

The Edge of the Map

by Ian Creasey

Our June issue seems to be almost a special multi-media issue. James Patrick Kelly's story investigated a brand new medium, while Robert Reed reflected on a familiar entertainment form that regularly invades the average living room. Now Ian Creasey, whose first story for Asimov's--"The Hastillan Weed"--appeared in our February 2006 issue, examines a fairly recent phenomenon that has swallowed the lives of many Internet users, and takes a look at where it's going and what it may lead to when it reaches...

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Susanna listened resentfully to the helicopters spraying nanocams over the foothills. She kept her gaze locked on the plantation, rubbing her tense neck as she waited to get the shot. It was a long time since she'd filmed her own footage. She fiddled with the controls on her ancient glasses, practicing framing the scene, zooming in, panning back for a wide angle.

"How long will this take?" asked Ivo. "This isn't what I'm here for. We need to head off soon." In her peripheral vision, she saw him twitch restlessly as he kept glancing in all directions, like a nervous bird in a garden full of cats.

"I want to film a few things before I'm finally obsolete," Susanna said. "It shouldn't be long now." She saw no sign of movement downhill. The cannabis plants, which had grown four meters tall in the African sun, might still harbor a few defiant hippies. Should she move along the ridge for a better angle?

A bar of green light split the sky in two. The *crack* of ionized air rolled across the mountain like a manmade thunderbolt. Susanna adjusted her glasses, zooming in to focus on the flames. The smell of burning cannabis rose up the hillside.

She gave the glasses to Ivo, then walked a few steps down the hill. "Keep looking at me, but film as much fire behind me as you can."

Ivo donned the glasses with little enthusiasm. He brushed aside the fringe of his ash-blond hair, then gave her a perfunctory thumbs-up sign.

Susanna stood up straight, took two deep breaths, and raised her voice over the crackle of flames. "As the Blind Spot shrinks, more secrets are revealed." Another *zap* echoed around the hills. "When the nanocams found a drugs plantation, American satellites fried it."

A gust of wind fanned aromatic smoke toward her, and Susanna suppressed a tickle in her throat. She wiped her brow with a sponsored sweatband. "I can smell the burning from here. With the sun and the fire and the lasers from the sky, I'm roasting like an ant under a magnifying glass." She included these sensory details to emphasize that she reported from the spot, unlike all the bloggers who'd comment on the nanocam footage from the comfort of their own homes.

“In the last few days, soldiers have arrested dozens of terrorists as soon as the cams spotted them. But who else--and what else--is still out there?” She left a dramatic pause before signing off. “This is Susanna Munro reporting from Zaire.”

Now she let herself cough volcanically. Her eyes watering, she stumbled up the bare slope, following Ivo to his battered Land Rover.

The vehicle, parked in the shade of a huge rock, was a blessed harbor from the heat and smoke. Ivo started the engine and turned up the air-conditioning, then returned her glasses with a grimace of distaste.

“Thanks,” said Susanna, smiling. “They won’t bite you.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about,” Ivo said, and she felt that he only barely refrained from adding “old chap.” Despite the heat, he wore a formal shirt and waistcoat as if he were starring in a twentieth century movie about a nineteenth century explorer.

Susanna played the recording. The obsolete glasses pixellated the image on zoom shots, and Ivo had jiggled his head while filming her. But the segment was usable. Watching her spiel, she winced at the sight of her grey hair. The last time she had used these glasses--or their backup system--her hair had been Pre-Raphaelite red. And in those days, simple moisturizer had kept wrinkles at bay. Throughout the past week she had felt the tropical sun beating through her high-factor sunblock, scouring crevasses in her skin, tanning it like old leather.

But that hardly mattered now. There would be no more stories after this one, no more dispatches from the field. The advancing nanocams made images accessible to everyone, and frontline journalism redundant.

A black helicopter roared overhead, spraying its invisible cargo. Inside the Land Rover, both their comps beeped to signal Net access. Susanna plugged in her glasses, uploading all the footage recorded this morning and last night--when the doomed hippies had got high for the last time, vowing that the Man could have their joints when he pried them from their cold dead hands. She sent the update to various channels she freelanced for, then began scanning her mail.

Ivo interrupted. “That’s where we’re going,” he said, pointing to a map on his laptop screen. An overlay showed nanocam coverage at 98 percent, and the Blind Spot shrank by a few more pixels as she stared. “Are you ready?” he asked. “Forward, forward, let us range.”

