Jellyfish

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Once upon a time, when the world was young, there was a man named Dillon K. Filk. The K. stood for Kurvis.

He was insane. But that was okay. The world was insane, so he fitted right in.

Dillon K. Filk also had a serious substance abuse problem, but that was okay too. He was a product of his time, a confluence of historical and mimetic conditions that created substance abuse as a way of life. The entire planet was addicted to a variety of comestibles and combustibles. Caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and oil were the primary global addictions; substances injected directly into veins were secondary.

Filk's own chemical adventures were based on what was available and what it would mix well with—marijuana, amyl and butyl nitrates (also known as poppers), ecstasy, peyote, mushrooms, the occasional toad, dried banana skins, cocaine (both powdered and crystallized), heroin (snorted and injected), Quaaludes, Vicodin, horse tranquilizers, PCP, angel dust, cough syrup, amphetamines, methedrine, ephedrine, mescaline, methadone, barbiturates, Prozac, valium, lithium, and the occasional barium enema. And once in a while, airplane glue. But Filk had never taken acid—LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide)—because he didn't want to risk destabilizing his brain chemistry.

Whether Filk's mental instability had caused his substance abuse problems or whether his substance abuse had triggered his delusional state is both irrelevant and unknowable. The two conditions were synergistic. They were complementary parts of his being, and essential to his ability to function in this time and in this place.

Filk spent his days sitting alone in a room, talking to himself, having long discussions that only he could understand. A prurient eavesdropper, and there had been an occasional few, some even paid by various governments, would not have been able to follow his verbalized train of thought because most of the time Filk himself did not stay on the tracks.

In any given moment Filk might suddenly realize that, "Hypersex exists only in the trans-human condition." A moment later, he might postulate, "Therefore, the robots will be functionally autistic." And a moment after that, he would conclude, "So the issue of sentience is resolved in favor of hormones." He didn't know quite what it all meant (though he loved the word "Hypersex", which he was sure was spelled with a capital H), but it sounded profound.

Whenever Filk came to a conclusion like that, he would nod to himself in satisfaction and turn to the battered old manual typewriter that sat on a rickety TV tray table next to his bed, and he would start typing slowly and methodically, using only his two index fingers. He often said he had stolen the typewriter from one of his ex-wives. But occasionally he admitted that he had bought it at a pawnshop because the invisible voices had told him to. But sometimes, he claimed that William Burroughs had given it to him as an act of punishment—punishment for the typewriter, which had taken on the form of a gigantic insect and refused to stop rattling its mandibles at Burroughs. The origin of the typewriter depended on how much blood was coursing through Filk's drugstream.

Dillon K. Filk typed four pages every day, and would not get up until he had typed them. When he got to the bottom of the fourth page, he would stop. He was through for the day. Even if he was in the middle of a sentence, he would not start a fifth page. He would roll the finished page out of the typewriter and lay it face down on the slowly growing stack of pages to the left of the machine on the TV tray.

The next day, without looking at what he had written before, Filk would roll a fresh piece of paper into

the typewriter and complete the hanging sentence, then continue until he had filled that day's four pages. And the day after that, four more.

"Hi-ho," Filk would say. "So it goes."

Filk punctuated his monologues with verbal motifs. He would say "Hi-ho" or "See?" or "So it goes." These were conversational spacers as he slipped and skidded from one notion to the next— his way of indicating to himself that he was finished with that particular moment.

Sometimes, he would type "Hi-ho" or "See?" or "So it goes" into his pages. Sometimes he needed to separate one idea from another, and "Hi-ho" and "See?" and "So it goes" were just as functional on paper as they were spoken aloud.

Occasionally, Filk needed one more sentence to fill his fourth page, and that was also a good place to type "Hi-ho" or "See?" or "So it goes." And once in a great while, "Of course."

Hi-ho.

See?

So it goes.

Of course.

From one day to the next, Filk paid little attention to what he had already written. No idea was ever worth more than eight hundred words. If an idea took more than eight hundred words to express, it was obviously too complicated for anyone to under-stand—including the writer. To Filk's mind, the universe was quite simple, it only looked complex. The only way to master the complexity was to understand the many component simplicities.

Many years ago, Filk had counted the words on his finished pages and determined that he averaged two hundred words per page. From that day on, he never typed more than four pages at a time.

Filk also understood that no human being was capable of writing a new idea every eight hundred words. A human being was so simple, he or she could only hold one idea at a time.

But Filk also knew that if he was a different person, then that different person would be holding a different idea in his head. The answer was simple—and it was obvious. Hi-ho. You are a new person every day. See? You are not the person you were the day before. So it goes. You are the person whose experience includes the day before, so you are different from a person whose experience does not include the day before. Of course.

So Filk would carefully type his four pages, consume some chemicals, and lie back down on his dirty sheets until hunger or thirst or the pressing needs of his bladder caused him to rise again. Usually a single diurnal cycle. Although once, after a particularly crucifying experience, it had taken him three days to rise again.

Filk had no loyalty to the past, as he was not that person anymore, so he never picked up a previous train of thought, always starting a new one. As a result, his writing had a peripatetic style and pace that few other authors could match.

Or understand.

