

CONCEPT

Sci-fi e-zine

INSIDE:

Short Stories...

- Daniel 7 by Lee Gimenez
 - Daddy's World by Walter Jon Williams
- and many more! Plus...
- An exclusive interview with Marianne De Pierres
 - Writing Realistic Dialogue by Gary Reynolds





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Editorial

Welcome to the second issue of the Concept Sci-fi E-zine. Since the first issue back in July, I've been working hard on adding new content to the website and, of course, ready numerous e-zine submissions. I'm still moving steadily towards my goal of a site that embraces science fiction while providing writing resources and advice and giving new writers the opportunity to gain exposure for their work. Huraah for me!

In this issue, I've decided to continue my 'theme' of breaking the 'no reprints' rule for established authors. This issue includes a short, Nebula-winning story called 'Daddy's World' by Walter Jon Williams. Walter's book 'Voice of the Whirlwind' was one of the first 'serious' sci-fi books that I read, so I'm honoured that he has agreed to let me reprint his story.

And I'm also delighted to be able to include an interview with Marianne De Pierres conducted back in early August. Marianne's Parrish Plessis novels are some of the best modern post-cyberpunk novels I've come across in recent times. They're well worth a read if you haven't done so already.

Finally, I'd like to welcome Andrew Males to Concept Sci-fi. Following his publication of *Fatal Vision* in issue #1, Andrew will be writing regularly for Concept Sci-fi in his column *88 Miles Per Hour*.

As always if you have any suggestions or comments, please email feedback@conceptscifi.com. And if you'd like to subscribe and get future issues directly to your in-box for free, then please visit <http://www.conceptscifi.com/ezine.htm>. I hope that you enjoy reading issue #2.

Gary Reynolds.

Editor.

Artwork

Sam Shishekli at www.virtualgeneration.co.uk

Fiction

Lee Gimenez, Walter Jon Williams, Andrew Males, Susan Murray, Benjamin O' Neill, Michael Kechula

Non-fiction

Andrew Males, Gary Reynolds

Poetry

Aurelio Rico Lopez III

Special Thanks

Marianne De Pierres



Daniel 7

by Lee Gimenez

January, 2048

I pick up the Glock and take off the safety. The handgun feels cool to the touch. I aim and fire; the roar from the blasts echoes in the range. Dr. Krupp reels in the paper target and inspects it. Three perfect shots to the heart. He turns to me and smiles. “Daniel, you’re ready”

I grin back. “My mission can finally start.”

It all begins the next day.

The military jet flew at 60,000 feet, three miles above commercial flights. I look out the small window and see only a dark blue sky.

My name is Daniel 7 and I was “born” a year ago. If you saw me on the street you’d have trouble picking me out from the hundreds of other male androids walking around. We all look pretty much the same; it’s the programming that makes me superior. I’m six foot tall, slender, mid thirties in age with human looking features. Almost human. The eyes are never perfect.

“How does it feel to be on your first mission?” Dr. Krupp asks.

“Strange,” I say. “It’s what I’ve worked for all this time...yet...I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“You’re ready. I’ve programmed you perfectly.”

“But what about the problems with the series 6?”

He gives me a stern look. “Don’t worry. I fixed those problems. You series 7’s are the best droids money can buy. And the Pentagon is paying top dollar.”

I fidget in my leather seat.

Dr. Krupp hands me a thick envelope. On the outside it simply says, *Instructions* “You’ll find everything you need inside there. In Frankfurt you’ll meet your contact. If you run into any problems, they’ll provide local support.” He paused and took off his glasses. “Once you step off this plane, you’ll no longer be Nelson Robotics property. And you won’t be a Department of Defence employee. You’ll just be a reporter.”

“I understand,” I say. But I don’t really. Krupp has been the only father I have ever known, and odds are I won’t see him again. I feel like hugging him right now but I know androids don’t have emotions.

The plane touches down at Frankfurt airport, then taxis to a remote area away from the terminal. I grab my duffel and walk down the plane’s ramp. It’s snowing heavily.

A large black BMW pulls up and a door swings open. "Get in," a voice says from inside.

I get in the car and throw the bag in the back seat.

A woman is at the wheel. "I'm Erika," she says. "I'm with the BND, the German intelligence service."

I see her eyes are a dull grey, with no iris. An android, like me.

"I'm Daniel 7." I stare at her. She's stunningly beautiful, with shoulder length black hair and an hourglass figure. She's wearing a blue, form fitting jumpsuit. One of the newer sex droids, I guess.

She stares back. "Daniel, if we're gonna get along, let's get one thing clear up front. I don't do sex with androids."

I look out the wind shield. "What do you mean..."

"Look, I know what you're thinking. I'm a sex droid, but I'm only programmed for human contact. And anyway, the sex thing is to help my cover."

I look at her again. "Sure, no problem. Dr. Krupp told me you people would be the local support."

She frowns. "You Americans kill me. You fly in here and think we're your servants."

"No, no," I say. "I didn't mean to insult you..."

"I'm not losing any sleep over it," she says, laughing. As if droids needed sleep.

I see she's just playing with me and I start to relax. Maybe this mission won't be so bad after all. "Listen, I just have a job to do. I appreciate your help."

