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Issue 6

SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

MARIANNE DE PIERRES

BRUCE BOSTON

ARTWORK BY

LYN MCGONCHIE **VINCENT DI FATE**

SIMULACRUM

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THE EDITOR'S DESK

Every editor has a taste for what they like - a design behind the editorial madness and I'm no different. Lynne has temporarily handed the editorial reigns and layout over to me with issue six - *is she nuts... it's like handing your car keys over to a crash test dummy; hopefully, I won't crash and burn* - as she moves into her new home in New Zealand. And I thought what could be better than to kick off this issue with at least one story from a writer from New Zealand: the very talented novelist and tall teller of tales, Lyn McConchie (one of my favorite writers if I do say so myself). And for those of you not familiar with Lyn's work should drop on over to Amazon.com and pick up a copy of the BEASTMASTER'S ARK or the BEASTMASTER'S CIRCUS - or better yet, *BUY* three or four copies of each and send them to friends.

The featured writer for this issue is Marianne de Pierres - she's written a story from her Parrish Plessis series especially for *Simulacrum*. To be honest I never heard of Marianne before Lynne's grateful introduction. This is the only story Lynne picked for this issue and after reading the "Cure" I made a mad dash to the bookstore to buy a copy of NYLON ANGEL and CODE NOIR but quickly found out it can't be found in the States? *The nerve of some publishers...* Thank God for Amazon.com UK once again. The good news is that both books will hit the bookshelves in the States in early 2005.

We also have a story by Sherry D. Ramsey - editor of The Scriptorium, one of the most popular websites for writers on the internet - hands down). Not only that but Sherry can write as you'll soon find out. She has a way with words that seem to drip off the tongue like a fine wine and "Signs & Portents" makes you drool for more.

And once again I feel lucky enough to be publishing Bruce Boston's work. He's the featured poet for this issue along with Thomas Zimmerman, another talent Lynne introduced me to with the last issue of *Simulacrum*. I don't know that much about Thomas's work other than what I've read for this issue and the last and what I found is - something great is brewing over the horizon for this writer. Bruce has won a Pushcart Prize, the Best of Soft SF

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Award, a Bram Stoker Award, and he's also a seven time Rhysling award winner - I imagine I missed a few awards - so Bruce please *forgive*. His talent runs the entire speculative gambit with both fiction and poetry. Novels, short stories, poetry - *what else can this man do?* And if you find you enjoy Bruce's work in this issue - go pick up a copy of PITCHBLEND, Bruce's recent Bram Stoker Winning poetry collection. This is a must have in my book.

Inside you'll also find an interview with the popular Richard Chizmar (the publisher and editor of *Cemetery Dance magazine*, *Grave Tales*, and Cemetery Dance Publications. Richard is the kind of publisher every writer wants to work with no matter the circumstances.

We also have an interview with the world famous artist Vincent Di Fate (which you'll here more about below) and an interview Marianne de Pierres the featured writer for this issue.

And I've saved the best for last - at least for me - artwork by Vincent Di Fate. One the greatest science fiction artists of all time. What more can I say? His work brings me back to the good ol' days when I was ten or eleven and use to hide out in the bathroom daydreaming through the pages of my dad's latest copy of *Amazing* or *Analog*. I loved those covers. You could lose yourself in them; and Vincent has that kind of magic. No doubt.

Trip the light fantastic!

-- Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr (September 2004)

CURE (a Parrish Plessis story)**BY MARIANNE DE PIERRES**

Marianne de Pierres is the author of the Parrish Plessis series. The first book, Nylon Angel, is currently in bookstores. And Code Noir was recently released in July 2004. Her short fiction has appeared in Eidolon and Fables and Reflections, and various book anthologies, including Agog!, Forever Shores and Shelf Life. She has written book reviews and feature articles and is also currently studying for a post-graduate certificate in Writing, Editing and Publishing at the University of Queensland. Marianne is a co-founder of ROR—wRiters On the Road—a critiquing workshop for Australian professional genre writers, and the VISION SFF writers group. She has served on the judging panels of the Aurealis Awards (the Australian awards for speculative fiction) and was integral in the development of Clarion South. Visit her website at www.mariannedepierres.com. Marianne will be GOH at Thylacon (The Australian National Convention) 2005 in Tasmania.

Quoll died under his bed in the dormitory.

I found him there, picked him up and carried him outside to the incinerator.

The rest of the ferals watched me dry eyed and silent. No tears from them. Death happened often enough around here and this kid was from Mo-Vay—one of the ugly halfings already living on loan.

Glida-Jam, the oldest of the Mo-Vay's, pointed to the discharge and swelling in his neck. "What's that Parrish?"

Glida's speech was improving quickly. Not surprising. Her desire to learn bordered on obsession. She spent all her time on language interactives. The younger ones survival depended on her communication—none of them had real language.

Like Quoll.

I'd rescued him and Glida and some others from a living hell only a few clicks away and set them up in a barracks style living with a bunch of local kids. Now he'd died from what looked like an infected neural interface implant.

"It's an infection. From a dirty jack," I said thickly.

The horror on her face ripped me. Glida had lost Roo, the first boy who'd ever looked at her, because I couldn't keep him safe. Now she'd lost one of the children she cared for as her own family.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. I promise."

I knew who was responsible for fitting the dirty jack but stopping them wasn't just a matter of getting in the face of a backroom operator and telling him he was out of order. *The Cure* was a bunch of shady but organised medics who fitted most of the bio-ware you could buy in the Tert. They held hands and scratched balls with a guy called Stenhouse who supplied their hardware. Together they formed some serious opposition.

I'd always had an issue with their practises but as my best friend and ex-lover Teece kept telling me - it was a battle I couldn't win. Sim-stim and Vreal helped keep The Tert's fragile economy afloat. If I upset the balance of it by going on a crusade, I'd have Gigi, the Tert's banker, cutting off my credit.

No credit, no keeping the barracks alive. No barracks and the ferals would end up back in the attics.

This...problem I knew should approach with some finesse.

Parrish Plessis, warlord, was not known for her finesse.

More like her mad berserkers. I could feel one inside me now, welling up at the sight of the small body and Glida's distress.

I placed Quoll gently on the ground, slid back the grate and stoked the fire. When it was roaring I thrust his body in there. His marsupial tail fell back out like a plea. I used my knife to push it in.

There was no place for burials in The Tert unless you wanted to take a trip onto the waste.

No funerals.

No kind words.

Only the dumb misery on Glida's face and an ungovernable rage settling on my chest.

I watched the smoke plume and then die down. With the taste of cremation in my throat I sought my weapon collection for solace.

Raul Minoj, weapons dealer, had recently installed a gun safe in my rooms. For being such a good customer and all round nice grrl he threw in a couple of presents. With everything my life had become I hadn't even had a chance to look at them properly. Right now I craved the feel of something cool and hard and lethal. Maybe it would ease my guilt. Hold back the dark.

My private war with sim-stim had a lot of history. My mum, Irene, was addicted and I knew what power stims had given my step-dad over her.

The Mo-Vay kids I'd rescued had little enough of anything. I'd interfered with their lives, bought them to a strange place, and now I had to do something about keeping them safe in it.

I actually had an allergy to the word *responsibility* but somehow it kept finding me—by the truckload.

Outside my villa door two bored Muenos played knife games. I'd had some good security installed - the best around this tawdry villatropolis—but Teece insisted on guards as well.

Profile, he explained. *You're the boss, Parrish, you gotta act like it.*

I let myself in to find Merry 3#, my neurotic holo P-diary, dancing in her spanky high heels across the old blood stains on the floor. I'd inherited these rooms from a gang lord, and all the bad memories that hung around in them. I lived with them as a reminder of what life could be like when someone owned you.

“Thinking of going into acting?” I asked.

She pulled a bitchy face.

It was our private joke. Media/entertainment were dirty words between us. But hey, that story would take a *Flux* to tell.

“Get hold of Lize for me,” I told her.

I went into my bedroom and unlocked the gun case. The new pieces were beautiful. A Sprag semi-auto and a handcrafted Beretta copy. I handled them while I tried to forget how quickly Quoll had burnt.

Lize was a bounty hunter who owed me a debt. She'd taken on a contract to kidnap me for a voodoo bitch named Leesa Tulu. Things hadn't quite worked out for Lize. I stopped short of killing her and sent her on a short holiday until things cooled off. I didn't bear grudges against people on commission.

I also didn't forget.

I couldn't risk taking the Muenos with me on the visit I was planning. The Tert politics was as fragile as its economy. I had to be careful what acrimony I invited. Right now I was working at building trust between the Muenos and the northside punters. Lize would have to do instead.

“Paa-rrih!”

I slipped the Sprag's strap over my shoulder and went out to my living room. Lize's face shimmered in the holo frame. She didn't look happy to hear from me.

“I thought we'd squared things off?” she said.

“We're square. But I've got work for you.”

“What if I don't want to do it?”

“Then we're not square.”

She sighed heavily. "You were the worst days work I ever did Parrish."

"Meet me at Hein's in full kit. Unlikely there'll be any killing. Just make sure you look good."

"Pity," she said and cut the link.

The *chained dog* flouro on the villa roof of Hein's bar may have lost the ruby lights in its collar but it didn't deter the crowd. The place was filled with the usual pm detritus - glassy-eyed and more interested in the sport feed from OneWorld than conversation. Larry Hein, owner and fashion victim, was thumping the 'tronics panel of his glass steriliser and swearing.

I waited for Lize at the south end of the bar with my back to the wall.

Feng habit.

She barely raised an eyebrow from the regulars when she arrived but Larry stiffened and stalked over to me.

"Trouble, Parrish?"

Larry was my broker. He loved chiffon and all things floaty, except when he was horny, and then he wore latex. You could always tell when Larry had a hot date.

He also ran a slick holocaust drill to make the bar safe when trouble was brewing. Larry was foremost a businessman.

"Lize and I are planning a visit to The Cure."

"Teece know about this?"

"Not until it's too late. Right Larry?"

Larry shrugged. "He's looking for you. Says it's important."

"Yeah well so's this."

The truth was I was avoiding Teece on account of some personal stuff. 'Stuff' scared me more than death and snakes.

I told Lize who we were visiting and why.

She screwed up her face.

Her frown wasn't sympathy for Quoll. Lize didn't suffer sympathy.

“So let me get this clear. I'm just here for the purpose of intimidation?” she asked.

“Yeah. Watch my back and look like you'll follow through.”

“How much?”

“If everything goes smoothly - two hundred.”

She flexed and rotated her third arm - the heat-resistant one that operated the firestormer—like she was hoping it wouldn't.

We took a Pet to the party. I was not a fan of using bio-mek transport, preferring to walk mainly. But I didn't want word to spread ahead of us and sometime you just gotta get places in a hurry.

The Cure's med-centre was an overly glamorous name for two villas patched together, housing three crude labs and a ground floor office.

The patient queue often spilled outside and down the nearest alleyway.

I told Lize to prep ahead. She warmed up the firestormer and I re-checked my ammo.

Her grin was turning into something cold and glittery. I liked what I saw.

“Do some damage if you like,” I told her. “These bastards can afford it.”

We were out and parading our hardware in seconds. The queue of punters dispersed like dust into a vac leaving only the hired muscle guarding the door.

When Lize charcoaled their toes, they scarpered as well.

No need to burst through the office door. It was wide open.

I dropped the Sprag onto the desk, tip of the barrel straight at the chest of the human receptionist while Lize did a little décor melt.

“Tell the boys, I'd like to buy them a coffee,” I said.

She kept cool enough. I guess sangfroid come with the job description. “You'll have to wait. They're in procedures?”

The uhh? on my face must have been obvious.

“They're o-p-e-r-a-t-i-n-g,” she spelt out.

I thought about nuking her for the insult but let it pass. She hadn't killed Quoll. She'd just taken his cred.

“Where's the boss?”

She pulled a ferocious face and pointed up the stairs. “If you go into a sterile environment you'll cause an infection for the patients.”

I laughed dangerously at that. “Lize. My back.”

I kicked open the crudely fashioned double doors at the top.

Two medics and a couple of assistants were busy fitting neural interfaces or upgrades to a string of punters. In the centre of the room a unit hummed and sprayed a fine mist into the air. I'd seen something like it before in Mo-Vay. Loyl Daac reckoned it was a portable steriliser - the latest giz for labs.

I shot it in the guts.

Both the medics cancelled the charge on their sculpting wands. One of them, a tall dude with neat hair and too-shiny boots poking out from his gown, looked terrified.

The other tore his mask away in fury.

“What do you want Parrish?”

