yes, but never an image of an object, not to mention a person."

"I know it's the synesthesia," I said. "I can feel it. The exact same experience as when I summon colours from my keyboard."

"And you say she always appears in relation to your eating ice cream?" he asked, squinting.

"Coffee ice cream," I said.

This made him laugh briefly, but his smile soon diminished, and he brought his free hand up to stroke his beard. I knew this action to be a sign of his concern. "What you are describing to me would be, considering the current medical literature, a hallucination."

I shrugged.

"Still," he went on, "the fact that it is always related to your tasting the ice cream, and that you can identify an associated noetic feeling, I'd have to agree with you that it seems related to your condition."

"I knew it was unusual," I said. "I was afraid to mention it."

"No, no, it's good that you did. The only thing troubling me about it is that I am too aware of your desire to connect with another person your age. To be honest, it has all of the earmarks of a wish fulfilment that points back to a kind of hallucination. Look, you don't need this distraction now. You're beginning your life, you are moving on, and there is every indication that you'll be successful in your art. When the other students at the Conservatory understand your abilities, you'll make friends, believe me. It won't be like high school. Chasing this insubstantial image could impede your progress. Let it go."

And so, not without a large measure of regret, I did. To an extent, Stullin was right



about Gelsbeth. It wasn't like high school, and I did make the acquaintance of quite a few like-minded people with whom I could at least connect on the subject of music. I wasn't the only odd fish in that pond, believe me. To be a young person with an overriding interest in Bach or Mozart or Scriabin was its own eccentricity for those times. The place was extremely competitive, and I took the challenge. My fledgling musical compositions were greeted with great interest by the faculty, and I garnered a degree of notoriety when one day a fellow student discovered me composing a chamber piece for violins and cello using my set of crayons. I would always work in my corresponding synesthetic colours and then transpose the work, scoring it in normal musical notation.

The years flew by, and I believe they were the most rewarding of my entire life. I rarely went home to visit, save on holidays when the school was closed, even though it was only a brief train ride from the city. The professors were excellent but unforgiving of laziness and error. It wasn't a labour for me to meet their expectations. For the first time in my life, I felt what it meant to play, an activity I'd never experienced in childhood. The immersion in great music, the intricate analysis of its soul, kept me constantly engaged, filled with a sense of wonder.

Then, in my last year, I became eligible to participate in a competition for composers. There was a large cash prize, and the winner's work would be performed at a concert in the city's symphony hall by a well-known musician. The difficulty of being a composer was always the near-impossibility of getting one's work performed by competent musicians in a public venue. The opportunity presented by the competition was one I couldn't let slip away. More important than the money or the accolades would be a kind of recognition that would bring me to the attention of potential patrons who might commission a work. I knew that it was time to finally compose the fugue I'd had in mind for so many years. The utter complexity of the form, I believed, would be the best way to showcase all of my talents.

When it came time to begin the composition of the fugue, I took the money I'd made tutoring young musicians on the weekends and put it toward renting a beach house out on Varion Island for two weeks. In the summers the place was a bustling tourist spot for the wealthy, with a small central town that could be termed quaint. In those months, I wouldn't have been able to touch the price of the lowliest dwelling for a single day's rent. It was the heart of winter, though, when I took a leave from the school, along with crayons, books, a small tape player, and fled by way of bus and cab to my secret getaway.

The house I came to wasn't one of the grand wooden mansions on stilts that lined the road along the causeway, but instead a small bungalow, much like a concrete bunker. It was painted an off-putting yellow that tasted to me for all the world like cauliflower. It sat atop a small rise, and its front window faced the ocean, giving me a sublime view of the dunes and beach. What's more, it was within walking distance of the tiny village. There was sufficient heat, a telephone, a television, a kitchen with all the appliances, and I instantly felt as at home there as I had anywhere in my life. The island itself was deserted. On my first day, I walked down to the ocean and along the shore the mile and a half to the eastern point and then back by way of the main road, passing empty houses, and I saw no one.

I'd been told over the phone by the realtor that the diner in town and a small shop that sold cigarettes and newspapers stayed open through the winter. Thankfully, she was right, for without the diner, I would have starved.

The setting of the little bungalow was deliciously melancholic, and for my sensibilities that meant conducive to work. I could hear the distant breaking of waves and, above that, the winter wind blowing sand against the window glass, but these were not distractions. Instead, they were the components of a silence that invited one to dream wide awake, to let the imagination open, and so I dove into the work straightaway. On the first afternoon, I began recording in my notebook my overall plan for the fugue.

I'd decided that it would have only two voices. Of course, some had been composed with as many as eight, but I did not want to be ostentatious. Showing reserve is as important a trait of technical mastery as is that of complexity.

I already had the melodic line of the subject, which had been a cast off from another project I'd worked on earlier in the year. Even though I decided it was not right for the earlier piece, I couldn't forget it and kept revising it here and there, playing it over and over. In the structure of a fugue, one posits the melodic line or subject, and then there is an answer (counterpoint), a reiteration of that line with differing degrees of variation, so that what the listener hears is like a dialogue (or a voice and its echo) of increasing complexity. After each of the voices has entered the piece, there is an episode that leads to the re-entry of the voices and given answers, now in different keys. I had planned to use a technique called *stretto*, in which the answers, as they are introduced, overlap somewhat the original subject lines. This allows for a weaving of the voices so as to create an intricate tapestry of sound.

All this would be difficult to compose but nothing outlandishly original. It was my design, though, to impress the judges by trying something new. Once the fugue had reached its greatest state of complication, I wanted the piece to slowly, almost logically at first, but then without rhyme or meter, crumble into chaos. At the very end, from that chaotic cacophony, there would emerge one note, drawn out to great length, which would eventually diminish into nothing.