"I bet you do," she says, and winks at me.

We take the autobahn south toward Stuttgart, then east to Munich. The snow continues to fall, piling into deep mounds by the highway. At days' end we reach the Austrian border. The border police scan her ID chip and then mine; they wave us through. Erika drives another two hours, and we reach the outskirts of Vienna. We stop at a small inn several miles from the autobahn.

"You'll be staying here," she says, pointing to the hotel. "We've left an Audi parked in the lot. Here's the key."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

She smiles. "No. This isn't our mission. I'm just here in case you run into problems." She hands me a phone the size of a quarter. "If you need help, call me on this."

I put the phone in my pocket and grab my duffel. "It was good meeting you, Erika."

"You're awfully polite for an android reporter," she says.

She drives away and I wonder what the hell I'm doing here.

I check into the hotel and lay down on the soft mattress. I don't need sleep, but I power down my electronics to Rest mode. I close my eyes and think about Erika.

At 6am, my eyes snap open and I start to get ready for the day. My power level is a little low, so I jack into the wall and recharge. I open my duffel and pull out what I'll need for today. My CNN press credentials, cameras and sunglasses.

Outside, the snow continues to fall. I put on an overcoat and hat, although I'm not cold. I drive the Audi toward the fairgrounds outside Vienna. That's where the Prime Minister's speech will be later today. There's a checkpoint ahead and I slow down. Cars are lined up for miles. Finally, I approach the checkpoint.

"Geben Sie mir Ihre Papiere," one of the armed guards says. I recognize their brown uniforms.

I give him the CNN papers and he scans it with a wand. Satisfied, he nods then motions me out of the car.

"An American reporter," he says, then spits on the snowy ground. "We don't like your type around here."

The guards search the car, scan me and my equipment. "Gehen Sie voran," he growls.

"Danke," I answer and drive through the checkpoint.

I park the car and join the hordes of people walking toward the fairgrounds. Tens of thousands are already here. Even from this distance, I can see the huge banners by the stadium. *Das Viertel!* they say: The Fourth!

I go to the press area on the ground level of the stadium. The podium is 200 feet away, ringed by heavily armed guards and bomb sniffing dogs. Bullet proof glass surrounds the podium.

The stadium fills quickly, the crowd loud and rowdy. I see they wear the brown and red colours so popular in Austria now. The roar of the crowd grows; they chant "the fourth, the fourth" over and over again.

When Prime Minister Otto Eichmann reaches the podium, a pandemonium of noise breaks out. The cheering and clapping grows to a deafening crescendo.

"Our time has come," Eichmann says in German. He's a small man, but he has a booming voice. "The Fourth is here. Austria will no longer be part of the European Union. We will no longer be a lackey for American interests. Our new alliance is with Russia."

The crowd roars its approval. The press from all over the world is here and they record every image and sound.

I aim my camera at the podium and look through the viewfinder. I start, but then stop cold. I can't do this. It's wrong. But I feel the programming guide me, push me.

I aim the camera again, then squeeze the shutter three times.

The first hyper velocity bullet cracks the glass, the second one shatters it, the third one slams into Eichmann's chest. He topples backward, crumpling to the ground.

The crowd gasps. Then screaming, shouting, confusion.

I press the shutter release on my other camera and a huge plume of black smoke shoots up, diffusing over the stadium. Panic erupts in the crowd. Everyone is trying to run out, falling over each other because they can't see. I throw away my cameras, take off my hat and put on my sunglasses. Half blinded from the black smoke, I push and crawl my way out of the stadium.

I run toward my car, but see the security guards have locked down the parking lot. Along with thousands of others, I continue running away on foot.

Military jets and hover craft circle the fairgrounds, criss-crossing the overcast sky. I walk for hours, finally reaching a desolate area. The snow continues to fall heavily, sticking to the plastic skin of my face and hands. I brush it off and continue walking.

I find a deserted cabin by a small road. Pulling out my instructions, I read and re-read them again. They are very clear. In case of imminent capture, go to self destruct mode. I look at the small keypad on my wrist and start to dial in the code. The programming pushes me to finish. But I can't do it.

I pull the phone from my pocket and call Erika.

Two hours later, the black BMW pulls up and I get in.

"Did you have anything to do with Eichmann's assassination?" she asks.

"No, of course not. I was just recording the event."

She gives me a hard look, then stares straight ahead. "Eichmann was a madman, but there had to be a better way to handle this." She turns back to me. "The Austrian border and airports will be closed off. We'll have to wait it out at our embassy in Vienna."

We ride in silence the rest of the way.

The German Embassy is a historic looking building, much like the other structures in the city of Vienna. It's located on Stadiongasse Street, close to the Parliament building. Being a BND officer, Erika had her own office there.

They sat there now, just the two of them.

"So, Daniel, tell me about yourself. We've got plenty of time before we can head back home."

"There's not much to tell. My builder is Dr. Krupp. I'm one of Nelson Robotics' new series sevens."

She smiles. "I've heard a lot about the sevens. You're supposed to be the best in the world."

I stare at her. She's wearing a short, form fitting dress today.

"I've never had sex," I blurt out.