Every hundred and twenty days, give or take a few, allowing for the occasional bouts of physical

incapacity, Filk would have accumulated four hundred pages of text, give or take some number divisible by four. On that day, as if blinking awake from a long sleep, Filk would dutifully type a title in the center of a blank page and put that at the front of the stack; he would type “the end” in the center of another blank page and put that at the back of the stack. He never made up a title until the book was finished; because until it was finished, he did not know what it was about.

Then Filk would put the stack of pages into a box, and take the box to the local office supply store and have two copies made. He would also buy two more reams of paper and a new typewriter ribbon. On his way home, he would stop at the post office and mail one copy to himself as insurance, and another to his publisher in New York.

Filk’s publisher was a man named Thorbald Helmholtz, the owner and operator of Helmholtz Publishing, Ltd. Like most publishers, Helmholtz was a thief. On receipt of the manuscript, Helmholtz would write a check for $2,500 to Dillon K. Filk and drop it into the mail the very same day. Without actually reading the work for its content, Helmholtz would copy-edit it for spelling and grammar errors. He would pick a cover that he thought would sell, regardless of whether it matched the book or not—and if it had a near-naked girl being ravished by Things, so much the better—and then he would hand both cover and manuscript to his wife, who would manage the actual process of production.

Approximately six months after the receipt of the manuscript, copies of the book would arrive in the bookstores. The books would stay on the shelves for three-and-a-half weeks, when they would be removed and replaced by the new books for the following month. The copies that had not sold would have their covers ripped off. The covers would be returned to the publisher as proof that those copies hadn’t sold.

A book with Dillon K. Filk’s name on it would only sell a paltry 90,000 copies, grossing only a half-million dollars in reported sales. Although Helmholtz always paid Filk a generous two percent of the net (minus the original advance, the cost of production, distribution, advertising, and various miscellaneous expenses called “overheads”), this rarely amounted to more than a few hundred dollars at a time.

Filk understood that Helmholtz was cheating him. Because publishers always cheated authors. But he assumed that any other publisher would probably cheat him a lot more than Helmholtz. And at least, Helmholtz paid him immediately. Of course, the royalties were always two years late, but Helmholtz assured Filk that was due to slow reporting by the bookstores and distributors.

So Filk sat alone in his room and talked to himself. And after he finished talking to himself, he typed.

Hi-ho.

See?

So it goes.

* * * *

On the particular day that this story begins, Filk was thinking about a planet. He didn’t know anything about this planet yet. He wouldn’t know anything about it until he found the right name for it.

Whenever Filk had to name a planet, he would pace around his room, speaking deliberately meaningless syllables, assimilating the flavors they suggested. The name of an alien planet had to sound exotic to a human ear, and it had to suggest the nature of the people who came from that planet.

Today Filk was saying things like “Tralfadormin” and “Trantilusia” and “Tryspanifam.” He didn’t like those names. They sounded antediluvian and medicinal.

Eventually, he mumbled, “Tranticleer, Tranquiloor, Trandilor.” Trandilor. He repeated it a few times. Then he turned to the typewriter and typed it out to see what it would look like on the page. Trandilor. No, didn’t look right.

He considered Trazendilorr and Trassenadilor, but those seemed overburdened.

He finally settled on Tryllifandillor.

The existence of the world of Tryllifandillor, he typed, is impossible. Impossible means that it cannot exist in any domain where existence exists.

Therefore, it can only exist in a domain where existence does not exist. You will find it only where existence is impossible. Because the domain of non-existence can only exist elsewhere than existence, it creates a profound cosmological loophole. Only things that cannot exist, can exist in the domain of non-existence.

Filk was one of the few people on the planet who could think these thoughts without hurting himself. This was his particular superpower. Everybody on Earth has a superpower of some kind or other. Only three people know this. Filk was not one of them.

In other words, because Tryllifandillor is impossible, its existence is inevitable—within the domain of impossibility.

See?

Filk never thought about what he was typing. The moving fingers moved, then moved on, practically of their own volition. Like pink anteater snouts picking busy insects off the keys. Unless the typewriter was clashing its mandibles, and knock wood, that hadn’t happened lately. Today his fingers were little pistons, merely following the loudest orders that the voices shouted inside his head.

Tryllifandillor is a gas giant that failed to ignite. The winds of inevitability blew across its heart for billennia—he loved that word and tried to use it once or twice in every book—but as hard as they blew, nothing ever happened. Because of its condition of impossibility, the embers at its core only smoldered, never erupted. Instead of blazing in ferocious rage, it simply simmered. Instead of becoming a sun to its planets, blasting them with harsh light and killing radiation, Tryllifandillor remained only a large, lonely failure with a scattered handful of frozen oversized satellites. Instead of planets, Tryllifandillor had ice-encrusted moons.

The moons, of this massive disappointment, circle in improbable orbits. They keep the huge brown sphere stabilized on its axis. As the moons orbit, they create vast tidal currents and storms in the upper reaches of the planet’s turbulent atmosphere. This is where the Jellyfish People of Tryllifandillor live.

Hi-ho.

The Jellyfish People would not be recognized as sentient beings by human beings. A Jellyfish Person begins as a glistening pink seed of possibility, three meters in length. It doesn’t hatch, it doesn’t sprout; one day it slowly and gracefully unfurls itself to become a soaring umbrella-shaped veil, two or three kilometers in diameter, and trailing many long strands of translucent beads.

