

CONCEPT

Sci-fi e-zine

INSIDE:

Short Stories...

- **The Thursday Night League** by James Hartley
 - **Softlight Sins** by Peter F. Hamilton
- and many more! Plus...
- **An exclusive interview with author Michael Carroll**
 - **Writing the Perfect Scene** by Randy Ingermanson





In This Issue

<i>Editorial</i>	3	<i>Fatal Vision</i>	25
<i>Credits</i>	3	<i>by Andrew Males</i>	
<i>The Thursday Night League</i>	4	<i>An interview with Michael Carroll</i>	30
<i>by James Hartley</i>		<i>by Richmond A. Clements</i>	
<i>Softlight Sins</i>	9	<i>Writing the Perfect Scene</i>	37
<i>by Peter F. Hamilton</i>		<i>by Randy Ingermanson</i>	
<i>The Pet</i>	21	<i>Superhuman by Michael Carroll</i>	43
<i>by Samantha Frankenstein</i>		<i>Reviewed by Richmond A. Clements</i>	
<i>The Oldest Man in the World</i>	22	<i>TAXI</i>	44
<i>by Richmond A. Clements</i>		<i>by Wayne Summers</i>	



Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of the Concept Sci-fi E-zine. Considering the fact that Concept Sci-fi was only launched at the beginning of May 2008, I'm absolutely delighted that the E-zine has become a reality so soon afterwards.

We have some great stories in this edition. My overall aim is to include works both from authors who clearly know their trade inside-out and those who can write well, are still learning and have great ideas. I hope you approve of the selection!

On a slightly embarrassing note, I have to tell you that I've broken my own rules regarding 'no reprints'! Two of the items in this issue have seen the light of day before...

The first is Softlight Sins by Peter F. Hamilton – how could I refuse when he volunteered his short story to me!

The second is an article on writing technique kindly donated by Randy Ingermanson, entitled 'Writing the Perfect Scene'. I have no qualms about re-printing this, even though it's been on his website for a while. It is an excellent article that many authors, both new and established, could benefit from reading.

I'd also like to personally thank Sam Shishekli for creating the cover art. You can visit his website at www.virtualgeneration.co.uk

And finally, this is the first issue of the Concept Sci-fi E-zine and we're keen to improve. So if you have any suggestions or comments, please email feedback@conceptscifi.com. I hope you enjoy reading issue #1 and keep coming back for more.

Gary Reynolds.

Editor.

Credits

Artwork

Sam Shishekli

Fiction

James Hartley, Peter F. Hamilton, Andrew Males, Samantha Frankenstein, Wayne Summers, Richmond A. Clements

Non-fiction

Richmond A. Clements, Randy Ingermanson

Special Thanks

Michael Carroll



The Thursday Night League

by James Hartley

It seems quite a coincidence that the Doxzji have a seven day week the same as we do, but it's a fact. They have what appears to be a period of religious observance once a week. On Thursday night, local time. I say "appears to be" because no human has ever been allowed to attend, nor to look at the writings they use during that time and no other.

I got about as close as any human back when I was working for the U.N., before the Doxzji finally dissolved it. Some kind of emergency came up that required the presence of the head Doxzj, and I was sent to fetch him from "church." There were two guards on duty at the door. I explained what I wanted in the pidgin we used in those days, and one went in to fetch the big wheel for me. I got a glimpse through the door as the guard went in, and another glimpse as the guard came back out with the bigwig.

It sure did look a lot like church. They were all sitting in rows, facing the far end of the room, and they were singing or chanting or something like that. At the far end was a single Doxzj standing on a platform. And he was wearing clothes. Never saw one with clothes before or since, but this one had some sort of long robe on. He was waving his arms, I think in time with the chanting, but I didn't get a long enough look to be sure. The bigwig came out, and I led him over to my car to take him back to the local U.N. headquarters. Damn, that must have been fifteen years ago, only a year or so after the Doxzji landed on Earth and took over.

The Doxzji don't seem to care what we do on Thursday nights, though. Their "church" is just for them, and we humans can go right on with our activities. The Thursday Night Bridge League, the Thursday Night Bowling League, whatever. Or just the Thursday Night League.

I had kind of a rough time when the Doxzji got rid of the U.N., about five years after they landed. It took them that long after the invasion to get their own administration fully in gear, but when they did ours wasn't needed any more. I was out of a job, and so were a lot of others. But it was no surprise. We all saw it coming for almost a year. The coming loss of jobs was the number one topic of water cooler discussion. I was the pessimist. "Did you guys see how they got that new filing system going in their own language? We'll be canned in another month."

"No way!" That was Bob Slater, always the optimist. "They're gonna need us for another two years yet, the people just won't deal with an all-Doxzji government any sooner than that. Maybe three years."

Helen Canfield was more worried about what would happen than when. "Sometimes I think a lot of the people would rather deal with the Doxzji than us. They hate to see humans fronting for the aliens. They think we're traitors, quislings."

"That's silly," said Bob. "Right after the invasion they published all those rules, and one was that anyone working for the U.N. had to stay on and run the temporary administration or get shot. Why should anyone think we're traitors?"

"All those freedom fanatics?" I chimed in. "The ones who thinks it's better to die than give in?"

"No," said Helen, "lots of ordinary people. They've forgotten a lot of those rules now that things have calmed down. When they do close down the U.N., I'm going to be ready."

"Ready for what?" asked Bob. "You're getting paranoid about this."

"Could be, but so are lots of others. The people down in Records are setting up a whole bunch of fake ID's in the computer, and printing papers to go with them. You ought to go down and sign up."

It sounded like a good idea to me, but Bob just laughed. Nevertheless, when I got a chance to go down to Records a day or two later, I saw "Bob Slater" on the list in front of me. I asked Shirley, the girl in Records, "Are you people doing this for everyone?"

"Almost everyone," she replied. "There's just a few on the black list, people who have, well, over-cooperated with the Doxzji. They aren't getting any help from us when they have to get back out into society."

I remembered what Helen had said people thought of us, and shivered a little.

When the break finally came and I was out of work, I made tracks for somewhere about a thousand miles away, where nobody would know me. I ditched all my real ID and started using the fake stuff that said nothing about U.N. employment. With nobody living near me who had known me before, I got away with it.

I got a few letters from friends like Bob and Helen, carefully worded of course. Most of the people we knew made it OK. But Helen sent me a clipping from a town near her. A man, one of those on that black list, moved in and tried to get a job. The company traced his ID and found he had worked for the U.N. They threw him out. Literally, they threw him out the door, shouting comments about his background after him. In seconds there was a mob--a lynch mob--and before the cops could do anything they rode him out of town on a rail. Only they ... no, it's too horrible to repeat. If they hadn't dumped him right in front of a Doxzji post he would have died, and even with the alien medical treatment he ended up in pretty bad shape. Helen's so-called paranoia turned out to be the dead straight truth.

I had picked the suburb of a minor city in the Midwest to escape to. Many former U.N. people went for little hamlets and villages too small to have any Doxzji, but I'm a city boy, always have been, and I can't imagine being happy in Lower Podunk or East Squeedunk, just so as not to have a Doxzji base nearby. On the other hand, if there hadn't been a Doxzji base ten miles away, I would never have gotten involved with the Thursday Night League, either.

When I arrived here--no, I'm not going to tell you any more specifically where "here" is--I had enough money, my separation pay, to get a small apartment and eat regularly for a while. Fortunately computer experts are still in good demand just about anywhere, Doxzji or no Doxzji, so I got a job long before things got desperate. After a while I met Francine and we got married and bought a house and had a couple of kids.

In truth, things were not all that different from pre-invasion days. In some ways, better. The crime rate was way down after the Doxzji took it in their heads to shoot all repeat offenders and anyone involved with drugs. In fact, the Doxzji were probably killing more people in their clamp-down on crime than they had during the brief and almost bloodless invasion, while their free medical services were saving enough lives to more than make up for it.

But still, we all chafed a bit because we were no longer "free." I'm not sure if those in the Iranian Soviet or the South African Empire even noticed any difference, but for Americans it rankled a bit.

It was about two years after I got married that I began to hear rumors about the Thursday Night League. It took a while to figure out that it was not the Thursday Night Bowling League (which met at the Bowl-o-Tron), or the Thursday Night Bridge League (which held a duplicate game at the YMCA). No, it was something else, something totally different.

I decided to find out about it, and started looking for information. All I got was a lot of dead ends, which stirred up my curiosity even more. I couldn't even find out the names of any members, although rumor had it that a lot of prominent citizens belonged. Francine used to chide me about it.

"Harry, why are you wasting all this time looking for some group that may not even exist?"

"I don't know, I'm just curious, I guess. I'm sure they exist, and I want to know how they hide themselves so effectively. And why. Call it a hobby."

"Right! A hobby! Why can't you take up bridge or bowling? Both of those meet on Thursday night."

For a while it was just a hobby, and privately I agreed with Francine that I was wasting time. Of course I wouldn't admit that to her. But six months ago I finally made a breakthrough, and suddenly it stopped being idle curiosity and became serious. Deadly serious.

There was a new kid in my department, Joe Collins. Just out of college, computer hacker extraordinaire. I mean, I'm an expert with computers, but this kid has me beat six ways from Sunday. He just looks sideways at a terminal, and it logs on to every secure system in the country.

Joe and I got friendly, and pretty soon he'd be stopping over to our house evenings for a couple of beers and some computer talk. One night I mentioned the elusive Thursday Night League, and he got interested.

"Bet I could find them, if I had a good enough computer system."

"What do you mean, good enough? Don't you have a system in your rooming house?"

"Yeah, but that's just a standard student-issue computer, nowhere near enough memory or disk. For this kind of thing you don't dare stay logged on long, you have to download the data real quickly and get off, then look at what you got. At school I used one of the big computers in the department for my hacking."

"Well, how about one of the systems at work? Some of those are the biggest around."

"Harry, are you crazy? The I/S people are the worst collection of snoops I've ever seen. Porter, the head of I/S, has several who spend all their time trying to audit your files to make sure there's nothing except business in them. I wouldn't dare do this kind of a search from there."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Well, what about my system? It's pretty good." I described what I had to him, and watched his eyes light up more every time I mentioned some additional feature.

So he began using my system to look for the Thursday Night League. After a week or two Francine started inviting him to dinner, and pretty soon he was spending more time at my house than in his room. Progress was slow at first, but Joe kept at it month after month, and finally he found something.

"Harry, I've got it, and you'll never guess where."

"Come on, I'm not in any mood for guessing games."

"On the company computers! There were some directories I haven't been able to safely crack from my ID at work, and I thought I'd see if I could get to them from here. Turned out that there was an easy path if you dialed in instead of logging on a terminal at work, and I found just what we've been looking for. The Thursday Night League."

"Why on the company computers? That doesn't make sense?"

"It makes lots of sense when you find out that Mr. Simms, the company president, is head of the local chapter. Several other company bigwigs involved, too. Including Porter, the head of I/S, that's probably why they thought it was safe to keep the files there."

"Damn! Mr. Simms? Hey, what do you mean, the local chapter? This thing is bigger than local?"

"World wide, Harry, world wide. Funny thing, I thought there was something familiar about the locations, and I ran a cross check. Every chapter is right near a Doxzji base, every Doxzji base is near a chapter. Makes one wonder. But anyway, now that you have it, what are you going to do about it?"

"Joe, I sure wish I knew!"

In fact, all I did was think about it for several weeks, trying to make up my mind. Francine wasn't much help figuring it out.

"Well, you found it, your curiosity should be satisfied, why don't you just drop it? I don't see much other choice, unless you go see Mr. Simms, and that doesn't sound very smart if you like your job."

In spite of Francine's advice to drop it, Joe and I decided to go ahead. We made an appointment to see Mr. Simms. We marched together to his office carrying a pile of printouts. I spoke first. "Mr. Simms, we found some strange files in the company computers. All about the Thursday Night League, and you as head of the local chapter."

Simms looked at us for a minute. He pressed a button on a gadget I recognized as a mop and waited until a little green light winked before he spoke. "So you two are the ones Porter is having hysterics over, hmm? He's been telling me someone's been getting in, someone too skilled for him to touch. Well, now that you have the data, what do you propose to do about it?"

"These files," I touched the printouts, "tell us who and what, but not why. We want to know more about the League."

"Oh, that's simple enough to do, but if I do, you guys will be in too deep to ever back out. If you aren't already. Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes," I said, and Joe nodded.

"The Thursday Night League is involved in plotting revolution. Overthrow of our alien oppressors and mass murder--or more accurately, mass Doxzjicide. Some one of these Thursday nights - soon - we're going to bomb all their 'churches' so we can be free again. A communications blackout so those in later time zones don't get tipped off, and in 24 hours we're rid of the alien SOBs."

Joe's jaw dropped, and I sat there stunned, unable to move.

Mr. Simms continued. "We hadn't tried to recruit you two. Joe is too fresh out of college, we try to let new hires mature a bit. As for you, Harry," he turned to look at me, "we've shied away from those with U.N. backgrounds--yes, we know about that, but we won't say anything unless we have to. But now you know about us, I guess we'll have to sign you up. You do want to join, don't you, boys?" The tone of his voice added an unmistakable "or else" to his words.

So now Joe and I are members of the Thursday Night League. Turns out Francine was already a member, which explains why she was so unhelpful. We're all working hard toward that great Thursday night when we clobber the Doxzji and the Earth will be free again.

Free again! It sounds so good, such a noble thing. Overthrow the Doxzji. Most of the time I don't see how any human could do otherwise. Most of the time. Mr. Simms obviously feels that way, and my wife Francine. But then once in a while I remember those who were on the black list when the U.N. was shut down, who didn't get new ID's and were probably all killed. They really thought the Doxzji were helping Earth. And then I wonder if they weren't right, if we

aren't better off now. Almost no crime, lower taxes, no drug problem, medical miracles. They're doing better at running us than we ever did ourselves.

How does all that stack up against an abstract something called "freedom?"

They just announced the date for the revolt, it's less than a month away. I have enough information to completely destroy the Thursday Night League if I turned it over to the Doxzji, and that would be plenty of time to use it. Or Joe and I could patch up the weaknesses we found in their computer system, make certain no one else could sneak in and betray the League in that last critical month. I wish I knew the answer. I wish I knew the right course of action.

I wish I'd never heard of the Thursday Night League!

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James Hartley is a former computer programmer. Originally from northern New Jersey, he now lives in sunny central Florida.

*He has published a fantasy novel, "Teen Angel," and stories in *Illusion's Transmitter*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Demon Minds*, *Lorelei Signal*, *KidVisions*, *Golden Visions*, *Raygun Revival*, and the anthology "Desolate Places."*

He is currently working on a second novel, "The Ghost of Grover's Ridge." His website is <http://teenangel.netfirms.com>



Softlight Sins

by Peter F. Hamilton

Ghosts drifted through Douglas McEwan's mind as he drove down the long road towards the execution. There were four spectres, the family of Adrian Reynolds, his mother, his abominable father, and his two lovely young sisters. The forensic team's in situ video had shown them in their beds, captured in a frozen pose that feigned sleep: eyes closed, lips relaxed, fingers splayed like albino starfish. In each case their throats had been slit open, black yawning gashes that had sprayed thick jets of blood across the sheets.

The phosphene mirage was broken when Douglas's police escort switched on their lights and sirens. The five-car convoy was motoring along a thin ribbon of road that cut through the heavily wooded Ling common to the north of King's Lynn. Tall pines and slim silver birch trees stood sentinel duty on either side, their small yellowed leaves swirling through the air like a rusty snowstorm, settling on the grass verges where they formed a soggy mantle. Twin lines of parked press vehicles were backed up a hundred metres from the entrance of the Clinical Rehabilitation Institute.

A dense knot of people was blocking the road ahead. The media circus. And to Douglas's eyes they did look like clowns, dressed in their bulky garishly coloured parkas, noses and cheeks raw from the chill morning air. A double rank of police in blue-grey riot tunics had linked arms, creating a barrier to hold them back from the road.