Susanna hesitated, thinking of the desperate criminals who could still be out there, hiding from the advancing cameras. If she met them, she might be giving them their last chance to commit rape, torture, murder.

And yet this was her last chance too, her last opportunity for an old-fashioned scoop, here in the continent where scoops began when New York *Herald* reporter

Henry Stanley said, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

Ivo revved the engine, and the Land Rover shot forward into the glare of the sun. Susanna’s comp chirped indignation as they left the Net behind and re-entered the Blind Spot. She read the mail she’d downloaded. Her husband had sent a Happy Birthday message, in case she stayed out here another week. Her daughters were baking cookies--chocolate for Michelle, and almond for Vanessa. In the background, the kitchen looked like chaos, as always, and she saw Toby scooping chocolate dough from an abandoned mixing bowl.

Susanna took off her glasses and put them in the pocket of her once-white blouse, now stained with sweat and smoke and dust. The children, she thought. The children were one reason she had stopped chasing stories across the globe. But it wasn’t just that. It had seemed a promotion to become the anchorwoman in the studio, to become an armchair pundit filing expert opinions from home. And yet, as the nanocams spread, everyone became a pundit. Anyone could bookmark footage and post comments, edit montages and record a voiceover. Susanna had once been proud to call herself a journalist, but the label meant nothing now.

Well, the bloggers weren’t out here, breathing the parched air, clutching a broken seat belt as the Land Rover bumped over stones and fallen branches. There was hardly any trail, just a network of goat tracks and dry stream beds. Ivo zigzagged up the mountain, leaving the contour-hugging helicopter behind. The nanocams could only advance slowly and methodically, needing to knit together in a network. From their inception as an anti-terrorist measure in the USA, they had spread remorselessly across the world. War and disease had kept this remote corner of Africa clear, a haven for the hunted, but now the last Blind Spot would disappear--Ivo’s laptop predicted--in less than two days.

She watched Ivo drive. Every few minutes he turned his head for a sudden glance out of the side window, as though trying to catch something by surprise.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“We’ve been through this already,” he said. “I’m not telling you what could be out there. The power of suggestion might make you imagine anything I mentioned. I’m bringing you because I need an independent pair of eyes. You’re the journalist--shouldn’t you see for yourself ?”

Susanna thought of pressing him, but decided to wait. Sometimes silence created its own pressure. People gripped by an obsession--and Ivo’s had brought him to the remotest corner of the Earth--could rarely shut up for long.

But he didn’t speak again until the Land Rover crunched to a halt. Susanna hopped out and helped Ivo heave a dead shrub from their path. She swallowed hard, trying to relieve the pain in her left ear. They had climbed many hundreds of meters,

but even in the thin air, the midday sun still broiled the landscape. The rocky hillside, pockmarked with tufts of dry grass, felt hot through her shoes, as if the long-extinct volcano plotted a comeback.

Ivo said, “Can you see anything?”

She paused and looked around. Bar the Land Rover, she saw no sign of human presence. The only movement came from a single bee darting between small purple flowers.

“Can you see anything in the corner of your eye?” Ivo asked. “Can you feel anything brushing past you--running from the nanocams â€”like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing’?” He spoke with the intensity of a true believer, though she still hadn’t figured out precisely what he believed in.

“Maybe you inhaled too much of that burning dope,” said Susanna. She hoped this might sting him into saying more, but he only shrugged and joined her back in the Land Rover.

They crawled on, stopping more frequently as the slope grew rugged. Eventually a huge jumble of boulders halted their progress.

“From here, we walk,” said Ivo.

Susanna rummaged in her holdall. “Coke?” she offered.

Ivo stared in disbelief. “Where did you get this? There’s not a bar or a vending machine in two hundred kilometers.” When he opened the can, froth spurted out and soaked him with cola.

They both laughed. “Sorry,” said Susanna. “I guess we’re pretty high up. And you just wasted about a hundred dollars worth of Coke, by the way. Some guy airlifted it all in and charged me one thousand dollars for a six-pack.” She tried to ease open her own can, and relieve the pressure gradually, but she only succeeded in spraying foam out of the window. Bubbles hissed as they fell on the Land Rover’s sun-heated metal.

“Unless the forex markets just exploded, that’s a lot of money for Coke.” Ivo wagged a finger in mock disdain. “And it’s not even chilled!”