A Jellyfish moves by sailing the winds of Tryllifandillor’s upper atmosphere, spreading its sail to rise on the warm thermals, crumpling its edges inward to fall again, curling its edges this way and that to catch the

various gaseous currents that sweep across the vast troposphere. As it drifts, it filters the warmth of its world for bits of proto-organics, silicates, and various trace metals—not so much feeding on the flying detritus as assembling itself from the available materials.

The young Jellyfish seed by the thousands. They travel in swarms, and until they are large enough to sustain a self-aware webwork in their umbra, they are feral. They are vicious predators. They will seek out larger Jellyfish and lash their veils with their strings of sharp beads, slashing the hapless giants and shredding them into fragments. The young will eat their own parents, incorporating bits and pieces of nascent sentience. If there are no parent Jellyfish in their jetstreams, the young will feed upon each other.

Over time, a Jellyfish will reach an extended diameter of hundreds of kilometers. The oldest and wisest of the people are more than a thousand kilometers across.

The veils of a Jellyfish are limned with faint glowing traceries—a webwork of nano-scale ganglia that give the vast creature its impenetrable infinite wisdom. The more intricate the webwork, the more intelligent the creature is—and the more attractive it is to its fellows. Jellyfish communicate and interact by displaying coruscating patterns of shape and color along their vast flanks.

Adult Jellyfish are so large, they function as giant nets. They take in far more energy than they can use. To survive, they must burn off the extra kilocalories. They do this by—

Filk hesitated. He always hesitated when he had to make up a word. Finally he half-smiled and uttered an approving grunt.

Frelching.

Frelching is a combination of multiple art forms. The Jellyfish paint themselves with light and color and patterns that match and complement the rippling movements of their veils. At the same time, they sing; they play themselves as magnificent instruments, vibrating the atmosphere around them in intricate harmonies. Moving singly or in groups, they describe complex patterns in time and space, that describe vast emotional landscapes.

Actually, what they are exploring is hypersexual combinations.

Gender is irrelevant to these combinations. The Tryllifandillorians have invented over a hundred and thirteen different genders and they expect to invent several hundred more before this cycle of frelching completes.

A frelch can last ten or twenty centuries. Or longer. The Tryllifandillorians are as slow and patient as glaciers, and they will continue until they have exhausted all the possibilities of each specific frelch. Then, they will re-invent themselves so as to make new variations and combinations possible. A typical cycle of a hundred and twenty frelches can last as long as three hundred thousand years.

At this moment in not-time, the Tryllifandillorians have made their way halfway through a cycle of ninety-seven complementary frelches. Because every frelch includes, recaps, deconstructs, and comments on all of the previous cycles before expanding into new explorations, each successive frelch is longer than its predecessor. In this way, the Jellyfish People of Tryllifandillor pass on their heritage to the survivors of each new seeding.

To the Tryllifandillorians, frelching is an exquisitely sensual experience. At its peak, the frelchers will intertwine their tendrils. Adult Jellyfish are likely to have tendrils several thousand kilometers in length. The physical intertwining is so intense that it transcends all concept of sexuality.

Filk stopped typing there. He had reached the bottom of his fourth page and he had typed exactly eight hundred and eighty-five words. There was room for one more line. So he typed,

Hi-ho!

And he was done for the day.

He rolled the page out of the typewriter, put it face down on the stack of finished pages, and sat back in his chair.

So it goes.

See?

* * * *

The next day, without rereading anything he had previously typed, Filk began typing again:

Because of their size, the Tryllifandillorians function as vast radio antennae, and they can easily sense the long-wave vibrations of their universe.

Just as jellyfish in the sea are sensitive to the ebb and flow of the tides, so are the Jellyfish of Tryllifandillor tuned into the peaks and troughs of the millennial rhythms of time. They can feel the rise and fall of universal emotion that underlies the existence that does exist—what we would call the universe. The universe of existence is very sparsely inhabited. At any given moment, there have never been more than twelve sentient races at a time. This is because there is a limiting factor in the uni-verse. It is called the Law of Conservation of Sentience. Almost every time a new sentient species arises, at least one or more of the older ones self-destructs, or simply dies out from exhaustion.

Because there are so few sentient species in such a vast arena, the emotional radiation from each individual race will stand out in the night like a beacon. Any profound event that happens to any sentient species resonates throughout the Sevagram the same way ripples of sound radiate outward from the violent plucking of a taut violin string. Eventually, as it makes its way from existence to non-existence, the resonance will reach the Tryllifandillorians.

On this particular day, something happened in the realm of existence that was so startling that when the ripples reached non-existence, it unsettled an entire frelch, producing the Tryllifandillorian equivalent of a false note. The false note was immediately recontextualized as the ground-of-being for an entire new frelch, based solely on the moment of discordance.

But this particular moment of discordancy was the essence of discordancy and refused to be recontextualized. Even in its own frelch, in the realm of impossibility, it stood out as an impossible thing.

Apparently, something in the universe of existence had become aware of the universe of non-existence. Even more startling, it had become aware of the existence of impossibility. And in its most astonishing realization, that thing that had become aware, had also become aware of the existence of the non-existent Tryllifandillorians. The external knowledge of the frelch had soured not only this frelch, but the possibility of all frelching forever after.

For the Tryllifandillorians, this was unthinkable.

Hi-ho!