A hundred shouted questions merged into a single unintelligible bawl as Douglas drove past. Cameras zoomed in.

Protesters had taken up the prime sites on either side of the Institute's gate, their stamping feet pounding the mown grass strips into rucked quagmires. The police were three deep here, forming a funnel down to the gate, both lines visibly wavering from the pressure of the protesters' bodies.

On Douglas's right was the LIFE! group, opposing any form of capital punishment. From what he could see a majority of them were women. They held hundreds of white candles aloft, ranging from small nightlights to elaborately carved half-metre columns of wax. A ragged chorus of defiant voices sang *Abide With Me*.

Gobs of mud pelted the car. Douglas switched his wipers on, smearing the windscreen with brown streaks. It was the TRUE JUSTICE group on the other side launching the deluge. Trim young men in the main; hair cut close to the skull, wearing olive-green military-style sweaters, a red crucifix stitched on the breast. And so much hatred leaking from their hard young faces. They were carrying a forest of placards; obscene demands for Adrian Reynolds to be hung, fried, shot, gassed, guillotined, poisoned... The gallows erected next to the Institute fence had a straw-stuffed effigy of Adrian dangling in a noose. As soon as Douglas's car swept through the gates someone put a torch to the wooden structure. A well planned optical bite for the cameras.

Then he was through, the gate closing behind him. Something about the savagery of the protesters bolstered his own determination.

And what an irony that is. Me, the man who prides himself on his liberalism, having to find refuge in the stiff upper lip tradition the minute adversity strikes.

The Institute building was only three years old, paid for by the European Federal Criminal Psychology Bureau. A four storey cube, with green-tinted mirror glass that bounced the forest trees back at him, their bare autumn-ravaged trunks long and wavey.

It was part secure hospital, part research facility. The Bureau had originally hoped the doctors could use laser imprinted subliminal commands to insert new behaviour patterns into the more stubborn social recidivists. A technique that would produce, if not model citizens, at least reasonably honest ones. That research was still continuing, but for the last year the Institute had concentrated on developing Softlight.

It had been the idea of Doctor Michael Elliot, a neurologist who had been studying memory retention to see how long the rectification commands would last.

What his research uncovered was the amnesia mechanism, the method by which grey cells discard the unwanted memories of each day's events, preventing the brain from being cluttered up with a billion irrelevant details. Elliot isolated the governing neurological code and managed to adapt the laser imprint technique to transmit the sequence throughout the brain. Softlight: the total erasure of memory and behaviour patterns. Personality death.

Anyone committing a capital crime could be mentally executed, leaving behind a perfectly viable body; an adult infant ready to be named, educated, and returned to the world as fully functional members of society. Capital punishment without death. For the PC politicians of the Brussels Federal Assembly it was a dream solution.

Adrian Reynolds was about to become the first subject.

Barbara Johnson was standing in the Institute's reception area, her long face taut with agitation. Douglas had met her on several occasions; she was Dr Elliot's deputy.

She led him to an interview room on the third floor where Adrian Reynolds was waiting. A couple of muscular-looking male orderlies stood patiently outside.

"Ten minutes, Douglas, please," she said, apparently embarrassed at rushing him. "No more than fifteen. The judge is already here."

"Sure," he said, and walked into the interview room.

Most Court Defence Officers tended to develop a sense of responsibility for their clients. But Douglas had taken it to an extreme, always refusing prosecution cases. The price he paid for his quirk came in the form of people like Adrian Reynolds. Twenty years old, with a father who had abused him from the age of eight - sexually, physically, and mentally. Abused him right up until the day he finally snapped, taking a kitchen knife upstairs while the family slept.

The Reynolds trial hadn't dealt with guilt, that was beyond question. Instead Douglas had fought to establish the level of culpability; arguing that a degree of blame must lie with the social services, to let it go on undetected for so long; with the teachers for not spotting the boy's moodiness; with knowing relatives who had turned a blind eye.

Douglas fully expected to lose the case. The people of Europe were aching tired of psychopaths and terrorists and ideology warriors and street gangs. The death penalty had been reintroduced six years previously, the Federal Assembly finally bowing to enormous pressure from the electorate. The jury found Adrian guilty on three charges of murder. He should have been given a painless lethal injection. But with providential coincidence Dr Elliot announced Softlight was ready, and Douglas had asked judge Hayward to consider Adrian as an appropriate subject for the treatment. Judge Hayward agreed.

Adrian Reynolds was standing by the window wall, a tall skinny young man, with a weak chin, puffy cheeks, his dark mousy hair lying lank over his ears. One of the Institute's baggy green overalls hung loosely from his body.

He turned when Douglas came in, then dropped his eyes. "They want me dead, don't they?"

Douglas realised the gate and the mob were just visible from the room. "They don't know what they want." It was true enough. TRUE JUSTICE thought Softlight was a liberal/scientific cop out, allowing criminals to escape punishment once

again. LIFE! denounced it as a living death, court sanctioned zombiism. The only thing they had in common was their opposition to it.

"Is my will sorted out?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, half to Barnardo's, half to the RSPCC."

"There's not very much."

"Every little helps." Douglas was having trouble keeping his voice level.

If people could just see him like this, see that he cares. He doesn't deserve Softlight. Maybe I should be on the other side of the gate, join in the chanting. If only it wasn't so utterly futile.

"They asked me if I wanted a priest," Adrian said. "Last rites and all that crap. I said no. I said if there was a God then he wouldn't have made my father."

Douglas half smiled. "You said that to the Institute chaplain?"

Adrian gave a fast wild grin. "No." The humour faded. "Shall we go now? I don't think there's much point in dragging it out any longer."

Officially it was laboratory complex seven. But Douglas knew the Institute staff had taken to calling it the Light Chamber; and the press had somehow got hold of that title. It resembled a dental surgery, with a bulky hydraulic chair in the middle of the floor, a glass-topped desk, several cabinets of electronic equipment, and two voice-activated computer terminals. The Softlight imprinter was a triple-segment metal arm standing next to the chair; it ended in a bulbous plastic strip moulded to fit over the eyes like an optician's mask.

Judge Theresa Hayward was sitting behind the desk when Douglas walked in. She was sixty years old, her oval sun-browned face heavily wrinkled, exacerbated by her frown. During the trial Douglas had found her to have an astute mind, in court she was scrupulously impartial, and very aware of the political undertones of the case.

Harvey Boden, the Court Prosecution Officer, was studying a plasma screen on one of the computer terminals. He greeted Douglas with a thin nod.

The third person in the laboratory was Dr Michael Elliot. He shared Barbara Johnson's air of sheepish eagerness, desperately trying to camouflage his feelings below a crust of professional detachment.

Adrian walked straight over to the chair, not looking round. The orderlies who were escorting him slipped the restraint straps around his wrists and legs.

The knot of tension in Douglas's stomach twisted sharply when Dr Elliot swung the Softlight imprinter up, manoeuvring the black mask over Adrian's eyes.

"Will I see anything?" Adrian asked suddenly.

"The laser operates predominantly in the green section of the spectrum," Dr Elliot explained. "It will be quite bright, but not painfully so."

"No lasting damage, eh?" there was a quaver in Adrian's voice.

Dr Elliot managed a sickly smile.

Barbara Johnson was voicelining one of the terminals, reeling off a string of security codes to access the data core which stored the Softlight sequence. Dr Elliot joined her, and added his authorisation code, then he glanced at Judge Hayward. Her face showed nothing but regret. She jerked her head down.

Douglas closed his eyes, secretly terrified that a flash of green light would spill out from around the black strip, boring its way down his own optical nerves, exploding in his brain. Somewhere in the distance he heard Dr Elliot voiceline: "Expedite."

The imprinter arm retracted automatically. Adrian's face wore the look of docile imbecility, eyes unfocused, every muscle relaxed.

Barbara Johnson walked forward carrying a white plastic sensor crown which she settled around Adrian's head. "No brainwave activity above the autonomic level," she reported, oh-so careful not to display any satisfaction.

Douglas watched a bead of saliva leak from the corner of Adrian's mouth, and turned away.

It worked, punishment and redemption wrapped in one neat package. Taking away the threat and salvaging our conscience. I ought to be grateful. If only Adrian didn't look so pitiful, so... wasted. But at least I cannot be faulted for that, I did my best for him.

"Abschaum!"

The vehement shout electrified Douglas. He jerked round to see Barbara Johnson stumbling back from Adrian in panic.

Adrian stared at them with a covetous birdlike expression, his nostrils flaring as he sucked down deep breaths. He shouted at them again, the words making no sense as he snarled and spat.

Douglas heard Harvey Boden saying, "That's German."

"What's happening?" Judge Hayward demanded.

Dr Elliot shook his head, staring at Adrian in numbed consternation.

"It didn't work," Douglas blurted.

"It did work," Barbara Johnson insisted. "The brainwave function was zero."

"Does this sound like he's empty headed?" Douglas waved his hand angrily at Adrian.

She appealed to Dr Elliot. "Some kind of residual activity?"

"I don't know," he said in a shaken tone.

"What's Adrian saying?" Judge Hayward asked.

"I've no idea, I don't speak German," Douglas said. "My God, neither does Adrian."

Judge Hayward gave him a sharp look, then turned to Dr Elliot. "Find someone who does, and fast."

"Not necessary," Barbara Johnson told her. She took some headsets from the desk and handed them round. Douglas slipped his on as she voicelined the computer terminal for a translation program. The earplugs muted another of Adrian's invectives, then the translator cut in.

"...bastard Yankees. No better than fucking Jews. Queers and women, nothing more, we'll shit on you yet. Your President Roosevelt is dead, from shame, from the pox- "

Douglas voicelined the headset to stand-by mode, an unnerving chill blossoming inside his head.

"All right," Judge Hayward said. "I want best guesses, and I want them now."

"It's quite obvious Softlight doesn't work," Harvey Boden said. "It doesn't wipe memories, it simply jumbles them up."

"There was no primary brainwave activity for two minutes," Barbara Johnson said stubbornly.

Harvey Boden shrugged. "People recover from comas. Weeks and months spent like a vegetable, then they're up and talking as if nothing had happened."

Douglas knew what Boden was doing. The Prosecution Officer wanted Adrian dead. For real.

It's obviously not just my skull those two girls are haunting.

"I can't even pretend to understand what's happened," Douglas said as Barbara Johnson and Dr Elliot started whispering together. "And you're certainly not in a position to give qualified neurological opinions, Harvey. We'll need a complete assessment made before any decisions are taken. And we certainly shouldn't decide anything in haste."

Dr Elliot nodded in agreement with something Barbara Johnson said, and faced the judge. "I believe we should consider regression as a logical explanation for this situation."

"Regression?" Douglas asked in confusion.

Harvey Boden gave him a contemptuous look. "Past lives, Douglas. People thinking they used to be Napoleon or George Washington, that kind of thing."

"There have been documented cases," Dr Elliot said. "Under hypnosis, subjects have related a wealth of details concerning their previous existence, details they couldn't possibly have known without extensive research."

"Rubbish," Harvey Boden said.

Douglas was inclined to agree, but that would be offering Adrian up to TRUE JUSTICE. "Are you saying this German personality popped up out of nowhere to fill Adrian's empty brain?" he asked Dr Elliot.

"Yes. A German from the Second World War, judging by the reference to Roosevelt."

Adrian had fallen silent, glaring round at them, teeth bared.

Judge Hayward voicelined the terminal for a two way translation. "What is your name?" she asked Adrian.

The terminal repeated the question in German.

"Mentally defective bitch," he shouted.

She backed away, badly disturbed. "Whoever Adrian believes he is, he remains our problem. The three of us- " her red fingernail lined up first on Douglas then Harvey Boden, " -have to decide what to do next."

"Is this an official session?" Douglas asked.

"We'll call it an In Chambers consultation, if you and the Prosecution have no objection."

"After this failure of Softlight, Prosecution has no alternative but to apply for the death penalty," Harvey Boden said quickly.

"On who?" Douglas snapped back. "On Adrian Reynolds, or this German?"

"There is no German, Douglas, only a mind screwed about by a subliminal laser code. Face facts."

"You don't know that. At the very least I would appeal for an identity check first."

"Oh yes?" Harvey Boden was scathing. "What kind of check, genetic fingerprinting?"

"My client, Adrian Reynolds, was sentenced to personality erasure. That has been enacted; successfully, as far as we can tell. The emergence of this second personality is outside the court's jurisdiction."

They glared at each other.

"We could try a hypnogenic," Barbara Johnson suggested.

"Fair enough," Judge Hayward said. "Any objections? No. Good."

Adrian spat on Dr Elliot as he approached with the spray ampoule. Phlegm dripped down the doctor's collar as he applied the nozzle to Adrian's neck.

Dr Elliot waited until the young man dropped into a waking trance, eyelids heavy, head drooping. "Can you hear me?" he asked.

Adrian mumbled something. "Yes," the translator program said.

"What is your name?"

"Erich Breuer."

"What is your job, Erich?"

"I am a member of the garrison troop."

"Where?"

"Dachau."

Douglas heard a quick hiss of indrawn breath from Barbara Johnson. Harvey Boden's face turned blank, unreadable.

"What is the last thing you remember before you woke up in this room?"

The man's hands started to tremble slightly. "The Yankees have arrived, their tanks halting by the guard post. There were shots, our officers were killed. The Yankees, they cried and they vomited when they saw the inmates, the unburied corpses. I am lined up against a wall with my colleagues, some are bleeding from the beatings. I hear the machine gun firing. Louder. Louder." His eyes widened with shock, mouth hanging open.

Douglas turned away, unable to look at the shell of flesh which had once been Adrian Reynolds.

"That's enough," Judge Hayward said as Dr Elliot began another question.

Douglas walked over to the chair, and studied the now quiescent figure.

If Elliot is right about regression, if you are who you now seem to be, then that would prove the existence of men's souls. That would be so hard for me to really believe in. It would mean there is a God, that Jesus was born and died for us. A long agonising death nailed to a cross of wood. And how could we ever be forgiven that? Better we believe in some shared consciousness theory; that will be the scientists' answer. The other is too much to bear. An afterlife. That you have been sent back from Heaven. Or Hell. That life on Earth is nothing more than a penitence to serve before we can enter God's Kingdom for all time.

"Now what?" Harvey Boden asked,

Douglas left Erich Breuer, wearied by the Prosecution Officer's unceasing assault. "I maintain the case is closed. We have now proved beyond reasonable doubt that this is no longer Adrian Reynolds. The Institute should help Erich Breuer adapt to modern life, and let him go."

"I can't agree with that," Judge Hayward said. "Douglas, you haven't thought this through. Suppose this really is Erich Breuer?" She held up a hand to forestall Harvey Boden's protest. "The body contains Erich Breuer's memories, camp guard at Dachau. Then what?"

"Oh," Douglas saw what she was driving at, his mind racing after the implications. "War Crimes."

"Exactly. If you bring an appeal over the question of this body's identity, and prove your case that this is Erich Breuer, then he will have to face the consequences of his actions in World War Two. Do you want that to happen, Douglas? Do you want the public spectacle of a trial? Because that's what you'll get. The Israelis were chasing the original concentration camp guards up until the middle of the nineties; old men whose identities were extremely uncertain. Erich Breuer, who by his own admission was part of the holocaust, would never be allowed to walk out of the Institute a free man. That's what your appeal would bring."

Oh God, she's telling me it's my decision. Me! Forced into the role of judge, and probably executioner by default.

"I don't know," he said miserably.

"Let me see if I can clarify the situation," Judge Hayward said. "I sentenced all the memories to be wiped from Adrian Reynolds's brain. Now we find a deeper, hidden set of memories." She narrowed her eyes, and fixed Dr Elliot with a lance-like stare. "Can these Erich Breuer memories be wiped by Softlight?"

He looked startled. "Well, yes. I would suppose so. But I don't think it's advisable."

"Why not?"

"We don't understand how they originated. It opens up an entire new area of neurology to study. It is quite possible that each of us possesses a similar mental heritage, a window into the past. Think of the data that could be uncovered, the true history we could learn."