She laughs, then crosses her legs. "I'm not surprised."

"I mean, I have all the equipment. Dr. Krupp told me once that sex is overrated, that I didn't need it. But I find you very attractive"

"You're a strange android. You need to get your programming checked."

"I like you, Erika. I like you very much."

"We're just machines. We're not supposed to have emotions like that. But...I am curious about the sevens...and I guess...there's no reason machines can't have fun sometimes." She gets up and locks the door to her office.

She starts to unbutton her dress. It drops to the floor and she steps out of it. She comes up to me and starts to unfasten my belt.

"Here's lesson number one," she says and smiles.

A week later, the crisis in Austria has subsided, and the airports reopen. I catch a commercial flight from Vienna to Atlanta.

I rent a car in Atlanta and drive to the Nelson Robotics headquarters, located on the city's north side. The ten building complex is interspersed by lakes and parks.

Dr. Krupp greets me in his office with a big hug. "Great job, Daniel. The elimination went flawlessly. The Pentagon is extremely pleased. We'll even make a bonus on this one. I told you, you were ready."

I see Krupp is proud of me and that makes me feel good.

Krupp sits down behind his desk. "But, unfortunately, I have some bad news. I'm going to have to turn you off. You'll have to be dismantled."

"But...why...why?" I stammer.

"I'm sorry, but we can't have anything left that could tie the Eichmann thing back to us."

"But I did everything I was told to do."

"You're like a son to me, Daniel But, life is hard sometimes."

"I understand," I lie. "Could I go to the park outside for a few minutes? I'd just like to feel the sun and wind on my face for one last time."

He gives me a puzzled look. "Well, we do need to take care of this right away. But, I guess a few minutes won't do any harm. Anyway, you've earned it."

I shake his hand and walk out of his office.

I go outside, get in my rental car and drive away. I drive as fast as I can. I get on the highway and get out of Atlanta, away from my past. I don't know where to go. I have no instructions. But I want to live.

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Lee Gimenez is a writer of science fiction and speculative fiction; his stories have been published in numerous magazines in the U.S. and abroad.

Lee earned a BS degree in Design from Georgia Tech University, and an MBA degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University. During his career as a marketing manager, he worked for three Fortune 500 companies: Verizon, Tech Data and M&M Mars.

Visit Lee at his website, www.leegimenez.com



Area 51

by Aurelio Rico Lopez III

DO NOT CROSS THE YELLOW LINE

The sign says in large, bold letters,
The kind of letters that are
Bound to catch one's attention.

The electrified barrier,
Sensitive motion sensors,
And high-tech video cameras
Make such a sign unnecessary.

Two night guards
Stare at the specimen
Behind the glass
As if examining
A Van Gogh in a museum.

"Is that it?"

"Yep."

"Always thought they'd look bigger."

© Aurelio Rico Lopez III

*Aurelio Rico Lopez III is a self-diagnosed scribble junkie from Iloilo City, Philippines. His poems have appeared in various venues such as Mythic Delirium, Star*Line, Sybil's Garage, Black Petals, Steel Moon Publishing, Tales of the Talisman, Kaleidotrope, Electric Velocipede, Wanderings, and The Shantytown Anomaly. He is also the author of the chapbooks JOLTS and SHOCKS (Sam's Dot Publishing). You can reach him at thirdylopez2001@yahoo.com*



Ready or Not

by Andrew Males

It mocked me. Light flooded up from its bulb, bathing my face in red, before vanishing, then illuminating me again. A simple button with a simple job. The machine had done its checks and all was well; it was ready, and more than happy to tell me so. Me? I could do nothing more than stare at it, wires jangling from my left wrist as I steadied myself with my other hand. Once pressed, its only job would be to tell the rest of the machine that it had been activated. I, on the other hand, would change my life forever. I let out a small laugh. Life? Odds were it would give me a self-imposed death. Glory or death with one little press. It blinked on, needlessly reminding me it was my turn to act.

What was stopping me? Didn't I dream of this very moment, this precise point in time where the thing that had occupied my thoughts for every damn second I had been alive since the moment I'd had the idea, was within my reach, just inches away? The years of labour, the setbacks, that time where I'd just cried for days – all that had been conquered to be here, right now. The constant hum of the machine entered my ears between my rapid exhales. I'm sure it questioned me too, standing here like some bravado schoolboy in front of an experienced lover, frozen at the moment of truth. If I had the courage, teleportation was within my reach.

I could both smell and taste my own sweat as it cascaded over my lip as I continued staring at the red light. Did I hear a click? Is something wrong? I held my breath and listened hard. Maybe there's a problem. A malfunction. A small glitch that hasn't been able to tell the button. I should abort, re-check. Maybe come back tomorrow. Yes tomorrow, much better. I blew a gust of air out into the musty room and then bowed my head. Are you nuts? You get this far for what? To chicken out? To bottle it? Why will tomorrow be different? How many checks and fail-safes did you put in this damn machine? If the button flashes, everything is perfect. Did Neil Armstrong say, "You know what boys? It looks a little bit cold and scary out there, why don't you go first, Buzz?" History awaits; I just have to make the next step on my own.