“Yeah....” She sighed. “It was my little nostalgia trip. Back in the old days, when there were dozens of reporters chasing every story, we used to compete to see who could get the most outrageous item through expenses.” She remembered Pink-Slip Pete, the BBC veteran who’d mentored her through early assignments. He would have applauded the thousand-dollar Coke, and topped it with some ludicrously expensive taxi or minibar tab. Pete had died before the newsroom started sourcing all their pictures from the nanocams.

Ivo clinked his can with hers. “Cheers.” He started checking the contents of

his rucksack. "Are you going to hump your bag up the rest of the hill?" he asked.

Susanna frowned. "How far is it?"

"The more you carry, the farther it'll feel."

She hefted the holdall, which contained exactly what she used to pack in the old days. "I'll give it my best shot."

"Fair enough." Ivo pointed to her blouse pocket. "But you're leaving those behind."

Susanna pulled out the thick-framed glasses. "These? Why?"

"Because they're a camera. Okay, they're not the nanocams, but they're a camera nonetheless. Why do you think I'm here in the Blind Spot?"

"I don't know. You won't tell me what you're looking for."

"No ... but the reason I'm looking *here* is that there are no cameras. Not yet, anyway." Ivo looked up, as if to check for helicopters, but silence shrouded the mountain. "And that's why you can't bring your glasses."

"But I'm a journalist," Susanna said. "When I find the story, I need to film it."

"Ah, but what I'm looking for can't be filmed."

She turned to stare at him. "Run that by me again."

Ivo drained his can of warm Coke. "In ancient times," he began, "when people made maps, they wrote 'Here Be Dragons' at the edge, and drew sea-monsters in the ocean. Over the centuries the dragons got pushed back and back.

"Even in the scientific era, people still saw strange sights. Giant apes, rains of frogs, lights in the sky, fairies at the bottom of the garden. All sorts of stuff, but with one thing in common--they didn't show up too well on film. When the nanocams blanketed North America, you didn't hear much about Bigfoot any more.

"So there are two possibilities. Anyone who ever saw anything weird was mistaken or lying--or all those weird things retreated from the cameras, just as expanding civilization has always made wildlife retreat."

"Or die out," Susanna said.

"Cheery soul, aren't you?" said Ivo. "Yes, many creatures have died out. But wildlife isn't all extinct. And there were so many different weird things, they can't all have died, just as those witnesses can't all have been wrong."

"So we're looking for Bigfoot?" she said, pleased to have finally winkled out Ivo's obsession, and a little amused by it.

He shook his head. "I knew I shouldn't have mentioned anything specific. No, unless Bigfoot managed to swim all the way across the Atlantic, it seems unlikely he's here--if he ever existed. The same applies to most of what used to be called the unexplained, before the nanocams showed exactly how rains of frogs occurred.

"But if there's anything left, if there's just one single weird thing left in the world, it's right here. The nanocams have driven it back and back, and now the Blind Spot is the edge of the Earth. And that's why you can't bring your camera-glasses. The weird is like a superimposed state in quantum mechanics--when you record it, you destroy it." He said the last sentence as if it made sense.

"So you invited a journalist along, and now you're asking her to leave her camera behind?"

"'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen'--but what if it can *only* blush unseen by mechanical eyes?"

"Then I wonder what it has to hide." Yet Susanna felt sympathetic to Ivo's bizarre request. Journalism wasn't just about taking pictures, otherwise she could have stayed home and let the nanocams get the footage. Journalism was about being on the spot, talking to the locals, getting the real story rather than just a picture of it. Yes, she could leave her glasses behind.

After all, she still had her backup system.

"Okay," she said, putting her glasses into the Land Rover's glove compartment. "Let's go."

They clambered over the boulders that had blocked the vehicle's ascent, and then began trudging the rest of the way up the mountain. Susanna kept transferring her holdall from one shoulder to the other, in ever-diminishing intervals as the weight grew harder to bear. She wanted to rush to the top, to get the climb over with, but found herself panting for breath in the thin air. She felt dizzy, and saw black spots floating in her vision.

Were they what Ivo was looking for? When she asked, he smiled and shook his head. "You're just trying too hard, using too much energy. It's easier if you take small steps." He demonstrated walking with tiny heel-to-toe steps that Susanna remembered from childhood games.