Yan and I went back away. In my first few months in The Tert he'd offered me a free fit for sex. I didn't do contra deals where my body was concerned. Besides the guy looked like a sick goat. When he tried to pressure me I could have taken real offence, but I understood that someone who looked like him had to use *strategies*, so I just broke the fingers on his o-p-e-r-a-t-i-n-g hand.

“You've got a problem,” I sang.

He tugged his beard. “What's that?”

“Me. One of my kids has just been to visit you. He's dead now.”

He frowned, surprised. “You mean the hairy one with the...the...”

“The tail, yeah. Now talk Yan. Stop me shooting you. Why did you fit him with a dirty connection?”

I stepped towards him to disperse the hovering image of the rot around Quoll's wound.

“I didn't. The polymer was quite clean. He must have had an allergic reaction to the adhesion proteins we use to maximise compatibility of the implants.”

“Allergic? How?”

He gave a short laugh. “You'd have to talk to Ike del Morte. Something in the gene splicing he's done has probably altered their bio-chemistry.”

Ike del Morte was dead and Yan knew it. I'd strangled him and crushed him against a fibre optic mutation that had leeches the blood out of him. The reason? To stop him making any more Quoll's. Halflings with marsupial tails and scale and hair in all the wrong places.

“Of course it's altered them. They look like freaking animals.” I tried not to shout.

My finger trembled on the Sprag's trigger. It would be so easy to waste Yan. But there were too many punters here as witness, and I knew what the consequences of my impulse would be.

This part of The Tert didn't need another war. Nor did I.

“Cell adhesion and interface compatibility aren't the only thing they're going to have problems with. My guess is their chemistry is totally freaked. Ike's never had good track record with longevity for his human experiments.”

I winced. The thought had been grating at the back of my mind for a while. Now Yan had voiced it I couldn't pretend. The Mo-Vay's were probably going to die young. “No more fit ups - to any of them.”

“Sure, Parrish, if that's what you want, we'll turn them away. Everyone knows how important these... *fauna* are to you. But it won't stop them if they want it. Hell, you can get this shit done anywhere,” he sneered.

He was right of course. Punters only paid for Yan because it was normally safer but you could buy DIY upgrade kits in Plastique.

“If you had any brains you'd go talk to the person who gave him the cred to do it.”

My jaw dropped. I hadn't even thought to ask Glida how Quoll had afforded it. The Cure's *expertise* didn't come free.

Yan didn't bother to hide his gloat at my stupidity.

Enjoy it, I thought. People like Yan were far less of a problem when their wounds were salved.

“Don't do any more and I won't bother you again,” I said.

“Don't come here again, Parrish. Or *you'll* have the bother.”

Lize was longing against the wall near the front door, playing eyeball chicken with the receptionist.

“Drink?” I said.

She looked surprised but nodded.

We found a bar nearby. I didn't want to go back to Hein's right away, I couldn't get any thinking room there.

I bought two rums and paid her the cred.

She didn't offer any back. A deal was a deal, no matter how easy the job turned out to be. Instead she slugged back the shot and called for the bottle.

“What's on your mind, Plessis?”

Maybe she was smarter than she looked.

“What do the punters around here think of the Mo-Vay kids?”

“Not much I guess. They look like rats but nobody'd be fool enough to say so to you.”

“How d'ya mean?”

“The stories. Some say you did a trade with the devil to bring them back here. Some say you sacrificed Roo to a bitch Loa to save them. Some say they're the kids you're never going to have. Whatever the truth is...it will have cost you. It always does.”

“Howso?”

She shrugged, guzzling straight from the bottle in deep practised gulps without offering me any.

“You invest...” she drained the last of it, “you're...wassa word...vulnerable.”

I waited for her to throw up, or head spin. But apart from the slight slur she seemed sober enough. She methodically disassembled the firestormer and slotted it into toggles on her body armour.

“Thanks for the drink,” she said, and left.

“Where did Quoll get the money, Glida?”

She was slumped over her dim net-viewer, reading and chewing her lip in concentration.

“Do not know.” She said the words precisely.

I didn't push it. Her thin body seemed emptied by fatigue and grief.

“You need to sleep,” I said.

“No thank you.” She kept her eyes on the screen.

Frustration drove me to Lu Chow's where I ordered a mockoff and a shawarma. My cred was better than good at Lu's and she always threw in a little extra. Today it was dough soaked in burnt caramel.

“Teece is looking for you.”

I stuffed the dough into my mouth. “Uh huh. Well, you didn't see me.”

As I ate I thought about whether I believed Yan. He had every reason to want to upset me. Hurting a Mo-Vay kid was a sure fire way to do that.

“Lu?”

“What's itching you Parrish?’ She re-filled my mock-off, wiping the lip of her jug with a dirty towel and a sarcastic flourish.

“Who hates me the most, Lu?”

She rolled her eyes. “Can't you ask me something easy?”

“Yeah. When you gonna get some proper tea? This stuff tastes like dog fur.”

“And you wanna know who hates you most,” she huffed turning her back on me.

I fell to compiling a full mental list of Parrish haters until it got too long and too depressing. I switched to watching the passing traffic for distraction.

They were mostly regular Torleys punters on their way to Hein's bar to drink, or to Shadoville to trade, or to the Strip for sex. None of them knew a kid had just burned in their breathing space. None of them would care.

Only me. Glida and me.

Around Lu Chow's the huddle of food vendor's and hawkers were in the lull of late day. At Jack-Knife's pawn stall I noticed someone familiar—or something. A dude in a set of shiny, narrow-toed fashion boots.

“Lu?” I called the sulky food vendor over from her cooka. “You seen that guy over at Jack-Knife's stall before? The one with the chi-chi boots.”

She gave a casual glance. “Yeah. Sure. He's that medic. Works for Yan.”

I looked harder at his neat hair and tall, thin body; remembered him standing alongside Yan in the surgery.

He pocketed cred in exchange for something and left.

I followed him on instinct.

He left Torleys-proper and wound his way slowly to the barracks. He went inside and came out a few minutes later with Cus-Cus, one of the Mo-vay's. He handed the feral a wad of cred.

I only took me three steps before I got him by the throat. “What are you doing?”

He tried to kick me in the crotch and run but I shoved the nose of the Beretta-copy between his ribs and twisted it.

He froze.

“Why are you giving her money?”

“N-no reason,” he gasped.

“You work for Yan don't you?”

He nodded.

The blackness that had been circling me since I found Quoll, swarmed. I shot seven holes into the shiniest of his chi-chi boots - one through each toe.

He didn't scream straight away but when he started it brought out a crowd.

I didn't even notice them. I levelled the pistol at his heart and wondered if I would need to cut his arms and legs from his body to fit him in the incinerator.

“Parrish! STOP!”

The voice pierced my thoughts like a pickaxe.

Teece?

“Parrish. Listen to me. I've been looking everywhere for you. Road's behind this.”

Road Tedder. Drug distributor in Plastique. Parrish hater. Competitor.

“He wants to start trouble.”

“Give me proof, Teece,” I said hoarsely.

He thrust Glida between the medic and me so that the tip of the gun pressed on her forehead. Her eyes were swollen from crying.

Teece shook her arm. “Tell her.”

“The man...Road...gave me speed. He said it would help me learn. I-I didn't trust him. I sold it and gave Quoll the money.”

“Why?”

“Quoll couldn't talk even though I tried to teach him. I thought an implant would help him better. All the others...” she gestured to the Torleys ferals crowding around us, “they've got them.”

“Why didn't you tell me that?”

Her face crumbled. “Thought you'd kill me,” she whispered.

I pushed her into the shelter of Teece's arms and kept the pistol pointing steadily at the medic. “What were you doing then?”

He was crying. Blood leaked from his boot onto the pavement. “I w-wanted them to have the money b-back. I felt bad about the kid.”

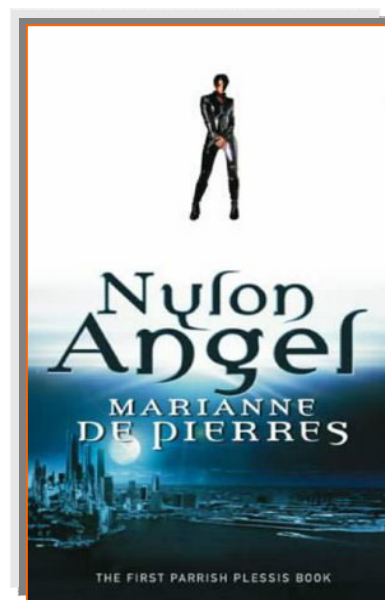
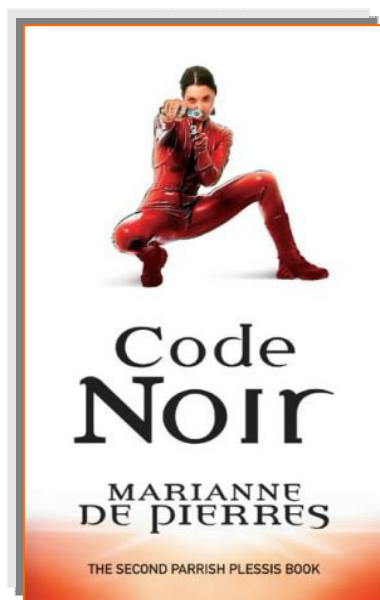
“You kill him, Parrish. Road gets what he wants anyway.”

Teece's words fired light into the heart of the blackness that gripped me.

I dropped my pistol.

And faced my cost.

THE END



CHILDREN OF THE CITY

BY LYN MCCONCHIE

Lyn McConchie has have had over 180 stories professionally published since 1991. This includes work in STRANGE PLASMA, ON SPEC, HORIZONS SF, MZB's FANTASY MAGAZINE, DRAGONSLAUGH, MILLENNIUM SF/F, SCHERAZADE, PLOT, ROGUE WORLDS and a wide variety of other North American and English Magazines as well as work in DAW anthologies SPACE OPERA, CATFANTASTIC III, IV and V, MERLIN, and FURTHER ADVENTURES OF XENA:WARRIOR PRINCESS (Ace September, 2001.) She has also had a number of genre books published in the USA: THE KEY OF THE KEPLIAN from Warner Aspect mid-1995, CIARA'S SONG from Warner July '98. TOR published BEASTMASTER'S ARK as a June 2002 Hardcover (paperback mid-2003) BEASTMASTER'S CIRCUS February 2004. TOR has THE DUKE'S BALLAD (sequel to the 1998 fantasy, Ciara's Song,) listed for December this year and SILVER MAY TARNISH, a stand-alone fantasy appears in 2005.

It was slipping to dusk as they assembled. Seven of them with the last the smallest. But it was to her they turned.

"S' funny, the city tonight." her fey silver eyes scanned them slowly. "I dunno. Come with me, there's a new story teller down in oldtown an' she's part of it somehow."

They followed, sliding silently through the crumbling ruins. Long ago the city had been different. But cities age and this one had. She'd had a wild youth, tempestuous and violent. The ruins had been a part of it. So had the ancestors of the children.

"Where is she?"

"Down on the quay. She's bin telling tales and she's good."

"Then what's spooking you?"

"Told you, I dunno. Just - she's somethin' different."

"Mutie?"

"Nope. Not the feel. I dunno, I tell you. Come and hear her your own selves. Maybe you can say."

Jela who'd been questioning shut up. She doubted it. If Dee couldn't say what was spooking her then it wasn't likely Jela could. She was their leader. But Dee was the one with the warnings. The one who saw things. It was why their own small pack had survived so long. That and Jela's leadership. She trotted at their head with Dee beside her. The quays could be dangerous, what was a woman alone doing down there. A stranger?

"Dee, do you see anything?"

"Nope." The silver eyes lifted shifting anxiously. "I sort of feel it. Like a humming."

"What do you think it means?" She saw the girl shake her head. "I ain't asking for a clear sign, Dee. What'ya feel about it?"

"Like a warning, but not yet," Dee blurted softly.

Jela considered. "You ain't never felt a warning like this before."

"I know that. S' what worries me. As if maybe this one's different."

Jela fell silent as they moved on. The silver-eyed fey type had begun to be born after the last unrest. A cocktail of gases, viruses, antidotes, and mutations had been released. Once it was discovered they lived too long to please many in the city their parents often abandoned them. Later if not sooner. Most died quickly, they were fragile for all their long spans. The child packs would not take them in. But Jela had. Dee repaid it with her warnings and the pack closed about her. Warmth, support, and love. She was one of them now. Despite the disgust of the other packs.

"Jela, I'm hungry." That was Mar and there was a soft chorus of agreement. Dee chuckled.