For the first week, the work went well. I took a little time off every morning and evening for a walk on the beach. At night I would go to the diner and then return to the bungalow to listen to Bach's *Art of the Fugue* or *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*, some Brahms, Haydn, Mozart, and then pieces from the inception of the form by composers like Sweelinck and Froberger. I employed the crayons on a large piece of good drawing paper, and although to anyone else it would not look like musical notation, I knew exactly how it

would sound when I viewed it. Somewhere after the first week, though, I started to slow down, and by Saturday night my work came to a grinding halt. What I'd begun with such a clear sense of direction had me trapped. I was lost in my own complexity. The truth was, I was exhausted and could no longer pick apart the threads of the piece – the subject, the answer, the counter-subject snarled like a ball of yarn.

I was thoroughly weary and knew I needed rest, but even though I went to bed and closed my eyes, I couldn't sleep. All day Sunday, I sat in a chair and surveyed the beach through the front window. I was too tired to work but too frustrated about not working to sleep. That evening, after having done nothing all day, I stumbled down to the diner and took my usual seat. The place was empty save for one old man sitting in the far corner, reading a book while eating his dinner. This solitary character looked somewhat like Stullin for his white beard, and at first glance, had I not known better, I could've sworn the book he was reading was *The Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer*. I didn't want to get close enough to find out for fear he might strike up a conversation.

The waitress came and took my order. When she was finished writing on her pad, she said, "You look exhausted tonight."

I nodded.

"You need to sleep," she said.

"I have work to do," I told her.

"Well, then, let me bring you some coffee."

I laughed. "You know, I've never had a cup of coffee in my life," I said.

"Impossible," she said. "It looks to me like tonight might be a good time to start."

"I'll give it a try," I told her, and this seemed to make her happy.

While I ate, I glanced through my notebook and tried to re-establish for myself the architecture of the fugue. As always, when I looked at my notes, everything was crystal clear, but when it came time to continue on the score, every potential further step seemed the

wrong way to go. Somewhere in the midst of my musing, I pushed my plate away and drew toward me the cup and saucer. My usual drink was tea, and I'd forgotten I had changed my order. I took a sip, and the dark, bitter taste of black coffee startled me. I looked up, and there was Anna, staring at me, having just lowered a cup away from her lips. In her eyes I saw a glint of recognition, as if she were actually seeing me, and I'm sure she saw the same in mine.

I whispered, "I see you."

She smiled. "I see you too," she said.

I would have been less surprised if a dog had spoken to me. Sitting dumbfounded, I reached slowly out toward where she seemed to sit across from me in the booth. As my hand approached, she leaned back away from it.

"I've been watching you for years," she said.

"The coffee?" I said.

She nodded. "You are a synesthete, am I right?"

"Yes," I said. "But you're a figment of my imagination, a product of a neurological anomaly."

Here she laughed out loud. "No," she said, "you are."

After our initial exchange, neither of us spoke. I was in a mild state of shock, I believe. "This can't be," I kept repeating in my mind, but there she was, and I could hear her breathing. Her image appeared even sharper than it had previously under the influence of the coffee ice cream. And now, with the taste that elicited her presence uncompromised by cream and sugar and the cold, she remained without dissipating for a good few minutes before beginning to mist at the edges and I had to take another sip to sharpen the focus. When I brought my cup up to drink, she also did at the same exact time, as if she were a reflection, as if I were her reflection, and we both smiled.

"I can't speak to you where I am. They'll think I've lost my mind," I whispered.

"I'm in the same situation," she said.

"Give me a half hour and then have another cup of coffee, and I'll be able to speak to you in private."

She nodded in agreement and watched as I called for the check.

By the time the waitress arrived at my booth, Anna had dissolved into a vague cloud, like the exhalation of a smoker. It didn't matter, as I knew she couldn't be seen by anyone else. As my bill was being tallied, I ordered three cups of coffee to go.

"That coffee is something, isn't it?" said the waitress. "I swear by it. Amazing you've never had any up to this point. My blood is three-quarters coffee, I drink so much of it," she said.

"Wonderful stuff," I agreed.

Wonderful it was, for it had awakened my senses, and I walked through the freezing, windy night, carrying in a box my containers of elixir, with all the joy of a child leaving school on Friday afternoon. The absurdity of the whole affair didn't escape me, and I laughed out loud remembering my whispered plan to wait a half hour and then drink another cup. The conspiratorial nature of it excited me, and I realized for the first time since seeing her that Anna had matured and grown more beautiful in the years I had forsaken her.

Back at the bungalow, I put the first of the large Styrofoam containers into the microwave in the kitchen and heated it for no more than thirty seconds. I began to worry that perhaps in Anna's existence time was altogether different and a half hour for me might be two or three or a day for her. The instant the bell sounded on the appliance, I took the cup out, seated myself at the small kitchen table and drank a long draught of the dark potion. Before I could put the cup down, she was there, sitting in the seat opposite me.

"I know your name is Anna," I said to her. "I saw it on one of your drawing pads."

She flipped her hair behind her ear on the left side and asked, "What's yours?"

"William," I said. Then I told her about the coffee ice cream and the first time I encountered her image.

"I remember," she said, "when I was a child of nine, I snuck a sip of my father's coffee he had left in the living room, and I saw you sitting at a piano. I thought you were a ghost."

I ran to get my mother to show her, but when I returned you'd vanished. She thought little of it since the synesthesia was always prompting me to describe things that made no sense to her."

"When did you realize it was the coffee?" I asked.

"Oh, some time later. I again was given a taste of it at breakfast one morning, and there you were, sitting at our dining room table, looking rather forlorn. It took every ounce of restraint not to blurt out that you were there. Then it started to make sense to me. After that, I would try to see you as much as possible. You were often very sad when you were younger. I know that."

The look on her face, one of true concern for me, almost brought tears to my eyes. She was a witness to my life. I hadn't been as alone as I had always thought.

"You're a terrific artist," I said.

She smiled. "I'm great with a pencil, but my professors are demanding a piece in colour. That's what I'm working on now."