"Let's catch a yeti, hitch a ride," she said.

Ivo disdained to reply, and climbed onward. She followed him, grateful for the nanobots maintaining her osteoporosis-stricken bones. The sun descended the empty sky.

Susanna only noticed that Ivo had stopped when she bumped into him. "Take a rest," he said. "From here it's easier."

They'd reached the rim of the ancient volcano. Before them a vast lake stretched as far as Susanna could see. She sat on her holdall, too tired to even speak. Ivo, ten years younger, looked just as glad to take a breather. She watched him staring out into the lake, and wondered what he had expected to find. Only wind-blown ripples broke the surface.

They couldn't afford to rest long; the sun hung low, with twilight brief in the tropics. Ivo led them round the shore of the lake, crunching grey sand underfoot. Ahead stood a small hut, built from mortarless stones and roofed with reeds.

"I scouted out a few places," Ivo explained. "When the nanocams began their final push, I didn't know exactly where the last Blind Spot would be, but I thought the lake was a likely spot." He paused. "Um ... you might want to wait here for a minute."

Ivo approached the doorway cautiously, and Susanna remembered that terrorists might be hiding beyond. But he gave her a reassuring wave, and she joined him inside.

A few folding chairs surrounded a picnic table full of moldy Styrofoam cups and empty packets of rolling papers. "Some of the hippies used to come up here for the fishing," Ivo said. "They had lots of stories about the things that got away."

Susanna thought he referred to drug-inspired tales, until she realized that he meant *weird* things. What monsters might be wandering outside the stone walls? Was it safe up here?

The hell with it, she thought. Bigfoot could scare off the terrorists--or vice versa. She was too tired to worry. She looked for a bed, but saw only a pile of dry reeds. From her holdall she took some spare clothes for a pillow.

"Good thinking," said Ivo. "We need to start early tomorrow, to beat the helicopters."

If he said anything else, Susanna didn't hear it before she fell asleep.

In the morning they walked further round the lake to a stretch of tall reeds growing in the shallows. A thin layer of cloud veiled the sun, but did little to restrain its heat from baking the landscape.

Ivo splashed through the reeds until he shouted in triumph. Susanna stepped into the water--finding it colder than she expected--and joined Ivo as he heaved aside a faded tarpaulin. Underneath bobbed a motorboat, its off-white interior colonized by nesting spiders. Susanna threw in her holdall and clambered onto a bench, brushing arachnids aside. *Oh, the joys of location reporting*. She toweled off her wet feet while Ivo struggled to start the engine.

The boat roared into the lake, flattening reeds on its way. Ivo throttled back to a gentler pace. He kept glancing from port to starboard, bow to stern. Susanna saw

only birds wading near the shore, taking to the air when the boat came too close.

She looked away from the shore, out into the lake. Beyond the boat's wake, the still water reflected the sky. She barely saw any boundary between them. No farther shore darkened the horizon.

Susanna blinked, and peered into the distance. She still couldn't see anything.

"How big is this lake?" she asked.

Ivo shrugged. "I haven't been round it."

"I thought we were in a volcano crater. Shouldn't we be able to see the other side?"

"I'll check the map." Ivo delved into his rucksack. But when he tried to boot up the laptop, nothing happened. He shook his head. "Batteries must have run out. They don't last long out here."

"You don't have any spares?"

"Sure, back in the Land Rover."

Ivo looked more excited than concerned. "Let's get across and have a look," he said, revving the boat like a boy racer.

Susanna glanced back and watched the hut dwindle into an imperceptible speck. The loss of her only landmark disturbed her on a visceral level.

You wanted to chase a story, she reminded herself. In the old days she'd survived dozens of disturbing moments. Back then she had almost relished being scared, because the most uncomfortable stories sometimes turned out to be the best.

In those days, of course, she didn't have a family waiting back home.

The engine cut out.

"Shit!" said Ivo. He yanked the starter. The engine coughed and grunted, but wouldn't fire. "We must be out of gas. Stupid hippies! They promised me there was loads left."

Susanna bent down to peer under her bench. She rejoiced at the sight of a red canister, but when she grabbed it, she could feel it was empty.

Below the other bench, Ivo retrieved two long paddles. "I guess this is the emergency engine."

"It's a long time since I did any canoeing," said Susanna. *Or anything much*, she thought.