"You're always hungry. Okay. If there's a crowd once we get to the quay you spread. Dip a little, be careful. Don't take food. We buy that."

"What if there ain't no crowd?"

"I can buy us something." Mar beamed. "Don't go getting ideas. I'm not springing for no feast. Maybe a pie each if I have 'ter. Better if we don't waste the coin we already have."

That was the truth. Although under her careful saving the pack always had coin to fall back on. It was one of the reasons they survived. Other packs took in coin and spent it as fast. Then starved in Winter. Unable to buy or gather wood for fires. Unable to afford a coat. Jela saved, a coin here, a coin there. Most years by Spring Fires she had still a store, a little more each year.

They came to the quay and halted in the shadows to watch. The story teller was sitting on an ancient iron bollard. Around her sat a number of listeners. Dee hissed.

"See, there's Aral's pack, 'n Kish's. I kin see..."

Jela cut in. "So can I." Her eyes narrowed. There was two complete packs listening. Mixed with members from several others and with ordinary folks as well. That wasn't usual for a start. And for a finish, none of the packs were working. She'd have expected to see a few of the members dipping the crowd. There were folk there worth the time. She hissed orders.

"Mar, the fat man on the left. A coupla silvers, no more or I'll skin ya. Joi, that woman, the old one, see what she's got and be careful."

"Can't we listen..."

"Not 'til we got enough to eat. Work first then eat and listen. Oke?"

She watched as they fanned out, merging into the growing crowd. Most pack leaders were too busy bullying their pack to look after them properly. Jela tried to be different. She couldn't really recall the loss of her family. Just loudspeakers in the street. People tumbling from their houses, confusion. Then the gas. Her father had thrust one of the cheap masks over her head

and yelled at her to run. Jela had obeyed in mindless terror. When she stopped she was down in the ruins and alone. She'd remained that way.

"I got them silvers. He had a real filled pocket but I only took what you said." Mar displayed her gains. Jela nodded.

"Good girl." She pointed Mar at another target. "That man now. No more'n two silver remember."

After her family had gone Jela had survived. Mostly on the fringes of packs but never quite of them. But she watched, listened, learned. That was why she stole selectively. It was something she'd realized in the early days. She'd seen a pack member take everything in a mark's pocket and be caught when the target noticed the lightening of his coin. She saw that several times and used her wits. Better to take a smaller amount. Then it often wasn't noticed until the marks counted their coin at day's end. Or not even then often enough.

It was why she saved as well. Too often packs had nothing and became desperate. The danger increased when they HAD to steal. The bossfolk had a swift way with pack thieves. If their attention wasn't drawn a pack could dodge them. But once it was noticed too strongly, the whole pack vanished. Jela shivered. There were tales about that. She didn't want to know.

One by one her members drifted back, each with loot to give up. Jela counted. Good. She beamed at them. Dee was last with a ring. She grinned.

"Lookit this!" Jela gasped, then frowned. Before she could speak the fey was explaining.

"S' okay. I had a feel. It was in the dirt. I had to dig."

Jela relaxed slightly. If there was one thing there, other bits and pieces could be close by. "Where'd you find it."

Dee took her hand. "Take you." She circled the growing crowd to where part of a jetty and buildings had fallen towards the water. The fall had been so long ago that tall weeds and a sapling had sprung up.

"There, I felt something an' I dug."

"Feel anything now?"

"Nope. But - " she hesitated. "Humming stopped, now it's back."

"The same."

"No, sort of urgent. Like we should do something."

Jela paused to think. Dee's abilities could be vague but always they meant something. She glanced across the warped timbers to where her pack had settled to listen. Her gaze sharpened.

"Dee, look at them around the story teller. Notice anything?"

"They're quiet?"

"Aren't they. An' no one pushing, no one watching their backs."

"Maybe it's her tales. Can't we go an' listen, Jela?"

"Soon, first we check out here." She picked up a triangular piece of wood. "Dig around. See if you can find anything. Keep listening to yourself too. See if you feel something."

But it was Jela who made the find only inches from where Dee had dug. The mass showed a whitish colour, then as the shape defined, Dee skittered backwards.

"A deader." Jela sat back on her heels, hidden from the crowd in the tall-growing weeds.

"Get down. We don't want everyone seeing. Dee dropped obediently still quivering. Jela allowed her gaze to turn slowly, studying the surroundings. She knew the ancient quays, she listened to sailors' talk, and she could read, enough to clean up now and again and visit the book place. She began to talk, half to herself, half to the silver-eyed fey.

"Long back these quays was busy an' big. Much bigger than's used now. People came from across the sea. Then there was the troubles an' boatloads 'a them come in. Mostly the rich ones who could afford to pay. They was

killed fer being strangers. They fought back and parts 'a the quays was ruined. Maybe this was one of the strangers. Died here, lay under part 'a the ruins and wasn't found."

"Then how come there ain't nothing atop them now?"

"Buildings was all wood. Packs have taken it for fires. By the time they got it all other stuff rotted to cover the deader." Dee nodded.

"Makes sense. So no one ain't found them 'til we did." She took up a stick. "If that's so they could have all sorts 'a stuff."

Jela dug carefully on the other side. Gradually they uncovered the bones, digging deeper where a person would have or be wearing valuables. Dee uncovered the rest of the hand and garnered two more rings. Jela found the other arm and pulled a bracelet from the bones. There was a knife fallen from the dead hand. Jela spat and wiped. Good steel in the ruined sheath. And a big clear amethyst in the hilt. She'd pry the stone out, sell it, but keep the knife. In the packs good steel was an asset to be prized.

"Where'd you think they'd keep coin?" Dee queried. "I can't find no pockets."

Jela thought back. There'd been pictures of people in funny robes wearing pouches slung on a strap across their chest. From the bones the deader had fallen face-down.

"Help me turn it over." Dee muttered.

Jela pounced as the rib cage came into view. "Lookit that." She pryed open the cracked mouldy leather and both girls gasped. A double handful of tiny gold coins spilled into Jela's hands. To the woman who'd died with her pouch, her jewelry and her knife, it had been little. Just a handful of coins to buy whatever trinket took her fancy. It was wealth unimaginable to a child pack. Jela stowed it hastily deep in secret pockets and pouches in her clothing.

"Don't say nothing to the others. I ain't gonna cheat them but we gotta think about this."

Dee nodded. "Ain't no one gonna change that fer one of us. They'd want to know where we got it."

She didn't have to say more. If it was seen one of the packs had gold, the bossfolk would come asking. By the time they believed the story the pack would be dead - or sent some place to be used for purposes which made horror tales around the pack's night-fires. Jela slipped from the weeds and stood up, drifting back with Dee at her side. Good, no one had seen them. They joined the crowd and wormed their way quietly to where the rest of the pack sat enthralled. Jela listened. She'd admit the woman was good but something nagged. At last the story teller stood.

"Enough for this day. My voice tires. I will story tell you again tomorrow mid-morning if any wish to hear."

Jela grabbed Mar as the child moved. "Do as I say, I'll explain later. Go with house folk. Listen to what they say about this story teller. You others, Joi, listen to the sailors. Dee, you and me listen to the other packs. Shan, follow that hotelier. I know him, it's Jarad Peters of the Happy Traveler. She looked at the twins,

"You two go after the fancy lady an' her minder. Meet back at the den in a coupla hours. Dee and me'll have food." That would bring them back in good time.

She moved in the wake of the two complete packs as they headed for the ruins. She and Dee tagged on behind to listen. Dee would have spoken after a few puzzled minutes but Jela shook her head. They peeled off as the packs reached their ground. Once alone again Dee grabbed Jela's arm.

"But she WASN'T. They said she was just like their mother."

"I know. It isn't sense anyway. Most of them don't remember a mother, an' how could she look like all of them anyways. She didn't look like no mother to me. What'd she look like to you?" Dee hesitated. Jela looked at her. Her silver-eyed friend was shivering. "What is it?"

Dee's voice was tiny and frightened. "Jela, she looked like a fey to me. A grown-up, very old and wise. Like she knew everything an' if I just listened she'd tell it to me."

Jela felt a cold shiver up her spine. The fey didn't change like that. They stayed eternal children. If they managed to avoid illness and cold,

accidents, and adults who used them, they might live several hundred years. But they never became adult.

"Let's get home. I want to hear from the others.

She lit a fire once they were back, huddling chill in front of the flames. The others trickled back with the twins last. She shared out the food then, as they ate, her questioning began. At last she sat back to lay it out for them.

"Kid packs saw the story teller as all 'a their mothers. Dee saw her as fey. Old Peters from the pub saw her as a customer, decent clothing but not rich. Not the sort to demand more 'n he'd have. Fancy Lady saw her as a madam. The kind that treats the girls well. Her minder he saw her as an aunt. Sailors saw her as a sister. Long hair, an' always laughing. Sister they'd protect. House folk saw her as a neighbour. Decent, middle-aged, always ready to loan them a cup 'a something did they ask."

Joi shrugged. "She can't be all 'a them."

Dee looked up, silver eyes flickering in the firelight. "Can't she. What's to say. She ain't - she ain't right somehow."

"Dangerous?" Jela queried.

"Not to us. I don't feel that. But maybe to all 'a them others."

"Why not to us?" Dee shrugged in turn.

"Tomorrow we go back and listen. We get there early. Take it in turns. Listen to what others say about her. Listen to the stories she tells. Watch and see anything that don't feel right. Now go to sleep."

She stacked the fire carefully. It'd burn all night if you did that properly. She'd said nothing of what she herself had seen. She didn't believe and wouldn't expect them to believe, all except Dee. She'd tell her when they were alone again. Once the pack slept she rose quietly and counted the tiny gold coins. It was a fortune. And with the rings, the bracelet, the knife's amethyst it could be a future for them all. She hid everything with care and picked up her blanket.

She remembered the story teller's face then as she laid down to sleep. She didn't really recall most of her family, they'd died too long ago. But she remembered her older sister, T'Bella. It had been her sister who spent most time with her. Who chased away the nightmares. Her sister who had been away with a friend when the trouble came. J'Bella might have lived, become a teller of tales, but too many others had not seen as Jela saw. She slept, her expression that of a lonely child as she dreamed of a time lost to her now and forever.

The twins bounced out first. When Jela woke they'd heated the beans and stew and were adding gathered firewood to the pack's heap of it. Lesa looked over.

"We've already eaten. We'll go watch the quays now."

They pattered off and Jela watched them smiling. Later it was the turn of her and Dee to watch and listen. The stories were wonderful, many sending eerie chills down a listener's spine. This time the story teller talked until a little after midday. Then she left, to return at dark's edge.

She had with her firewood which she lit as she began another tale. Despite the dangers of darkness many stayed on to hear her stories. When she fell silent again it was well into dark. The fire burned almost out as she rose. Without knowing why, Jela moved forward and spoke.

"We have wood, we have food." It was half a statement, half an offer.

The woman bowed. "I am honoured. I have nowhere else to be tonight."

She followed quietly as the pack departed. At their fire she ate lightly then turned to look at them, to each her eyes seemed to love them, know and accept all they had been and were.

"A story in return I offer." Their faces lit as they settled to listen. A story of their own that no one else heard, that was a delight.

She spoke, the low rich voice rolling over them as she told of an old woman who lived in a city like this one. Who feared what it had become and wished only to return to her place as a girl. For her the city opened a

door. When she was done they sighed in satisfaction. It had been a good tale. Well worth the food shared. Other times no one had asked questions. But this time they were alone and it seemed right. Lesa leaned forward.

"How could the city open a door?"

"Ah, in a city all times that it has been still exist."

"But why should there be a door to them?"

"Because the old one wished it to be so greatly the city took pity."

Asran, Lesa's twin, giggled. "Cities aren't alive."

"Are they not, child? Listen, if something is made and grows, if it soaks from those within its borders hopes and dreams, love, hate, and compassion, why should it not live? Are there not places in these ruins where you fear to walk because of the strangeness?" She gathered their nods. "So, then maybe those are the places where the city dreams." She smiled around the half circle. "Things are not only stranger than you know, sometimes they can be stranger than you may believe. But one who is wise believes, or at least they do not refuse the possibility."

She stood then. "I must leave you. For your kindness I give thanks." Dee slipped away. The story teller had said she had no place to go tonight. Adults needed a proper bed, a door to lock. The lady had no pack to care for her. Dee returned. Clasped in her fingers she held the ring she had found. She offered it. Jela might have objected. The jewel was worth good coin and was now pack property but she found herself nodding. Something had shared their fire that made this gift worth the giving. Long fingers accepted it, then reached out to touch between silver eyes.