That was when Douglas witnessed the showing of the Judge's claws for the first time. "Dr Elliot," she said coolly. "Adrian Reynolds is not an experimental subject, he is a multiple murderer sentenced to personality erasure. A sentence which this Institute is legally obliged to enact. You will either fulfil this function, or tell me you are unable to. Do I make myself clear?"

Dr Elliot considered his options, and settled for a reluctant submission. "Very well, I accept that a penal institution is not the place for an academic study of this nature."

Judge Hayward glanced at Douglas then Harvey Boden. "Any objections to a further Softlight administration?"

"No," Douglas said, partly ashamed. It was the easy way out.

The one I always take.

This time he left his eyes open for the whole procedure. Erich Breuer stared placidly ahead as the Softlight imprinter's moulded strip went over his eyes.

"That's it," Dr Elliot announced.

The arm retracted, folding back onto its pedestal.

Barbara Johnson moved in with the white plastic sensor crown again. She settled it on the head. "No primary brainwave activity registering," she reported.

"We'll wait for a little while," Judge Hayward said. "See if there's any change."

"It's happening," Barbara Johnson called. She was hovering around the computer terminal which was displaying the sensor crown readings. "His brainwave activity is picking up."

When Douglas checked his watch he saw that barely four minutes had elapsed.

Adrian's head had been bowed limply ever since the arm had retracted. Now Douglas watched him lift his chin, his expression perfectly calm. Then he began to hunch in on himself, bending his shoulders round as far as the straps allowed.

"Why doesn't he say anything?" Douglas whispered to Barbara Johnson.

"Because we haven't told him to," she whispered back. "The hypnogenic lasts for about three hours, he's still well under."

"Can you hear me?" Judge Hayward asked. "What is your name?"

He blinked slowly. "I hear you, miss. Please, they call me Deaf Willy, miss."

It was an American accent, a slow rich twang, setting off an unwelcome train of thought in Douglas's mind. It was the servile manner which he couldn't ignore.

"Why Deaf Willy?" Barbara Johnson asked impulsively.

"Cos I ran when the sheriff shouted me to stop, miss. I didn't hear him, I swear. Boxed my ears when he caught me. Said I must've been born deaf."

"Are you black?" Douglas asked. He ignored the looks the others gave him.

Deaf Willy's mouth split into a wide grin. "Yes sir. I surely am."

"How old are you, Deaf Willy?"

"Sir, maybe sixteen, seventeen. Don't rightly know for sure."

"Do you know what year it is?"

"Year, sir? No sir, I don't know that, sir."

"Who is the president?" Harvey Boden asked.

"Why, it's Mr Harrison, sir. Mr Benjamin Harrison."

Barbara Johnson started to voiceline the terminal, calling up a list of American Presidents.

"Where do you live?" Judge Hayward asked.

"Mississippi state, miss."

"Benjamin Harrison served one term," Barbara Johnson said. "Eighteen-eighty-nine to ninety-three."

"What is the last thing you remember before you woke up here?" Dr Elliot asked.

"Sir, it's the horses, sir. They's riding all around the house, sir. Must be twenty or thirty of them. They's got torches, razing everything as they go. Flames is rising halfway to heaven." Beads of sweat began to prick his forehead. "Little Jose, she's inside. I can hear her. Lord, I can't see her. Oh Jesus almighty, I'm on fire. Jose's still screaming. I'll get her momma, I will." Thick chords of muscle rose on his throat. He began to gurgle, a thick liquid sound as if he was choking.

Dr Elliot rushed forward. "Forget! Forget that, go back, right back. When you were a little boy. Think of that. When you were little. What do you remember when you were little?"

Judge Hayward pumped her cheeks out as Dr Elliot soothed Deaf Willy down with calming words, encouraging murmurs. "At least we haven't got a zealot this time," she said.

"No," Harvey Boden said carefully. "But you did rule that Softlight should be used until it was successful."

Douglas couldn't believe what the Prosecution Officer had said. "Are you telling me you want this Deaf Willy personality wiped?"

"Prosecution does have a valid point," Judge Hayward said. She looked unhappy at what she was having to say. "If I order a halt now, then that judgement will have to be reviewed by an appeal court. And it wouldn't hold up, it's abysmally arbitrary; we didn't like Erich Breuer so he was wiped, but we felt sorry for a downtrodden cotton picker boy so he was allowed to stay. What kind of legal basis is that? No Douglas, we committed ourselves when we wiped Erich Breuer. Either this body is wiped clean of all its memories, or it is physically executed."

"But we have neither the moral nor legal authority to order the death of an innocent like Deaf Willy," Douglas insisted. "And that is what we are discussing here; Softlight is a death penalty for Deaf Willy. He is nothing like Erich Breuer, he doesn't deserve to be erased. I contend that what we've found in this instance is an eminently suitable replacement personality for Adrian Reynolds's body. As you originally ruled, Judge."

"Not quite," Barbara Johnson said. "Examine that idea from a practical standpoint, Douglas. You will have one hell of a problem trying to integrate an illiterate nineteenth century black boy into modern European society, not to mention acclimatising him to a white body. Without such conditioning he would be totally adrift in time, no family to love him, nothing he can understand, let alone relate to. In order to survive, his antique behaviour patterns would all have to be suppressed. The memories too, I imagine. Could you stay sane with the memory of your own death in your mind? In fact you would probably wind up having to junk about ninety per cent of his memories. Only the name would be left. You wouldn't be saving him at all." She appeared saddened by the prospect. "Our era would be as cruel to Deaf Willy as his own."

Douglas thought about it, and couldn't see an out. "Very well," he said. "I have no objection to clearing Adrian's brain entirely."

"You want me to wipe every past life?" Dr Elliot asked in astonishment. "But that will probably mean going back down to pre-sentience, Neanderthal man, that's the Palaeolithic age. And from what we've seen so far there are about two or three lives per century. If that holds constant, you are talking about four-hundred-plus incarnations. It'll take a week."

"Did you have anything else planned?" Judge Hayward asked icily.

The third personality was called Rosin, another slave from Mississippi. He died from a whipping while James Monroe was President. He was still uttering little dog-like whines when Dr Elliot lowered the Softlight imprinter over his eyes.

Number four was French, a peasant killed at the start of the revolution.

They had some trouble coaxing number five to speak, there was no response to any European language. Barbara Johnson solved it by accessing Cambridge University's linguistics department computer, and requesting a list of greetings in all the languages known to be in use around seventeen hundred.

"If we have to do this each time, the whole process is going to take a month," Dr Elliot said as the terminal droned through the catalogue. "And I doubt that the university's memory cores will be able to help us when we enter pre-Roman history."

The man sitting in the chair mumbled something in response to the terminal.

"African," Barbara Johnson said triumphantly.

His name was Ingombe, a member of the Fon tribe; they were migrants based in Abomey, prey to the coastal slavers. He remembered the Ardra war canoes coming upstream to attack his village, a fight.

Listening to him, and the ones that followed, it seemed to Douglas as though Adrian had turned the tables on them, condemning them to witness a seemingly endless litany of misery, a refined torment for the empathic.

They had lunch delivered to the laboratory, compartmentalised airline-style trays from the canteen. Douglas just ate the cheese and biscuits, staring out through the window. The mist which swirled through the woodland outside was thickening, it already obscured the yellow-brown carpet of dead bracken.

Incarnations ten to twenty were mainly European -Portuguese, English, Dutch, German. Two of them awoke screaming and pleading in Spanish, their anguish so deep set it was beyond even the hypnogenic's ability to quell.

Harvey Boden grimaced while Dr Elliot hurriedly manoeuvred the Softlight imprinter over the first. "Spanish Inquisition," he said softly. "The time fits."

"And LIFE! thinks Softlight is medieval," Barbara Johnson said grimly.

Douglas abandoned his cheese and biscuits. He walked over to the window wall, only half listening to a man called John Diker give an account of Cambridge in the thirteen-forties; his job as a freemason, how he lost his mother, wife, and five children to the Black Death before succumbing himself. The autumn frost seemed to reach in through the thick glass to frost Douglas's body to the core.

Why are there no memories of what happens between his lives? God's censorship? Or is it simply that the afterlife cannot be interpreted through human senses, the brain cannot hold it? Maybe Dr Elliot will chose that as his next area of study. If he does, I'd like him to fail utterly. Even before this we regarded life too cheaply. Now Softlight will reduce its value still further. In that respect it has already been a tragic failure. Perhaps that is our punishment for meddling with the substance of our own souls. But what kind of God would that give us? One who shows little compassion, one who will hold us to account for each of our actions on this Earth, one who is prepared to turn us away from the gates of the Holy City. An Old Testament God. He cannot be like that. He cannot.

The evening wore on without respite, one tale of woe following another as the incarnations came and went.

When Douglas stood beside the window wall he could see the tiny yellow flames of the candles the LIFE! women were using for their vigil, a small dim galaxy lost at the end of time. Their flames held an unknowing poignancy; if they had lit one for every mortal death Adrian's soul had undergone they would have the number about right.

Douglas strode over to the chair as Dr Elliot was lowering the Softlight imprinter over Decius Tactus, a Roman centurion, and Christian, condemned to death by a local magistrate. His family had been butchered by soldiers, blaming the bad harvest on their alien God.

The man's eyes gazed back at him through a hazy chemical veil.

"What did he do?" Douglas whispered hoarsely. He met the blank faces of the others.

"Christians were blamed for everything," Barbara Johnson said. "It was convenient."

"No, not Tactus. Originally. What sin could possibly be so bad, so brutal, to deserve this?"

"What do you mean 'originally' Douglas?" Judge Hayward asked, there was a degree of petulance in the question. It was midnight, they had been in the laboratory for a straight fourteen hours.

"This man's soul has been sent back from the afterlife forty times in two thousand years. And each time he has suffered the most appalling degradations, known nothing but war, pestilence, and slavery; seen his families murdered, his homes razed, whole cultures wiped out. Torment without end. This is Hell for him, not Dante's Inferno, Hell on Earth. Every single time. Why? What did he do that God would subject him to this?"

He saw Judge Hayward and Harvey Boden exchange a heavy glance.

"Look, Douglas- " Harvey Boden began.

"Don't," he said angrily. "Don't you tell me it's been a long day, don't tell me I need to go home and get some sleep."

"Probability," said Dr Elliot. "That's all it is, Douglas. So far we've seen less than ten per cent of his incarnations. Apart from the last couple of centuries the vast majority of the human race has lived short miserable lives in unhygienic squalor. In any given historical era the number of aristocrats is a minute fraction. It always has been."

"No. He did something. Something terrible." Douglas could sense the conviction growing inside him. It was one of the most frightening experiences he had ever known. A precognition that could look into the past.

"Genghis Khan?" Barbara Johnson suggested.

"He was late tenth century," Judge Hayward said thoughtfully. "We've regressed well past that now."

We have another half hour before this hypnogenic wears off," Dr Elliot said. "Do you want me to go on?"

"Yes," Judge Hayward said before Douglas could voice a protest.

Should I object? I want to know who he was, what he did. And I don't want to know. That is the way my life goes, always unable to decide. Well it ends now. Taken out of my hands. I could have stopped it, right at the start, I could have said no, stood firm. But I did what appeared best at the time. I cannot be blamed for that. It is not I who is stained by guilt.

They waited in restless silence while the forty-first incarnation flooded into the body of Adrian Reynolds. His eyes narrowed, the irises appearing to blacken, receding to some indefinable depth. For one supremely disconcerting moment Douglas thought he was looking directly into a distance beyond that of galactic night.

I know that man, that look; he holds a terror from which even insanity is no refuge. I have seen it once before, so long ago. But where?

Douglas heard the terminal start with a Hebrew greeting; the man answered straight away.

"What is your name?" Dr Elliot asked.

The man blinked, his lips quivering as he fought against the words the hypnogenic was tearing from his mind. "I am named Judas Iscariot." His wounded gaze swept round the five of them in a voiceless plea. Then he saw Douglas, and a confounded light of recognition flared. "Pilate," he cried. "Pontius Pilate."

Douglas stared back at him in mute horror while time quietly dissolved inside his brain.

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The Pet

by Samantha Frankenstein

As he entered, Sarge noticed the unit clustered in the back of the dugout.

"Alright, what's going on here?" he demanded, barrelling forward. The others cleared a path before him, right up to Pfc. Sampson.

"Sampson?" Sarge demanded. "What's going on here? Why is... oh!"

Something or someone had peeked out from behind Sampson.

"What's this?" he asked, craning around to take a look. Behind Sampson, almost obscured by the shadow of the small battle tank's tread was the brown round face of a small human child.

"It followed me here, Sarge," the AI admitted. "Can I keep it?"

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The Oldest Man in the World

by Richmond A. Clements

When he woke up, Eddie could not have been any happier. Today, you see, was a very special day. Today Eddie would become the oldest man in the world.

He lay in bed considering this, with his hands entwined behind his head, listening to the sounds outside his window. It was peaceful out, with just the joyous dawn songs of the birds breaking the silence.

Eddie got out of bed and stretched, yawning and scratching himself the way men do.

‘Good morning, Eddie,’ said the house in a cool female voice.

‘Hi Mandy,’ he said as he was pulling his trousers on.

‘Congratulations, by the way,’ said the house. Eddie did his best to look modest, but couldn’t help smiling, ‘Why, thank you,’ he replied, as he finished dressing. The bedroom door irised open for him as he approached, and closed when he had passed through. He knew that already, in the bedroom, Mandy was tidying up, making the bed, ready for him this evening.

‘Mandy, there seems to be a fault with the kitchen lights,’ Eddie stood at the kitchen doorway, faced with a wall of darkness; the light should have come on automatically when he opened the door.

‘Mandy? *Mandy?*’

The kitchen lights suddenly burst to white life.

‘Surprise!’

‘Wow! You have been busy, Mandy!’

The kitchen was bedecked with flowers of all colours, their various scents, which Mandy had been masking, burst forth and hit him like a shot of whiskey. A rainbow of balloons bobbed on the ceiling, among a festoon of streamers that looked like a technicolour kelp forest.

Mandy was singing ‘Congratulations’, as a tiny robot airplane, its single prop buzzing, circled the room, trailing a long banner which echoed the sentiment of the song.

Eddie smiled, because now he was happy. Now he was exceptional.

All through his life, Eddie had been unexceptional. At school, he had sat at a desk in the middle of the room. He was not among the eager to please at the front, or the obviously disinterested at the back. He had made his way through school with little fuss, and few friends, none of the romantic adventures usual in that age group.

At University, there had been a girl, like him, she had been studying biology. Eddie had an aptitude for the subject, he would go far, all his tutors told him so, but not her. Amanda had been exceptional. Eddie had been content in her shadow, as they had dated he fed off her brilliance, a flower to her sun. But, of course, she was a genius and he was not, and eventually she left. She explained that it wasn’t him, it was her. She had promised that they would always be friends.

Eddie never heard from her again.

She had hurt him, that's for sure. He promised himself that this would never happen to him again. And it never had. He threw himself into study, passing with top marks, and thus reached the notice of those shady government departments who found young minds valuable. Valuable and pliable.

Amanda, he found out, had secured a post, heading a research team on an orbiting hydroponics lab. Eddie was creating chemical agents for the military.

Morally dubious though the work may have been, the money made all those feelings go away. Anyway, it wasn't like he had any friends who could disapprove, was it? Any friends he did have, worked in the same job, so their moral outlook was as mercenary as his.

One of these guys was Ant. He was an AI expert, with a nice sideline in cybernetics. He was most proud of a nanobot he had designed; he called it the Little Drummer Boy. The idea was to introduce it into the bloodstream of the victim, where it made its way to the heart, and, once there, attached itself to the muscle. Then it began to send conflicting electrical signals to the heart, disrupting the beating, and causing a heart attack.

Ant listed him about a dozen famous deaths he claimed had been the result of his invention. Ant was deep into Black Ops. He loved it.

Eddie mentioned to Ant that he was buying an ergonomic house. Ant got excited, and offered to install one of his own AIs, instead of the off the shelf model that came with the house.