The motorboat was no canoe. Susanna found the benches uncomfortably

placed for paddling, as did Ivo. Nevertheless, after several minutes of splashing and swearing, they found they could move the boat if they had to. This made Susanna feel a little better, though she reflected that the few minutes the engine had driven them out would take a whole lot longer to paddle back.

And where was “back,” exactly? In struggling to coordinate their paddling, they’d spun the boat so many times that Susanna had no idea which way they’d come.

All directions looked the same, an expanse of water stretching to the hazy sky. The heat made her scalp itch with sweat. She opened a Coke and swigged the whole can.

“Laptop down; engine stopped,” she said. “Do you reckon gremlins did it? Are they part of the weird?” She wanted to bait him, to get him to talk about what he was looking for.

“If gremlins existed, they’d sabotage the nanocams. They haven’t managed that yet,” said Ivo.

He raised an ancient pair of binoculars to his eyes. For long minutes he slowly turned, scanning all angles. He peered into the depths of the lake, then shrugged and sat down.

For a few minutes, no one spoke. The occasional call of a faraway bird sounded as distant as if it came from another world.

Susanna decided to test her backup system. She fixed her gaze upon Ivo and asked, “What made you start chasing the weird? Did you once have an encounter with it?”

“No,” said Ivo. “Quite the opposite.” He paused to put on more sunscreen, then continued, “When I was a child, I used to lie a lot. I would make up stories, tell people I’d seen strange things. My parents thought I just wanted attention, that I’d say anything to make people listen to me. Maybe it started out that way.

“But I didn’t *want* to lie. I really wanted to have stories to tell, true stories of marvelous things, inexplicable sights, strange meetings. I hated living in a suburb where nothing ever happened except bikes disappearing and pets being run over. I made up stories about bicycle-napping aliens, and monsters who emerged from the woods to gnaw the corpses of roadkill.”

Susanna nodded sympathetically. Ivo went on, “To get ideas, I read old books about strange phenomena. And I began to wonder why those things didn’t happen any more--not in the suburbs, anyway. That’s when I realized that maybe all the surveillance was pushing back the unexplained, driving it away.”

When he halted for a moment, Susanna rewound the last few seconds in her eyes. She saw Ivo speaking; she didn’t hear him, because she didn’t have an ear

implant. But her camera-eyes included a tiny microphone to capture sound. When she uploaded the footage, she'd have full sound and vision.

She remembered the day she'd finally topped Pink-Slip Pete, when she told him how she'd persuaded the network to pay for cyber-eyes as a covert backup for her glasses. The expense claim was so huge, it had to be authorized by a vice-president. But her eyes had secretly captured some great stories.

Then the nanocams came along, and left her with a head full of obsolete hardware. This would be the last time she'd ever use it.

She filmed Ivo talking about all the years he'd spent in ever more remote parts of the world. The oppressive heat made his Arctic adventures sound almost cozy. They both splashed themselves with water from the lake to cool down.

"What about you?" Ivo asked at last. "Is this the story you anticipated when you came to Zaire?"

Susanna shrugged. "I was just looking for someone to take me into the Blind Spot. I didn't know what the story would be, and I still don't. Yours isn't the only theory about what's out here, you know. I've heard conspiracy types claim there's a secret government base beyond the cameras. There's plenty of other theories, too. Whatever people want to believe in, they find a place for. And this is the only hidden place left."

Ivo scanned the horizon yet again. "The occupants are staying hidden so far." He took a monogrammed snuffbox from his waistcoat pocket, extracted a mint, and ate it.

"What are you expecting, the last UFO to turn up and beam you away?"

"I already said, I'm not telling you what I'm expecting. You're the independent witness--just keep watching."

Susanna wondered if Ivo refused to specify his goal because he didn't know what it was, and only had a blind faith in *something* out there.

Years of failing to find it, of being narrowed down to this one final spot, must have shaken that faith. Maybe he knew in his heart that he'd been chasing a mirage. Why invite a journalist, then forbid her to bring cameras? Was he planning a hoax?

She didn't see how he could manage it, unless he had an accomplice somewhere out on the lake. Susanna sighed. Professional paranoia was all very well--Pete's journalistic motto had been "Why is this bastard lying to me?"--but Ivo's sincerity had convinced her that he believed in what he searched for. She admired his commitment, his unwavering pursuit. He'd spent years in the field, chasing his goal, while she'd stayed home with the Teletubbies.