"Gifts for a gift, daughter. Dream true and grow." She turned to meet Jela's gaze. "The words of a friend are wisdom. Do not reject what is strange for its strangeness alone." The fire dropped abruptly to coals and she was gone. Jela straightened with a gasp.

"All right. Clean up and sleep. It's been a good evening." In a short time seven forms lay quiet. But towards dawn the fey began to mutter. She shifted and finally cried out in fear. Jela woke.

"Dee, Dee? What is it?" The girl sat up as she was shaken. Her eyes were fixed, staring. They rolled in their sockets to hold her friend's gaze. The look was terror and belief.

"I saw! The city, the trouble's coming back. Fire'll reach for us. The bossfolk'll hunt us out. We're gonna die. All the kid packs. All of them still here." Her eyes and voice compelled belief. The other five gasped and began to talk, to yell questions. Jela snarled for silence.

"When, Dee, you got a time? How long we got?"

"I don't know, I'm not sure. More than hours, not more than days."

Jela thought quickly. They'd been together almost eight years. She knew when Dee had one of her feeling so strongly it HAD to be right, but she wasn't sure now. There hadn't been that kind of troubles here since her own family had been lost. Yet ten years wasn't long in the life of a city. Maybe the troubles would come again. And maybe the bossfolk would use the excuse to rid themselves of the child packs. They'd been hunting them harder of late. Jela found her mind was abruptly made up. She spoke slowly and deliberately.

"Lesa, stir the coals, add wood. Mar, I want you to pack all our things. Asran, you help her. Joi, make us food, a good hot meal and plenty of it. Use up everything that could go bad in a day or two. Dee, you and Shan come with me. We'll be back soon." She led them out of earshot. "Shan, who do you know who has a van that'd take all of us an' our stuff. One they might sell? Someone who won't cheat us or call the bossfolk?"

"Old Billit has one. He'll bargain but he could call bossfolk in a day or two. Try to have it both ways."

"In a day or two won't matter if Dee's right. You go talk to Billit. See what he wants for the van, Make sure tyres aren't too worn, enough fuel to get it a few miles. Bargain him tight. We ain't got it to waste. Then come back here once you got the deal." Shan trotted away and Jela led Dee in a different direction.

"Where we going in the van?"

Jela took a deep breath. "We're leaving the city. I believe you dreamed right. I seen maps. There's another city, bigger'n this one. They had their troubles too an' they got big ruins. It's maybe three-four days drive away. All the little places between us 'n them are dead. We could hole up in one for a while. Shan can drive. But we gotta get out first an' have enough to live on a while. Maybe we come back here, maybe we go on. But we get out now, decide that later."

Dee's voice was small, "An' if I'm wrong?"

"Then maybe it's still a good thing. I been thinking, Dee. Too many knows us here. But in another city we could be anything. That coin we found. We could use it. Learn stuff, dress decent. We could all have a chance at being housefolk."

The silver eyes kindled. "Maybe find others. Help them too."

"Maybe. Now we gotta help ourselves. Come on. Think what we could need to live without a city fer a while." They returned laden to find Shan coming through the ruins beaming.

"Billit'll sell. An' I nicked a fool down the market. Got two silvers and a half-gold. Went to Werner first and bought a coupla cans 'a fuel. I got it cached. Enough to get us a long way." He beamed more widely at their praise. Jela laid out their own purchases and looked at Shan. He nodded. It was a large enough van, it would hold what they had even if most of them would have to sleep elsewhere once they stopped.

Jela ate slowly. Dee had said more than hours, not more than days. Staying one night should be safe. They would collect the van after dark. If Billit ran to the bossfolk he wouldn't go then. He'd wait until morning and he was a lazy man. Likely it would be late before he roused. Then he'd have to find someone who'd listen. Bossfolk couldn't do anything without talking hours. The pack could leave as soon as it was half light next day. It might be another day or more before the bossfolk came hunting.

She sent Shan with their handcart and the twins to retrieve the fuel and cache it in the ruins where they jumbled close to the old main road. Then he was to take coin and buy more fuel. She sent the rest of the pack carrying their gear to the cache in a roundabout way. She and Dee went to

the market. Then to the quays. They listened. Nothing concrete, nothing clear but Jela had a feeling at the back of her neck. Dee had been right.

Shan went with her after dark to pay for the van. Old Billit grumbled at being woken but took the coin greedily. Jela saw the way he eyed them after that. Oh, yes. He'd talk. They couldn't kill him. Behind him she could see his woman holding a weapon. But perhaps they could delay him.

"We'll collect the van tomorrow afternoon." She took the van key and they waited in the dark. Once the door shut and lights went out she whispered. A door slid open and the van was pushed silently outside. It was on a long shallow slope and moved easily. She left Dee and Shan to it and laid a couple of careful booby-traps by the house door. With luck Billit would fall over them and be too lame-legged to rush to the bossfolk for another day. She pushed the door shut where the van had stood.

At the bottom of the slope she looked back. If they started the van here they could leave without Billit or his family hearing them. Shan drove. Behind them the house remained dark. Back in the ruins she stood checking items as they were loaded. It would be a tight fit but they'd manage. Shan had found an old roof rack they could use. It gave them more room inside.

At first light they were away with the ruins slipping by. They were half excited, half apprehensive. But they were together. They rode quietly in the van all that day. Slept in or beside it that night and moved on. They drove all the second day until towards late afternoon they crested a hill and saw a narrow road leading off to the left.

"Follow it," Jela said. "By this map it goes to a small town. Won't be no one there an' we can rest. An' we can see the city from up here."

"How far've we come?" Shan was exhausted.

"Not sure. But we can stay a coupla days if you need to rest." He nodded and once they reached the empty ruined township he slumped. Jela organised the others until a sheltered small fire burned, food was ready and bedding laid out. Shan crawled down, ate, drank, and collapsed into the blankets. Dee covered him gently.

"I got that danger humming feeling again, Jela. It went while we was moving. Just now it come back again." Jela looked about her. They'd come up the main road from THAT direction. Come around this way. So - she turned, the city should be over THIS way.

"Come on." With Dee on her heels she walked through the dusk to the township edge where the land began to fall away. There was an old tower there. She thrust open the moldering door, climbed the steps and emerged on a roof. She looked out over darkening land seeking city lights. The lights were there but so were others. Flaring points of flames which grew as she watched. Beside her the fey shivered. Jela put an arm about her.

"You were right, Dee."

"So was that story teller." Would you 'a packed up so easy if you didn't remember what she said?"

Jela thought. "I guess not. I'd of listened to you, I always do. But I wouldn't of moved so quick I reckon. She was a strange one that. I keep wondering who she was. Some new change like the fey maybe."

Dee shook her head. Her voice came quietly, musing. "I don't think so, Jela. All of us saw her as family 'a some kind. An' that story she told us." her voice became very soft. "An' she called me daughter."

Her companion moved sharply. "You saying..."

"I think so. Who else we got as kin. We're the city's children and I say it was her who came to warn us."

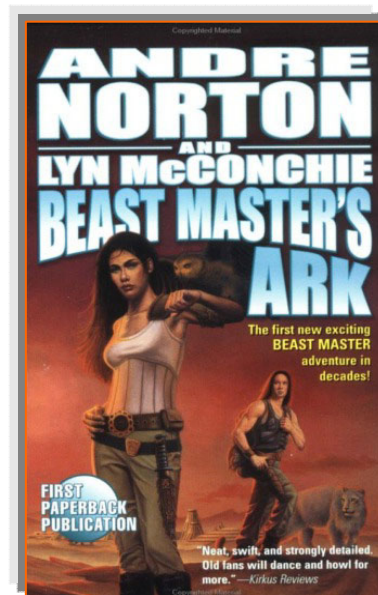
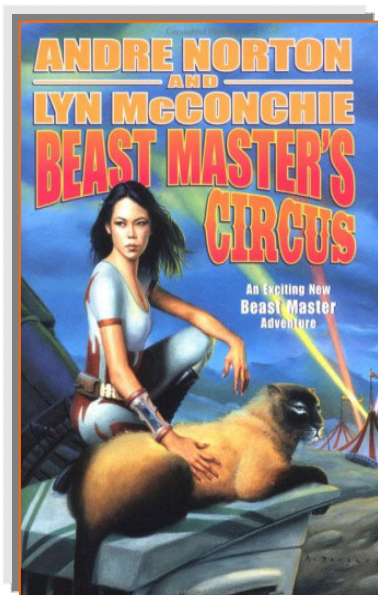
"Us and not the other packs?" Silver eyes caught the last light as they turned to study her.

"There's seven of us, Jela. Boy, girls, twin neuters an' a fey. Something 'a all that was in the city. The only pack 'a that kind." Her head turned, eyes watching the leaping flames below and far away. "It was the city - an' she blessed me, said I should grow. Maybe it'll work. I'll be like the her I saw. A fey grown up an adult. The first one."

Jela took her hand. "You said that one was old and wise. It'll take

time." She shook herself, "Well, thanks to you we got that." Hand in hand they went back down the steps. The city's children, acorns free to grow.

THE END



SIGNS & PORTENTS

BY SHERRY D. RAMSEY

Sherry D. Ramsey's work has appeared in Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine, the anthology The Day The Men Went To Town, On Spec, GateWay S-F, Oceans of the Mind, The Martian Wave and Neo-Opsis, among others.

I didn't notice the coming of the Sign Man. The first time I saw him he was already a fixture on the corner halfway between the newspaper building and the post office, tattered black overcoat flapping around him like last year's feathers on a molting crow. I met his mad eyes across the street for only an instant before averting my own with the city-dweller's practiced ease.

A crude placard, today's sign, hung below his matted beard. Careful block print proclaimed, "RAAL COVER-UP!"

Startled, I looked again. RAAL was the Russell Affiliated Accelerator Lab, where I was headed to do an interview. But no, the sign read "RAFFLE COVER-UP," and in smaller letters, "Lies in the House of God."

I blinked. I knew the story; I'd written it. A recent local scandal in a church-run funding scheme. But I could have sworn the sign said "RAAL." I stopped walking and watched the Sign Man while the "Don't Walk" sign blinked its crimson warning. He began shouting, one fist pounding an imaginary wall while his beard swayed in time. He sure was riled up about a little church corruption. The sign definitely read "RAFFLE."

Well, I had RAAL on my mind, I rationalized, since I was on my way out there. And I had only glanced at the sign. It happens.

But my stomach writhed, as if I'd eaten something disagreeable. If I closed my eyes I could still see the image of the sign, the letters "RAAL" sharply drawn.

The light changed, and a well-dressed woman ahead of me glanced across at Sign Man as she stepped off the curb. She did a double-take, cartoon-style, and stopped abruptly. I almost bumped into her, but she just stood gaping across at the Sign Man. He wasn't even looking at her. He'd suddenly stopped shouting and was thanking someone who'd pressed a coin into his hand.

The woman turned to me, frowning. "What does that sign say?"

"Raffle cover-up," I answered. "Why?"

Her face drained as pale as Sign Man's cheap white posterboard. "Thanks," she choked, and hurried on across the street.

Bemused, I looked back at the Sign Man. He was staring at me. Expressionless and deliberate, he winked. A shiver pricked me, like I'd left my coat back at the office.

I pretended I hadn't seen and walked on. Behind me, I heard another endless rant begin, words spewing out at a furious and mostly unintelligible rate. I threw one last glance at him over my shoulder, but he wasn't looking at me. His face was upturned to the sky.

Richard Hawsmill, the site director at RAAL, met me at the accelerator lab's Visitor Center. I'd covered the opening of RAAL nearly a year ago, when it commenced operations in conjunction with the university's physics department. Hawsmill remembered me.

"Mr. Jackson, good to see you. Welcome back to RAAL," he said as he pumped my hand. "Let's walk."

The facility hadn't changed much in the past year. Hawsmill kept up a steady stream of press-release chatter about environmental waste studies, antiviral drug research, global warming studies and ultra-heavy particles as we walked the complex.

RAAL wasn't a big accelerator, nothing like Fermilab or CERN or even Stanford, but it was pretty big news here. I'd struggled through hours of background research a year ago to get my mind around just what a particle accelerator did.

Basically, it raced atomic particles via an electron beam around a big buried concrete racetrack at enormous speeds, then let them smash into each other or into a fixed object at the end. Detectors recorded the resulting formation of new particles and other unusual phenomena, and researchers used the information in everything from drug research to astronomy. I was present at one of the first "runs." Disappointing, really. There was nothing to see but reams of data on computer screens, and for the uninitiated it was about as exciting as computerized bank statements.