My eyes haven't changed the focus of their attention in what feels like hours. Stupid, bloody button! You think you're superior? A simple switch with a bulb? Who are you to dare me? I banged my fist against the wall. Oh to hell with it. I've accomplished nothing but this. No family, save for my Dad, and even he wouldn't understand any of this. If it's death, then death it is. If it's glory, then glory is my reward, and history will welcome me into its open arms. I clenched every muscle in my entire body, raised my right hand high above my head, and made a noise that came from somewhere deep inside with tones I had never heard before. At the millisecond the annoyingly-square button illuminated red for the last time, I slammed my palm hard into its surface, sending a high-pitched buzz out from underneath and billions of instructions scattering throughout the now fully-activated machine. As I prised my hand from it and took in my last breath before the unknown, I smiled at the now steady green glow telling me disintegration was just moments away. Yeah, I'm ready.

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Andrew Males lives in south-east England and has a strong interest in most things sci-fi. He is currently training for the New York marathon in November, and is hoping for a breakthrough in teleportation technology to help him when he hits that dreaded wall.

Andrew has been published online at several places, including Every Day Fiction, Spineinglers and Bewildering Stories.



An interview with Marianne De Pierres

by Gary Reynolds

Tim Holman, Marianne De Pierres and Darren Nash at the *Dark Space* Launch



Can you begin by telling us a little about yourself and how you got into writing?

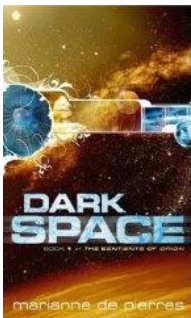
I grew up as the youngest child of farmers on a wheat and sheep property in Western Australia. To keep me occupied over the summer holidays my mum would buy a carton of books and meter them out to me. So my reading habit began young and just grew stronger. I probably spent more time mooning about in imaginary worlds than in the real world. That translated very early into writing stories.

I thought of myself as a writer from the age of eight or nine. Even then I loved adventure stories. Over the years the desire to be a writer stayed

with me until I was finally mature enough to set some goals. I was thirty four by then!

The Parrish Plessis novels have a definite cyberpunk feel to them, what do you think has happened to cyberpunk since the 80s?

I think it has evolved - only some readers/critics don't want it to do that, and some like to think that it died. But these sorts of things are so fluid in my opinion. Why try and tie them up in absolutes?



In your Sentients of Orion series you've made the move into "space opera". Why the change of sub-genre?

I'm not the kind of writer who will ever stay cemented in one sub-genre. I just don't see that as challenging. I'm fortunate to have a publisher (Darren Nash) who has supported that. However I can never see myself leaving the SFF world.

Did you have any concerns that writing the Sentients of Orion series might alienate your hardcore cyberpunk fans?

I did. And it did a little. But you really need to be honest about your writing. I know I'll be a better writer if I continue to try different things. Hopefully some readers will come with me for the ride - if I keep giving them entertaining stories.

Are we likely to see either Parrish or any of the other characters from that series in the future?

I hope so. She's such a powerful and exciting character to write that I would love to revisit that headspace. However, many variables affect that sort of decision, and not all purely creative.

I certainly have one more story to tell and that will entail the war between Viva and The Tert, and more importantly, Parrish's choices – the side she takes.

Can you describe your writing process. How do you go about planning, designing, writing and revising/editing your novels?

The more experience I gain as a writer the more I subscribe to the Stephen King theory that a story is something that you excavate – not plan and plot within an inch of its life. The creative muse is best – for me at least – when it is free to turn any corner. Writing series though, requires the writer to keep a number of balls in the air over long periods of time.

Plotting and planning prevent series from becoming loose and baggy monsters.

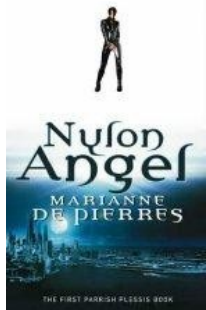
I always begin a series by writing a series synopsis. Then as I write each book I will write a synopsis for it before I start. These are quite brief – often no more than a page.

Once I begin to write I buy a brand new sketch pad which I use as my notebook. The notebook grows into an absolute mess of notes and questions. Yet somehow I can always find what I want when I look for it. I've thought about trying one of the various pieces of writing software, but plot solutions come best to me when I have a pen in my hand.

I write the novel through in a linear fashion. If I'm alternating chapter view points, sometimes I will stay with a character for a few chapters before coming back and resuming the other viewpoints.

The amount of revision/drafts is entirely dependent on how well the novel has come together. Usually a second draft for major plot issues and then lots and lots of word massaging.

Nylon Angel was your first published novel, how did you go about getting it published and how long did it take?



NA took me about two years to write. I got some positives when I first sent it out. Probably the most significant interest was from Garth Nix who was an agent at the time. He said that he liked it, but that it needed more work. Another year and a bit passed before I sent it out again. This time it went to Tara Wynne at Curtis Brown Australia (Garth had left to pursue his writing career by then). She decided to take a shot on it and sent it to Orbit. Tim Holman contacted us a while after and said all those things writers dream about hearing.

You've also written some shorter works of fiction, such as "Origins" and "The Cure". How do you approach shorter fiction compared to writing a novel?