Intermittently in the conversation we'd stop and take sips of coffee to keep the connection vital. As it turned out, she too had escaped her normal routine and taken a place in order to work on a project for her final portfolio review. We discovered all manner of synchronicities between our lives. She admitted to me that she'd also been a loner as a child and that her parents had a hard time dealing with her synesthetic condition. As she put it, "Until we discovered the reality of it, I think they thought I was crazy." She laughed, but I could tell by the look in her eyes how deeply it had affected her.

"Have you ever told anyone about me?" I asked.

"Only my therapist," she said. "I was relieved when he told me he'd heard of rare cases like mine."

This revelation brought me up short, for Stullin had told me he had never encountered anything of the sort in the literature. The implications of this inconsistency momentarily reminded me that she was not real, but I quickly shoved the notion from my thoughts and continued the conversation.

That night, by parsing out the coffee I had, and she doing the same, we stayed together until two in the morning, telling each other about our lives, our creative ideas, our dreams for the future. We found that our synesthetic experiences were similar and that our sense impressions were often transposed with the same results. For instance, for both her and me, the aroma of new-mown grass was circular and the sound of a car horn tasted of citrus. She told me that her father was an amateur musician who loved the piano and classical music. In the middle of my recounting for her the intricacies of the fugue I was planning, she suddenly looked up from her cup and said, "Oh no, I'm out of coffee." I looked down at my own cup and realized I'd just taken the last sip.

"Tomorrow at noon," she said as her image weakened.

"Yes," I yelled, afraid she wouldn't hear me.

Then she became a phantom, a miasma, a notion, and I was left staring at the wall of the kitchen. With her gone, I could not sit still for long. All the coffee I'd drunk was coursing through me, and because my frail system had never before known the stimulant, my hands literally shook from it. I knew sleep was out of the question, so after walking around the small rooms of the bungalow for an hour, I sat down to my fugue to see what I could do.

Immediately, I picked up the trail of where I had been headed before Saturday's mental block had set in. Everything was piercingly clear to me, and I could hear the music I was noting in various colours as if there were a tape of the piece I was creating playing as I created it. I worked like a demon, quickly, unerringly, and the ease with which the answers to the musical problems presented themselves gave me great confidence and made my decisions ingenious. Finally, around eight in the morning (I hadn't noticed the sunrise), the coffee took its toll on me, and I became violently ill. The stomach pains, the headache, were excruciating. At ten, I vomited, and that relieved the symptoms somewhat. At eleven AM, I was at the diner, buying another four cups of coffee.

The waitress tried to interest me in breakfast, but I said I wasn't hungry. She told

me I didn't look well, and I tried to laugh off her concern. When she pressed the matter, I made some surly comment to her that I can't now remember, and she understood I was interested in nothing but the coffee. I took my hoard and went directly to the beach. The temperature was milder that day, and the fresh air cleared my head. I sat in the shelter of a deep hollow amidst the dunes to block the wind, drank, and watched Anna at work, wherever she was, on her project – a large, colourful abstract drawing. After spying on her for a few minutes, I realized that the composition of the piece, its arrangement of colour, presented itself to me as the melodic line of *Symphony no. 8 in B Minor*, by Franz Schubert. This amused me at first, to think that my own musical knowledge was inherent in the existence of her world, that my imagination was its essence. What was also interesting was that such a minor interest of mine, Schubert, should manifest itself. I supposed that any aspect of my life, no matter how minor, was fodder for this imaginative process. It struck me just as quickly, though, that I didn't want this to be so. I wanted her to be apart from me, her own separate entity, for without that, what would her friendship mean? I physically shook my head to rid myself of the idea. When at noon she appeared next to me in my nest among the dunes, I'd already managed to forget this worm in the apple.

We spent the morning together talking and laughing, strolling along the edge of the ocean, climbing on the rocks at the point. When the coffee ran low around three, we returned to the diner for me to get more. I asked them to make me two whole pots and just pour them into large, plastic take-out containers. The waitress said nothing but shook her head. In the time I was on my errand, Anna, in her own world, brewed another vat of it.

We met up back at my bungalow, and as evening came on, we took out our respective projects and worked together, across from each other at the kitchen table. In her presence, my musical imagination was on fire, and she admitted to me that she saw for the first time the overarching structure of her drawing and

where she was headed with it. At one point, I became so immersed in the work, I reached out and picked up what I thought would be one of my crayons but instead turned out to be a violet pastel. I didn't own pastels, Anna did.

"Look," I said to her, and at that moment felt a wave of dizziness pass over me. A headache was beginning behind my eyes.

She lifted her gaze from her work and saw me holding the violet stick. We both sat quietly, in awe of its implications. Slowly, she put her hand out across the table toward me. I dropped the pastel and reached toward her. Our hands met, and I swear I could feel her fingers entangled with mine.

"What does this mean, William?" she said with a note of fear in her voice and let go of me.

As I stood up, I lost my balance and needed to support myself by clutching the back of the chair. She also stood, and as I approached her, she backed away. "No, this isn't right," she said.

"Don't worry," I whispered. "It's me." I took two wobbly steps and drew so close to her I could smell her perfume. She cringed but did not try to get away. I put my arms around her and attempted to kiss her.

"No," she cried. Then I felt the force of both her hands against my chest, and I stumbled backward onto the floor. "I don't want this. It's not real," she said and began to hurriedly gather her things.

"Wait, I'm sorry," I said. I tried to scabble to my feet, and that's when the sum total of my lack of sleep, the gallons of caffeine, the fraying of my nerves, came together like the twining voices in a fugue and struck me in the head as if I had been kicked by a horse. My body was shaking, my vision grew hazy, and I could feel myself phasing in and out of consciousness. I managed to watch Anna turn and walk away as if passing through the living room. Somehow I got to my feet and followed her, using the furniture as support. The last thing I remember was flinging open the front door of the small house and screaming her name.

I was found the next morning, lying on the beach, unconscious. It was the old man



with the white beard from the diner, who, on his daily early-morning beachcombing expedition, came across me. The police were summoned. An ambulance was called. I came to in a hospital bed the next day, the warm sun, smelling of antique rose, streaming through a window onto me.