I had a few prepared questions, but as the meeting progressed it was Hawsmill who piqued my interest. If the facility hadn't changed, he certainly had. I remembered him as a quiet man, enthusiastic about the accelerator without being effusive, more interested in answering intelligent questions than in spewing out preformatted publicist cant. Today his thin face seemed haggard and he was chattery.

"Have you had problems with any of your departments?" I asked finally, when he paused for breath.

"No. Aside from scheduling, because the demand for beamtime is so high. But that's standard for any accelerator facility."

"Much staff turnover?" I pressed. We were in the SRL, the synchrotron radiation lab area. Vacant offices studded the hall.

"We're looking for a new on-site department head for synchrotron radiation," Hawsmill said, "and some personnel have moved to other projects. But the lab is still booked solid. Several drug companies are doing research here. Important work; osteoporosis, viruses. Cancer-causing proteins."

I reviewed my mental notes. Synchrotron x-rays were a kind of "super" x-ray, containing all the wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum and allowing researchers to peer into the tiniest of molecules. Useful in medical research, they were only a by-product of the accelerator's electron beams.

"Bigger facilities stealing your people?"

Hawsmill didn't look at me. "Not really. Specialists tend to follow their interests. There are a lot of new applications springing up for SR, new

projects all the time. Biomaterials for prostheses, superconductors, digital data storage. One lab can't cover everything."

"Your department head was Dr. Grange? Douglas Grange?" I vaguely remembered interviewing him.

"Yes, he's moved on," Hawsmill said. "Now here's something I want you to see. It's a schematic for the new beamlines we're proposing. There's such a heavy demand for beamtime we're hoping to be able to begin the expansion within the next six months..."

I kept walking and nodding, but I felt the silent presence of undiscovered facts crouching just out of sight.

That night I had dinner with Linda and skated around the subject of whether we should move in together. I thought I loved Linda. As a reporter, I deal with facts, and I like that just fine. I knew the facts about Linda; she was beautiful, smart and practical, funny and tender, and our sexual chemistry so intense that I had seen no other women since Linda invited me into her bed.

Love, however, was a different matter. It wasn't something I could research, investigate, and send to the fact-checker. I thought I loved her, but--there was always a but. So whenever she brought up the subject of moving in, I moved the conversation out.

"I saw the Sign Man today," I said during one potentially dangerous lull.

"I loved yesterday's sign," she said, 'IS THERE A TOXIC COCKTAIL IN YOUR BACKYARD?' The mayor must have been having kittens over that one."

Turned out Linda knew more about the Sign Man than I did. As a registered nurse, there isn't much happens that she doesn't hear about at the hospital. She'd make a good reporter. He'd been on that corner since the beginning of January, she said, sported a different sign every day, and rented a room in a dive on the Low Side. The police seemed willing to leave him alone, his only crimes being social commentary, poor hygiene and the occasional rant.

"I've been watching him, actually," she added, "to see what kinds of reactions he gets to his signs."

"What?"

"I was thinking of getting one myself," she said, reaching over and cupping my chin in one long, slender hand. "I'd write on it, 'Move in with me!' and wear it over here some night."

"Is that all you'd be wearing?" I asked, twisting my face to kiss her palm. She tasted better than the supper.

She laughed. "Oh, go ahead and change the subject, Phil," she said. "I'm just teasing."

Later she followed me willingly into the bedroom, but I knew the time was coming when the subject wasn't going to go away with a kiss and a caress. And the fact was, all the facts I knew about her weren't doing me any good.

Sign Man's message the next morning made no sense. "NEAR MISS ON 24" it read, Sign Man's usual careful block print replaced by inelegant letters scrawled in dark red paint. The reference meant nothing to me.

When I got to the newsroom, I said to Charlie, "What do you make of Sign Man today?"

"Poor crazy bastard probably doesn't even have a ticket," Charlie said, laughing.

"A ticket?"

"For the concert tonight? I think that's what he means by 'THIS CITY ROCKS!'" He raised his eyebrows. "Where you been? Don'tcha read the paper?"

"Oh, right. The concert." I forced a laugh. Some mega-band at the Stadium tonight. "Must have been thinking of yesterday's sign."

Charlie nodded. "'MUNICIPAL LEECHES ARE SUCKING YOU DRY.' Wish I'd thought of that headline for the piece on the annual expense reports. Maybe we should hire him."

But I was hardly listening. I knew it wasn't yesterday's sign. I could see it clearly in my mind, letters the color of old blood. And by all accounts Sign Man never wore more than one a day. Someone once said that facts are stubborn things, and I hate it when they refuse to line up in nice neat order.

Theresa, the managing editor, came out of her office then. She stopped and tapped my desk with a needle-sharp pencil.

"Philip," she said, "Is your piece on RAAL just about ready?"

Theresa's a decent boss and a friend when you need one, but she'll chew your butt off and spit the pieces in your face if you don't make deadline.

"Just filling in some background," I assured her, although it wasn't strictly true. Richard Hawsmill's odd behavior was still bothering me, so I got to work and did a little cursory digging into news items pertaining to RAAL, just wondering if I'd missed something. All I found was mention of a week-long shutdown about six months earlier, to overhaul the accelerator's magnetic steering fields.

I checked the date to see how I'd missed that, and it made sense. I'd taken two weeks' vacation in November, when my grandfather died. He'd left me a house and farm property in Montana and I'd driven there to deal with the paperwork and decide what to do with it.

I intended to sell it, but I hadn't been prepared for the way the place felt like...well, home. My grandfather had been a real character, and his presence permeated the whole place, from the solidity of the house he'd built himself to the comforting craziness of the backyard bomb shelter he'd installed in the '50's. I thought I just might want to come back someday, maybe bring Linda to see it. So I rented it to a young couple with what seemed like a dozen kids, but which I think was actually only four.

Half an hour in the archives with the papers from those two weeks turned up one more interesting fact. Douglas Grange had left RAAL in November. A connection? Unlikely, but possible. I called RAAL and set up another meeting with Hawsmill the next day. I thought I could smell the first faint scent of a story, and I had a few more questions to ask.

I ducked Theresa and left work early. I wanted to bring Linda some wine for supper, something to make her smile and maybe ease my guilty conscience.

Traffic was heavy on the by-pass heading out to the mall and for a while I was stuck behind the looming backend of a cargo trailer, breathing diesel. It was no-brain driving and I let my thoughts bounce around RAAL and the other stories I was working on.

When the truck ahead swerved abruptly to the right, trailer tilting precariously, it took me a second to react. The air horn shrieked like a bellowing animal. A crazily veering car, on the wrong side of the divided highway, bounded past the truck toward me. I swung the wheel hard right. I think I screamed. Or swore. Or prayed. Maybe all three. The impact came with shocking finality and blackness fell on me like a hungry wolf.

Consciousness returned slowly. I was aware of a curiously painless throbbing in my head and a stickiness on my cheek. I touched it gingerly, and my hand came away streaked dark red, the color of the Sign Man's letters this morning. The diesel smell was gone, replaced by the metallic tang of spilled oil and gasoline. Beyond the spiderwebbed windshield, all I could see was the enormous "24" on the highway marker the truck had sheared off and sent hurtling back at me.

24. *Near miss on 24.*

I sat quietly then, waiting for the pain and the distant wail of ambulances, and wondering what the hell was going on.

Three days later, my head still bandaged, I walked toward the Sign Man's corner. He was quiet today. The army fatigues were gone, replaced by a wrinkled blue plaid jacket and paint-speckled olive polyester pants. The ever-present placard read "SPACE SHUTTLES--AS IF!".

I walked right up to him and just stood for a minute. He fixed me with a placid stare. His eyes weren't mad at all today. They were quiescent spheres of polished granite.

"How did you know?" I said finally.

"Spare some change?" he asked.

"How did you do it?"

"The space shuttles aren't real, you know," he confided. "It's all just entertainment. Hollywood jerking us."

"Your sign," I said. "I saw something on it the other day. A warning, maybe."

"I'll sell you the sign," he offered, tapping today's placard, "for a dollar."

I steadied my voice. "No, not this sign. Another sign. A few days ago. It said, 'Near miss on 24'. I was nearly killed on route 24 on my way home."

He regarded me silently for a moment, nodding. "Know how you feel. I was nearly killed at RAAL." Then he leaned toward me, his grey eyes fixed on mine. Eyes that I recognized with a shock.

He winked. "This city rocks," he whispered, and the smoke of madness swirled across his face again. He turned away from me, shouting invective against the greedy, unprincipled Hollywood bastards who let us believe that we were actually making progress toward real space exploration.

I didn't stay to listen. I wasn't going back to work until tomorrow, and I walked home very slowly, my head pounding. I wanted to drive straight out to RAAL and confront Hawsmill, but I needed time to contemplate the fact that Dr. Douglas Grange, former head of the Synchrotron Radiation Lab at RAAL, had somehow become the Sign Man.

The next day was beautiful, a June day that had lost its way and arrived in April, and Sign Man was in dirty white shirtsleeves under his posterboard when I passed on my way to work. I figured I'd check in just to placate Theresa before I headed out to RAAL. My accident had played hell with her carefully organized story schedule.

A handful of teenagers stood waiting for the crossing light, reading Sign Man's thought for the day. The boys were guffawing, the girls pouting in dainty disgust.

"Still want burgers for lunch?" one of the boys asked a waiflike blonde girl.

"Eewww," was her only reply, but she smacked his arm for emphasis.

I glanced across. "THREE WEEKS UNTIL THE ARRIVAL," the placard proclaimed.

My insides slipped into a leathery knot. What were they seeing? And who was out of synch, me or them?

I tapped one of the boys on the shoulder. "What's he got to say today? Don't have my glasses," I lied easily.

"TODAY'S WORMS ARE TOMORROW'S BURGERS'," he said with a smirk. "He's always good for a laugh, anyway."

I chuckled and nodded, then strolled down the street. Sign Man didn't look over at me. He was busy being over-friendly and obsequious. Most people were chuckling and shaking their heads at the sign, or looking repelled. No one seemed confused.

At the newsroom, I didn't even have to ask. Charlie had apparently had a burger and fries for lunch yesterday and the other guys were razzing him about worms as I walked in. The knot pulled tighter.

Three weeks until the arrival. But who or what was arriving? Did anyone else see what I saw? Or was I just going crazy?

I turned around to leave. I hadn't even taken off my jacket, but to hell with Theresa. I had to get out of there, had to think about this. Maybe I could find someone else--

"Phil? Hang on a sec, Phil."

Theresa, of course. Deadlines were dealines, head injuries notwithstanding, and facts were not the only stubborn things in my life. I forced a smile.

"Hi, boss."

She stood with her hands on her hips, her face set in a mock glare. "Welcome back. How's your head? Now where's that piece on the accelerator lab? I thought we were running it tomorrow?"

I grimaced. It was only half-written. "Sorry, Theresa. One more day, okay? I need to verify a couple more facts."

"Where are you going?"

"Back out to the University. Right now. To finish the story." I crossed my heart solemnly. "Promise."

She gave me a hard look, then shook her head in resignation. "On my desk by noon, Phil. No excuses. Got it?"

I saluted. "Got it." I left before she could ask me anything else, but I didn't go straight out to the University. I stopped off at the Classifieds desk and placed an ad:

If you know anything about the Arrival in three week's time, call 555-4994. No religious calls please.

Hawsmill's receptionist wasn't happy about my abrupt arrival at RAAL, even after I showed her the bandage and explained why I'd missed my last appointment. She admitted that he was in, however, and let him know I was there. He kept me waiting twenty minutes. I didn't care, since he'd be the one sweating pretty soon.

In his office, I shook his hand, sat down, and hit him with it.

"Douglas Grange is the Sign Man."

He almost rode it out, but his head twitched back like he was dodging a blow, and the color drained out of his face. He knew he'd given it away before he managed to say anything, so he just sat and looked at me. The seconds ticked past. But that's an old reporter's trick, and I had the stamina born of experience.

"How did you find out?" he asked finally.

"I recognized him yesterday, when I went to ask him how knew in advance that I was going to have a car accident."

That one didn't faze him. He nodded. "I'm guessing he had no explanation for you."

"That's right."

"Which is why you're here."

"Partly," I allowed. "What the hell happened here, Hawsmill? And how'd you keep it quiet?"

He sat back in the big leather chair, pulling a few shreds of dignity around him. "Is this for publication, Mr. Jackson?"

I usually know exactly how to answer that question. Not this time. "I guess I don't know that yet."

"It's a little different when it's personal, isn't it?" he said, and his face was terribly tired. "What I'm telling you is officially off the record. I'm willing to explain this to you, since you've already discovered Douglas. I thought we should have handled it--him--differently, but that doesn't matter much now."