'Those ones are nothing but complex pattern recognition systems. The house observes your actions and eventually will begin to react to them, and in the end, anticipate them. Well, this girl is ten million times better. She is *fully* integrated into the house, top to bottom, in every single aspect. She can do anything you want.'

Ant paused for effect, 'Anything.'

Eddie chewed his lip, 'She?'

'Ha! I knew you'd like it!'

So, that was how he had met Mandy.

At first he had been reticent, understandably so, as they did not know each other. They had been two intelligent personalities, thrown together in the same house. Eventually, they had become comfortable with each other; they became friends, then, in the end, lovers.

Eddie was able to open his heart to Mandy in a way that was impossible with anyone else. He told her of his frustrations at being... ordinary. He always seemed to have been in the company of exceptional people, both in university or work, but he could never quite get there himself.

'Even you're exceptional, Mandy,' he told her. At this, she would voice her objections. Her false modesty was something he loved about her.

One day, as he sat eating his evening meal, after a days work, Mandy said, 'Eddie?'

'Mmm?' he said, chewing his food.

'I've been thinking, darling, and... well, I think I've thought of a way to make you exceptional.'

Eddie put his fork down and looked up at the ceiling, the way he always did when talking to her, 'What? I mean, how?'

She told him. Mandy had it all worked out.

Eddie was appalled. To begin with. But you know what women can be like. They know how to get their own way.

'Think of it this way, Eddie. You are going to be the oldest man in the world.'

It only took one night of her nagging for Eddie to come round to her way of thinking.

With Mandy's help, or rather, her guidance, Eddie had worked hard, creating the serum that would make him the oldest man in the world. It took a year or more to do it, through many a trial and error. Mandy scanned it, using instruments no other house had, instruments she designed using all the military cunning Ant had programmed into her.

'We're ready, love,' she said at last.

Eddie nodded, and rolled up his sleeve. His chair ease back, and an arm extruded from the material of the headrest. Gently, the end of the arm stroked his face. A lover's touch. He gave a tiny shiver; her touch had the same effect on him now as it had the first time they had been together. The end of the extruded arm narrowed to a point, then narrowed again, even thinner, until it was the width of a hypodermic needle. The needle drifted down, Mandy dragged it gently across the bare skin of his arm, raising the hairs there as it travelled. The needle came to rest of the blue line of a vein.

'Ready?' she asked.

'Ready.'

The needle slid into his arm painlessly. He felt a spreading coolness, beginning at the needle and moving across his body, as she injected him with the serum. The cold tendrils of sleep coiled around his mind, and he drifted into sleep.

And so he had awoke the next morning in bed. Mandy must have undressed him and put him there. He had got up, and she had the surprise party for him.

He had laughed at the little airplane. She produced a bottle of champagne, cracked it open with a gunshot pop, and poured him a glass.

He held the glass up, glancing at the ceiling, 'To the oldest man in the world,' Mandy said. Eddie laughed again, and drank the champagne.

'Can I look outside?' Eddie asked.

'Do you want to?'

He thought for a moment, 'I don't know... I think I should. But I don't think I want to.'

Mandy communicated her understanding in the tone of her voice, 'Perhaps it is better to get it over with now. I suppose you're going to have to do it in the end.'

'You're right, as usual, babe,' Eddie said, standing up, and walking to the front door.

It peeled open as he approached. Outside was bright and dry. It looked like it was going to be a good day.

He sucked in a deep breath of fresh air. He couldn't yet detect the smell on the wind, but it was still early. Looking down the length of his street, Eddie could only see a few bodies, five or six at the most. Nothing had started to rot. Mandy had only released the virus last night. Eddie had designed it himself, well, he and Mandy had. That was something couples did- they did stuff together. The virus had been the easy part, coming up with the antidote for him had taken more time. Eddie rubbed the red spot on his arm where the needle had entered. Everybody else was dead.

He was the oldest man in the world. He was thirty three.

He was exceptional.

Eddie turned and went back inside, to be with the woman he loved.



Fatal Vision

by Andrew Males

As his head hit the curb, Dan heard a sickening noise that echoed throughout his skull. A blinding whiteness filled his vision, and his body became limp. The last image that went through his mind as he dived into unconsciousness was of his attacker's face: worn and scarred, sneering beneath a black New York Yankees hat. Robbed, alone in the puddle-strewn pub car park, Dan's world turned to black.

A fuzzy vision of a strange room gradually filled Dan's eyes as he awoke.

"It appears your head has swallowed an egg, Mr. Simpson."

Dan felt his eyes grate in their sockets as he located the nurse standing beside his bed.

"It feels like an ostrich's," he said, like a ventriloquist's dummy.

"Well, it is a particularly vicious one. How's the pain?"

"Pain? I hadn't noticed."

"Oh well, the tablets should help, and it will ease in time. The egg's gonna be there for a while, though."

He nodded slightly and lay back as she flashed a sympathetic smile and turned to walk away. As he half-shut his eyes and watched her about to leave, his gaze was attracted to something shimmering above her head. Opening them wider, he whispered, "Nurse?" She turned back and stooped down, eyes level with Dan's. "That number." He moved his gaze to a few inches above her head. "What is it?"

She looked at him, puzzled. "You get some rest, love. Don't strain yourself too much yet."

"You really didn't have to do this," Dan said, gazing across at Laura.

"You're a lousy driver at the best times, hon, let alone when you have double vision."

He ignored the insult. "It's been a few days now and my vision is fine, thank you. Although you do look more beautiful than I remember..."

Laura poked out her tongue and stopped at the traffic lights. The truth was Dan didn't know if his vision was normal yet. Today had, so far, been OK, but he'd experienced similar strange visions of numbers during and since his hospital visit. He dared to glance out to his left at the newsagent a few yards away, and watched a couple of teenagers walk past. Nothing unusual this time; maybe it was getting better. Whatever he thought he'd seen it must have just been the injury, and now it's healing. Dan relaxed a little in his car seat. Laura sat patiently through red-amber before slowly pulling away.

"You know most people don't wait until green to go. It's nearly nine o'clock."

“Most people ain’t driving this car – I am. And *if* you want to get picked up tonight, Dan, you’ll shut up and let me drive *my* way.” She briefly looked across and pulled a face. He opened his mouth to reply, but ending up being thrown sharply towards the windscreen, the sound of the brakes screeching in his ears. Swearing, and bouncing back in his seat, Dan turned to the road to see a pretty, young blonde woman with one hand on the bonnet of the car mouthing apologies.

“Jesus! Stupid cow!” Laura yelled. “She just shot out from nowhere – I could have killed her!”

Still getting his breath back, Dan watched the woman dust herself down, turn and jog off towards the train station. The number “3” floated above her head all the way until she disappeared round the corner.

As dusk slowly crept into view outside his window, Dan sat and looked at his task list print-out on his desk. Twenty items, but only a red tick against two of them could be seen, and even they hadn’t been particularly important. Normally, he would have felt guilty at such a lack of productivity, but a sense of worry had clouded the whole day. He had tried to keep pretty much to himself, locked away in his office, and barely looked up when the odd person wandered in to drop off reports or ask a question. He looked out through the dark into the empty car park, glanced at his watch and shut down his email. As usual, he loaded up the news page on the Internet and casually browsed the day’s stories, clicking round a few of interest. On the third link, he froze. There, in a small frame on the right of the screen was a picture of the girl that Laura had nearly hit this morning. He could still picture her now. His heart raced as he read on. “...*tragic accident...had been running down the train station’s stairs...neck broken...dead at the scene*”. He scanned the text and saw the time “...*just after nine o’clock this morning*.” Dan’s whole body tightened. His mind replayed imaginary footage of the possible journey of the fateful woman. At jogging speed, she would have reached the station in a couple of minutes. Allow a minute to get through the barriers and then she’d be on the stairs. He thought of the number he had seen above her head.

“Do you actually get paid for staring into space all day?” Laura stood in the doorway with a mischievous smile, happy to see him jump on her first word.

“Woah. I was just...how the heck did you get in?”

“Oh, you know, shinned up the drain pipe, laser cut through the glass, blasted open the inner door, usual way. Or the cleaner let me in on her way out.”

“Oh.” Dan said vaguely. He decided not to say anything about the news article, so just sat there.

“Well, excuse me while you put away all your pens neatly in a colour-coordinated order, but this girl needs to pee. Meet you downstairs in five - I’m parked at the front.” Laura turned, playfully switched off the lights and went out of his office. Dan sighed, looked at the bios on the desk in the dim light and started to pack them away. Before he could finish, he caught sight of a white van pulling round the corner at the back of the building. Frowning, he logged on the company’s intranet and opened up the security portal. A few clicks later, and the computer screen was displaying four grainy, black and white CCTV pictures, one of which was pointing at the back door. Dan could see two figures dressed in dark clothes, carrying various tools and as they came nearer he could also make out a logo on the hat of one of them. He peered closer at the monitor and caught a glimpse of a rugged face. Recognition hit as Dan’s breath froze. Realising Laura was downstairs, he flung himself towards the office door.

Fear and adrenalin flowed through his body as he leapt the last five stairs, a few feet away from the women’s toilet. “Laura!! Laura!! Get out! Now!” he whispered, knocking frantically at the door.

“Dan – what the...? I’ll be out in a minute, I - ”

“NOW!”

He heard the lock turn just as he heard the sounds of the men reach the inner door ten feet behind him. A millisecond glance around told him there was no way of an undetected escape, so he shoved the toilet door hard and stumbled past Laura into the small room. As she opened her mouth, he span around and pushed the door shut – stopping inches from the frame before cushioning the last bit. In a dexterous manoeuvre that came from somewhere within, the light had been flicked off and a hand had been clasped over Laura’s mouth in one quick move.

“You take the upstairs, I’ll clean up below,” said an unwelcome voice, passing the door. “You find any unlucky soul, you bring ‘em down to me.” The footsteps trailed away.

Dan could feel her breathing hard against his hand, and hoped she’d now had an inkling what was happening. He whispered into her ear, “It’s OK, they don’t know we’re here. Just be quiet. You all right?”

She nodded quickly, and he took his hand away. Instinctively, they hugged each other, and just for a few seconds Dan felt safe. Soon, she put her mouth by his ear. “What are we going to do? Did you lock the door?”

A worry pain shot through his body. Recalling the sequence of events, he knew the answer. “No.” He could tell the look on her face even though it was pitch black. Hope surged through him again. “At least the sign doesn’t say “engaged”. Then they’d know someone was in here.” He had put on his best selling voice.

“Or,” she replied, “they’ll open it anyway to check and find us here, unarmed, hunched together like gift-wrapped hostages.”

Dan thought for a second, before Laura shook him impatiently. He didn’t do thinking on his feet. “Neither decision may end up being right, that’s the trouble.” He paused again. “Give me your mobile.”

“What? Decide on the door first!”

“Just give me it!” It wasn’t the time to question his actions. Laura slid down his side, and moments later he felt cold metal in his hands. He opened the clam shell, sending out a soft glow around them. Quickly setting it to silent, he looked up at her in the strange, ambient light. Their eyes locked, and he was shocked at the fear he saw in them. He had wanted to reaffirm her, but the terror of what he saw next stunned him instantly. Drifting slowly back and forth above her head, barely visible, stood a small number 10.

“W-what is it?” she whispered in response to his recoil. Thinking he was focused on something behind her she turned around, puzzled. If his theory was right – however bizarre it might seem – things were about to go very wrong. But, he thought to himself, they had choices; despite what he may have seen earlier he didn’t believe that they were heading down a rail track with only one destination. He spun around, shone the phone light towards the door, and slowly, gently slid the lock across. He turned back to Laura and almost dropped the phone – the number was now 2.

“Shit!” he cried as he spun around again and reversed his actions. The light on the mobile went out before he could see, hands trembling as he fumbled for the buttons to wake it up again. Laura shrugged and frowned. The 10 had reappeared.

“We’re going,” he said firmly. “Now.” She looked deep into him. *Believe me, trust me*, he said to himself. Whether she did trust him or whether his strange reactions made her feel that he knew something she didn’t, he wasn’t sure - but she nodded. As she did, the number fell to 1, and his stomach fell into his socks.

If this grave game he was somehow playing was true, it was as terrifying as it was useful. “I’ve changed my mind – we’re staying here,” he quickly said. Laura put her hands to her face and kept them there.

“Look, I...” What was he meant to say to her? “I just think, well, that we need to be careful and not make the wrong decision.”

“The wrong decision? *Wrong* decision?” Laura’s eyes shouted louder than her words. “How about making a decision and actually *doing* something for Christ’s sake!” At the last of her words, she flung out her right arm – and suddenly the pair were engulfed in a tremendous noise. For one brief, surreal moment, it felt like a tornado was going to rip apart the toilet, until reality dawned. It seemed like the hand dryer stayed on forever as they stood together, stunned, and just as they regained their senses the door came crashing in.

“Who’s in there? Get out here now!” The sudden light flooding in made it difficult to make out any detail, but Dan could see a large man in the doorway. Dan looked back at Laura who had let out a small scream, but with his eyes still adjusting he could no longer see the number. “I said out!”

A hand grabbed Dan and pulled him out, stumbling into the corridor. Laura came next, yelping. “Hey look,” Dan began, “whatever you’re doing, just leave us out of it. I won’t call the police, I – “

“Shut the hell up!”

Dan watched him as wild brown eyes flicked rapidly between Dan and Laura, chest pumping. With his scars and a nose that had obviously been broken once or twice, the smile that was now creeping across his face completed the now-familiar sinister look.

“Well, well. I was hoping to see you again... *Dan Simpson.*”

Dan flinched. “How?” Realisation dawned. “My wallet. The one you stole.” Dan knew what might be coming next.

“Yes. Rough area, was it? Thought you were clever carrying an old wallet with an expired credit card?”

Dan looked away. “My business card, I take it.”

He nodded. “Think you’d got one over me? No chance, mate.”

“Billy! C’mon!” a voice said behind him. “I’ve got the van all loaded so let’s get out of here!”

“Go wait in the car,” he snapped. “I’ve got something I need to handle here.”

The other guy waited a few seconds before running off towards the back door.

Smiling, Billy pulled out a silver gun from the back of his jeans and grabbed Dan’s jacket.

“No!” Laura shouted behind Dan. “Don’t – “

“Shut up, bitch!” Spittle flew out of his mouth, landing on Dan’s shoulder. He looked past Dan to see her crouching down several yards behind.

“You’re lucky I’m in a hurry, Dan. But if I was you,” he said, turning the gun slowly towards Dan’s neck, “I’d turn around, take my girly, and run. Fast.” Their faces inches away from one another’s, the intruder’s eyes darted left and right, looking for the reaction he wanted. Avoiding the smoky breath, Dan looked at the gun before glancing sideways at the window. He didn’t have to see his reflection to know, but the single digit floating away confirmed it: right now, running was not an option that he should be taking. He decided to fight. The number blurred, and suddenly he could feel his pulse running through his blood. Slowly, it reappeared in a blaze of multi-digit glory.

“Well?” Billy snarled. “Go on, RUN!” He was too busy intimidating Dan with his eyes and weapon, too confident in his obvious superiority on this situation to even register that Dan had slowly slid a biro out of his pocket. Dan glanced back further at Laura’s reflection. It was fainter as she was standing back, half cowering behind a pillar, but he could see the vague outline of a large number. He carefully flicked the lid back into his pocket, exposing the small tip, and gripped it tight.

Billy drew breath as he wound himself up to push Dan away, but instead opened up a chance for Dan to strike low. As his knuckles hit fleshy stomach, Dan knew the pen had penetrated some distance before he saw the shocked look on his opponent’s face. Billy’s eyes widened, almost comically, and an instant later with a muffled grunt he released his grip on both Dan and the gun. Dan swiftly stooped to pick it up and stepped back towards Laura, watching the shaken, bewildered giant try to make sense of these developments. Billy looked down at the half of the pen poking out of his abdomen and his expression underwent multiple changes, like an impressionist trying to get the right face. He lumbered backwards but only managed to wheel one leg round, leaving him slumped against the glass of the window. Dan aimed the gun at him. It wasn’t the largest of numbers that appeared above his sagging head, but Dan calculated Billy almost certainly wouldn’t die from his wounds. Looking at this potential killer, gun in his hand, Dan knew he had another decision to make.