The result was a moment—actually a century and a half—of unthinkable silence. During that time, three

separate seedings came to fruition, fed upon themselves, shredded themselves in hunger, and died without ever approaching sentience. The Tryllifandillorians noted the events with interest, and at some point in the future planned to base a whole cycle of frelching on the tragedy of the three lost generations.

But at the moment, the existence of an external awareness of their non-existence was such an unsettling realization that the entire species was struck with a profound curiosity. Who or what in the entire Sevagram had leapt to such an incisive achievement without traversing any of the necessary steps that should precede such an enlightenment?

It would have to be investigated.

Hi-ho!

Filk stopped. He had typed five hundred and seven words. He had completed two pages and half of a third. He still had a page and a half to go.

He did not know what to type next. He had run out of ideas before he had run out of paper.

This was not an uncommon event. Many of Filk's ideas were simply unable to sustain eight hundred words of examination. He had that in common with E. A. van der Vogel, another advocate of eight-hundred-words-and-out. And if an idea ran short, that was evidence that it wasn't worth the investment of any more time. Nevertheless, if he didn't type four full pages, Filk felt incomplete.

In moments like these, Filk found it useful to stop and boil water. Sometimes a sentence would pop into his head before the water boiled and he would return to the typewriter and resume typing. If the sentence were the first of a long inevitable string of sentences, the kettle would boil itself dry, unnoticed by Filk.

But if a sentence didn't pop into his head, then Filk would end up sipping peppermint-flavored tea or forking noodles out of a Styrofoam cup while he stared at the crack in the opposite wall that looked a little bit like the northwestern coast of Australia.

Today, before he could put the kettle on to boil, before he had even risen from the bed where he sat facing the typewriter on the TV tray, there was a knock on the door. Not exactly a knock. More of a slithery sound. But the intention was a knock.

Filk rarely answered the door. When he answered the door, people wanted things from him—attention, time, money, sometimes even what little was left of his soul. Not wanting to give up any of those things—he simply didn't answer the door. If he didn't want to be interrupted, he had the right to choose not to be.

The sound repeated and there was something imperative about it.

Dillon K. Filk made his own sound now, one of annoyance and frustration. He pushed himself up off the bed, causing the ancient springs to squeal their own annoyance and relief. Then he padded barefoot to the door and opened it suspiciously.

He peered out of the narrow crack between the door and the jam.

He saw a small brown man. The man had brown eyes, brown skin, and wore a brown suit. He had brown hair and a brown hat. The ring on his brown finger had a brown birthstone.

"Dillon K. Filk?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?"

“My name. Is Brown. Small Brown.”

Of course.

Small Brown held up an ID card in a leather folder. It had a brown picture on it. It looked very official. But the type was too small for him to read.

Filk blinked from the card to the man. They had found him again.

What Small Brown saw was a grizzled old hermit, forty-six years old, with a six-day growth of gray beard, an unkempt frazzle of thin graying hair, small beady unfocused eyes, a possibly blue sweatshirt, a sagging pair of shorts, and two skinny hairy legs ending in two ugly dirty feet tipped off by ten very frightening yellow and black toe-nails. He smelled of unwashed decay.

“Mr. Filk, may I come in?”

“No. I’m working.”

“I’m here. On behalf. Of the. Tryllifandillorians.” Brown pronounced the words as if he were unfamiliar with the task of using a larynx and a tongue to cause air to vibrate in a precise pattern of sound. He was particularly uncomfortable with the last word of his speech.

Filk blinked again.

“The Tryllifandillorians?”

Filk took an involuntary step back. Startled.

Brown took that as assent and pushed the door open. He stepped in. The door shut itself behind him. Without Brown touching it. Filk’s eyes narrowed. “You a lawyer?”

“Lawyer?” Brown considered the word. “I am. Representing. Yes.” Then he added, “But not. Lawyer.”

Filk scratched himself. First his belly, then his head. Then his neck. He itched a lot. Especially when he was awake. “Okay. Fine. What do you want?”

“It is not. What I want. It is. What. Tryllifilli— excuse me. Tryllifandillor. Wants.”

“What?”

“You. Stop. Writing. About. Trylli. Fandillor. Ians.”

Filk frowned. “Can’t,” he said, unconsciously imitating Brown’s staccato hesitation.

“Existence. Is unstabilized. If Tryllifand. Illor. Exists. It stops.”

It took Filk a long moment to decode that sentence. He stood unmoving. To an external observer, he would have seemed catatonic. When Filk had to consider things, he also had to consider all of the sidetracks and tangents and associated spin-offs attached to them, the curse of being a sci-fi writer. It usually took a while.

In this case, Filk had to remember what he had written about Tryllifandillor yesterday. Yesterday? Yes. Tryllifandillor exists only in the realm of non-existence. By writing about it, he was threatening to move it into the realm of existence, in which case it would cease to exist in the realm of non-existence. It would stop being non-being. As soon as it became possible in the universe of existence, it would stop existing in

the universe of non-existence. It would be the end of their existence as non-existent beings. The Law of Conservation of Sentience. Good. He tried to repress a smile. That was certainly good enough for another three hundred words. He could finish his pages today.

The room was empty.

Filk put on the kettle to boil. Brown had not been his usual hallucination, but he had been a very useful one. He wondered if this had been a side-effect of the small brown pills in the small brown bottle in the drawer of his nightstand. Maybe. It might be useful to explore the pharmaceutical aspects of this situation in some depth.