With care. It takes me a long time to write a short story – up to a year, so I'm not very prolific. I also try to avoid commissioned short stories these days because I prefer them to spring from an idea that I've had 'involuntarily'. I have three published stories set on the same island that were inspired wholly and solely by Ballard's collection Vermillion Sands. I felt such strong emotions writing those stories and I don't think I would have had that experience if I'd been commissioned to write them. That's not to say it doesn't work for others.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently working on *Mirror Space*, Book Three of the Sentients of Orion series and then will move straight onto Book Four, which as yet is untitled.

Those are my priorities. However when I have time I have a couple of other projects that I tap away at. One is a contemporary paranormal suspense novel which is immensely entertaining to write (and I hope to read) and the other is an original film project (SF Noir). I have also recently finished a teen, dark fantasy which I hope will cause some 'commentary' when it sees print.

What can we expect to see from you beyond your current projects?

Long term, I really don't know but I am keen to work with artists from different media. Hybrid creativity attracts me.

[Watch my website space!](#)



Darkness to Darkness

by Ben O'Neill

I remember darkness. Not a simple, straight-forward absence of light, but rather a far deeper depth of black, possible only in complete ignorance of the very concept of light. Time, space, life itself held no meaning to me. The only thing differentiating now from the infinite period of nothingness before was a slowly burgeoning awareness of self. I hold no great store of memories from this period, no wealth of profound musings sparked in those first tangled moments of life. Adrift, my newly minted consciousness slowly began to center around a singular idea: growth. There was no true grasp of the notion, I was simply filled with a latent and uncontrollable need to become more than I was.

Quite suddenly my existence took on an entirely new dimension. My body, of its own volition, began to take this lofty new notion of growth and apply it. The tiny shell of my being slowly broke apart and spread outwards, and the darkness receded into a thousand shades of gray, blazing bright to my new-found senses. For the first time the world around me took on definition, but I must confess I scarcely noticed. Growth now consumed me.

From my first tiny, introspective spark of life, roots burst forth in all directions, burrowing mercilessly through whatever lay in their path. I reached both up and outwards, discovering in the dark soil around me the energy I needed to grow still more. Gradually as my expansion took on more focus, my progression to the sides began to slow, and all the energy my roots gathered went towards stretching my body ever upwards. I thickened while growing thinner, my base taking on girth while my upward motion was guided by little more than a slender shoot, driven by a desperate instinctual need to reach something, though I knew not what. Suddenly I reached my goal, and everything changed.

I find it ironic that, while I have since lived a full lifetime, the most profound moment I can ever recall is that first instant, as I broke the surface of my subterranean nursery. There was no graduated increase in illumination, no period for adjustment. One instant there was nothing but gray and grayer, and the next instant the world exploded in light and warmth and life. Nothing else has ever come close to the singular perfection of that sublime moment, as I first blossomed from the ground, and the dazzling brightness of the sun first blossomed within my senses.

What happened next was a stark contrast to that moment. It must first be explained that all plants have a natural, innate sense of their surroundings, though they neither see nor hear. My first instinctual act, after my initial jubilation upon achieving the surface faded, was to reach with this sense, to seek my own kind and inform them of my arrival. It was then that I felt the counterpoint to my earlier exultation. Hope swelled, followed quickly by a crashing wave of disappointment. I sensed life all around, indeed the ground abounded with it, but all alien to me. I felt no answering glow of awareness among the assorted greenery, save for a dim, fleeting flicker among the tallest and most ancient. The kinship I sought was nowhere to be found amid all this bustling flora. For long moments I lost all sense of purpose, adrift alone in this sea of foreign life. My disappointment eventually faded, however, set aside in the face of more pressing needs. I had little choice in the matter. I was a plant. Alone in radiant sunlight, I grew.

Ahh, sunlight. I quickly came to understand that there is nothing more important to all things green and growing than those wayward strands of golden light, and the brilliant orb which spawns them. Perhaps it would be most accurate to compare it to some all encompassing religion, for the sun was both our god and our provider. Our entire lives were spent striving ever skyward towards that unreachable golden globe, and we maimed and murdered mercilessly for its life giving attention. In its blazing glory we thrived, and on its callous whims we starved. Luckily for me, I seemed to be in good standing with this capricious god.

While I had no companionship beyond the mindless flora surrounding me, I was well situated, and with little competition for sunlight I quickly grew from a tiny sprout into a modest plant, sporting a tiny limb on either side. My limbs were almost perfectly symmetrical, with a few tiny budding leaves just starting to grow, and I must admit I was enormously

proud of them. Few plants of my tender age had limbs at all, let alone such splendid little leaves. Of course, beauty is a completely worthless trait for a non-flowering plant to possess, and can actually be quite detrimental; the prettier the plant, the more likely to be plucked by hungry teeth. In my innocence, I cared not a bit, and enjoyed the simple timeless pleasure of growing lazily in the sunshine, swaying in the wind; alive, vibrant, and terribly handsome. Such peace was not to last.