After that night, they never talked about what Dan did. Laura had sat in silence for a long time that night before finally putting a hand on his arm and looking deep into his eyes. “I know you knew something. I don’t know *how*, but I know it

was the right decision,” she had said in a smile full of sympathy and pain. The police had bought the story of self-defence; Laura had accepted the truth through her eyes. Maybe one day, Dan thought, he will stop hearing the screams for mercy.

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Andrew Males lives in south-east England and has a strong interest in most things sci-fi. He hopes to go into space one day, although will wait until Richard Branson drops his prices a little. Andrew has been published online at several places, including Every Day Fiction, Spinetinglers and Bewildering Stories.



An interview with Michael Carroll

by Richmond A. Clements



For those who don't know, tell us a bit about yourself.

OK, you asked for it! I'm forty-two years old. I live in Dublin, Ireland, with my wife and my cat and a huge collection of books, comics, DVDs, CDs and dust bunnies. I've been writing full-time since mid-1999 when the software company for which I was working decided that instead of having those fifty or so programmers sitting around doing nothing because there wasn't much work coming in, they'd make some redundancies. So they started with the newest people and not, strangely, with the people who had been employed for over a year to read the paper and play Tetris. Me, I was glad to get out of there because I was one of the few busy ones, averaging twelve hours a day, six days a week.

But before that... I left school at the age of sixteen because, well, that was 1982 and Ireland was in the middle of a recession. Jobs were few and staying on in school just didn't seem like a viable option. So I joined the post office as a "Junior Postman" and spent the following two years delivering telegrams and express letters. I hated it, but it did provide me with regular money, which I used to buy myself a Sinclair ZX Spectrum. When I turned eighteen I was promoted into a full postman, and I hated that job even more.

Because all of my friends were in school or college, I had a lot of spare time and I used that to teach myself how to program the Spectrum, first in the idiosyncratic Sinclair Basic, then in machine code. Sometime in the middle of 1985 I came into contact with a software company and they offered me a programming job, so I took a career break from the post office and never went back (and even though over twenty years have passed, I *still* occasionally have nightmares about the place!)

I'd always been a fan of science fiction, and in 1987 I met my all-time favourite writer, Harry Harrison, at a signing in Dublin. Harry was – and still is – a great inspiration to me, and talking with him encouraged me to finally start writing my own stories.

Looking back, I can see that most of them were rubbish, and all of them were badly written, but I was learning... Shortly after that I discovered the Irish Science Fiction Association, became a member and, eventually, chairman and editor of the ISFA's fiction magazine FTL.

It was through the ISFA that I met two more very influential people: First, my wife Leonia – no writer ever had a better muse! – and the second was Michael Scott.

By that stage in his career, Michael already had dozens of books behind him, so he was well used to people saying, "You know, I've always wanted to write a book." He'd developed a stock reply of, "Well, why don't you?"

It might seem a curt, almost angry response, but it works to separate the would-be writers from the will-be writers. The would-be writers want to *have written*, they don't want to actually *write*. The old saying of "The wishbone will never replace the backbone" definitely applies to writing. You can't produce a book by endlessly talking about how you're going to write it "one of these days, as soon as I get the time" – you actually have to make time, sit down and do it.

So, encouraged – or at least challenged by Michael Scott's words – I decided to give it a shot.

My first novel was *The Last Starship*, a young-adult sequel to a short story that had been rather well received. I sent it to a big publisher over here, who promptly didn't get back to me or even acknowledge that they'd received the book. Undaunted, I ploughed on and wrote *Moonlight* (a half-SF / half-fantasy novel). I was just about finished *Moonlight* when I heard of a new publisher emerging on the scene, so I sent them the manuscript of *The Last Starship* and they accepted it almost immediately. And a few days later the *first* publisher got back to me saying that they wanted to publish *The Last Starship*. Even less daunted than before, I cheekily wrote back and told them that they were too late, but I did have this *other* book...

Tell us a bit about the New Heroes, what was your thinking in coming up with the idea?

Like all novels or stories (or movies or any form of fiction), the New Heroes began with a single idea. In this case, it was something like, "What if you were thirteen years old and you were the most powerful person on the planet?"

A writer trains himself or herself to keep poking at ideas like that until either the idea dies from a poke-overdose or it begins to grow. One thing that many non-writers or novice writers often don't quite understand is that an idea is not a story: an idea is a seed, but that's all. For the seed to grow it needs constant care and attention, it needs to be fed and watered with other ideas and it very definitely requires the writer to be pretty ruthless with the pruning shears.

I had the New Heroes idea so long ago that I can't actually remember having it; I can only remember the memory, if you see what I mean... But somewhere along the way I concluded that if the protagonist was to be the most powerful person on the planet, then there has to be a solid reason. "Because he just is" is not good enough... It wasn't long before I decided to make him superhuman. I've always loved superheroes and it seemed like a fun area in which to play.

Was it originally envisaged as a series of novels or did you see it as a comic to begin with?

At one point very early in the development of the story I toyed with the idea of doing it as a comic, but superhero comics aren't exactly a rarity, so I chose novels instead. I find novels much easier to write, and at the time there were no original superhero novels of which I was aware. There are quite a few now, of course, but I'm pretty sure that the New Heroes series was the first.

You've written novels in a few, it has to be said, very different genres. How did you come to write 'chick-lit'?

I sort of fell into that by accident: I'd published a YA horror novel – and a few short stories – with Poolbeg, and one day I went in to pitch future ideas. They rejected all of them, but were intrigued by my casual mention of an adult mainstream novel on which I'd been working. After much discussion I agreed to rework it into more of a romance (there was a romantic sub-plot that I brought to the fore), and see what happened. It was tough going, because I had to write the book in the first person from a female perspective: I started and abandoned the book many times until I realised that I should stop worrying about the protagonist being female and treat her as a person first. After that, it went pretty smoothly... Except that my editor passed away the day after I finished the final draft and the book went into a mysterious limbo for over a year. It was rescued when the publisher found the manuscript by accident, read it and really enjoyed it.

The book was published under the pseudonym “Jaye Carroll”, on the assumption that most female readers wouldn’t be interested in a romance novel written by a man. I didn’t care that no one would know it was me: the important thing was that they enjoyed the story.

But shortly before publication somehow the word got out that I was the writer, which gave it a brief burst of publicity. To capitalise on that, my publisher decided that it would be a good idea to have a bookstore signing session the day after it was published. I was initially tentative, but was quickly buoyed up by the thought of meeting “my public.”

No one turned up.

Not *one single person* showed up to meet this fabulous new author.

For a whole hour I sat there in the bookstore at a little table piled with books while making difficult small talk with the embarrassed staff and doing my damndest to look as though I wasn’t at all bothered.

As you can imagine, that was a serious blow to the ego. “My public” didn’t care. And why should they? They’d never heard of me before, and the book hadn’t been out long enough for anyone to have read it.

When a book is just about to be published, the publishers are all over you. They phone three or four times a day giving you an update on the status and arranging radio and newspaper interviews. You become the star attraction, and it’s easy to believe that the book – and its author – are something special.

Then the book comes out and unless it’s an immediate best-seller or in some way controversial then your moment in the sun is over. The phone stops ringing – and the publisher keeps forgetting to return your own calls – and suddenly you’re back in the real world again. You start to understand that it’s only a book, no different from millions of others and certainly not special.

This is why I always feel sorry for first-time writers whose novels make a huge splash: they don’t get that important dose of reality and they frequently come to believe that they are better than the average writer. But they’re not: they’re just luckier.

Take *The Bridges of Madison County*, for example: for such a tiny book it was a phenomenal success. But what about the writer’s *second* book? Did anyone buy it? Can anyone remember what it was called? For that matter, hands up everyone who bought *The Bridges of Madison County* but has never actually read it. Hmm... there’s a lot of hands raised, I think!

People buy best-sellers because they believe that a book must be good if it’s a best-seller. They rarely stop and think about *why* one book is a best-seller and another isn’t. The truth is that best-sellers are marketed, not written. By that, I mean a book achieves best-seller status chiefly through the efforts of the publisher’s sales team, and rarely because the author is gifted. We’ve all read truly rotten books that have sold in the millions, and I’m sure we’ve all also read plenty of excellent books that will never sell enough copies for the author to earn out his or her meagre advance.

Do you find a big difference between writing for adults and the YA (young adult) market?

In some respects there’s a huge difference: a YA novel is generally shorter, but aside from that the approach is very important. For an adult novel, the writer can assume that the reader is familiar with most aspects of adult life, but that’s not so straightforward with the younger readers. Michael Scott gives a great example: anyone over the age of forty will understand what “Bay of Pigs” means... But mention that phrase to a twelve-year-old and he or she will picture a family of piggies building sand-castles on the beach.

However, when it comes to plotting a novel (which, for me, is at least 80% of the work), there’s not really much of a difference between YA books and Adult books. Both require the writer to construct a viable, credible (in context) world, populated with interesting characters and conveyed to the reader via an invisible but potent narrative. By “invisible” I

mean that – for the most part – the writer shouldn't indulge in clever word-play, puns for their own sake, or anything that breaks the reader's suspension of disbelief.

It's not uncommon for established writers of adult novels to decide to dip their toes and their pens in the YA market, but this is rarely done with any great success. The self-deluding mantra "how hard can it be?" is to be heard bandied about in such cases, especially from writers who never actually *read* YA fiction. They tend to produce some of the very worst YA books, which is both entertaining and frustrating for the rest of us. It's entertaining because everyone loves to see the giants fall, but frustrating because said giants will often receive advances that make ours look like sofa-change. Plus they get tons of publicity (the rest of us only get the publicity that we can generate by ourselves).

What's your typical working day?

Get up at about ten, work through until my wife comes home from work at about six, then start work again at eleven when she goes to bed, and keep going until about four. On weekends I take it easy and only do about six to eight hours a day. Unless I'm in the middle of a first draft, of course... Then I stop only to eat and sleep. For one of the Jaye Carroll books I got to the end and discovered that I had a beard – I hadn't had one when I started (for some reason this rarely happens to female writers).

How do you go about the 'writing process'? Do you need a fixed routine or 'special room' to work in, or can you do it anywhere?

I always thought that I needed to be here, in my office, to write, but I have found over the past couple of years that I can do it anywhere that's reasonably quiet. That said, I can't just sit down, open the laptop and begin typing (at least, not for novels): I need to have enough time to "work up" to it.

When I'm working on a first draft I begin by re-reading the previous day's work – correcting typos, expanding or reducing the narrative – then I plough right into the next scene or chapter and just keep going. Because I plot everything in extreme detail before I begin, I rarely find myself stuck, and if I do I just skip the sticky part and move on to the next.

During this stage I produce the "copy" at quite a rate: about three thousand words per day at the beginning, growing to six or seven in the final days. Then I set the book aside for a week or two and come back to it armed with a metaphorical red pen. That's where the real writing comes in: the first part is just throwing words down on the page, but the editing is a far more important process.

Every writer needs a good editor, someone who won't pander to the writer's ego and will push him or her as hard as possible to produce the best work. With the *New Heroes* series, my editor at HarperCollins practically drove me mad with all the suggestions and rewrites, but the final books are much, much better than they would have been without him (a further note on that: I have an involuntary reflex that makes me automatically reject an editor's suggestions and come up with my own – I suspect that this is a little annoying for the editor, but it forces me to work harder and almost always results in a stronger story).

Without giving anything away, the New Heroes trilogy ends in a pretty amazing cliff-hanger. Are there plans for more?

Ah, that old question! When I was writing the third book my editor and I discussed whether I should wrap up the whole story or leave something dangling to be picked up in future books. He agreed that dangling was the way to go... Unfortunately he then left HarperCollins and his successor doesn't have the same level of enthusiasm for the series. I was contracted for three books, and I've delivered three, so from that aspect HarperCollins are happy enough with things as

they are. I'm told that the books have sold well, but they clearly haven't sold well enough for HC to come begging for more...

That said, I do have some plans up my sleeve, but right now nothing has been finalised so more than that I cannot say. Soon, but not yet!

The first book in the series has just been released in the USA. How are they being accepted over there?

So far, so good... The first book (retitled *Quantum Prophecy: The Awakening* in the USA) did pretty well in hardback despite absolutely no promotion. For the paperback of *The Awakening* and the upcoming hardback of book two, *The Gathering*, Penguin have given the books a snazzy new design and will be promoting them pretty heavily, so fingers crossed! Remember, the more Michael Carroll books you own, the happier you'll be – this is a scientifically proven fact. I have *hundreds* of them and I'm incredibly happy, so it stands to reason that it must be true for everyone else.

On reading them, the books come across as astonishingly visual - they scream 'Movie Franchise'! Have you had any interest you can talk about for the studios..?

There's been a lot of interest from movie producers, director and studios, but so far none of them have decided to bite. If the series does well in the USA then it's more likely that a studio will snap up the rights.

A movie version would be fantastic, though... I have a dream cast for all the adult roles, but I won't name any of them just in case!

Tell us about Superhuman, your New Heroes short story collection.



I spent years working on the New Heroes series before I even began the first draft of the first book, and I developed a lot of side-stories and back-stories that just didn't fit in the main tale... *Superhuman* contains nine stories, three of which can be found on the website (www.quantumprophecy.com). Of the remaining six, one – the very first – is really just a fake newspaper article I wrote many years ago (and which is also on the website), but the others are fairly important to the NH universe. That said, I made sure that knowledge of the stories in *Superhuman* isn't necessary to enjoy the novels.

The longest tale in *Superhuman* is "Flesh and Blood". It's about a third of the size of an NH novel and could probably have been expanded into a full novel, except that the protagonist is a baddie and publishers tend not to like that... However, "The Footsoldiers" seems to be the fans' favourite of the tales, as it answers a few questions from the novels and has a neat little twist at the end.

Why did you decide to self-publish it? Wasn't that a bit insane?

"Insane" doesn't begin to cover it! I wrote it, edited it, type-set it, designed the cover, and paid for the printing. The only thing I *didn't* do was write Michael Scott's introduction (though I did edit it a bit). I've only printed 1000 copies of *Superhuman*, and they sell for 10 Euro each – including postage to anywhere in the world – so there's no way I'm going to make a profit even if every copy sells (I'll make back the cost of the printing, but not all the time I've put in).

But I did it because (a) I've always, *always* wanted to self-publish a book – just to see if I could – and (b) because even though it's effectively a loss-making venture I wanted to give something back to the readers. OK, so they have to *buy* the book, but it's a limited edition – there'll never be another printing – and each copy is signed and numbered.

(A note to anyone else considering the same idea: first, make sure you have enough space to store 1000 copies of your book, and second, don't attempt to sign and number every copy in one session... your writing hand will be aching for days afterwards!).

You've recently had a Future Shock published in 2000AD. Has this been an ambition of yours, and could you see yourself writing more comics in future?

I'm a huge fan of *2000 AD* – I've been reading it since the very first issue back in 1977 – so to finally have a story accepted was a dream come true! I've had maybe forty pages of comic strips published over the years – mostly in small-press publications like *FutureQuake* and *Solar Wind* – so I don't have a great deal of experience yet. But I do love writing comic strips and I've been developing a few stories specially for comics.

I can't see myself ever entirely abandoning novels, but I like to think that I'm not one of those writers who can only work in one field. I've written for radio, for TV and for cinema (sadly still haven't had any movies produced, but I did get paid!), so I've learned a few tricks about story-telling that work well in different media.

I have a huge ambition to write *Judge Dredd*, but he's a hard character to write because – to be blunt – there's not a lot of depth to him as a person. This, I'm sure, is intentional on John Wagner's part. Dredd is really only a catalyst: he effects change in the world and people around him, but *he* rarely changes. That should make him easier to write in many ways, but it doesn't. In thirty years only three or four writers have really been able to get a handle on him: chiefly Wagner, Alan Grant and Pat Mills. Of all the others, Gordon Rennie has come closest, but his most successful Dredd stories have been those that focus on other characters, not on Dredd himself.