Ivo gazed at the lake like a patient fisherman, absently twiddling with his

cufflinks. “Once by men and angels to be seen,” he muttered to himself. “In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.”

Susanna recognized the cadence of poetry, but without a Net connection she couldn't identify it. Who memorized verse nowadays?

A breath of wind blew across the lake, a welcome breeze in the furnace of the volcano crater. Susanna stared at the water, waiting for Atlantis to appear or Nessie to start frolicking, or whatever might manifest in front of her recording eyes. To pass the time, she mentally rehearsed voice-overs. For the Nostalgia Channel, “Remember Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster? You don't hear so much about them these days, but one man reckons he can track them down....” For the Conspiracy Channel, “The government captured Bigfoot and friends, and is holding them in a secret reserve in remotest Africa. What sinister experiments are they performing on harmless yetis?”

The searing heat had given her a headache. She swallowed an aspirin along with her lunch of a low-fat cereal bar. “Should we make a move?” she asked at last. “We're not seeing a damned thing sitting here.”

“We're certainly not,” said Ivo, frowning. “The weird flees from cameras. Yet here we are, in a camera-free zone--the only camera-free zone on Earth--and it still hasn't showed up. I wonder why that is? You left the glasses behind, but you wouldn't happen to have brought any *other* cameras, would you?”

Susanna stared at him, her cyber-eyes filming twenty-four frames per second. A surge of fear made her tremble. If she admitted that her eyes were cameras, what would he do? Ivo's single-minded quest might make him do anything to reach his goal, anything to someone who threatened it. She felt acutely vulnerable, alone on the lake with this burly stranger. Years of living under the nanocams had made her feel safe; crime had plummeted under their surveillance. And now she had abandoned their protection for someone with a weird obsession.

She pondered whether to lie to him, to say she had no other cameras. And yet as a journalist, she hated being lied to. She was committed to finding the truth. So how could she lie?

All these thoughts whirled through her mind while Ivo waited for her to answer. At last, she nodded. “Yes, I've been using a backup camera. I'll turn it off if I have to, I promise.”

Ivo stared at her. Susanna realized that he wanted to see her turn off the camera, so he knew she'd done it, so he knew where it was. She couldn't bear to tell him that the cameras were her eyes. He might rip them out of her head.

“Look! Out there!” she shouted.

He turned round and squinted at the calm surface of the lake. “What?” he

demanded. “What did you see?”

“I’m not telling you,” she replied. “The power of suggestion, remember? We’re making independent observations.”

“Indeed we are,” said Ivo, his voice full of skepticism.

By not claiming to see anything in particular, Susanna hadn’t actually lied. She’d heard so much spin as a journalist, she could spin herself when she had to.

And yet.... “Look,” she said again. This time she pointed.

A faint patch of mist hung over the water.

““The game’s afoot,”“ Ivo said. “We need to get over there. You ready to paddle?”

“Er ... yeah.” Susanna didn’t feel quite as much enthusiasm as the prospect ought to inspire. The fog seemed to thicken as she gazed at it. What was out there anyway--the Flying Dutchman?

“Then let’s go,” Ivo said impatiently.

Susanna sat port and aft, with Ivo diagonally opposite. Together they slowly paddled across the lake. The mist approached faster than their paddling speed, as if the fitful wind blew it toward them. Now a whole bank of fog stretched across the water, like a cloud fallen from the sky.

Just before they reached the whiteness, Susanna shipped her paddle. Ivo swore as his strokes, now unbalanced, sent the boat spinning. They slipped sideways into the fog.

The cool mist made Susanna grateful for a respite from the heat. Inside the fog, visibility fell to a few meters. They floated in a cotton-wool cocoon, silence pressing down upon them.

Susanna peered around to see what might be looming in the mist. The minutes passed slowly. Ivo drummed his fingers on the side of the boat, then stopped. Susanna saw nothing, heard nothing. She sniffed the air, but smelled only their own sweat.

She remembered her promise to turn off her backup camera. But she hadn’t filmed with her eyes for years, and had forgotten exactly how they worked. Now she recalled that they recorded continuously on a seven-day loop. Was her gaze repelling weirdness? Ivo certainly thought so.