They kept me at the small shore hospital two days for psychological observation. A psychiatrist visited me, and I managed to convince him that I'd been working too hard on a project for school. Apparently the waitress at the diner had told the police that I'd been consuming ridiculous amounts of coffee and going without sleep. Word of this had gotten back to the doctor who attended to me. When I told him it was the first time I had tried coffee and that I'd gotten carried away, he warned me to stay off it, telling me they found me in a puddle of my own vomit. "It obviously disagrees with your system. You could've choked to death when you passed out." I thanked him for his advice and promised him I'd stay well away from it in the future.

In the days I was at the hospital, I tried to process what had happened with Anna. Obviously, my bold advance had frightened her. It crossed my mind that it might be better to leave her alone in the future. The very fact that I was sure I'd made physical contact with her was, in retrospect, unsettling. I wondered if perhaps Stullin was right, and what I perceived to be a result of synesthesia was actually a psychotic hallucination. I left it an open issue in my mind as to whether I would seek her out again. One more meeting might be called for, I thought, at least to simply apologize for my mawkish behaviour.

I asked the nurse if my things from the beach house had been brought to the hospital, and she told me they had. I spent the entirety of my last day there dressed and waiting to get the okay for my release. That afternoon, they brought me my belongings. I went carefully through everything, but it became obvious to me that my crayon score for the fugue was missing. Everything else was accounted for, but there was no large sheet of drawing paper.

I asked the nurse, who was very kind, actually reminding me somewhat of Mrs Brithnic, to double-check and see if everything had been brought to me. She did and told me there was nothing else. I called the Varion Island police on the pretence of thanking them and asked if they had seen the drawing. My fugue had vanished. I knew a grave depression would descend upon me soon due to its disappearance, but for the moment I was numb and slightly pleased to merely be alive.

I decided to return to my parents' house for a few days and rest up before returning to the conservatory in order to continue my studies. In the bus station near the hospital, while I was waiting, I went to the small newspaper stand in order to get a pack of gum and a paper with which to pass the time. As I perused the candy rack, my sight lighted upon something that made me feel the way Eve must have when she first saw the apple, for there was a bag of Thompson's Coffee-Flavoured Hard Candy. The moment I read the words on the bag, I reached for them. There was a spark in my solar plexus, and my palms grew damp. *No Caffeine* the package read, and I was hard-pressed to believe my good fortune. I looked nervously over my shoulder while purchasing three bags of them, and when, on the bus, I tore a bag open, I did so with such violence, a handful of them scattered across the seat and into the aisle.

I arrived by cab at my parent's house and had to let myself in. Their car was gone, and I supposed they were out for the day. I hadn't seen them in some months and almost missed their presence. When night descended and they didn't return, I thought it odd but surmised they were on one of the short vacations they often took. It didn't matter. I sat at my old home base on the piano bench and sucked on coffee-flavoured hard candies until I grew too weary to sit up. Then I got into my childhood bed, turned to face the wall as I always had when I was little, and fell asleep.

The next day, after breakfast, I resumed my vigil that had begun on the long bus trip home. By that afternoon my suspicions as to what had become of my fugue were confirmed. The candy

did not bring as clear a view of Anna as did the ice cream, let alone the black coffee, but it was focused enough for me to follow her through her day. I was there when she submitted my crayon score as her art project for the end-of-the-semester review. How she was able to appropriate it, I have no idea. It defied logic. In the fleeting glimpses I got of the work, I tried to piece together how I'd gone about weaving the subjects and their answers. The second I would see it, the music would begin to sound for me, but I never got a good-enough look at it to sort out the complex structure of the piece. The two things I was certain of were that the fugue had been completed right up to the point where it was supposed to fall into chaos, and that Anna did quite well with her review because of it.

By late afternoon, I'd come to the end of my Thompson's candies and had but one left. Holding it in my hand, I decided it would be the last time I would conjure a vision of Anna. I came to the conclusion that her theft of my work had cancelled out my untoward advance, and we were now even, so to speak. I would leave her behind as I had before, but this time for good. With my decision made, I opened the last of the hard confections and placed it on my tongue. That dark, amber taste slowly spread through my mouth, and, as it did, a cloudy image formed and crystallized into focus. She had the cup to her mouth, and her eyes widened as she saw me seeing her.

"William," she said. "I was hoping to see you one more time."

"I'm sure," I said, trying to seem diffident, but just hearing her voice made me weak.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked. "I saw what happened to you. I was with you on the beach all that long night but could not reach you."

"My fugue," I said. "You took it."

She smiled. "It's not yours. Let's not kid ourselves; you know you are merely a projection of my synesthetic process."

"Who is a projection of whose?" I asked.

"You're nothing more than my muse," she said.

I wanted to contradict her, but I didn't have the meanness to subvert her belief in her

own reality. Of course, I could have brought up the fact that she was told that figurative synesthesia was a known version of the disease. This was obviously not true. Also, there was the fact that her failed drawing, the one she'd abandoned for mine, was based on Schubert's Eighth, a product of my own knowledge working through her. How could I convince her she wasn't real? She must've seen the doubt in my eyes, because she became defensive in her attitude. "I'll not see you again," she said. "My therapist has given me a pill he says will eradicate my synesthesia. We have that here, in the true reality. It's already begun to work. I no longer hear my cigarette smoke as the sound of a faucet dripping. Green no longer tastes of lemon. The ring of the telephone doesn't feel like burlap."

This pill was the final piece of evidence. A pill to cure synesthesia? "You may be harming yourself," I said, "by taking that drug. If you cut yourself off from me, you may cease to exist. Perhaps we are meant to be together." I felt a certain panic at the idea that she would lose her special perception, and I would lose the only friend I had ever had who understood my true nature.

"Dr Stullin says it will not harm me, and I will be like everyone else. Good-bye, William," she said and pushed the coffee cup away from her.

"Stullin," I said. "What do you mean, Stullin?"