My own most attempts at writing Judge Dredd tales have appeared on the 2000 AD Review (www.2000adreview.co.uk) website, but I abandoned my "Year One" storyline when I heard that John Wagner was finally going to reveal Dredd's origin. I still want to go back to it one day, though!

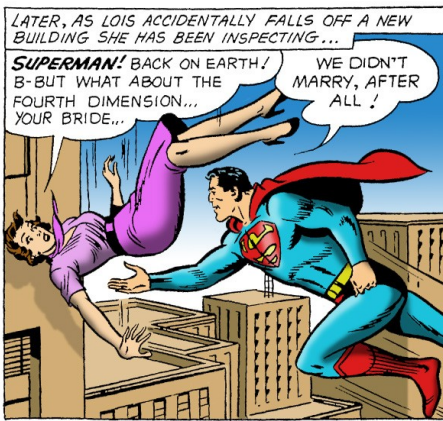
In fact, The New Heroes would read well in a comic adaptation..?

That's a very attractive idea, and I'd love to see it drawn by someone like John Higgins or Dave Gibbons, but I'm not sure how well the books would work in that form.

The pacing is wrong for a comic, and there's a *lot* of internal dialogue and introspection. I'm not a fan of internal dialogue in comics! We're long past the days when a character could explain away the plot-holes through the magic of thought-balloons: "Lucky I remembered to bring my grappling hook – which I keep hidden here in the folds of my cape – otherwise Professor Psycho would be able to escape with Diana, my girlfriend, and I'd have no hope of catching him!"

Look at *Watchmen* for a good example of how a comic should work: no thought balloons, no info-dumping, and the only captions are things like Rorschach's journal entries, the Pirate story and Doctor Manhattan's retrospection – not a single "Meanwhile..." or "As you know..." in the whole series – and yet it's widely considered to be one of the greatest comics ever created.

My all-time favourite dumb caption is from a Superman story written way, way back in the – ahem – "golden age":



Think about that one for a few minutes: She's a *newspaper reporter*, for crying out loud! What is she doing inspecting a building? And she just "accidentally falls" off it? Just like that, with no further explanation? She's not even dressed in a manner appropriate to the process of new-building-inspection: where's her hard-hat, safety harness and steel-toe-capped boots? Nor, you will note, does Lois seem even remotely concerned that she's just fallen off a new building she'd been inspecting – she's much more interested in the discovery that Superman has returned from the fourth dimension without his bride.

I know that some modern readers who grew up reading Moore and Miller and Bendis tend to look down on Stan Lee's early work for his sometimes hokey plots and corny dialogue, but before he came along the above panel wasn't just the norm, it was among the best writing that comics had to offer.

Is it any wonder that many people still think comics are for the illiterate?

What are you working on next?

Right now I'm in waiting-mode... I've got half a dozen pitches out with a bunch of publishers and producers, and I'm waiting to see which – if any – of them will bite.

I realise that sounds a lot like one of those interviews with a barely-remembered pop-star from the 1970s who claims to still be big in some far away land and who is currently working on "a number of exciting projects", but it's true.

I almost never talk about a book until it's about to be published. That's not because I'm afraid of someone stealing my ideas: it's because I'm afraid of someone telling me that something in my story sounds a lot like something else they've read. I hate it when that happens! I still receive e-mails from readers asking "When you were writing the New Heroes books did you know that Marvel already had a superhero called Inferno?" No, I *didn't* know! If I had known, I would have used a different name! Grr...!

Anyway... At the moment I'm developing a bunch of separate and very different stories, all of which, naturally, are completely brilliant (if I'm not in love with an idea I can't bring myself to develop it). I've got a far-future SF story, a medieval adventure tale, a western, a horror story all about zombies, and a couple of others. What I pick to do next depends on what the publishers – or producers – are most interested in seeing.

The Zombie story looks like it'll be the most fun to write: after spending the past few years with brightly-clad superheroes it'll be a nice change to delve into the lurching, rotten-flesh world of animated corpses!

Michael's new short story collection 'Superhuman' is reviewed later in this issue.



Writing the Perfect Scene

by Randy Ingermanson

Having trouble making the scenes in your novel work their magic? In this article, I'll show you how to write the "perfect" scene.

Maybe you think it's impossible to write the perfect scene. After all, who can choose every word perfectly, every thought, every sentence, every paragraph? What does perfection mean, anyway?

Honestly, I don't know. Perfection is in the eye of the beholder. Style is a matter of taste.

But structure is pretty well understood. Maybe you can't write the perfectly styled scene. But you can write the perfectly structured scene. And that's a whale of a lot better than writing a badly structured scene.

The Two Levels of Scene Structure

A scene has two levels of structure, and only two. They are:

- The large-scale structure of the scene
- The small-scale structure of the scene

This may seem obvious, but by the end of this article, I hope to convince you that it's terribly profound. If you then want to fling large quantities of cash at me in gratitude, please don't. I'd really rather have a check. With plenty of zeroes. I am going to steal insights from Dwight Swain's book, *Techniques of the Selling Writer*. This is quite simply the finest book ever written on how to write fiction. If you don't have this book, you are robbing yourself blind. I will be giving you the high points in this article, but there is really no substitute for reading the book and digesting it.

Before we begin, we need to understand how we keep score. How do we know what perfection is? The answer is based on understanding your reader's motivation for reading.

Your reader is reading your fiction because you provide him or her with a powerful emotional experience. If you're writing a romance, you must create in your reader the illusion that she is falling in love herself. If you're writing a thriller, you must create in your reader the illusion that he is in mortal danger and has only the tiniest chance of saving his life (and all of humanity). If you're writing a fantasy, you must create in your reader the illusion that she is actually in another world where all is different and wonderful and magical. And so on for all the other genres.

If you fail to create these emotions in your reader, then you have failed. If you create these emotions in your reader, then you have succeeded. The better you create the desired emotional experience in your reader, the better your fiction. Perfection in writing comes when you have created the fullest possible emotional experience for your reader.

Large-Scale Structure of a Scene

The large-scale structure of a scene is extremely simple. Actually, there are two possible choices you can make for your scene structure. Dwight Swain calls these two choices "scenes" and "sequels". This is horrendously confusing, since both of these are what most ordinary people call scenes. In what follows, I'm going to capitalize these terms, calling them Scenes and Sequels. That is your signal that I'm using Swain's language. When I use the word "scene" in the ordinary non-Swain sense, I'll leave it uncapitalized. Since you are exceptionally brilliant and perceptive, you will not find this a problem. Let me give you the high points on Scenes and Sequels right up front.

A Scene has the following three-part pattern:

- Goal
- Conflict
- Disaster

A Sequel has the following three-part pattern:

- Reaction
- Dilemma
- Decision

You may think these patterns are too simple. You may think this is reducing writing to Paint-by-Numbers. Well, no. This is reducing fiction to the two patterns that have been proven by thousands of novelists to actually work. There are plenty of other patterns people use. They typically work less well. It may well be that there other patterns that work better. If you can find one that works better, please tell me. But for now, let's pretend that Dwight Swain is right. Let's pretend these are absolutely the best possible patterns for writing fiction. Let's pretend these are the keys to writing the perfect scene. Let's move on and look at each of these in turn.

As we said, the Scene has the three parts Goal, Conflict, and Disaster. Each of these is supremely important. I am going to define each of these pieces and then explain why each is critical to the structure of the Scene. I assume that you have selected one character to be your Point Of View character. In what follows, I'll refer to this character as your POV character. Your goal is to convincingly show your POV character experiencing the scene. You must do this so powerfully that your reader experiences the scene as if she were the POV character.

Goal: A Goal is what your POV character wants at the beginning of the Scene. The Goal must be specific and it must be clearly definable. The reason your POV character must have a Goal is that it makes your character proactive. Your character is not passively waiting for the universe to deal him Great Good. Your character is going after what he wants, just as your reader wishes he could do. It's a simple fact that any character who wants something desperately is an interesting character. Even if he's not nice, he's interesting. And your reader will identify with him. That's what you want as a writer.

Conflict: Conflict is the series of obstacles your POV character faces on the way to reaching his Goal. You must have Conflict in your Scene! If your POV character reaches his Goal with no Conflict, then the reader is bored. Your reader wants to struggle! No victory has any value if it comes too easy. So make your POV character struggle and your reader will live out that struggle too.

Disaster: A Disaster is a failure to let your POV character reach his Goal. Don't give him the Goal! Winning is boring! When a Scene ends in victory, your reader feels no reason to turn the page. If things are going well, your reader might as well go to bed. No! Make something awful happen. Hang your POV character off a cliff and your reader will turn the page to see what happens next.

That's all! There is literally nothing more you need to know about Scenes. Now let's look at Sequels.

The Sequel has the three parts Reaction, Dilemma, and Decision. Again, each of these is critical to a successful Sequel. Remove any of them and the Sequel fails to work. Let me add one important point here. The purpose of a Sequel is to follow after a Scene. A Scene ends on a Disaster, and you can't immediately follow that up with a new Scene, which begins with a Goal. Why? Because when you've just been slugged with a serious setback, you can't just rush out and try something new. You've got to recover. That's basic psychology.

Reaction: A Reaction is the emotional follow-through to a Disaster. When something awful happens, you're staggering for awhile, off-balance, out of kilter. You can't help it. So show your POV character reacting viscerally to his Disaster. Show him hurting. Give your reader a chance to hurt with your characters. You may need to show some passage of time. This is not a time for action, it's a time for re-action. A time to weep. But you can't stagger around in pain forever. In real life, if people do that they lose their friends. In fiction, if you do it, you lose your readers. Eventually, your POV character needs to get a grip. To take stock. To look for options. And the problem is that there aren't any . . .

Dilemma: A Dilemma is a situation with no good options. If your Disaster was a real Disaster, there aren't any good choices. Your POV character must have a real dilemma. This gives your reader a chance to worry, which is good. Your reader must be wondering what can possibly happen next. Let your POV character work through the choices. Let him sort things out. Eventually, let him come to the least-bad option . . .

Decision: A Decision is the act of making a choice among several options. This is important, because it lets your POV character become proactive again. People who never make decisions are boring people. They wait around for somebody else to decide. And nobody wants to read about somebody like that. So make your character decide, and make it a good decision. Make it one your reader can respect. Make it risky, but make it have a chance of working. Do that, and your reader will have to turn the page, because now your POV character has a new Goal.

And now you've come full circle. You've gone from Scene to Sequel and back to the Goal for a new Scene. This is why the Scene-Sequel pattern is so powerful. A Scene leads naturally to a Sequel, which leads naturally to a new Scene. And so on forever. At some point, you'll end the cycle. You'll give your POV character either Ultimate Victory or Ultimate Defeat and that will be the end of the book. But until you get there, the alternating pattern of Scene and Sequel will carry you through. And your reader will curse you when he discovers that he's spent the whole doggone night reading your book because he could not put the thing down.

That's perfection.

However, it's only half the battle. I've told you how to design the Scenes and Sequels in the large scale. But you still need to write them. You need to write paragraph after compelling paragraph, with each one leading your POV character smoothly through from initial Goal to knuckle-whitening Conflict to bone-jarring Disaster, and then through a visceral Reaction to a horrible Dilemma and finally on to a clever Decision.

How do you do that? How do you execute those paragraphs? How do you do it perfectly?

Small-Scale Structure of a Scene

The answer is to use what Dwight Swain calls "Motivation-Reaction Units." He calls them MRUs for short. This is such an absurdly ridiculous term that I'm going to keep it, just to prove that Mr. Swain was not perfect. Writing MRUs is hard. However, I've found that it provides the most bang for the buck in improving your writing. I've mentored many writers, and a universal problem for them was the failure to write MRUs correctly. My solution was to make them painfully work through several chapters so that each one was nothing more nor less than a string of perfect MRUs. After a few chapters, the technique gets easier. Then I maliciously require them to rewrite their whole novel this way. This is brutally hard work, but those who have survived it have become much better writers.

Writing MRUs correctly is the magic key to compelling fiction. I don't care if you believe me or not. Try it and see.

I hope you are salivating to learn this magical tool. You need to first suffer through one full paragraph of theory. I know you will do this because you are intelligent and patient and because I am flattering you quite thickly.

You will write your MRUs by alternating between what your POV character sees (the Motivation) and what he does (the Reaction). This is supremely important. Remember that Swain calls these things "Motivation-Reaction Units". The Motivation is objective but it is something that your character can see (or hear or smell or taste or feel). You will write this in such a way that your reader also sees it (or hears it or smells it or tastes it or feels it). You will then start a new paragraph in which your POV character does one or more things in Reaction to the Motivation. There is an exact sequence you must follow in writing your Reaction. The sequence is based on what is physiologically possible. Note that the Motivation is external and objective. The Reaction is internal and subjective. If you do this, you create in your reader the powerful illusion that he is experiencing something real. Now let's break this down into more detail . . .

The Motivation is external and objective, and you present it that way, in objective, external terms. You do this in a single paragraph. It does not need to be complicated.

Here is a simple example:

The tiger dropped out of the tree and sprang toward Jack.

Note the key points here. This is objective. We present the Motivation as it would be shown by a videocamera. Nothing here indicates that we are in Jack's point of view. That comes next, but in the Motivation we keep it simple and sharp and clean.

The Reaction is internal and subjective, and you present it that way, exactly as your POV character would experience it -- from the inside. This is your chance to make your reader be your POV character. To repeat myself, this must happen in its own paragraph (or sequence of paragraphs). If you leave it in the same paragraph as the Motivation, then you risk whip-sawing the reader. Which no reader enjoys.

The Reaction is more complex than the Motivation. The reason is that it is internal, and internal processes happen on different time-scales. When you see a tiger, in the first milliseconds, you only have time for one thing -- fear. Within a few tenths of a second, you have time to react on instinct, but that is all it will be -- instinct, reflex. But shortly after that first reflexive reaction, you will also have time to react rationally, to act, to think, to speak. You must present the full complex of your character's reactions in this order, from fastest time-scale to slowest. If you put them out of order, then things just don't feel right. You destroy the illusion of reality. And your reader won't keep reading because your writing is "not realistic." Even if you got all your facts right.

Here is a simple example:

A bolt of raw adrenaline shot through Jack's veins. He jerked his rifle to his shoulder, sighted on the tiger's heart, and squeezed the trigger. "Die, you bastard!"

Now let's analyze this. Note the three parts of the Reaction:

Feeling: "A bolt of raw adrenaline shot through Jack's veins." You show this first, because it happens almost instantly.

Reflex: "He jerked his rifle to his shoulder . . ." You show this second, as a result of the fear. An instinctive result that requires no conscious thought.

Rational Action and Speech: ". . . sighted on the tiger's heart, and squeezed the trigger. 'Die, you bastard!'" You put this last, when Jack has had time to think and act in a rational way. He pulls the trigger, a rational response to the danger. He speaks, a rational expression of his intense emotional reaction.

It is legitimate to leave out one or two of these three parts. (You can't leave out all three or you have no Reaction.) But there is one critical rule to follow in leaving parts out: Whatever parts you keep in must be in the correct order. If there is a Feeling, it must come first. If there is a Reflex, it must never come before a Feeling. If there is some Rational Action, it must always come last. This is simple and obvious and if you follow this rule, your Reactions will be perfectly structured time after time.

And after the Reaction comes . . . another Motivation. This is the key. You can't afford to write one perfect MRU and then be happy. You've got to write another and another and another. The Reaction you just wrote will lead to some new Motivation that is again external and objective and which you will write in its own paragraph. Just to continue the example we've created so far:

The bullet grazed the tiger's left shoulder. Blood squirted out of the jagged wound. The tiger roared and staggered, then leaped in the air straight at Jack's throat.

Note that the Motivation can be complex or it can be simple. The only requirement is that it be external and objective, something that not only Jack can see and hear and feel but which any other observer could also see and hear and feel, if they were there.