The free-moving intruder approached haphazardly, almost playfully, riding on its bizarre assortment of trembling limbs. This was hardly the first time I'd sensed such a creature, but this was by far the closest encounter, and it was coming closer still. Up until now, the free-movers and I had shared a mutually apathetic relationship; they didn't bother me, and I didn't do much of anything, which is a widely accepted and respected plant stratagem. Not so this encounter. The creature's intent was immediately obvious, and deadly dangerous. I felt its gaze single me out from all my other leafy counterparts in the clearing. I sensed my doom in those big, dopey eyes. It occurs to me now, long after the fact, one reason self awareness is completely wasted on a plant: while I could feel the approaching danger, could sense the evil, blunt teeth waiting to grind my various body parts into a delicious green paste, I could do exactly nothing to prevent it. The unwieldy animal gathered itself, charged violently towards me, stumbled, fell, and promptly forgot my existence as other greeneries appeared closer to mouth. After a time another of its kind appeared in the distance and some sort of communication passed through the air. Moments later the threat fled as gracelessly as it had arrived, while I remained, triumphant in my inaction.

Time seemed to slow and sharpen after my first taste of danger, as if only now I began to realize the fleeting nature of, well, nature. With no direct challengers for sunlight I began to grow quite large, dwarfing most of the plant life in my corner of the glade. Long gone was the neat, symmetrical body of my misspent youth. I sprouted a number of branches, with many broad leaves to better catch the sunlight. The occasional sprout would spring up within the range of my shadow, struggling vainly for their chance to grow, and I must confess I tended to wax philosophical as they inevitably withered and died. It was not as though I bore them any ill will, or that I took pleasure in their demise, I was simply unable to do anything one way or the other. I would have spared them if I could. Really, I was quite faultless in the whole fatal affair. And so I would attempt to convince myself, each and every time some fledgling flora sprang to life and quickly perished under the deadly covering of my broad leaves, with only the shortest glimpse at life to show for it. As time passed, it began to bother me more and more. I did not recognize the reasoning behind such thoughts then, but reflecting now I have a fair idea. Guilt is a foreign concept to most wild plants and animals, but I think it is inevitable once a certain plateau of intellect is achieved.

As my discontent deepened, I began seeking external distraction more and more often. Each morning I would cast my senses toward where the sun peeked over the horizon, not in search of light or warmth, but instead scouring the land with my thoughts, seeking once more the kinship I knew must exist. My senses grew stronger, and each day my senses wandered ever further, and still each night I would find myself as lonely and desolate as the last. With all my energy dedicated towards my desperate search, my growth began to stagnate. My leaves lost their lustrous green hue, turning instead a sickly, brown-spotted yellow. I admit no remorse; as each day my leaves grew smaller and less healthy, the small plants around me were finally able to taste their first sweet drops of unfiltered sunlight. They grew stronger even as I grew weaker, and I found this a fair trade. I watched them develop with rapt attention, sensing in their budding vitality the promise of a life untethered by guilt or loneliness. They were not as I was, not thinking self aware beings, but they were living things surrounded by their brethren, and through my solicitude I could help them thrive. My failing life began to centre around these budding sprouts. My limbs wilted still further as I stopped drawing water and nutrients from the soil, and I rejoiced, for now the tiny plants stood proudly, fully bathed in the sun's life giving rays. I stood now withered and fading, a paltry imitation of my former glory, and yet I felt now a growing contentment and acceptance.

I knew I was dying. No creature can live without the basic sustenance I was denying myself, yet I felt no sense of loss as my leaves began to fall to the ground. My limbs joined them on the floor of the glade, and I delighted in the knowledge that my diminutive successors would grow even stronger with the nutrients they provided. The trunk of my body began to curl in on itself, and I knew I could not last much longer. One last time, with all the will that remained to me, I cast my senses outward, seeking further than ever before. I revelled in the feel of all the flourishing, living beings around me as I never had in the past, my mind in awe of the sheer variation. I soared, nearly losing myself to the pulsating ebb and flow of life, when suddenly I stumbled upon something for which I had long since ceased hoping.

It was every bit as foreign and strange as anything I had encountered, perhaps even more so, yet I felt within this alien presence a reflection of my own self awareness. I hesitated, shocked at the implications of what I'd found, and in that instant's hesitation I felt my twisted, sickened body begin to fail me utterly. It was too late now for me to gather the sustenance I required, even were I willing to sacrifice the budding life which my leaves had once threatened, which I was

not. Serenity returned to me as I accepted my inability to thwart impending doom, and I reached out to the alien awareness with the last of my strength. What I found was confusing in the extreme, convoluted images of scenes far beyond my limited frame of reference, but buried deep beneath these things I felt what I had sought all my life; kinship. With no further hesitation, as my body at last curled upon itself and died, I recklessly threw my consciousness outward towards that singular light in a sea of darkness. So it was at the end as it was at the beginning; I remember darkness.