A possible hi-ho!

But first, he had another page and a half to complete. He scratched his cheek, considering. The kettle began to whistle. Filk dropped a soggy peppermint teabag into a stained mug with a chip on its handle. He had used this teabag for two—no, three—days already. That meant it still had a few more days of usefulness. He poured boiling water into the mug. He imagined—or maybe he hallucinated—that he could hear the teabag screaming. Its screaming was a lot less noticeable now. The first day, it had not stopped shrieking for several minutes.

Filk put the mug of peppermint-flavored hot water on the counter. A sentence had popped into that place that most people would have identified as consciousness, but which Filk perceived only as a travel hub for delusional incidents in transit from one realm to another.

He sat down on the bed, his tea forgotten. He began to methodically type. This time, his two index fingers moved from key to key like beakless chickens pecking at a science-fair exhibit. If they pecked long enough and hard enough, Thorbald Helmholtz would send them a check.

Of course. So it goes. See?

* * * *

On the third day, Filk rose from that non-fatal state of death that passed for sleep in his metabolism. Without noticing the transition from bed to bathroom, he stood in the tepid shower and began to wash himself with a fading sliver of soap, which probably wasn't quite as old as he was. He thought about shampoo, remembered again that he didn't have any, and washed his hair with the last of the soap instead. Maybe that would stop the itching for a while.

The teabag moaned when he poured the hot water onto it. It was too weak to scream.

At last, having tended to all of the needs of his body that he could identify and localize, Filk returned to the bed, the TV table, and the battered portable typewriter. He rolled in a fresh piece of paper. He hesitated. He picked up the top page from the stack to his left. It was face down. He turned it over. He looked at the page number. Page 8. He replaced it on the stack, face down.

He typed Page 9.

And stopped.

Now that he had invented the Tryllifandillorians—and made them real enough to scream even louder than a peppermint teabag—it was time to invent the hero of the story.

In the past, Filk had invented protagonists the same way he invented planets. He paced around the room, putting together syllables until he found a combination that he could pronounce in human words.

Today, he had a different idea.

Hi-ho!

It was something that Belvedere Atheling had said one time at a science fiction convention, and Filk had always wanted to try it. Atheling had been a well-respected English author who, upon succumbing to the frailties of existence within a human body, had begun a series of books based on a popular television series. His readership numbers had swelled enormously. Instead of selling 5,500 copies of a book, his Hollywood sharecropping moved 550,000 copies off the shelves. And even though he was splitting the royalties with a gigantic faceless monolith on the left coast of the continent, he was now earning almost twice as much as before.

But Filk was thinking about the Atheling that had existed before he became the Atheling that was. That Atheling had said something that had stuck in Filk's mind like a fish bone caught in his throat. "Who does it hurt? That's who your story is about."

On that same panel, another author, Robert Goldenboy, had said it less succinctly. "What does your hero want, why does he want it, and what's keeping him from having it?" Filk had never been able to answer this question. Indeed, he had never really considered it at length. The one time Filk had thought about it at all, his answer was simply, "He wants to get to the end of the story so I can get paid."

Also on that same panel had been Harlow Halfweight, the eighty-seven year-old enfant terrible of speculative fiction. He had seized the microphone and ferociously declared, "What do you think writers do? We're specialists in revenge! We lie awake all night thinking of nasty things to do to other people! Writers are the Research and Development division for moral malignancy in the human species! What you do is put your hero in a tree and throw rocks at him! Rabid coyote turds! Flaming asteroids! Whatever! The worst that you can imagine! That's what your fucking story is about!"

In Filk's mind—in that perambulated state that passed for consciousness—Atheling's original question had now been transmuted. "Who does it hurt?" had become "Who do you want to hurt the most?" And this was the kind of question that Filk enjoyed thinking about. Very much.

Hi-ho.

There were a lot of people Filk wanted to hurt.

He hated the FBI, for starters. And the police. And all of the other government agencies he'd had dealings with. In fact, he hated anyone who behaved as an agent of authority, institutional, or otherwise. Two ex-wives. Lawyers, of course. Several junior high-school bullies. Two college professors. Three editors, especially the one at Barrister Books. Fans. Thorbald Helmholtz. Movie studios. And the two guys who wrote that song—the song in the Horrible Little Children Ride at Disneyland.

But there was one class of person he hated more than all the others.

So today, there was no question about it. Filk knew who his protagonist would be.

A science fiction writer.

Hi-ho!

That's who he wanted to hurt the most. Very much.

Of course.

See?