"My therapist," she said, and although I could still see her before me, I could tell I had vanished from her view. As I continued to watch, she lowered her face into her hands and appeared to be crying. Then my candy turned from the thinnest sliver into nothing but saliva, and I swallowed. A few seconds more, and she was completely gone.

It was three in the afternoon when I put my coat on and started across town to Stullin's place. I had a million questions, and foremost was whether or not he treated a young woman named Anna. My thoughts were so taken by my last conversation with her that when I arrived in front of the doctor's walkway, I realized I had not noticed the sun go down. It was as

if I had walked in my sleep and awakened at his address. The street was completely empty of people or cars, reminding me of Varion Island. I took the steps up to his front door and knocked. It was dark inside except for a light on the second floor, but the door was slightly ajar, which I thought odd, given it was the middle of the winter. Normally, I would have turned around and gone home after my third attempt to get his attention, but there was too much I needed to discuss.

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. “Dr Stullin,” I called. There was no answer. “Doctor?” I tried again and then made my way through the foyer to the room where the tables were stacked with paper. In the meagre light coming in through the window, I found a lamp and turned it on. I continued to call out as I went from room to room, turning on lights, heading for the sunroom at the back of the place where we always had our meetings. When I reached that room, I stepped inside, and my foot came down on something alive. There was a sudden screech that nearly made my heart stop, and then I saw the black-and-white cat, whose tail I had trod upon, race off into another room.

It was something of a comfort to be again in that plant-filled room. The sight of it brought back memories of it as the single safe place in the world when I was younger. Oddly enough, there was a cigarette going in the ashtray on the table between the two chairs that faced each other. Lying next to it, opened to the middle and turned down on its pages, was a copy of *The Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer*. I’d have preferred to see a ghost to that book. The sight of it chilled me. I sat down in my old seat and watched the smoke from the cigarette swirl up toward the glass panes. Almost instantly, a great weariness seized me, and I closed my eyes.

That was days ago. When I found the next morning I could not open the doors to leave, that I could not even break the glass in order to crawl out, it became clear to me what was happening. At first I was frantic, but then a certain calm descended upon me, and I learned

to accept my fate. Those stacks of paper in that room on the way to the sunroom – each sheet held a beautiful pencil drawing. I explored the upstairs, and there, on the second floor, found a piano and the sheet music for Bach’s *Grosse Fugue*. There was a black-and-white photograph of Mrs Brithnic in the upstairs hallway and one of my parents standing with Anna as a child.

That hallway, those rooms, are gone, vanished. Another room has disappeared each day I have been trapped here. I sit in Stullin’s chair now, in the only room still remaining (this one will be gone before tonight), and compose this tale – in a way, my fugue. The black-and-white cat sits across from me, having fled from the dissipation of the house as it closes in around us. Outside, the garden, the trees, the sky, have all lost their colour and now appear as if rendered in graphite – wonderfully shaded to give them an appearance of weight and depth. So too with the room around us: the floor, the glass panels, the chairs, the plants, even the cat’s tail and my shoes and legs have lost their life and become the shaded grey of a sketch. I imagine Anna will soon be free of her condition. As for me, who always believed himself to be unwanted, unloved, misunderstood, I will surpass being a mere artist and become instead a work of art that will endure. The cat meows loudly, and I feel the sound as a hand upon my shoulder.

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*I wouldn’t normally cite resource material for a story; but in the writing of “The Empire of Ice Cream” I was dealing with concepts I was not readily very familiar with. For information on the condition of synesthesia, I turned to The Man Who Tasted Shapes, by Richard E. Cytowic. The Art of Fugue, by Alfred Mann, was a great help in understanding the history and architecture of this unusual musical form. I first came across the condition of figurative synesthesia in Thackery T. Lambshead’s Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases. – JF*



## Meet the Sofanauts

MICHAEL MOORCOCK is one of Britain's best-known and most respected novelists. He became editor of *Tarzan Adventures* in 1956, at the age of sixteen. He has also been the editor of the very influential magazine *New Worlds* on two occasions. His serialization of Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron* was notorious for causing British MPs to condemn in Parliament the Arts Council's funding of the magazine. He started winning awards in 1967 for his novella *Behold The Man* and has kept winning awards throughout his career. In 2008, he was awarded the SFWA Grand Master Award. In 2006, StarShipSofa flew over to Paris to video interview Michael Moorcock. You can find that interview by searching on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). The story *London Bone* was the first story StarShipSofa ran as part of her Aural Delights audio magazine. At present Michael Moorcock has had six stories narrated on StarShipSofa. [www.multiverse.org](http://www.multiverse.org)

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ADAM KOFORD is an improbably prolific cartoonist who has been involved in several projects, including *700 Hoboes* and *Conan vs. Bear*. He has been featured on Boing Boing TV and is a regular contributor to [www.Drawn.ca](http://www.Drawn.ca). He resides in Utah. His work can be found at [www.adamkoford.com](http://www.adamkoford.com)

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KEN SCHOLES grew up in a trailer outside a smallish logging town not far from the base of Mount Rainier in the Pacific Northwest. After an

unfortunate event involving feral llamas and tapioca pudding, Ken put away his typewriter to pursue other interests. Like many writers before him, he worked a number of jobs. After being a sailor, soldier, clergyman, and label-gun repairman, he eventually landed in non-profit management. After eleven years as an Executive Director, Ken recently moved into public procurement for a government agency. He has a degree in History from Western Washington University. In 1997, Ken returned to writing and submitting speculative fiction. Ken made his first short fiction sale. More sales followed. In 2001, his short story *Edward Bear and the Very Long Walk* picked up scattered award recommendations and honourable mentions, including honourable mention in Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction*. His short story *Into the Blank Where Life is Hurdled* won 3rd place in the 4th quarter of 2005 in the *Writers of the Future* contest. His novel *Lamentation* was published in 2009 and was based on a previous short story entitled *Of Metal Men and Scarlet Thread and Dancing with the Sunrise*. It is the first of five in the *Psalms of Isaac* saga. Book two, *Canticle*, from Tor will be released in October 2009. Ken lives with his wife and twin daughters just outside Portland. He invites readers to look him up at [www.kenscholes.com](http://www.kenscholes.com).