There was probably nothing out there, she thought. But if there was, right now it didn’t even have a chance to show up. She felt sorry for Ivo, about to have his dreams shattered when the nanocams finally covered the whole Earth. All his years of dedication would be wasted--all those years he’d spent out in the field, while she

sat at home spouting punditry and interviewing spin doctors. Didn't Ivo deserve a chance at his story? Didn't he deserve it more than she, who had abandoned journalism for a decade and even now hadn't fulfilled the promise she'd just made?

Her cameras had been staring for hours and not seen a damned thing anyway.

Susanna took two deep breaths. Then she closed her eyes.

Immediately, the silence developed texture. She heard the faint swish of water around the boat, the quiet creak of her bench as tension made her muscles twitch. She smelled dampness in the air, tasted moisture on her tongue. Her skin crawled--or maybe it was just the spiders. After barely a minute, the urge to open her eyes grew so strong that she had to clap her hands over her face. She began counting seconds under her breath, trying to calm down. But she kept imagining the fog closing in, crushing the boat.

When I get to one hundred, she promised herself, I'll do something.

At one hundred, she set herself the goal of reaching two hundred.

At one hundred and fifty-seven, she couldn't stand it any more. "Can you see anything?" she asked, trying not to sound like a gibbering wreck. "Ivo?"

He didn't answer. Susanna counted more rapidly, gabbling through the rest of the numbers. At two hundred, she opened her eyes.

Her companion had vanished.

"Ivo?" she shouted. Her voice sounded thin and muffled. The mist had surged--no, it had only thickened, Susanna told herself desperately--so that she could barely see past the end of the boat. She peered over the side, wondering if Ivo had fallen into the lake, though she would surely have heard a splash. Frantically, she scoured the water with the paddle, half hoping and half fearing to prod his body. But all around as far as she could reach, she only disturbed the smooth dark depths of the lake.

"Ivo!"

She strained her ears for any reply. Ripples slapped the boat with a whispery susurration.

"Lift not the painted veil which those who live

Call Life--"

Was that Ivo's voice, or just her remembrance of his dusty quotations?

"Where are you?" she cried.

The fog swallowed her voice, as it had swallowed him. He had found the

weird at last. Maybe they had fled to another world, and he had managed to follow them. Or maybe they had resented his long chase, and dealt with him.

As the mist swirled around the boat, Susanna felt that if it came any closer, it would envelop her and take her away. If it touched her, she would disappear like Ivo.

No! Her eyes would protect her. Hadn't Ivo said that the weird couldn't appear on camera? All she had to do was keep looking, and she'd be safe.

And yet--she didn't have eyes in the back of her head. The fog could creep up behind her. *Something* could reach out and grab her.

She whirled round. Nothing there, of course. Just more fog. Was it closer? She turned her head from side to side, trying to cover all angles. She heard the harsh sound of her own panting breath.

Then she heard something else, a muffled roar high in the sky. A monster was coming! Here Be Dragons. She had sailed off the edge of the map--

And then she recognized the sound of a distant helicopter. She had never been happier to hear any noise in her life. She waited for it to come closer, for the nanocams to save her.

The drone faded. The fog was growing stronger, swallowing all sound, swallowing everything within it.

Susanna started paddling frantically, chasing the faint whirl of the helicopter. The boat moved, but kept slewing to port. "Ivo!" she shouted again. Yet she knew he had gone.

She struggled to recall her canoeing lessons, to remember how a single person could steer a straight line, even paddling on one side of a boat. How? How?

J-shaped strokes. Susanna paused, took two deep breaths, and paddled furiously but with more effect. She followed the helicopter's siren song. Tendrils of fog brushed across her face, then dissipated. She could see further ahead. Looking up to the sky, she thought she glimpsed the copter. Or maybe something was out there--

Susanna paddled faster, gasping with exertion. A noise inside the boat made her heart skip. Then she realized it was her comp, beeping to indicate Net access.

The nanocams had arrived. She stopped paddling, knowing she had reached safety. Looking back, she saw only thin wisps of fog, shredding and fading in the wind. No sign of Ivo.

How had he disappeared? Had there ever been anything weird out there? If so, she hoped he was happy to join his friends--his large, hungry, monster friends.

But maybe Ivo had just searched for weirdness so hard that finally, in disappearing, he *became* the mystery that he had longed for.

Susanna smiled. Certainly she had got one final old-fashioned scoop, an epitaph for the end of strangeness in the nanocams' world. *The mysterious disappearance of Ivo the weird-hunter.*

The Conspiracy Channel would love it.

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