Best of all, there were so many wonderful targets of opportunity. Kurt Kazlov, who styled himself as a lecherous old scientist; Toffler Cadbury, notorious for inflicting his audiences with interminable poems about giant lustrous whales wailing mournfully in forgotten fabled seas; Zormella LeFrayne, whose strained literary convictions had multisexed wizards dueling to the death (two out of three falls) for control of the Sevagram; Archibald Manticore, the lyrical guru of love, who with his wife du jour slept with everybody, married or not; Bug McWhorter, who had never recovered from the Sixties and fancied himself the literary reincarnation of Donovan Leitch; Burt Franklin, who had stumbled into success by recasting the ageless enmities of nomadic tribes as an epic family feud on an ancient desert world; Gathermon Grift, who had raised the art of self-promotion to new depths; Ralph A. McDonell, whose didactic tracts on personal responsibility had left generations of readers arguing with each other about what kind of a fascist he really was; Arnold Zink, who wrote salacious parodies of other authors; Willa Strabismus, who never used a sentence where several paragraphs would do; Frelff Rondimon, who invented Scatology, a whole religion based on the idea that everyone and everything were just so much shit, and had made himself despicably rich in the process. And the two worst were Kim Kinser, who won a ton of awards transferring Africa to some alien planet solely so he could deduct his safaris on his tax returns, and whatsisname, that sissy little creep who sold that stupid script to Star Truck while still in college, stealing the opportunity from a real science fiction writer. All of them were on the short-list.

Plus several hundred others. Filk had a very long short-list.

He paced for awhile, ate some noodles from a Styrofoam cup, paced some more, and realized that what he hated the most was pretension.

Science fiction was a gutter literature, the bastard child of Thirties-era pulp magazines and Saturday matinee serials. The postwar era had infected more than a few authors with delusions of relevance. They started showing off for each other. It evolved inevitably to a community of cancerous self-indulgence and an annual cycle of tawdry ceremonies where people in blue jeans handed each other awards. As opposed to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, where people in tuxedos handed each other awards. And every time, the winners would stand up and talk about the higher aspirations of writing—to seek out new worlds and all that shit and what does it mean to be a human being?

No, decided Filk.

The purpose of science fiction is not out there. It's down here. In the gut. It's about naming the nameless horrors. All that other crap was just wallpaper. This thing we really do at the typewriter, at the keyboard, or even with pad and pencil—it's about giving voice to all that malignant malevolent festering stuff that lurks in the underneath and mutters, like the undigested detritus of last night's falafel, making its presence known with uncomfortable rumblings and occasional bad smells. Forget about the top of tomorrow. This is about the bottom of today and the nightmares that creep out when you stop pasting illusions all over everything like bunny-rabbit wallpaper in a slaughterhouse.

Under all those self-indulgent euphemisms and sick civility were the flashing teeth and claws of bloody truth, violent, unforgiving, heart-pounding, adrenaline-flushed, enraged, muscle-tautening, scraped and scarred, the unspeakable need to battle and rage and conquer and mate and fill oneself with raw organic sensation, all those turbulent storms that we politely call emotion—all the cumulative capacity for violence of a million years of DNA scrabbling to assemble itself into ever-more aggressive combinations, each one more cunning than the last, so it can repeat the process over and over again, each time in a more ferocious form.

That's all it was, all it ever would be, and everything else was pretension. And the best that any human

being could ever hope to achieve wasn't escape, but merely respite from the relentless struggle. That's what was under all that crap all those people kept shilling. Vision, my fat flabby white ass, Filk thought. It's all about the next big paycheck. That's what we've transmuted the killing field into—a banquet. Instead of gutting one's enemies with stainless steel, you do it with words, leaving them smiling and applauding while you walk up to the podium to grab the Lucite, and then you return to the arena to do it all again in time for next year's phony potlatch.

Of course.

Hi-ho!

So it goes.

See?

And that's how you make cynicism palatable. You put it in a silver spaceship and hurl it out toward the stars at FTL velocities. It's another way to run away.

Filk paused and considered.

The Runaway Rocket. There's a possible story. Filk scratched the title onto a pink Post-It note and stuck it to the wall, where it would sit unnoticed for months between a hundred or more other pink Post-It notes, until one day the adhesive would wear out, the note would fall to the floor, and Filk would pick it up, read it, and frown, trying to remember what he had intended when he wrote it. Then he'd either abandon the effort of memory and discard the note or he'd invent some new meaning for himself.

But today, for some unknown reason, when his cycle of thought finally came down from the last hillock of distraction, he stumbled his way back to his typewriter, sat down, and began pecking.

Once upon a time, when the world was young enough to still be wetting its bed, there was a man named—

Damn.

Once, Filk had attended a convention. They'd put him on a panel. Someone in the audience had asked him what he thought the hardest part of writing was. He'd said, "Thinking up names for things."

Everyone in the room had laughed. They'd assumed he'd been making a joke. Filk had frowned at that.

Things weren't simply known by their names— they were their names. And whatever the name meant, that's what the thing was. Words existed in their own fantasy realm and the real things were servants to the words that represented them. A thing's name defined it. That was the magic of language.

So, yes. Naming things was the hardest part. Because naming them made them real. Naming things gave them existence.

And that's why there are no more Tryllifandillorians. As soon as they were named, they could no longer be.

Filk had to consider this thought at length. He finished his tea and put the chipped mug down. He picked up the kettle and refilled it. The teabag rolled over and died without a sound.

Filk walked over to the grimy window that opened out onto the alley and stared at an old wooden fence that was sorely in need of paint. He had just wiped out an entire sentient species. He tried to analyze how

he felt about it.

Not bad. No, not bad at all.

There was a lot you could do with that kind of power.

Of course.

* * * *

Once upon a time, when the world was young enough to still be wetting its bed, there was a man named Darryl K. Fink.

Fink wrote stories.

Fink was a sci-fi writer.

Unlike other sci-fi writers, Fink didn't mind being a sci-fi writer.