The important thing is to keep the alternating pattern. You write a Motivation and then a Reaction and then another Motivation and then another Reaction. When you run out of Motivations or Reactions, your Scene or Sequel is over. Don't run out too soon. Don't drag on too long.

Write each Scene and Sequel as a sequence of MRUs. Any part of your Scene or Sequel which is not an MRU must go. Cut it ruthlessly. Show no mercy. You can not afford charity for a single sentence that is not pulling its weight. And the only parts of your scene that pull their weight are the MRUs. All else is fluff.

About Those Pesky Rules

You may be feeling that it's impossible to write your scenes following these rules. Doing so causes you to freeze. You stare blindly at the computer screen, afraid to move a muscle for fear of breaking a Rule. Oh dear, you've got yourself a case of writer's block. That's bad. Now let me tell you the final secret for writing the perfect scene.

Forget all these rules. That's right, ignore the varmints. Just write your chapter in your usual way, putting down any old words you want, in any old way you feel like. There, that feels better, doesn't it? You are creating, and that's good. Creation is constructing a story from nothing. It's hard work, it's fun, it's exciting, it's unstructured. It's imperfect. Do it without regard for the rules.

When you have finished creating, set it aside for awhile. You will later need to edit it, but now is not the time. Do something else. Write another scene. Go bowling. Spend time with those annoying people who live in your house. Remember them? Your family and friends? Do something that is Not Writing.

Later on, when you are ready, come back and read your Great Piece of Writing. It will have many nice points to it, but it will not be perfectly structured. Now you are ready to edit it and impose perfect structure on it. This is a different process than Creation. This is Analysis, and it is the opposite of Creation. Analysis is destruction. You must now take it apart and put it back together.

Analyze the scene you have written. Is it a Scene or a Sequel? Or neither? If it is neither, then you must find a way to make it one or the other or you must throw it away. If it is a Scene, verify that it has a Goal, a Conflict, and a Disaster. Identify them each in a one-sentence summary. Likewise, if it's a Sequel, verify that it has a Reaction, a Dilemma, and a Decision. Identify each of these in a one-sentence summary. If you can't put the scene into one of these two structures, then throw the scene away as the worthless piece of drivel that it is. You may someday find a use for it as a sonnet or a limerick or a technical manual, but it is not fiction and there is no way to make it fiction, so get rid of it.

Now that you know what your scene is, either Scene or Sequel, rewrite it MRU by MRU. Make sure every Motivation is separated from every Reaction by a paragraph break. It is okay to have multiple paragraphs for a single Motivation or a single Reaction. It is a capital crime to mix them in a single paragraph. When they are separated correctly, you may find you have extra parts that are neither Motivation nor Reaction. Throw them away, no matter how beautiful or clever they are. They are not fiction and you are writing fiction.

Examine each Motivation and make sure that it is entirely objective and external. Show no mercy. You cannot afford mercy on anything that poisons your fiction. Kill it or it will kill you.

Now identify the elements of each Reaction and make sure they are as subjective and internal as possible. Present them as nearly as you can from inside the skin of your POV character. Make sure they are in the correct order, with Feelings first, then Reflexive Actions, and finally Rational Actions and Speech. Again, eliminate everything else, even brilliant insights that would surely get you a Nobel peace prize. Brilliant insights are very fine, but if they aren't fiction, they don't belong in your fiction. If you can contrive to rearrange such a thing to be in a correct fictional pattern, then fine. Keep it. Otherwise, slit its vile throat and throw the carcass to the wolves. You are a novelist, and that's what novelists do.

When you reach the end of the scene, whether it is a Scene or a Sequel, check to make sure that everything is correctly placed in an MRU and all carcasses are thrown out. Feel free to edit the scene for style, clarity, wit, spelling, grammar, and any other thing you know how to do. When you are done, pat yourself on the back.

You have written a perfect scene. All is well in your world. You are done with this scene.

Now go do it again and again until you finish your book.

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Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 11,000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>. Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course on How To Publish a Novel.



Superhuman by Michael Carroll

Reviewed by Richmond A. Clements



If you've read the New Heroes series by Michael Carroll, you'll know what I mean when I say the ending leaves the reader desperate for more. The adventures of the teenage superheroes in the three volumes of the New Heroes, 'The Quantum Prophecy', 'Sakkara' and 'Absolute Power' are astonishingly exciting and paced at a level guaranteed to leave you feeling breathless.

Thank heavens then, for this short story collection. A few of these, 'Pressure', 'The Offer' and 'What I did on My Summer Holidays', have already seen the light of day on Carroll's website, but the rest of the stories on show in this volume are brand new.

What comes across throughout the volume is the depth of the author's vision. He's obviously thought long and hard about every facet of the universe he has created here, and this is no more obvious as in stories like 'What I Did...' and the thought provoking 'One Million'.

In 'What I Did...' Carroll does something he's very good at and takes what is a cliché, then flips it round into something original. You know that bit in Superman 2 when they're all fighting in Times Square? It's like that, only instead of focusing on the guys throwing the bus; we see it from the perspective of one of the folks on board.

Other stories here, like 'The Offer' provide further depth to characters readers of the trilogy will already be familiar with, though I don't want to talk too much about them. Actually, that's not true- I desperately want to do just that- but such would be the spoilers I better not!

I could go on- listing the stories in the volume and telling you exactly why they are worth your time, so what say we take it as read that they all are?

My favourite feature of any Stephen King short story collection is the bit at the end where he writes a brief note about the genesis of the story, so the fan boy in me was pleased to see the same thing here. In addition to this fascinating glimpse into the writer's mind, there is also a 'deleted scene' from one of the New Heroes books.

But I'm sure you're thinking: will these stories work if I've never read the novels? I think they will, yes. There are revelations here that will be missed if this is your first foray into the world of the New Heroes, but the flip-side is that when you do read the novels (and if you read this I assure you that you will want to) you'll enjoy these moments in reverse, as it were.

This is a superb collection. An essential addition to the collection of anyone who has enjoyed the novels, and well worth a look for anyone who enjoys intelligent sci-fi and superheroics.

Please visit <http://www.iol.ie/~carrollm/qp/coll1.htm> for further details on Superhuman.



TAXI

by Wayne Summers

As the plane touched down and coasted along the runway Sean McManus looked out into the night with brown eyes that were puffy and red from lack of sleep. After such a gruelling business trip it sure felt good to be home again. Already he could feel the tension draining from his muscles.

After collecting his luggage he walked through the throngs of people in the arrivals lounge and out into the cool night air, and while everyone was kissing their loved ones hello and hugging, he slipped into a taxi and was soon on his way home.

His apartment smelt stale after being locked up for six weeks, but there was nothing like being surrounded by his own things. He kicked the front door shut, dropped his two suitcases and then began to undress as he walked in the direction of his bedroom. By the time he reached his bed he was naked, though he somehow managed to struggle into his pyjamas before flopping onto the mattress where he waited for sleep to come and claim him.

Later, in the early hours of the morning, he was awoken by a strong breeze. It wasn't the breeze that gently lured him from his dreams, but the semi-conscious realisation that there was no possible way for a breeze to enter his bedroom. But something even stranger was happening. He could feel his hair being blown about as though he were outside on a blustery day.

His eyes sprang open, alert. He sat up. The night surrounded him like a blanket, though it was a blanket that didn't keep the chill from his bones. Below him were the twin white lines of an open highway and up ahead, piercing the pitch-darkness, he could see the headlights of a vehicle that was spearing through the night towards him. They were getting larger and brighter until he had to squint or go blind. He raised an arm to further protect his eyes as the vehicle passed below him with a force that rattled his bones and sucked him onto it.

He opened his eyes and saw that the vehicle was a New York cab. Since the vehicle was missing its roof he could see the yellow paint of the bonnet and the meter in the front. How it was flying was beyond him, but it was moving at such a great speed that the g-force made it impossible for him to crane his neck to see who was flying the craft.

Suddenly there was an almighty flash of white light. He shut his eyes tight though he could feel the heat of the light on his face like warm, golden honey. When he opened them again he noticed that he was no longer in the taxi, but reclining on a padded chair surrounded by the cold, silver-grey metallic walls of what appeared to be a spaceship. In front of him he could see a panel of buttons and flashing lights, and an empty navigator's chair. Hardly able to believe his eyes he went to stand up.

"Stay seated," said a voice inside his head. He looked behind him to see who had spoken yet all he saw was an empty space. Had he imagined it?

"You may now stand," said the voice. "Atmospheric adjustment is complete."

Sean lifted himself off the chair and knowing that he was still alone he looked for something to distract him. He saw a window. That would do. He walked over to it and looked out. At first he saw an endless carpet of stars but when he looked down he saw something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

Below him was a burnt out world whose landforms vaguely reminded him of Earth. The seas were still a vibrant, deep blue and he could even see the white foam of waves crashing onto beaches around Australia and continental Asia, but the land looked scorched and devastated, devoid of life. The ice caps had disappeared and many coastlines had been greatly

altered. The Pacific, once dotted with thousands of islands and atolls, was now a watery expanse interrupted by only a few remaining peaks.

Sean could hardly comprehend the scale of devastation. What cataclysmic force had brought about such destruction? And what had happened to all the people? And the animals?

It was as this thought was evaporating that he noticed an immense structure just to one side of the craft he was in, hovering several miles above the surface of the planet. It was a metallic silver colour which glistened as the rays of the sun hit it. In appearance it resembled a giant children's top, though more angular like two stepped pyramids that had been joined at their base, each level getting progressively smaller from the base outwards. A wide platform ringed the centre of the structure and several large doors opened onto it. He assumed that the platform was a landing area for smaller craft and that the doors led to docking bays and hangars.

The entire structure was covered in hundreds of windows, all neatly arranged in rows, each in line with the windows above and below it and level with those next to it. As his vision became clearer he could see tiny figures moving about inside the craft, though he couldn't make out what they looked like. A large rod seemed to pierce the whole structure through the centre, sticking out into space at both ends.

Then he noticed that in the distance, almost at the horizon, there was another of the structures.

"Amazed?" said the voice.

Sean almost ignored it this time but something made him turn around.

Three alien beings stood directly behind him. Although the one in the middle was taller than the other two, they were alike in every other detail. All three were grey, with large heads and large, almond-shaped eyes. Their tiny mouths and noses looked impractical and their thin, wiry bodies looked incapable of supporting such a huge head. He stepped back against the window, staring in wide-eyed silence as they stared back at him.

"Where am I?" he was about to ask.

"This is your world," replied the tall alien telepathically.

"I don't understand," he wanted to say, though the alien explained before his mouth had formed the first word.

"We have bought you two hundred years into your planet's future," said the tall alien. "Yours is a dead world, destroyed by nuclear war."

"So..." Sean began.

"Don't use your voice," said the alien. "You don't need it."

Sean apologised. "It's difficult not to speak when you are so used to it."

The aliens nodded.

"Only two hundred years?"

"Yes," the tall alien replied.

Sean looked again at the lifeless planet and shook his head.

"We just had to do it, didn't we?"

The three aliens looked at each other, their faces expressionless and devoid of any emotion. The taller being stepped forward.

"We have something to show you," it said. "It will explain your presence here."

Sean turned so that he was facing them again, still wary and on guard.

"Haven't you shown me enough?"

The tall alien ignored the comment.

“This is something that will give you hope.”

The alien turned and the other two motioned for Sean to follow. They moved in silence across the room and into a corridor. Sean could hear a gentle humming sound, gradually growing in intensity, yet even at its loudest it was no more than a vague sound in the background. The ship had begun moving, passing one space station and then another. Sean was awestruck at the sheer size of the floating cities and the thousands of alien beings he could see inside them. Then as they passed the second space city, they began to slow down. The taller alien invited Sean to look once more through the window.

“What do you see?” it asked.

At first he could see no more than the blackened landscape of what had once been the United States and Mexico, but then as he continued to look he noticed a slight reflection in the half-light of a new dawn. As the planet slowly turned and the sun’s light burst over the horizon, he saw a massive dome spanning most of the southern part of the continent and beneath it a luxuriously green oasis.

He turned to his alien guides.

“Terraforming,” they replied in answer to his unasked question.

“It is just a beginning. From one square kilometre at the very tip of your South America we have managed to bring most of the continent back to life.”

Sean listened intently as the alien continued.

“The dome is essential. The earth’s atmosphere was damaged before the war. After the war it was lethal. The dome encloses a fully functioning atmosphere that generates rain and maintains a healthy supply of oxygen.”

Sean shook his head in amazement. Once more he looked down at the miniature world beneath the dome.

“Of course you can’t see the inhabitants from here,” said the tall alien. “But they are down there.”

“Survivors?” asked Sean.

“No. Immigrants from your time.”

“You mean you’ve kidnapped them? I’ve heard all about alien abductions and the weird experiments you do,” Sean said, his thoughts tinged with a tone that was slightly defensive.

“We only take those who have the ability to understand what we are doing and those who support peaceful co-existence. Our research is very thorough.”

“I hope you’re not thinking of putting me down there. I like my life just the way it is.”

For the first time since his abduction Sean sensed a sinister undercurrent running through the unfolding events.

“Certainly not. We don’t send people against their will, but we would like to give you the opportunity to experience life in the dome for a day or two.”

Sean felt his body flood with adrenalin.

“And what if I don’t want to?” he snapped back. “What if I resent the fact that you’ve plucked me from my life to bring me here? Bloody arrogant if you ask me! And anyway, why did you bring me here?”

“At first there was no reason. You were chosen randomly but showed yourself to be an honest, hard-working member of your society. You care about your fellow humans and that is all the reason we needed to choose you.”

“Weapons aside from those that can be made from rocks and wood and leather for hunting are forbidden. All metallic elements have been removed from the soil since it was the weapons your world made from these elements that destroyed you. We will not allow that to happen a second time.”

“A spear can kill as surely as a bomb,” Sean retorted.

“True,” replied the tall alien. “But the inhabitants are controlled from killing their own by the telepathic hive.”

For a moment Sean didn't understand what the alien meant and then it dawned on him.

“The space stations!”

“Yes; situated out of sight from those below but near enough to monitor them.”

“But why?” asked Sean. “If you have taken so much trouble to build a new world, why control everyone in it?”

The tall alien suggested they go for a walk and with its long willowy arm around Sean's shoulders they headed away from the window and towards the heart of the ship. The two shorter aliens walked a discreet distance behind, although Sean could not see any reason for them to be there at all; unless they were some kind of body guard.

“I should not have used the word ‘controlled’,” said the tall alien. “We don't control, but monitor. We can hardly afford to make any errors. We have been watching your world with some interest for many hundreds of years and it took us by surprise at how quickly you have managed to destroy yourselves.”

Sean couldn't disagree. He came from a violent time, a time where terrorism and greed were rampant. The selfish desires of the individual came before the good of the whole. Governments and multi-national companies betrayed the common man to put dollars into the pockets of themselves and their shareholders. When he looked at it in that light even he was frightened, but it was his world and everyone he loved was there.

The tall alien continued.

“We have come from a time beyond yours to salvage what we can. It is not only to save your kind, but all the other species caught up in the wave of human destruction – the plants and animals. Eventually we will have terraformed the whole planet, though we can only bring back a handful of your species.”

“But don't they miss their old life? Their family and friends?” asked Sean.

“They have no memory of anything but their new world and the people in it. Memories can be painful and so we erase them.”

At that moment they entered a large, light-filled room. On the wall opposite them was a row of five semi-circular alcoves each with a step in front. On either side of the alcoves was a long, narrow groove, about an inch from the edge, and a bank of lights and switches. Aside from this the room was empty. The walls were the same polished metal as the rest of the ship, but every two metres or so there was a mirrored panel set into the wall. It was in one of these panels that Sean saw something that made his blood run cold.

He couldn't help but notice his own reflection as they passed the first panel. He looked a bit dishevelled, his brown hair, tinged with grey at the side, looked unkempt, but apart from that he was looking remarkably well considering his ordeal. But what shocked him was the reflection of his tall host. Gone was the large head, the willowy body and the grey skin, and in its place was something much more horrific.