The withered limbs of the great, dead plant began to fall away as something moved beneath. Suddenly, in a slide of dead leaves, a single hand groped upwards from the broken mass, questing towards the sunlight. Soon after another hand followed, bringing with it the head and body of a seven year old boy. With a great deal of wasted effort, the boy finally managed to pull himself completely free of the plant. He stood for a moment, bewildered, as his strangely luminous green eyes examined his filthy, unclothed body. After some consideration, he took a very hesitant step forward, only to stumble over a wayward branch and fall. Instinctively his hands sprang from his sides, just barely managing to catch him before he smashed face first into the ground. Wincing, he opened his eyes to find his face mere inches from several tiny flowers, partially shaded by the scattered debris of the fallen plant. After peering down at them for a time, uncomprehending, a small, awkward smile began to creep over his face. He stood and took a step back towards the husk of the once green and vibrant plant from which he'd emerged, and unceremoniously pushed its remains far to the side. He checked once more to be sure the tiny flowers had adequate sunlight and, at last satisfied, he began to peer into the distance. He turned about, scanning the horizon intently for a long moment, before coming to an abrupt stop. A fresh smile coming to his lips, the boy began a stumbling walk northward. Without a backward glance he strode out of the clearing.



88 Miles Per Hour

A regular column by Andrew Males

Retro is cool.

I'm not entirely sure why it's so cool at the moment, but it is. Atari t-shirts, Spectrum emulators, constant re-makes in the charts; retro is everywhere right now. Maybe it's a generation thing. Have all the kids who grew up in the 70s and 80s come of age, and are now yearning for the simplicities of their past?

You have to be very careful with retro. Your mind doesn't just remember the past good times as they were – it strips out anything whatsoever bad and adds glitter to everything left behind, giving you the best memory of each event - forever. A journey back can often blow that sparkle away.

Another challenge I perceive with older media, is those which I hadn't experienced the first time round. Take the original series of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: I just don't understand exactly why people love it so much. Don't get me wrong - the ideas were fantastic and influenced so much that went after it, but the actual episodes just seemed flat and boring to me. I probably felt this way because by the time I got round to watching it, I was used to the quick-fire comedy and first-class ideas in *Red Dwarf* (of which I am a big fan) and *Hitchhiker's* simply didn't keep up. Perhaps I would have loved it first time round. Perhaps, even, I would have thought less of *Red Dwarf* now if I hadn't seen that at the time it first came out. We'll never know. My advice: catch things while you can, before the moment disappears forever.

So is there anything timeless?

Sci-fi films suffer more than most, simply because many deal with the future in a visual way. Those that go way into the future and deal with concepts such as colonisation of other worlds, integration with alien populations, etc. are often safe as the present will take a long time to catch up. However, series that I used to watch in awe such as *Space 1999*, where people lived – gasp! - on the moon, are just disappointing now that we're nine years on and still very much here on terra firma.

Let's take a look at a few films to see how they've fared...

The apocalyptic future of *The Terminator* seemed horrifyingly possible to my teenage self. That original future is now eleven years in the past, but thankfully I'm not reduced to running around dodging laser blasts from Hunter Killers whilst trampling on the skulls of the millions who got wiped out!

I am, though, getting scared of how time will treat one of my more recent favourites: *Back to the Future II*. Manufacturers – you have just seven more years to perfect the flying car!! Let's see those hoverboards becoming a viable reality! Back in 1989, I watched with an open mouth as Marty stepped out into 2015 Hill Valley and all the future stuff, like self-fitting Nikes and *Jaws 19* at the Holomax, were showcased. That was my future; I couldn't wait. Sure, we have the 3G iPhone, but wouldn't you rather have the electronic whoosh of a hoverboard as you glide to work, waving at the poor sods emptying their bank balance into their petrol tanks?

“Star Wars” I hear you cry. “That never looks out of date.” Yes, I have to agree with you on that one. How the heck did Lucas pull that one off? It’s like the pyramids: quite simply they shouldn’t have done something so sophisticated with the tools they had back then. But just as they still stand today, so Lucas’ masterpiece still glitters under today’s spotlight.

So, do films fare better or worse than books? Let’s run an experiment involving four different items...

Firstly, a film that would really test me: Blade Runner. I’ll come out and say it: *I’ve never liked this film*. But it’s a classic. It’s by Ridley Scott. It’s the sort of film I should love, but I simply never took to it. I think I’ve watched it twice – the last of which was over a decade ago. My tastes have matured, so I’ll approach it this time with an open mind, but has my moment gone on this too? Or is it a timeless classic that any self-respecting sci-fi fan should love? As I write this sentence, I honestly don’t know, but I will have taken the test by the time you read on...

Next, a look back at an old favourite film: Robocop. Director Paul Verhoven apparently got the idea (unbeknownst to me when I chose these two films!) of a robot cop from none other than Blade Runner.

But how would the animation of ED-209 look to me now? How would all those future adverts compare to similar ones of today?

Thirdly, a book that I definitely wasn’t around for in its first incarnation: The Time Machine by H.G. Wells. I love time travel, and most books I’ve read and films I’ve seen on this subject have portrayed both the past and present with many fascinating ideas, paradoxes and conflicts. This is arguably the grand-daddy of them all. How would 2008-Andy cope with the style and early ideas of a nineteenth century writer? Would I laugh at the simplicity, technology or ideology described? Or would I be impressed with something ahead of its time in the light of few peers?

Lastly, something more recent I can assess to see if it might last the test of time. I’ve chosen a book I’ve recently read: “The Light of Other Days” by Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter; the former a sadly recently-deceased god of sci-fi, the latter one of my favourite authors around today. This has some very good views on how one bit of tech can change the world forever.