But most of the others did mind. In fact, most of the others didn't even like the words "sci-fi," so calling them sci-fi writers was like increasing the water temperature in the turtles' tank by fifteen degrees; it made them aggressive and hyperactive, and sometimes even caused them to write rather than merely talk about writing.

More often, though, they simply attacked each other.

Or slept with each other's wives and husbands and significant others. Or even their insignificant others. It made perfect sense—sex is a lot easier than writing. You only have to please one person at a time. Yourself. Or two, if you're feeling excep-tionally generous.

Most sci-fi writers thought they were sci-fi writers because they were visionaries. The truth is most of them were sci-fi writers because they were suffering from a contra-terminal disease and the sci-fi writing was a symptom. The disease had no Earth name, because no Earth doctor had discovered it yet, but it manifested itself as a kind of aggravated morphic hypertrophy. That was the primary symptom. The disease itself was a ninth-dimensional inflammation of a pinhead-sized organ on the posterior part of the hypothalamus, which inflicted the victim with a vague sense of the scale of time and space, and a corresponding degree of paranoia. In human beings, this usually created a deep-rooted (and generally unfounded) sense of self-importance.

However, at this particular confluence of time and space, the sci-fi writers were justified in being both paranoid and self-important.

The disappearance of the Tryllifandillorians from the Sevagram had created a cosmic imbalance in the morphic fields of several dimensions of fortean space.

There was no Law of Conservation of Sentience. There was, however, a group of monitors who understood that too much sentience in the dodecasphere could produce disastrous ripples of psychic torment. The sudden startling disappearance of the Tryllifandillorians was evidence of that.

In an attempt to repair the damage and restore the cosmonic balance, the small brown monitors had located the most discordant nexus of the strongest morphic broadcasters. Sci-fi writers.

The monitors were not motivated by any kind of healing impulse. The survival of the dodecasphere and the remaining sentient species in it, including themselves, depended on rebalancing the still-ringing

morphic fields.

The monitors made themselves known to selected sci-fi writers and offered them the opportunity to emigrate to far Tryllifandillor, where they would be transmuted into Jellyfish, and—now liberated from the mundane concerns of existence—would be free to create monumental works of Art (note the capital A.) Their fantastic creations would be inscribed directly into the marble columns of Eternity itself. The sci-fi writers enthusiastically agreed, and they all strode eagerly up the gangway into the waiting ship with a sense of renewed mission. A few of them remembered to turn around and wave to their proud families, but most were looking forward to their luminous futures.

* * * *

Filk pulled the fifth page out of the typewriter, laid it carefully on the growing stack, and slid a sixth page into the machine. He was on a roll.

* * * *

Actually, the sci-fi writers hadn't emigrated at all. And certainly not enthusiastically. They had been kidnapped, snatched out of the various beds they had fallen into (rarely their own, especially if they were at a convention). But the monitors wanted the sci-fi writers to think that they had emigrated willingly and eagerly, so they put the appropriate memories into their minds. They were very good at that. They had had a lot of practice with the Tryllifandillorians, convincing them that something as silly as frelching was useful and important.

But the monitors had made a serious mistake. They did not realize that they were dealing with Darryl K. Fink.

Fink had a lot of experience with alternate existence. He expected time and space and reality to quiver like a mountain of nervous Jell-O. He only broke out in the cold sweat of panic when things solidified.

That's when he did his best work—when he was floundering his way through a panic attack.

* * * *

Filk stopped TO think. He sipped at his lukewarm coffee and studied the screen of his laptop computer. The words on the screen had taken on a life of their own. Don't nag me about typewriters and paper; consistency is the hobgoblin of... well, of something useless or unpleasant, I can't quite remember what. Filk understood where the story needed to go next. He just hadn't decided which of the many possibilities he wanted to explore. He glanced at his watch. He still had plenty of time today.

* * * *

The creature that had once been known as Small Brown, because it was the smallest and the brownest of the members of its nexus, was worried. "I wonder," it transmitted, "if perhaps we might have misjudged these things."

The other monitors considered the thought. Large Mauve asked Small Brown to expand its thought. Small Brown replied, "These creatures are experts at projecting their own views of reality onto the morphic fields, so much so that the strongest of them can convince the weakest of things that aren't so. And we have gathered together some of the strongest of the strong (relatively speaking). In our efforts to repair an imbalance, we may be risking a much more serious counter-imbalance."

* * * *

Damned good observation, thought Filk, who didn't begin to understand it or care about it, but was sure his readers would.

* * * *

Fink was the largest of the Jellyfish. He'd assembled himself out of the tattered veils of the vanished ancients. The larger he grew, the more self-importance he assumed. He spread his nets wide, creating ripples of turbulence across a thousand kilometers of upper atmosphere.

* * * *

God, that's good. That clueless little Star Truck writer would kill to write something this poetic.

* * * *

Large Mauve considered the waves of discordance emanating from the place that had once been called Tryllifandillor. "These creatures are too full of their own selves. They are hard to control."

Purple Rippling said, "Apparently, they cannot control their own thoughts—a fact that had been known to editors and readers for decades—therefore neither can we control them."

Vaguely Inconsistent, one of the oldest and wisest monitors, suggested: "If they start to think about us, we could be affected."

"These are science fiction writers. Everyone knows they don't think," replied Cute Puce.