He rose and crossed to a plain-faced safe set into the wall near his desk. As he spun the dial, his body carefully positioned between me and the numbers, he said, "Douglas Grange was undoubtedly brilliant, but he was also foolish. Not to mention devious and secretive. He had his own agenda here, which he was following all the time he was working on approved projects, as far as I can tell."

He carefully laid a thin plastic envelope on the desk in front of me. Inside I could see charred paper remains, scraps with barely legible fragments of writing in a cramped hand. "This is all that's left of Grange's notes on his 'secret' project. He was burning them when I found him."

I waited. It's always best to let them tell it their own way.

He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Douglas was trying to isolate something he called the 'probability protein.' According to him, it's an actual genetic construct, like the parasite proteins that cause some cancers.

"He believed the few true psychics in the world have an 'activated' probability protein. And that we all have this protein, but it's inactive in most of us."

Hawsmill paused and shook his head. "That was his theory. He sounded like a quack. In the end, he exposed himself to a dose of synchrotron

radiation. That's not necessarily a problem; SR has been used to do imaging for coronary angiography, and he didn't get a much bigger dose than a subject would with that."

He leaned forward and stared at me. "But he directed the beam into very specific areas of his brain. He claims that he's activated this probability protein in himself, and that he can reproduce the experiment."

I drew a quick breath. "Grange claims to be psychic?"

Hawsmill shrugged. "He says he can detect *probabilities*. But that's not all. He also claims that he projects some kind of 'probability field' that will activate the protein in anyone with a high enough natural concentration of it.

"The problem is, whatever else he did to himself, he's quite mad now. After he finished his experiment, he uploaded a virus into our computer systems that had us shut down for a week. And he burned all his notes. But you know what he's like. You've seen him."

And I had also seen his sign. The one that predicted my accident. Or at least the probability of it. I shuddered.

"Has anyone tried to reproduce the effect?"

"Absolutely not. This was not a legitimate project, and most people thought he was crazy even before he did what he did. We exist on grant funds here, Mr. Jackson. No-one backs lunatics."

"What if he's right?"

Hawsmill looked at me with an unsettling mixture of fear and pity. "I don't think the human race is quite ready to see into the future, do you?"

I couldn't answer that one.

"How did Grange end up on the street corner, and living in some boarding house? RAAL could have done better by him than that."

"Grange's choice," Hawsmill said. "We pay his board, through a holding company, make sure he has money. He wouldn't hear of an institution, and he's clear enough in his lucid moments to be--"

"A threat?" I finished for him. "If he's happy, he won't talk, is that it?"

"Are you going to publish this, Mr. Jackson?"

"I don't--I'm not sure. I don't know." Those damn signs.

Hawsmill slumped back in his chair. "I'll tell you one more thing. Why your answer to that question is important to me.

"When I went into Grange's office the morning after his 'experiment,' I came down on him pretty hard. Ranting about the publicity, the problems he'd caused for RAAL and the University. He listened for a little while, but I knew I didn't have his full attention. His eyes were so bright--too bright, glittery, as if he were fevered. Finally he put a hand on my shoulder and said, 'Don't worry about it, Richard. You probably won't live to see any bad publicity.' Then he walked out, and I salvaged that"--tapping the charred notes--"from the wastebasket."

Richard Hawsmill was pale, the fluorescent lights limning his face with a ghastly glow. "So you see, Mr. Jackson, why I don't want you--or anyone else--generating any of that 'bad publicity.'"

I left him then, feeling as though I'd been buried in an avalanche of facts--facts I'd wanted, but the stubbornest damned bunch I'd ever seen.

I came close to begging on my knees, but I got Theresa to extend my story deadline by pleading recurring headaches from the accident. I had to stall her with something, because I needed the time to think. The next day's sign still gave me the three week warning, although subtle questioning revealed that to others it said, "STEPHEN KING IS ACTUALLY A COMPUTER PROGRAM." My ad ran in the morning edition, and by seven that night I was using my machine to screen callers. Despite my careful wording, most were quacks, nuts or fanatics.

Finally there came a call I picked up. A wary male voice said, "If this is about a sign on the corner of Vine and Terrace, I'd like to speak to someone."

I lifted the receiver. "Hi. You saw it, too?"

"I guess so. 'Three weeks until the arrival.' Is this a joke?"

"No, sir. Has this happened to you before?"

There was a pause. "Yes, but I won't talk about that. Do you know what 'the arrival' is?"

"No. I was hoping someone else might. I saw something before, too, but I didn't understand it in time."

"I'll keep this number," he said after a short silence. "If I find out anything else, I'll call you back." Then he hung up abruptly, before I could ask for his number. I tried last call retrieve, but he'd blocked it.

I cradled the receiver shakily and dropped onto the couch. Someone else had seen it. I wasn't the only one.

But I felt more alone than ever.

Douglas Grange's signs continued in the usual vein the next few days while I avoided Theresa and wrestled my conscience. "THE BEATLES WERE ANDROIDS"; "63 POISONS IN EVERY GLASS OF WATER"; "COPULATE NOW FOR A NEW YEAR'S BABY." I forced myself to work on other stories. I gave Theresa a plain-jane, factual piece on RAAL, but she knew or sensed I was holding back and refused to print it or get off my back about what she was now calling "the real story."

It's usually an easy matter to decide if a story should be reported or not. Most times the answer is yes, if you believe in the public's right to know, or if you want the ratings or the sales or the attention.

But this time...sure, there was a cover-up, but only of one man's folly, and he'd already paid for his mistake. RAAL was important to the community, good work was being done there. There was no reason to write this story.

Except for Grange's claim that he had made himself psychic, and that he could do it for others. The decision boiled down to whether I agreed with Hawsmill's opinion that humans weren't ready for wholesale precognition. When I thought about the collapse of the stock market and the potential havoc in personal lives, I thought we weren't. When I thought about the cure

for cancer and the avoidance of thousands of accidents, I thought maybe we were.

I just couldn't strike the balance.

When I couldn't stand it any more, I drove over to Linda's. She'd just gotten up after working the night shift, her brown hair was tousled, she wore no makeup, and she looked absolutely delectable. I'd been going to ask her to come with me, look at the sign, but when I got there, I couldn't. Everything was so normal. She passed me coffee and offered me lunch, but didn't buy the story that I'd just dropped in to say hi.

She opened a bottle of spaghetti sauce and dumped it into a pan. "What's on your mind, Phil? This isn't like you."

I was tired of lying. "The Sign Man."

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, it's better than another woman...I guess. What about him?"

"Have you ever heard of anything...weird going on with his signs?"

"Besides what they say?" Linda grinned. "No, I don't think so. Like what?"

I fidgeted, swirling my coffee. Linda had a preference for flavored instant varieties, her cupboard always full of vanillas and mochas and cremes. I liked mine plain and strong, just like the news stories I wrote. "Like...some people think the sign says something different from what everyone else sees." I waited for the laughter, but when I looked up, Linda was frowning.

"I remember someone at the hospital asking about the sign one day, but it's a few weeks ago. He was agitated, but wouldn't say why." Linda cocked her head at me and half-smiled. "This doesn't seem like your type of story. No facts to line up and organize."

"No, it doesn't," I admitted, "but I can't seem to stop thinking about it."

"I'd expect you to think the people who are claiming these things are just cranks."

Except that I'm one of them. "I probably should," I said slowly. "But--I don't know. The facts don't seem to be enough this time. There's something else here, Linda, and that's what I can't stop thinking about."

Linda came around to my side of the table then, and snuggled onto my lap. I had to admit, it was the nicest thing that had happened to me in a long time.

"Philip Jackson," she said, fixing her green eyes on mine, "I do believe there may be hope for you yet." Then she kissed me, hard, and what came next became the nicest thing that had happened to me in a long time.

Finally I drove out to RAAL to see Hawsmill. I didn't bother to call first. I knew he'd see me. I was hoping there'd be something else, some fact he'd held back, that would help me find an answer. Maybe some slant I could put on the story to make it okay to tell it, help Douglas Grange without hurting RAAL, get Theresa off my back, keep everybody happy and assuage my conscience. Tall order, I know.

I knew something was wrong the minute I walked into the building. The air was hushed, voices muted and hands stilled. Tragedy is always accompanied by either dreadful noise or terrible silence.

Hawsmill's secretary was at her desk, crying, another woman's arm around her shoulder. And suddenly I wasn't a reporter, cataloguing facts. I was just another person hearing bad news. The words hit me in short bursts, like headlines. Car accident. Richard Hawsmill dead at the scene. No one else involved. Police investigating. No explanation yet.

I left, but by the time I got to the car my hands were shaking and I had to steady them to fumble the key into the lock.

What had Grange said to Hawsmill? "You probably won't live to see any bad publicity." Could the mere possibility that I might tell the story have sealed Hawsmill's fate? I wanted to tell it right, not hurt RAAL, but maybe that would happen anyway.

I made it halfway back to the city before the shakes got so bad I had to pull off the road. I wouldn't believe it--couldn't let myself believe it. I leaned my head against the steering wheel. Wouldn't the signs have alerted me? But no, they just kept going on about the damned arrival. Maybe if I confronted Grange again--but I remembered the uselessness of our last conversation. I

was nowhere with the story, there were no answers in sight, and the facts were as recalcitrant as ever.

Or maybe there was one more place to look. I scabbled through my notebook. Somewhere I had jotted it down...there. Grange's address, the rundown boarding house on the city's Low Side where RAAL paid for him to live.

Getting in was easy. These places don't have locks. They do have landlords, but Grange's was more than willing to look the other way for a ten dollar bill.

What really frightened me was how easily I found it. Hell, I didn't even have to search. The envelope was propped up on the scuffed tabletop against a cracked coffee mug. My name was scrawled on the envelope's face in the cramped writing I remembered from Grange's notes in Hawsmill's office. I sat on a sagging sofa that smelled like a hundred year's worth of cat piss and read everything inside. It began with a note:

Dear Philip:

I feel confident that you will not take offense at my familiarity. You've discovered that I now live in a world of probabilities, and I've written this note and left it here for you based on those probabilities. Richard Hawsmill is probably dead, and you (or someone close to you) have seen something alarming or intriguing on one of my signs. I urge you, whatever it is, to believe it.

You may think I have done humanity a great disservice by going mad. In my more lucid moments I think this myself, although I had no choice in the matter. What I believe might have been mankind's great emancipation will, in all probability, be lost to us for many years yet. I could not, alas, foresee all the effects of my experiment, wherein lies the great irony.

You now hold the last copy of my notes on the probability protein. Keep them safe. I believe you will not be publishing them anytime soon. I also believe our paths will cross again.

The probability that you had any effect on the death of Richard Hawsmill is remote. I thought you might want to know that.

Sincerely,

Douglas E. Grange

When I say I read everything that was in the package I exaggerate. Most of it was pure gibberish to me. Given a month and a degree in particle physics I might have been able to decipher it, but I have my doubts. When I finished, what was clear was that Grange didn't know everything about what he'd done, and couldn't foresee everything--but I still had to find out what he did know.

He was on the corner as usual, beard and hair blowing back in the breeze like some gentle hippie from another age. His sign read, for me anyway, "GET UNDERGROUND. ONLY SAFE PLACE. TWO WEEKS LEFT." I parked, walked over to him. He smiled at me, no hint of recognition in his mad grey eyes, held out a hand hopefully. I pressed a dollar into it.

"Douglas?"

He nodded, apparently just happy that someone knew his name. "Great day, isn't it?" he said with a grin. "People sure get generous when the sun shines. Why is that, do you think?"

I just smiled back and shook my head.

"Good thing we don't have to understand everything," he said cheerfully.

"Yes," I said slowly, "it sure is."

And suddenly, surely, the facts lined up and marched off, leaving something intangible but infinitely truer in their place.

I went to get Linda.

She came along with an odd look but no hesitation, and on the way to Grange's corner I talked non-stop. I told her about the signs and the near miss on highway 24 and the three weeks until the arrival and the phone conversation with the man who'd seen the same sign and the probability protein and Richard Hawsmill's death and the notes I'd found in Grange's room. She just nodded and listened, and about halfway through she reached over and took my hand.

When we got out of the car she linked her arm through mine, and we walked together over to the Sign Man. He smiled and watched our approach, like a benevolent pastor waiting at the altar.

She looked at the sign for a long time. To me, it still showed the same warning it had an hour ago. Douglas Grange glanced at us curiously a time or two, but gave no indication that he recognized me. He didn't speak.

"Well?" I asked finally.

Linda smiled up at me, and her green eyes were wet. "It says, 'BUY LOW, SELL HIGH'," she said. "Tell me again what it says for you?"