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ELIZABETH BEAR is the winner of the 2005 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, the 2008 Hugo for *Tideline*, and the 2009 Hugo for *Shoggoths In Bloom*, which StarShipSofa has also narrated. Bear has had many jobs before settling down to be a full-time writer; these include working as a "media industry professional," a stablehand, a fluff-page reporter, a maintainer of Microbiology procedure manuals for a 1,000-bed inner-city hospital, a typesetter and layout editor, a traffic manager for an import-export business, Emmanuel Labour, and "the girl who makes the donuts at The Whole Donut at three AM." Her first novel, *Hammered*, was published in January 2005 and was followed by *Scardown* in July and *Worldwired* in November of the same year. The trilogy features

Canadian Master Warrant Officer Jenny Casey, who is also the main character in the short story *Gone to Flowers*. *Hammered* won the Locus Award for Best First Novel in 2006. *The Chains That You Refuse*, a collection of her short fiction was published May 2006. She is also a co-author of the ongoing *Shadow Unit* website/pseudo-TV series. Find out more about Elizabeth Bear at [www.elizabethbear.com](http://www.elizabethbear.com) or at StarShipSofa.

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ANTON EMDIN has drawn for numerous magazines, including *Rolling Stone*, *People*, *Penthouse*, and *MAD*. As well as doodling comic art and cartoons, he works with the Drawing Book illustration agency to produce character design and illustrated type for commercial projects. When he's not drawing Anton relaxes in his jelly-filled, Olympic-sized swimming pool, being fed meat pies and beer by buxom beauties bearing bare breasts beneath brown bearskin bikinis. He is also a fan of alliteration, but hates swizzle sticks. You can view more of Anton's work at [www.antonemdin.com](http://www.antonemdin.com)

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MICHAEL BISHOP was born in Lincoln, Nebraska. Because his father served in the United States Air Force, he spent his younger years as, yes, a "military brat." Later, he attended the University of Georgia and in 1967 earned his B.A. with Phi Beta Kappa honours. In 1968, he earned a master's degree in English with a thesis on the poetry of Dylan Thomas. His first fiction sale was *Piñon Fall*, published in *Galaxy* in 1969 for the grand sum of \$100. He has since published 17 novels, 7 story collections, and a volume of poetry, and has edited or co-edited 7 anthologies, including, most recently, *Passing for Human* (PS Publishing) with Steven Utley. In 1996, Bishop became writer-in-residence at LaGrange College. Early on, Bishop and British author Ian Watson collaborated on a novel, *Under Heaven's Bridge*, set in the universe of one of Bishop's earlier works. Under the joint pseudonym Philip Lawson,

he and Paul Di Filippo have also written two mystery novels, *Would It Kill You to Smile?* and *Muskrat Courage*. Bishop has twice won the Nebula: in 1981 for *The Quickening* (Best Novelette) and in 1982 for *No Enemy But Time* (Best Novel). His novel *Unicorn Mountain* received the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award in 1988, and he has also received four Locus Awards, including one for Best Fantasy Novel for *Brittle Innings* in 1994. Further, on many occasions, his work has appeared on the final Hugo ballot, and two of his stories, *The Door Gunner* and *Bears Discover Smut*, won the Southeastern Science Fiction Association Award for Best Short Fiction. In July 2009, *The Pile*, based on notes left behind by his late son, Jamie, received the Shirley Jackson Award for Best Short Story of 2008. (Jamie, a German instructor and a talented digital artist who did covers for several of his father's books, died during the Virginia Tech massacre on April 16, 2007). Bishop's collaboration with Steven Utley, *The City Quiet as Death*, was published in June 2009 on Tor.com. This piece has been touted as an moving commingling of magic realism, Lovecraftian horror, and science fiction. Find out more about Michael Bishop at [www.michaelbishop-writer.com](http://www.michaelbishop-writer.com)

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SPIDER ROBINSON made his first short-story sale in 1972 to *Analog Science Fiction magazine*. The story, *The Guy With The Eyes*, was set in a bar called Callahan's Place; Spider would often write stories about the denizens of Callahan's well into the 21st century. He sold several short-story sales to *Analog*, *Galaxy Science Fiction* magazine, and others, and worked as a book reviewer for *Galaxy* magazine during the mid-to-late 1970s. He has won many awards including the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer (1974), three Hugos, for *By Any Other Name*, *Stardance* (with his wife Jeanne Robinson), and *Melancholy Elephants*. He also won a Nebula for *Stardance*. In 2006, he became the only writer ever to collaborate on a novel with First GrandMaster of Science Fiction



Robert A. Heinlein, posthumously completing *Variable Star*. Then he went on to win the 2008 the Robert A. Heinlein Award (Lifetime Achievement). Most of his 36 books are still in print, in 10 languages. As an audiobook reader of his own and others' work, he has won the Earphones Award and been a finalist for the Audie, and his podcast *Spider On The Web* has appeared online weekly since September 2007. In 2001, he released *Belaboring the Obvious*, a CD featuring original music accompanied by guitar legend Amos Garrett. He has written songs in collaboration with David Crosby and with Todd Butler. Find out all about Spider at [www.spiderrobinson.com](http://www.spiderrobinson.com) or listen to Spider read his own stories at StarShipSofa.

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GORD SELLAR was born in Malawi, grew up in Saskatchewan, and currently lives and works as a professor of English Language & Culture in South Korea. Since attending Clarion West in 2006, his work has appeared in such venues as *Asimov's SF*, *Interzone*, *Clarkesworld*, *Fantasy*; and *The Year's Best SF Vol. 26*, edited by Gardner Dozois, and in 2009 he was a nominee for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. You can check out more of Gord Sellar over at [www.gordseller.com](http://www.gordseller.com) or listen to *Lester Young and the Jupiter's Moons' Blues* over at StarShipSofa's Aural Delights No 71.