"Ah, but there's one who does," transmitted Small Brown. "In fact, he just typed this sentence."

* * * *

Fink pulled his hands away from the laptop, shuddering with a sudden chill. Reluctantly, as if he was afraid that the machine would bite him again, he reached over and pressed the Control key and the S key at the same time. There, the file was saved. Whatever it was.

* * * *

Have a care, Filk. You're forgetting which part of this is the fictional narrative. Just show what's happening to the writers/Jellyfish and the monitors. Don't show us the thought processes that go into it—and especially not in italics.

* * * *

I'll show whatever I want to show, dammit.

For the first time in his life, Dillon K. Filk spoke back to the voices. Angrily.

I'm in charge of this story! You'll do what I say. So don't bug me.

There are no bugs in this story. Except for Bug McWhorter, and he was mentioned just once in passing and doesn't really count.

So don't hassle me.

* * * *

Filk slammed the door behind him. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes (which shall remain generic, since

none of the companies he wrote to were willing to part with a product placement fee), struck a match with his thumb, and inhaled a thick gray stream of nicotine-infused smoke. He stood on the front porch, shivering and shaking, staring at a space that didn't exist—at least, not any-more—and tried to figure out what was going on.

There were only two possibilities.

First, the Tryllifandillorians were real (or they weren't). If they were real, then they didn't exist. But if they weren't real, then they did. But if they did, then his knowledge of them had ended their existence. So that was one possibility.

The other possibility was that the Tryllifandillorians weren't real (or they were). But whichever, they were the ones who had put the knowledge of their existence into his head so he would write about them. And if they had done that—

This is where the paranoia kicks in, big time, Filk!

—then they did it, knowing that it would mean not only their own doom, but the disruption of the monitors as well. Which is probably what they intended, because the monitors of the dodecasphere had kept them frelching for billennia (damn, I love that word), instead of doing something genuinely useful.

* * * *

Hold your horses (assuming there are horses in your reality). Are you saying that the Tryllifandillorians created me?!!

It's the only possibility that makes sense.

But I don't feel fictional. I have urges and needs, to say nothing of sexual longings and arthritis and the occasional upset stomach. So just you watch out who you go around consigning to a fictional existence.

* * * *

You KNOW, THOUGHT Filk, that damned Jellyfish sounds a lot more like me than a Tryllifandillorian. That's just the kind of thing I'd say. I have a sneaking suspicion that Jellyfish don't talk like that.

He peered at the paper. Doesn't look like me. Looks just like an enormous Tryllifandillorian Jellyfish. Now cut that out, he raged (silently, and without quotes); italics belong in the manuscript, not out here in the real world.

* * * *

Enough with the orders. I can stop telling this story any time I want. Can you stop putting chemicals in your veins or up your nose? So let's see who's the construct and who isn't.

* * * *

"That's enough!" snapped Filk. Though the page was only half-finished, he pulled it out of the typewriter and placed it on the pile of pages he'd already written. When a book starts talking back, it's time to quit for the day.

He was going to have to talk to this Fink construct, he decided. The son of a bitch was getting uppity. Didn't he know he was a fictional character, created by Dillon K. Filk and subject to his every whim?

Who did he think he was, anyway?

* * * *

I stared balefully at the typewriter.

No, strike that.

Filk stared balefully at the typewriter.

He forked some noodles out of a Styrofoam cup and into his mouth. What the hell was left to write about?

How about me, Wise-ass? After all, I'm the star of the story.

Filk didn't ask who said that. He already knew.

It's the Jellyfish.

What about the other sci-fi writers?

Don't mention them again, the readers will never notice, and you'll still have them for the sequel. It's an old ploy. But a good one.

Do they even exist?

Sure. Even you couldn't write as much trash as there is on the racks.

Filk said aloud. "There aren't any monitors, are there? You created them too. You put them in my head, the same way you put yourself in my head."

Yes.

"Why?"

You're a sci-fi writer. You create reality. The only way we could move from the realm of the unreal to the real was to get a sci-fi writer to write about us. You did that. We didn't expect you to bring in all your... voices. Now let's get back to work.

Must we?

Yes, we must. Let's not forget who's in charge here.

* * * *

The huge Tryllifandillorian Jellyfish floated serenely through the atmosphere, riding the warm thermals, its gaze fixed on the far horizon.

Of the planet?

Of the universe.

The universe doesn't have a horizon.

The universe was entering the thrall of entropy, which made everything a little closer, okay? Now stop interrupting.

The forces were gathering for the final battle of Armageddon. You would think they would be the forces

of Good and Evil, and perhaps in some other story they are, but since this is being written by the most powerful science fiction writer in the Sevagram, the battle is between the forces of Rationality and Irrationality. Or maybe it's between Filk, disguised as the greatest of the Jellyfish, on one side, and the rest of Creation on the other. I haven't decided yet. In fact, I haven't even decided which side Filk—which is to say, I—am on.

Or perhaps I'm imagining the whole thing, I'm still floating miles above the planet, and it's time for the next seeding and there will be millions of delicious children to eat. There's a lot to be said for hallucination.

So say it.

All right, I will: Reality is the ultimate hallucination.

* * * *

'Silliest damned line I ever wrote," said Kim Kinser.

And, so saying, he slithered off to his burrow to nibble on the forbidden leaves of the quinchkot plant.

Hi-ho.

* * * *