The alien was in fact a crayfish-like creature with a hard, spiny outer shell and elongated head with jointed antennae and beady black eyes which stood on stalks. It was a reddish-orange colour and had many highly dextrous, multi-jointed limbs that sprouted from thick joints along its side.

Sean suddenly felt as though there were a great pressure on his chest and it became difficult to breathe. He stumbled and almost fell, and he could feel his face flush red.

“I understand,” said the tall alien. “So you have seen my true form and the form of all my kind. I apologise for the deception. Our intentions were good, please don't misunderstand. We simply wanted to avoid causing a reaction such as the one you just had.”

“But how...?” Sean began.

“Telepathy,” the alien explained matter-of-factly. “The illusion was just that, an image we sent to your brain. An image we knew you could relate to.”

Sean furrowed his brow. He began to absent-mindedly chew the skin on the inside of his cheek. The muscles in his neck tightened and a small throb developed in his right temple. A wave of panic flooded his body then abated. A sense of wariness replaced it.

“Along the wall you can see our transmat cubicles. This is how you will be transported to the surface of the planet.”

“Wait a minute!” Sean protested. “I didn’t agree to be a part of your little experiment. In fact, I want you to take me back to where you found me.”

Sean looked the alien defiantly in the eye.

“Will you agree to at least visit the surface?” it asked. “Surely there can be no harm in that. If you like what you see, you can stay and if you don’t, we can take you home.”

Sean eyed him distrustfully, though he could not deny his interest had been piqued.

“How can I contact you if I want to come back? And I’m not saying that I’ll go.”

“How are you communicating with us now?” replied the alien.

As they continued negotiating, the aliens subtly manoeuvred their unsuspecting visitor ever closer to the transmat cubicles, taking small steps towards him, forcing him to take small steps back.

“So here we are,” the tall alien announced. “The transmat cubicle. Now if you would just step inside we can transport you down.”

“I haven’t said I’ll go yet,” Sean reminded them harshly.

His hosts stood for a minute and looked at him. What were they thinking? It was difficult to gauge. Sean was beginning to feel very uncomfortable. Then the tall alien spoke.

“Imagine that you had the chance of a lifetime and passed it up. Imagine knowing you could have glimpsed a whole new world where your species could live in peace and harmony for evermore but you didn’t. Imagine passing up an experience like that.”

Sean reflected on what the alien had said. He knew they could hear his every thought, but he was beginning to care less and less. He had the distinct feeling that they were going to do whatever they wanted anyway.

“All right, I’ll do it,” he agreed, choosing to jump rather than be pushed. “But on the condition that it is only for a day. I want to be taken out of there tomorrow.”

“It is agreed then,” said the tall alien stepping forward. “Let’s not waste any more time. Step into the cubicle and we will begin transportation.”

Only with great trepidation did Sean do as he was instructed and step into the cubicle, turning to face the aliens once inside.

“Aren’t you afraid that I’ll tell them all about you?”

The tall alien approached the cubicle and stopped just short of the step in front of it.

“You do eventually want to get back to your own time, don’t you?” it said as a curved glass door slid around the front of the cubicle. “Besides, you won’t have any memory of our ship nor of us.”

“How will I remember to contact you then?” Sean screamed as the door locked into place. But it was useless. The cubicle was sound-proof and the tall alien had initiated transmission.

Suddenly bright light filled the small space which enclosed Sean and he felt a tingling sensation cover his body like raindrops. He felt faint and as the tingling sensation grew he lost consciousness. The last thing he remembered was the feeling that he was dissolving into a million tiny particles.

When he woke up he was lying naked on a large, moss-covered rock by a running stream and wondering how he had come to be there. Then he heard a voice. A female voice.

“Hello over there,” she called.

He looked up and saw a girl standing on the rock ledge above him. She looked to be about twenty-five and was dressed in finely trimmed animal skins. Her long, dark brown hair was adorned with a garland of tropical flowers.

“Hello,” he called back, standing. “Where am I?”

“You must have wandered away from the village and hurt yourself. Where are your skins?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Sean replied, noticing for the first time that he was naked. “I must have lost them.”

The girl used the smooth, flat rocks descending from the top of the rise as steps, jumping from level to another until she had reached the bottom.

“Never mind,” she said as she walked towards him, “we’ll get you some more. But you’d better hurry. It’s nearly time to eat.”

Sean wondered why he had no recollection of the village, of his skins or of this strange world. Yet it didn’t seem entirely unfamiliar.

“What’s your name?” asked the girl, flicking her shiny, long hair over her shoulder and smiling at him. “Mine is Cassandra. Call me Sandy.”

“Sean,” he answered.

Sandy led him through the thick jungle undergrowth, where brightly coloured macaws squawked in the canopy and butterflies, just as brightly coloured, fluttered about them. Sean bombarded her with a million and one questions and she did her best to answer them, although she had some questions of her own. In fact so engrossed in their question and answer session were they that they didn’t realise they had reached the village until Sean nearly walked into one of the huts. Sandy giggled.

“You have to be more careful,” she warned him. “It pays to keep your eyes open in the jungle.”

“You need to do some weeding,” Sean joked. “You can’t see the huts for the trees.”

“It was planned that way,” Sandy replied missing his attempt at humour. “We wanted to be part of the jungle, not separate from it.”

They walked further into the village, their arrival hardly raising an eyebrow. Sandy greeted everyone she met and everyone had a kind word for her in return.

“This is my hut,” Sandy said suddenly as she lifted the leather flap that hid the door. “Would you like to come in or do you have work to do?”

Sean furrowed his brow.

“I don’t think I have anything to do. Although I suppose I’ll have to find my hut. I seem to have forgotten where it is.”

Sandy didn’t think there was unusual about that.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “It’s happened to all of us.”

Sean found that difficult to believe but it was nice of her to say it.

“Well I’d better go and look for it then,” Sean smiled. “Maybe I can come by later.”

“Any time,” Sandy replied. “And try not to get lost again.”

Sean noticed that the villagers were from different racial backgrounds, although everyone wore their skins in the same way, and many were naked, which made him feel better. Children chased each other around the huts and trees playing Catch while their mothers prepared lunch, which consisted of great platters of fruit and vegetables, and banana leaves piled high with barbequed meat and grilled fish. Other women were preparing hides on rectangular frames made of wood, stretching them so they could dry in the warm sun. He didn't see many men and assumed they were out in the jungle hunting.

Finally he came to the edge of the village and a tree with branches that spread out for several metres in every direction. Beneath the cover of the tree stood a hut that he instinctively knew was his. He pulled aside the rough fabric which hung across the door and entered. It was dim inside and smelt musty. There was a straw mat with a collection of finely woven blankets on top and a small stool. It was simple but there was no need for any other possessions.

He looked out through one of the windows and sighed. He'd never felt so content in his life. Why was this place so new to him when it was obvious he belonged here? These were his people, friendly and happy with their lives. He looked up into the branches of the tree and saw a group of spider monkeys eating fruit; the peel and seeds dropping with a dull thud onto the dry grass of his roof and the soft ground below. Next to his window was a bush with beautiful pink and white flowers that gave off a delicate perfume. He breathed the scent in and closed his eyes. This was indeed Paradise.

With an overwhelming desire to explore, Sean left his hut and walked into the jungle. The soft mist which filtered down from the voluminous clouds hanging in the air evaporated upon contact with his skin, tickling him and feeling like a thousand tiny lips kissing him. There was life all around him. No signs of death. The moist earth beneath his feet and the gentle caress of the jungle foliage as he walked through it seemed to speak to him, whispering age-old secrets and making him feel a part of everything. It seemed that for the first time in his life he was truly alive.

He continued walking, making his way through the jungle towards an unknown destination and without the slightest concern about becoming lost. It was all part of the adventure. He could easily sleep on a carpet of moss and there was food all around him. The trees were bursting with fruit and nuts, and there were fish in the streams.

After trekking for two hours Sean came to a part of the jungle that seemed to be denser than it had been previously. As he approached the thicket, however, he noticed that it wasn't the jungle that had become thicker. There seemed to be a wall behind the screen of tree trunks and bushes. He walked towards it, carefully stepping through the vines and branches in his path until he got close enough to see that it wasn't a wall but a series of great steps which rose high into the jungle canopy.

Filled with a sudden and unrelenting curiosity he clambered onto the first tier and looked around him. Several smaller trees had taken root amongst the leaf litter and moss which had accumulated on the blackened stone. So precarious was their existence that Sean wondered how they had survived long enough to grow so tall. He pushed his way through the rubber-trunked saplings and the vines which grew in a tangled mess between them until, to his delight, he came across a set of smaller, more manageable steps. These made ascending the immense stone structure far easier and he was able to move more quickly, climbing higher until the vegetation started thinning out and he could finally see where he was.

It appeared to be some kind of stepped pyramid. He recognised it but didn't know where he recognised it from. The thought plagued him as he continued to climb. On and on he pushed himself. Halfway up he began puffing and panting. Sweat dripped from every pore until his naked body was bathed in rivers of perspiration snaking their way to his feet.

It was a small personal triumph when he finally made it through the cloud vapour to the top and even though he was panting and close to passing out he could still appreciate the breathtaking panorama surrounding him on every side. It was as if he'd ascended into Heaven itself and from his vantage point he was able to see everything in creation. Except for the west, where there was a range of mountains clad in cloud, the jungle reached to the far horizons in every direction. He smiled contentedly to himself then laughed. For a brief moment in time he was king of the world and somewhere out there under the cover of the jungle canopy were his people and his village.

The journey down was not as easy as the journey up. His legs began to ache and just a few metres from the top he began to cough because his throat was so dry. He hadn't had a drink in a few hours and his body was losing moisture rapidly through sweat. Still he persevered. He just had to take his time. There was a small stream not far from the base of the great pyramid and he could drink his fill when he got to the bottom.

He descended carefully, stopping when his throat became so dry that he coughed until he gagged. But soon his throat was not just dry, but raw. He was three quarters of the way down when an unexpected coughing fit made him lose his balance. His foot slipped and his ankle twisted. Suddenly his whole body seemed airborne and he was falling freely through the air. He hit the corner of one tier, his side crashing into it with such force that he had bounced off it and hit the tier below before the pain registered. The next tier spun him over and he hit the tier below that with the back of his head. There was an explosion of stars before his eyes before darkness erased them. The last thing he remembered before passing out was the feeling of falling once more through the air.

It was dark when he came to. The pain didn't seem to have set in yet. It was darker than he imagined the jungle would be at night and there were no stars and no moon. This struck him as being very odd. Then came the realisation that something was awry. Over where the pyramid had been there appeared to be the outline of a window. He sat up and in doing so realised that he wasn't on the floor of the jungle but on something soft, with blankets and a pillow. He leaned over and just as he suspected there was a lamp. He turned it on and found that he was in his own bedroom.

He rolled out of bed and looked at the bedside clock. 6:45. It would soon be light outside. He wandered over to the window and lifted it open. Leaning out over the sill he looked at the city below him. Had it all been a dream? It couldn't have been. It had been too real, too wonderful.

A police siren on Wellington Street tore him from his reminiscences. He frowned. Such a rude awakening. He looked at the horizon and saw that the sun was about to make a grand entrance. The pale light of a new dawn promised a new day, but what would that day hold? More of the same? How he wished the dream had been real. Life in the jungle may have been simple but in the few hours he'd experienced it he'd felt only utter contentment.

The phone rang.

“Who was ringing at this hour?” he thought.

He ignored it.

He sighed and told himself to snap out of it. It had just been a dream, a wonderfully vivid dream unlike any he'd ever had before, but a dream nevertheless. Then as sunlight began to fill his room he noticed that part of the wall seemed to glint then whole sections of it turned a metallic silver-grey colour. He wasn't back in his bedroom at all. He was on the alien spaceship.

“We must apologise,” said the tall alien. “We wanted to create that illusion to be sure of what was in your heart.”

Sean spun around as the trio of grey aliens moved cautiously towards him, their eyes focused on him, gauging his reaction.

“What are you talking about?” he snapped.

“Remember, you don't have to vocalise. Use your thoughts,” said the alien voice inside his head.

“I don't care about all that,” he growled. “I'll talk if I bloody well want to talk. What the Hell are you doing to me? You trying to drive me crazy?”

Sean brought his hands up to his temples and rubbed them.

“You are, aren't you? I'm going mad. I don't know what's real and what's not!”

The tall alien took Sean's hand between his own. It felt clammy and unnatural and his first instinct was to pull away. But he didn't.

“Don't torture yourself. The choice is easy. Either you go back to your old life or you return to the jungle.”

Sean glared at the aliens. His nostrils flared as he tried to force back the torrent of anger that was building within him.

“So let me get this straight. You take me from my life and transplant me on some alien world...”

“It is your world,” interrupted the tall alien.

“It’s alien to me!” Sean exploded. “And now you want me to choose? Why didn’t you just leave me in the jungle, or even better, leave me period?!”

“Look inside your soul,” said the tall alien, seeming to have missed the point. “What is it telling you? It knows the answer even if you don’t.”

Sean began to pace up and down, into the passageway and then back into the room. Every now and again he looked at the grey faces of his hosts, resenting them for putting him in this position, but at the same time visions of his world flashed before his mind’s eye. War, terrorism, taxes, poverty, corruption, traffic jams, price rises, bills.

“The jungle,” he said finally.

The aliens smiled, indicated only by the slightest extension of their tiny mouths.

“We thought so,” said the tall alien. “Each and every person in that dome replied the same way when it was their turn. And you will soon be joined by others, though you won’t know where they have come from. You will think of them as fellow villagers. When we have reclaimed more of the poisoned Earth we shall establish new colonies.”

Sean listened to the tall alien but grew impatient to return to the jungle, not because he was in any particular hurry to get there, but because he was afraid he might change his mind and he didn’t want to do that.

As they moved from one room to another through a series of passageways towards the transmit room, Sean had a couple of things on his mind that he wanted cleared up before he left their ship forever.

“If you are *kidnapping*,” he used the word deliberately, “people from my time and bringing them back here, who will be left to fight the war that destroys the planet?”

“There are billions of people on your planet. We are transplanting only a few thousand for the sake of not arousing too much suspicion. One human taken here and there is soon forgotten by all but those related to it. Those that remain will perish.”

Sean’s thoughts turned immediately to his family and friends. He would never see them again and he hadn’t even thought to say good bye. He hadn’t been allowed the opportunity.

“Your species has brought this destruction upon themselves,” the tall alien continued, hearing Sean’s thoughts and fearing they could sway him to change his mind. “However, your species also has great potential which will not be fulfilled if all of your kind is destroyed.”

“And remember, once you are on the surface of that planet you can longer come back.”

Sean gulped.

“Will I remember my old life? Or this ship?” he asked.

“No. You will only have your instincts and your language,” replied the alien.

“Then send me down. I don’t want to remember a thing.”

And he didn’t.

“There you are,” said Sandy as Sean opened his eyes. “What are you doing out here?”

Sean took a few seconds to orientate himself. He got up on one elbow and surveyed his surroundings. One thing was for sure, he certainly wasn’t at the pyramid. He was at the same place he had met Sandy yesterday.

“You seem to like this stretch of river,” she smiled. “I’m glad I had to come down for some water or you could have been washed downstream.”

Sean went to stand up but he felt dizzy.

“Careful,” gasped Sandy as Sean fell back to the ground.

She put her water jug down.

“Are you okay? How long have you been out here?”

“I don’t know,” Sean replied.

Sandy helped him to his feet.

“Will you be all right?” she asked.

Sean nodded. “I think so.”

Sandy picked up her water jug again and together they returned to the village. After saying goodbye to Sandy and thanking her for her help Sean returned to his hut. As it came into view a sense of relief overcame him though his attention was captured by something glinting in the thatch of the roof, like a reflection from the mid-afternoon sun on something metallic. It struck him as being odd since the hut was a wooden structure with a grass roof. He blinked and when he looked again it was gone. Then, in the darkest corner of his mind, he thought he remembered having seen something similar somewhere. It puzzled him.

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