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LAWRENCE SANTORO began writing darkly fantastic tales at age five. As associate producer of the syndicated television series, *Hyde & Seeker*, Larry wrote, directed and supervised production during the comedy/mystery show's first season. In 2001, the Horror Writers Association nominated his novella *God Screamed and Screamed, Then I Ate Him* for a Bram Stoker Award. In 2002, his audio adaptation of Gene Wolfe's *The Tree Is My Hat* garnered him his second Stoker nod. His Stoker-recommended *Catching* received Honourable Mention in Ellen Datlow's 17th Annual *Year's*

*Best Fantasy and Horror* anthology in 2003. Next year, his story *So Many Tiny Mouths* was cited in the anthology's 18th edition. His first novel, *Just North of Nowhere*, was published by Annihilation Press in 2007. His novella *At Angels Sixteen* appeared in 2008 in the anthology *A Dark and Deadly Valley*. Larry lives and works in Chicago and is currently working on a second novel, *The Bright Dreams of Children*. [www.blufftoninthedriftless.blogspot.com](http://www.blufftoninthedriftless.blogspot.com)

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JOUNI KOPONEN is a Finnish illustrator who provided the art for many of Neil Gaiman's stories including *Shoggoth's Old Peculiar*, *A Study in Emerald*, and *The Day the Saucers Came*. You can check out his work at [www.jounikoponen.com](http://www.jounikoponen.com)

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GENE WOLFE was born in New York. While attending Texas A&M University, he published his first speculative fiction in *The Commentator*, a student literary journal. Wolfe's best-known work is the multi-volume novel *The Book of the New Sun*. Gene Wolfe is highly regarded by all in the genre and considered by many to be one of the best living science fiction authors. He has won the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement and the Edward E. Smith Memorial Award, and he is a member of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

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BOB BYRNE is a writer and artist for *2000AD*. His comics and books can be found at [www.clamnuts.com](http://www.clamnuts.com)

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BENJAMIN ROSENBAUM gives himself many titles as to what his job is: Prosewright, Fictioneer, Genre Pirate; but whatever he goes by, his writing is something special. His stories have been finalists for the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, the Theodore Sturgeon Award,

the BSFA Award, and the World Fantasy Award. Born in New York but raised in Arlington, Virginia, he received degrees in computer science and religious studies from Brown University. He currently lives in Basel, Switzerland with his wife, Esther, and children, Aviva and Noah. Find out more about this Fictioneer over at [www.benjaminrosenbaum.com](http://www.benjaminrosenbaum.com) or listen to *Ant King: A Californian Fairy Tale* on StarShipSofa's Aural Delights No 42.

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STEPHEN G. BOEHME is a Highschool art teacher who runs a small pottery out of his home in Salt Lake City, Utah. He spends his time biking, fishing and drawing with his wife and three children. Stephen listens to SF podcasts and audio-books to make his long commute to work bearable. He has always had a desire to illustrate Science fiction and fantasy books. You can view more examples of his artwork at [www.boehmestudioproductions.com](http://www.boehmestudioproductions.com)

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JOE R LANSDALE has written novels and stories in many genres, including Western, horror, science fiction, mystery, and suspense. He has also written for comics as well as *Batman: The Animated Series*. He is perhaps best known for his *Hap and Leonard* series of novels which feature two friends, Hap Collins and Leonard Pine, who live in the town of Laborde, Texas and find themselves solving a variety of often unpleasant crimes. Joe R. Lansdale is the winner of the British Fantasy Award, the American Horror Award, the Edgar Award, and seven Bram Stoker Awards. Check out more of Joe's work at [www.joerlansdale.com](http://www.joerlansdale.com) or listen to *Godzilla's 12 Step Program* story on show No 52 of StarShipSofa's Aural Delights.

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ALASTAIR REYNOLDS was born in 1966 in Wales. He specialises in dark hard science

fiction and space opera. He spent his early years in Cornwall, and moved back to Wales before going to Newcastle, where he read Physics and Astronomy. In 1991, he moved to Noordwijk in the Netherlands, where he met his wife Josette. There, he worked for the European Space Research and Technology Centre, part of the European Space Agency, until 2004, when he left to pursue writing full time. He returned to Wales in 2008 and lives near Cardiff. He wrote his first four published science fiction short stories while still a graduate student. Al's fiction has received two awards and several other nominations. His second novel, *Chasm City*, won the 2001 British Science Fiction Award for Best Novel. His short story *Weather* won the Japanese National Science Fiction Convention's Seiun Award for Best Translated Short Fiction. His novels *Absolution Gap* and *The Prefect* have also been nominated for previous BSFA awards. Al's been nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award three times, for his novels *Revelation Space*, *Pushing Ice*, and *House of Suns*. In June 2009, Al Reynolds signed a new deal, worth £1 million, with his British publishers for ten books to be published over the next ten years. [www.alastairreynolds.com](http://www.alastairreynolds.com)

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KEN MACLEOD was born in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Scotland, on August 2, 1954. He is married with two children and lives in West Lothian. He has an honours and master's degree in biological subjects and worked for some years in the IT industry. Since 1997 he has been a full-time writer, and is currently Writer in Residence at the ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum at Edinburgh University. He is the author of eleven novels, from *The Star Fraction* (1995) to *The Night Sessions* (2008), and many articles and short stories. His novels have received two BSFA awards and three Prometheus Awards, and several have been short-listed for the Clarke and Hugo Awards. Ken MacLeod's weblog is *The Early Days of a Better Nation* at [www.kenmacleod.blogspot.com](http://www.kenmacleod.blogspot.com)