I told her. She nodded seriously. "Well, mine seems like better advice," she said, "but do you think maybe we should follow yours?"

I loved that woman.

I'm finishing this as I wait for Linda to emerge from the bathroom at a gas station near the Montana border. We've got a rented van packed to the roof with supplies and we're headed to my granddad's farm, and that old bomb shelter. My tenants can come down with us if they want, kids and all, and we're staying there until whatever's arriving has come and, hopefully, gone. Or until the time's up and nothing happens. We'll wait and see.

I wrote the story for Theresa, probably not the story she wanted, but the whole story, warnings and all, and I don't know what she'll make of it. I gave her three days to decide if she'll publish it. If not, I'll e-mail it out to every newspaper editor I know, and some I don't. That's about all I can do to try and warn people about whatever's coming. But I can't worry about it any more. This time I'm doing what feels right for me, and for Linda.

And Douglas Grange, of course. He's the key to it all, and I feel I owe him-- have to make sure he's in a safe, underground place when the arrival happens. He's in the back seat now, with a stack of posterboard and colored markers, happily making signs. Sometimes he shows us one, and sometimes Linda and I argue over what it really says. More and more we're seeing the same things. I guess our probability proteins are up and running. Once Linda saw something that made her eyes well up for a minute, but she only said she'd probably tell me later.

To hell with living together. If we survive whatever's coming, I want to marry her. Maybe Douglas will tell me what the probability is on that one.

THE END

CURSE OF THE AVALANCHE'S HUSBAND _____

BY BRUCE BOSTON

*Bruce Boston is the author of forty books and chapbooks, including the novel *Stained Glass Rain* and the best-of fiction collection *Masque of Dreams*. Stories and poems have appeared in hundreds of publications, including *Asimov's SF*, *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, and seven *Nebula Awards* anthologies. His fiction has received a *Pushcart Prize* and the *Best of Soft SF Award*. His poetry has received many awards, including a record four *Asimov's Readers' Awards*, a record seven *Rhysling Awards*, and the *Grand Master Award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association*. More information, including a bibliography, poems, and links to online publications, can be found at his website: <http://hometown.aol.com/bruboston>*

She is convincing
only in the downhill rush
her endless antics entail:

the alcohol, the forged scrip,
the injections and infections,
her ongoing infidelities

with some highway desperado
she met in a roadhouse
during one of her sprees.

Each of her actions
carries them further astray
from the future reality

they once concocted together,
until all of value they
ever owned or shared

starts helter-skeltering

down the steeply inclined
plane of their existence:

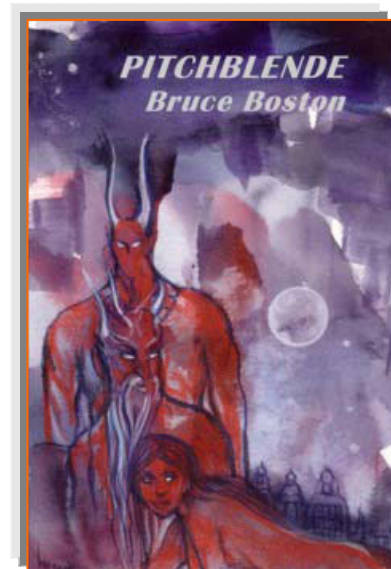
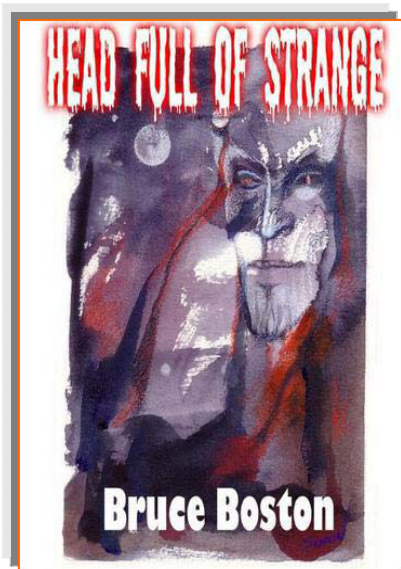
chairs and bureaus tumbling
past lamps and broken glass,
books with pages flapping,

marriage vows running to oaths
in a rain of lost keepsakes
and long forgotten keys.

Now they live on the vertical
rather than the horizontal,
belayed one to another

on a cliff face in motion,
eyes wide and jaws clamped,
like climbers straining

for whatever outcroppings
and crevices will sustain
their tenuous subsistence.



DOOMED-LOVE HAIKU

BY THOMAS ZIMMERMAN

Thomas Zimmerman teaches English at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Poems of his have appeared recently in Macabre, Lunatic Chameleon, and Scifaikuest.

Mausoleum Fiancée

Making love again,
here in this house where I dwell
on her skeleton.

Epithalamium

Song achingly sweet--
Ship, skull, and hopes dashed,
I cry, kiss my Siren bride.

Between the Winding Sheets

Even after death,
the other drive gnaws and pulls--
Love's maw's never full.

Eros and Thanatos

Lovely oblong box
conjures rapt, recurring dream
to slip inside, die.

Dulcinea's Teeth

Beguiled by a smile,
I howl, bleed, to satisfy
my sweet devourer.

FEATURED ARTIST

VINCENT DI FATE



Vincent Di Fate

Vital Stats

Age: 58

Country: USA

Training: Four years on scholarship to The Phoenix (now part of the Pratt Institute); MA in Illustration from Syracuse University

Medium: Acrylics; pen & ink on scratchboard; oils

Influences: Hieronymus Bosch, Yves Tanguy, Salvador Dalí, John Singer Sargent, Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Dean Cornwell, Chesley Bonestell

On The Web: <http://www.VincentDiFate.com>

How long have you been illustrating professionally?



I've been illustrating professionally since about 1965 or '66 when I started freelancing for *Galaxy* and *Worlds of IF* magazines as an art student. I started illustrating full time in 1969, after a brief stint in motion picture animation.

What initially drew you to illustrating and painting?

This is a question that's almost impossible to answer. Those of us who find careers in the arts usually start doing what we do at an early age. I could not have been older than four or five before I started producing credible, representational art on a regular basis. By the time I was of school age, virtually everyone around me knew that I'd be an artist, but it was something that I came to resist throughout my high school years. A full scholarship to The Phoenix, won in a tri-state competition, however, was almost impossible to ignore. My original ambition was to work in film.

Tell us a bit about your creative process.

I've been doing this for quite some time and am very prolific (having at one time, for a span of decades, produced between eighty and a hundred published images per year). In all, I've produced well over 3,000 illustrations over the course of my career—all of it SF, fantasy, astronomical or aerospace art. Because of my career-long association with science fiction, people trust me to read a story and to produce appropriate images.



It begins there, on the page, with schematic thumbnail sketches scribbled in the margins of the manuscript, evolves to a full blown color sketch (the painting complete and in miniature), then to the finished art. I paint in acrylics on sized hardboard.



My black and white work is done without sketches submitted to the client for approval, so there isn't quite the protracted evolutionary process. These drawings are executed in pen and ink on uncoated scratchboard, with specific areas of the picture surface inked and rendered as needed. Generally, I work from light to dark, rather than with the traditional scratchboard method of working from an entirely blackened surface. I developed this technique while working for John W. Campbell at *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact Magazine*, then the leading publication of its kind, back in the late 1960s. Campbell was often inclined to request editorial changes and, while my intention was to produce pen and ink drawings from him,

working on scratchboard made the process of changes relatively easy. It also afforded me an opportunity to integrate and to utilize the best advantages of both mediums. I don't think I'm particularly good at the medium, but I do have a unique approach to its use.

Scratchboard, for those of your readers who don't know, is a work surface coated with compressed clay or chalk. The surface is inked and selectively scratched away, usually producing white lines or stipple (tiny dots) scored in areas of black ink, somewhat simulating the look of an engraving.

Which artists have influenced you the most, whether through style or theme?

The artists previously listed have all been influential to me. You'll note, however, that with the possible exception of Bonestell, my work does not resemble the works of any of them. Each offers a different kind of inspiration—Bosch, Dalí, and Tanguy offer the surreal vision; Sargent the technique of paint application; Pyle, Wyeth and Cornwell, the narrative touch essential to effective illustration; Bonestell a sense of craft and a

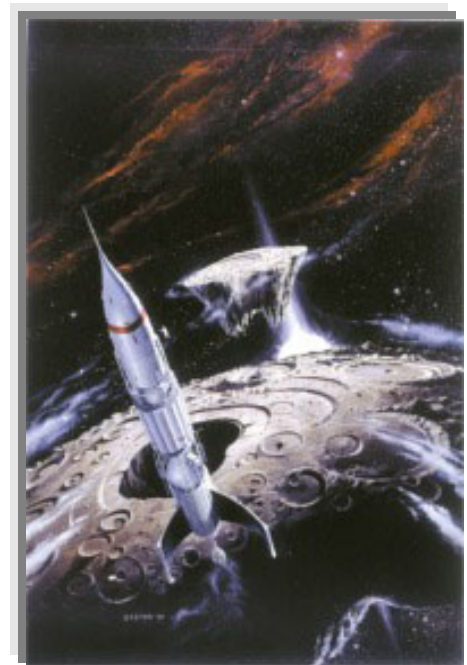
compelling wonder about the beauty of the heavens and the hopefulness of the human future.

Do you use a lot of computer software when creating, or do you prefer more old-fashioned techniques?

I'm proficient in most computer picture-making soft wares, but when it comes to illustration, I'm a traditional artist, working in traditional media.

What does the future hold for Fantasy and SF illustrating? Any specific trends that you would like to highlight?

SF and fantasy are allied genres that have grown steadily in popularity. While I'm delighted by this expanded interest, SF writers, particularly, have moved farther away from the hard sciences so that much of contemporary science fiction resembles fantasy, or has a strong sociological rather than hard science bent. Since all great fiction is character drive, I suppose this is a good thing, but I miss much of the sense of wonder that characterized the genre in the early and middle decades of the 20th century. I also suppose that this trend has more to do with a declining emphasis in the sciences in our public educational system, rather than purely a matter of artistic choice. Authors write less speculatively about science because they understand science less than the generations that emerged from the late Industrial Revolution and the two World Wars. Outside of the United States, this is less true.



What's the best thing about your job?

For me, it's the process. I still struggle with, and am seldom satisfied, with the results.

What are some of the most enjoyable and inspirational projects you have worked on?

I've work on many gratifying projects—the “official portrait” of the International Space Station that I painted for NASA in 1987 comes

immediately to mind—but the constant struggle to improve my work is daunting. There is little joy beyond the creative process for me. The results are always disheartening--could *always* be better—and are a constantly reaffirmation of my essential flaws as an artist.

Any advice for aspiring illustrators who would like to work in the field professionally?

It's a wonderful field to work in, but a difficult and highly competitive one. Everyone these days wants to work in the genre. Expect the work to be difficult and challenging, and understand that if it is truly your destiny to do it, it is the most difficult thing you'll ever do.

Parting shot:



My love for science fiction is greater than my love of making pictures. I've always considered myself an SF person first, and illustration merely the means by which I express that interest. But I never truly loved the personal ritual of creating art—probably because it came too easily to me at too young an age—and I've struggled all my life to become better at it while appreciating perhaps too broad a range of styles and approaches and failing to settle for very long on any one of them. I view my output as somewhat schizophrenic, but many genre fans see a distinctive style and approach in what I do. Clearly I've failed throughout my life to see the Big Picture, but I can think of nothing more noble in these troubled times than to remind ourselves that the future offers opportunities for expansion and hope.

EDITOR INTERVIEW

RICHARD CHIZMAR

Richard Chizmar is the publisher/editor of Cemetery Dance magazine, Grave Tales comic book, and the Cemetery Dance Publications book imprint. His own writing has appeared in dozens of publications including Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and Mystery Scene. His first collection of fiction was Midnight Promises. Two more collections are forthcoming.

What inspired you to start Cemetery Dance Magazine?

Two things. The first was that most of the other small press magazines in the late 80s didn't feature the mix of stories and articles that I preferred as a reader. The second reason -- and this was the big one -- was Dave Silva's THE HORROR SHOW. When I found that magazine in a mall bookstore, it represented everything I loved as a reader and a writer...and when I discovered that it was pretty much a one-man operation...that was all it took. A few months later, I started CEMETERY DANCE.

What was the first sign, to you personally, that Cemetery Dance would become the successful genre magazine it is today?

The first sign was that the creators -- the writers and artists - would trust someone new with their hard work. Right from the start, we were blessed with great material. These folks seemed to understand somehow that I was serious and wanted to create something that would stick around for awhile. And they came through for me. So I knew that I (as publisher/editor) would be the only possible reason for failure...and I was determined to not allow that to happen.