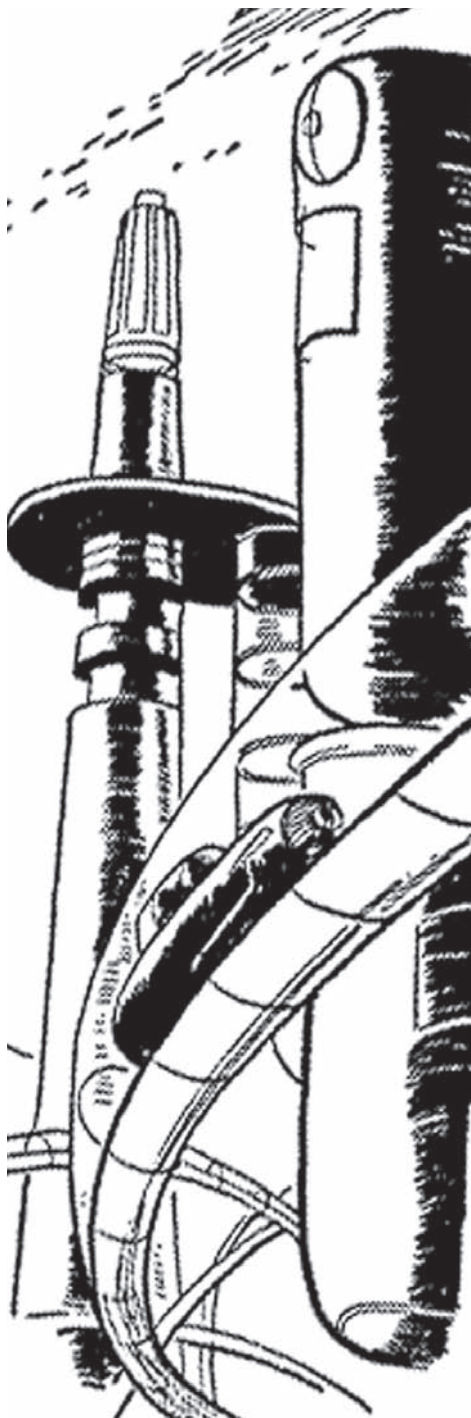
PETER WATTS is an uncomfortable hybrid of biologist and science-fiction author, known for pioneering the technique of appending extensive technical bibliographies onto his novels; this serves both to confer a veneer of credibility and to cover his ass against nitpickers. Described by the *Globe & Mail* as one of the best hard-SF authors alive, his debut novel, *Starfish*, was a *NY Times* Notable Book. His most recent, *Blindsight*, is a philosophical rumination on the nature of consciousness which, despite an unhealthy focus on space vampires, has become a required text in such diverse undergraduate courses as *The Philosophy of Mind* and *Introduction to Neuropsychology*. It made the final ballot for a whole shitload of genre awards, winning exactly none of them (although it has, for some reason, won at least two awards in Poland). This may reflect a certain critical divide regarding Watts' work in general; his bipartite novel *Behemoth*, for example, was praised by *Publisher's Weekly* as an "adrenaline-charged fusion of Clarke's *The Deep Range* and Gibson's *Neuromancer*" and "a major addition to 21st-century hard SF," while being simultaneously decried by Kirkus as "utterly repellent" and "horrific porn." (Watts happily embraces both views.) His work has been extensively translated, and both Watts and (more importantly) his cat have appeared in the prestigious journal *Nature*. Despite the foregoing (or perhaps because of it), the publishing industry does not appear to like him very much. The feeling grows increasingly mutual. [www.rifters.com](http://www.rifters.com)

RUTH NESTVOLD was born in Washington and raised in Oregon, and now lives in Stuttgart, Germany. By day she works as a technical translator, by night as a science fiction, hyper fiction, and fantasy writer. Her first professional publication was *Latency Time*, published in Asimov's *Science Fiction* in 2001. Since then, her short fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including *Realms of Fantasy*, *Sci Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*,

*Futurismic*, and several year's best anthologies. In 2004, her novella *Looking Through Lace* was short-listed for the Tiptree Award and nominated for the Sturgeon Award. The story in this anthology, *Mars: A Traveler's Guide*, was a finalist for the 2008 Nebula Award for Best Short Story. She is also a regular contributor to the *Internet Review of Science Fiction*. Ruth was a graduate of Clarion West Writers Workshop in 1998. You can find Ruth at [www.ruthnestvold.com](http://www.ruthnestvold.com) or listen to *Mars: A Traveler's Guide* over on StarShipSofa's Aural Delights No 73.

JEFFREY FORD'S most recent novels are *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque*, *The Girl in the Glass*, and *The Shadow Year* (all from Harper Collins). His short stories have been collected into two books from Golden Gryphon Press, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant* and *The Empire of Ice Cream*, and a third, *The Drowned Life*, has been published by Harper Collins. In '08 Golden Gryphon rereleased his trilogy, *The Physiognomy*, *Memoranda*, and *The Beyond* with new covers by John Picacio. Ford's stories have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and his work has been awarded The World Fantasy Award, The Nebula, The Edgar Allan Poe Award, The Fountain Award, The Shirley Jackson Award, and Le Grand Prix de l'imaginaire. He lives in South Jersey with his wife and two sons and works as a professor of Writing and Literature at Brookdale Community College. Visit him at [www.well-builtcity.com](http://www.well-builtcity.com)

SKEET SCIENSKI has drawing in his veins. He can't donate blood – all that comes out is ink. Over the years he's been involved in various projects from graffiti banners for local radio stations to tattoos for bikers and babes; from Innova discgolf art to computer illustrations for [www.StarShipSofa.com](http://www.StarShipSofa.com). Contact him at [skeetland@gmail.com](mailto:skeetland@gmail.com) or visit his website at [www.skeetland-art.com](http://www.skeetland-art.com)



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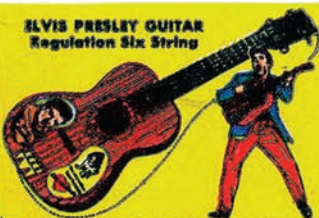
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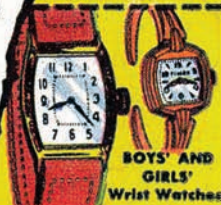
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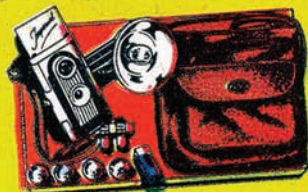
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