What are your feelings on the present state of the Horror genre? Have you seen any new interesting angles come to the fore lately?

It's funny, but I pretty much stay away from trends and upswings and downswings. I just keep my head down and keep doing what we've done for the past 16 years. Buying the kind of stories that I myself like to read. Commissioning interviews and articles on the subjects I'm interested in as a

fan. Not the most sophisticated approach, I know, but I think that's CEMETERY DANCE -- it's always been a very personal vehicle.

You've edited numerous Horror Anthologies over the years. Does it differ in any relevant aspect when editing for a magazine?

That mainly depends on whether I am editing the book for the CD imprint or for another publisher. If it's another publisher, then there are certainly commercial aspects to keep in mind. There usually needs to be a solid blend of old pros (to help market the book), along with a scattering of newcomers. If it's a CD book, that's not so important to me. Plus if you're working for another publisher, then that's exactly what you're doing -- you're working FOR them. So often times there are pre-determined "guides" you are asked to follow as an editor. But most of the time, I'm just hired to turn in the best possible book I can assemble within the budget allowed.

Are you currently working on\planning any specific anthology collections?

We just wrapped up the third volume of the SHIVERS series, which debuted at Horrorfind here in Baltimore. Several others are nearing completion, including our big 15 Year Anniversary antho, and there may be an announcement of a new one in the next month or so. Stay tuned.

What kind of kinds of stories scare Richard Chizmar, and why?

Oh, just about everything scares me at some level, which is why I love the genre so much. I've always had a big imagination, so it's easy for me to get into that place where I "believe" what I am seeing or reading. I'm still very much a little kid when it comes to that. On a more mature level, stories that deal with loss affect me very deeply. This is a fragile world we live in, and we're reminded of that every damn day...

Is it at all possible to define Horror?

No. Different people. Different definitions.

How does British horror compare to its US counterpart these days? Are you seeing many submissions from outside these two staples?

Sure, we see approximately 500 submissions each month -- from all over the world. But I'd say that about 80% are from within the States.

As for comparisons between UK and US horror these days...nothing jumps immediately to mind. Some would probably say that the English writers are turning out more "literary" work -- whatever that means -- but I don't see it. Just depends on the author and the theme of the story. Guys like Tim Lebbon and Simon Clark can write just as "American" as Stephen King or Dean Koontz. And writers like Charlie Grant and Thomas Ligotti can write just as atmospheric as anyone on the Island...

Do you consider yourself a 'hands-on' editor? How far are you prepared to go with an author in reworking a manuscript?

I'm hands-on when the situation calls for it. I've published many stories without touching a single word (and my critics are nodding their heads as they read this). But I've also tweaked and heavily edited dozens of others. Just depends on the situation...

What is this preoccupation with finding clowns scary? Do we blame Stephen King?

Hey, they ARE scary. Take a good look at one. Close up. In the dark. And, yes, I blame King and Bloch and a few others...

Is there something as being too original - too cutting edge - in terms of fiction?

I don't think so. Unless you are looking at one of those stories that is so clear an example of "style over substance" -- and then I think you're getting away from what makes reading so enjoyable in the first place. It's okay to make the reader "work" to fully enjoy a story (from time to time)...but a reader should not have to "decipher" what the hell the writer is doing. Too often, I think that is exactly what is referred to as "cutting edge" these days.

It usually takes some time for readers to catch on with writers like this...but they eventually do. Just take a peek around and look for that group of "cutting edge" writers from 5-10 years ago -- they're nowhere to be found and with good reason.

Should fiction still be classified in terms of genre at all? You take an author like China Miéville: is it Horror? Is it Steampunk? Fantasy?

This is an old argument without an answer, I think. Writers mostly hate them. Publishers swear they need them. Readers could care less. Around and around we go...

How big an influence to you think the small presses and independent publications have in terms of what people read - and what others think is publishable?

In the current climate, I think small and independent presses have a HUGE influence... and it's growing each and every day. Same in the film world. Big business has finally eaten enough of its tail to make room for the rest of us...

Where is the Internet going with fiction? Do you view it as a good or bad influence on the publishing industry as a whole?

As anyone in my office will tell you, I'm an internet-newbie, so I better pass on this one!

What do you look for in a story, as an editor?

First and foremost -- STORY! STORY! STORY! It's the most important thing. Call me a traditionalist, but I want stories that have narrative drive, that move the reader along. Sure, they can be atmospheric or moody or leisurely-paced, but they need to be structured properly. You're in control -- take the reader for a ride, but make it a good one.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

The usual stuff:

Read a lot. Write a lot.

Believe in yourself.

Figure out who to listen to, and who to ignore (this is more important than you think!)

Keep doing it. If you love it, don't let anything stop you....

What would you like your epitaph to read?

He was a good father.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

MARIANNE DE PIERRES

Marianne de Pierres is the author of the Parrish Plessis series. The first book, Nylon Angel, is currently in bookstores. And Code Noir was recently released in July 2004. Her short fiction has appeared in Eidolon and Fables and Reflections, and various book anthologies, including Agog!, Forever Shores and Shelf Life. She has written book reviews and feature articles and is also currently studying for a post-graduate certificate in Writing, Editing and Publishing at the University of Queensland. Marianne is a co-founder of ROR—wRiters On the Road—a critiquing workshop for Australian professional genre writers, and the VISION SFF writers group. She has served on the judging panels of the Aurealis Awards (the Australian awards for speculative fiction) and was integral in the development of Clarion South. Visit her website at www.mariannedepierres.com. Marianne will be GOH at Thylacon (The Australian National Convention) 2005 in Tasmania.

Tell us a bit about how the character of Parrish Plessis came about. Can you remember what the kernel was which sparked her in your mind?

I guess watching *Aeon Flux* in the 80's got me thinking about heroines. Aeon was such an amazing character, but she was pretty self-centered. I decided I wanted to write a story about a character who was capable of compassion and violence as most of us are; someone who was unpredictable and bit wild but would do anything to help you. I liked the mix of attributes.

Your portrayal of the Media in a future setting is not at all far-fetched. Is it your view that this is indeed something that modern society is moving towards?

Yes. It was my desire to touch on how our reality is shaped for us. A surprising amount of people either don't care or have never really thought about it. I believe documentaries are often more fiction than fact and news is guilty of omission and distortion (not even always intentionally). We need to

teach our children to assess how they are being filtered information and to always ask the question 'what are the other sides to this?'

Writing from a first-person perspective forces a writer to become totally immersed in the motivations of their character. Are there ever times you feel more like Parrish than Marianne?

I remember having a thought at one point that she was taking over my life. And occasionally my partner can be heard saying 'sure thing Parrish!' in a rather dry voice. But really, no. I'm much less impulsive than her and a pacifist (except maybe on the basketball court). I don't always agree with the way she conducts herself either, but I always find it amusing

Which writers have had the most influence on your own writing?

A.C Clarke. Octavia Butler. Terry Dowling, JG Ballard. Jonathon Lethem

There has been much talk of Cyberpunk being a dead, deflated genre. What's your take on this? What do you think the future holds for this specific school of writing?

Gawd, the whole cyberpunk debate gives me grief. I wanted to write something entertaining, action filled and accessible with a character who bought hope. But comparisons are inevitable—a reference point. Unfortunately some people get hung up on them. Cyberpunk may have been a specific 'movement' but it should be allowed to evolve, mutate, be reborn, be pastiched... whatever. Someone, somewhere, sometime seems to have decreed that we mustn't write anything that might strike a chord with it. Or use language reminiscent of it. Well excuse me! If you don't want to read that type of stuff, don't. For chrissakes, writing is getting more prescriptive than fashion—and I don't mean by the publishers. It's us—we're doing it to ourselves. It's like saying heroic fantasy is old fashioned...until someone comes along and writes a heroic fantasy that knocks everyone's socks off, and off we go again. Obviously technology has moved on, but that shouldn't be a reason to shut the door on a whole sub-genre. Call it something different if it makes you feel better, but 'you can't do that, it's not cool anymore' is decidedly uncool.

There has been a recent move amongst South African Speculative writers to get their work out to a wider, international market. What are Australian

writers in the same field doing to get their work noticed by a wider audience?

I think the Australian scene is strong and getting stronger. The creation of Clarion South has been a great showcase for Australian talent and all the other attendees; having David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer as international guests along with Nalo Hopkinson, is a big step in our evolution. Next year it will be Michael Swanwick and Ellen Datlow. We also have a thriving small press industry that is getting reviewed internationally, and people like Jonathon Strahan, reviews editor at Locus, and Trent Jamieson who worked for RedSine and edited Kirsten Bishop's book *The Etched City for Prime* are great ambassadors. (Kirsten's book has since been picked up by UK and US publishers). The SF community in OZ is active on the Internet, Cons are flourishing, as are genre writing workshops.

Have you always been attracted to SF?

Yes. Since my late teens. Nothing excites me as much. It makes me wish I was a whole lot smarter. I'd like nothing better than to be an astrophysicist, and if I was younger I'd go back to study and have a crack at it.

How much has your style changed through the course of writing the Parrish Plessis series?

Interesting question. Obviously maintaining Parrish's voice is paramount. And yet I wanted her to grow and learn. I've read a recent review that described the prose in *Nylon Angel* pedestrian. I often have a desire to break out and use more lyrical, shinier language, but the reality is that Parrish doesn't think like that, and this is her story. By book three however, she is consorting with the rich and dangerous and I'm prepared to let her voice and problem solving ability be affected by that experience. I've also stopped using so many exclamation marks!!!

What was your initial reaction after Orbit Books offered you a three-book deal?

Numb shock. Shakes. Shrieking glee. Tears. Champagne. Self Doubt. More champagne (to drown the doubt). Then...work. Truly, Orbit has been an absolute joy to be involved with. Tim Holman, Ben Sharpe. And now I have the good fortune to be edited by Darren Nash.

Do you have a specific writing ritual for when you want to immerse yourself in the work? Ever suffer from writer's block?

Mornings. I write best in the morning and hate to have to spend it doing anything else. My morning writing is ritually broken up with tea and an avocado. Writers block? No. Maybe I'm naive, but I believe we make too much of it. If you can't write then your body/mind is telling you to do something else for a while. You're stale or stressed. If you are tied into contract that could be a problem and you need to attack what you are working on sideways or backwards, change your approach. If you're not tied into a contract—go fishing. It'll come back when you get bored and the pressure is off.

What effect do you think has the Internet had on your work—exposing it to its intended audience?

It's an undeniably huge medium for communication—but to tell you the truth...I'm not sure. I guess hits on my website are some indicator—but then those visitors could just be lost...

You've also worked as a non-fiction reviewer, interviewer and feature writer. Do you still get much time for that now that the Parrish Plessis series has taken off so well?

Not really. I'm a slow writer and most journalism has a quick turnaround time. I made a conscious decision to put it aside for a while. I have a family, I can only fit in so much.

What are you reading right now? Anything in particular you'd like to recommend?

I'm reading *Agog 3* a small press anthology edited by Cat Sparks, showcasing Australian short fiction; Jon Courtenay Grimwood—Effendi, and *Buddhism for Mothers* :). Two books I would recommend, *Black Juice* a YA anthology by Margo Lanagan, and *Less Than Human* by Maxine McArthur, which will be out in about August from Warner Aspect.

What are you currently working on?

Book 3 of the Parrish series, which has a working title of 'Crash Deluxe' - the grand finale. I'm also working slowly on a novel set in an ever-dark Night Club city—my agent is very excited about this one, and I'm looking forward to getting into it fully when 'Crash' is finished.

Tell us something about Marianne de Pierres that no one else knows.

My first screen love was with Thierry La Fronde, a character in a 'B' grade French TV series called *The King's Outlaw*, dubbed for an English audience. Aaah, my heart still flutters.

Any insightful advice you would like to disperse to aspiring speculative writers?

Nothing that hasn't been said before. Write. And never stop striving to improve. One of the best ways to do this is to find some quality critiquing partners. Look for the balance between having confidence in what you do, and knowing you need to get better at it.

If you run into Parrish, could you ask her the following please? (Because I'm too scared to ask her myself):

Why do you like guns so much, Parrish?

Parrish stares blankly at Lynne Jamneck, goes back to cleaning her barrel.

You sound awfully confrontational—ever thought of seeing a shrink?

You sound like a wimp - ever thought of seeing a shrink?

What do you say to people who think girls shouldn't be 'In The Business'?

I don't say anything to people who talk drivel.

**Ahem. Thanks Parrish.
And thank *you*, Marianne.**

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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