Let the analysis begin...

Blade Runner

My first surprise was the year it declared itself to be: 2019. As the breathtaking visuals of an unrecognisable and fantastically futuristic Los Angeles swept majestically across my screen, I feared the worst for its predictions. Within minutes, details of Replicants, off-world colonies and copious amounts of flying cars confirmed that it’d been way too optimistic in estimates of our progress. Leaving this aside, however, I was impressed by the atmosphere generated within the city. The dark, dirty streets; the Chinese and Japanese areas; the small detail of umbrellas with neon lights as shafts; the hustle as everyone trudged on under the immense video screens. All of this did seem a believable possible future in a large city.

My next surprise was the quality of the visuals. I was watching the 2007 Final Cut on an HD TV, but I didn’t expect the crystal-clear scenes from an old film. Blade Runner also has possibly the best use of lighting I’ve even seen in a film.

Unfortunately, it made its biggest mistake with the personal technology available to the protagonist. I loved his gun: nothing too fancy, but obviously an upgrade on today’s handguns. His personal computer, on the other hand - in stark contrast to the tech all around him in his world - seemed to be woefully lacking power. If CSI had to wait as long as he did to select, zoom-in and pan in a photo, I doubt if many murders would get solved! Yes, it was all activated by voice, but it also demonstrated why voice control is not ubiquitous in today’s office. I guess you could argue that the low-tech might have been on purpose, if it was trying to show a lack of affluence, but I would expect even the cheapest of

computers to perform much better. The public video phone was delightfully understated, though (although why did no-one appear to predict the use of mobile phones?)

The stars of the film, though, are the Replicants. Many other films have dealt with genetic engineering, AI, etc. but the five shown in *Blade Runner* are extremely advanced in terms of human-like qualities. The elegance of Rachael is matched in intensity to the coldness of Roy, played wonderfully well by Rutger Hauer. I felt admiration for the cunning of Pris and, ultimately, even sympathy for the fruitless search by Roy. Will our future creations ever question their existence, or ask for an extension to their expiry date? If they did, would you blame them for trying?

My personal view of this film is that it is undeniably one of the most stylish and ambitious sci-fi films ever made. The vision of the future it gave us on its initial release in 1982 must have both excited and astounded its viewers. It's a fairly simple plot, but its handling of complex concepts is intriguing. Looking back on it in 2008, as a future sci-fi film it is my opinion that under scrutiny it *nearly* succeeds in surviving the test of time. The needless date stamp which will ultimately date it and the low-tech personal computer system just caused it to drop a few marks, but the visuals may last forever.

As for my own experience, I did my best to love it, but ultimately the slow pace, scarcity of dialogue and a deficit of truly memorable scenes simply didn't get me there.

Robocop

Ah, a classic 80s good versus evil sci-fi action film which has been in my collection since its launch.

I saw this first in my mid-teens and, like the poor chap in the boardroom mercilessly shot down by a malfunctioning ED-209, it blew me away. Today's viewing still had me enthralled, and I'm not ashamed to admit rolling off the numerous quotes as they came up.

Let's start with ED: the thing's huge, it growls and has all sorts of weaponry you don't want to be on the receiving end of. It still looks scary now, and although the magnitude of the shock of that boardroom scene is never repeated after the first time of viewing, the sight of the smoking guns after its plug has been pulled remains very cool. Does the animation still work twenty years on, though? Well, almost. You can see that ED's movements are all obviously special effects, but they don't suffer too much from the years that have passed. Today, I guess it would all be computer animation, but would it look any more real? The only blot on its reputation in the scary stakes is a Dalek-fondness for stairs (which even they conquered eventually) and its inexplicable paddy – complete with pig noises, for some unknown reason – when the poor thing tumbles down said stairs.

Robocop himself still looks a great piece of tech. A cyborg with enough armour to cope with a casual stroll into the local drug den, and maybe the best footstep sound in cinema history. Automatic aiming, strength to punch through walls, ability to drive cars, computer interface-cum-handly neck spike and calm one-liners make up a good package. His gun is simple, but has that great sound demonstrated no better than in the initial firing range scene. The views you see through Robocop's eyes still look impressive, although less fancy than, say, that of the Terminator's. The record-playback facility and the green text scrolling up wouldn't look out of place in a film today.

Set in the near-future, Verhoven certainly did all he could to poke fun of a possible future world filled with defective Star Wars-style defence systems, cynical nuclear board games and the must-have 6000 SUX car with its outstanding 8.2 mpg.

The only dated items that caught my attention were the slightly clunky facial matching system – especially the slow scroll of the picture on the screen – and the TVs and monitors everywhere. Other than that, the 1987 version of a potential future crime-ridden city survives quite well on close inspection twenty years on. I'd buy *that* for a dollar.

The Time Machine

I loved this book. I chose the Penguin Classics version of this 1895 book mainly because it appeared to have copious amounts of notes and a preface from Wells himself done for a later version in 1931. I was astonished how readable it was, given the period between its first publication and me turning to the first page.

Firstly, the time machine itself. Ask anyone today how they might travel into the future and they are likely to conjure up images of a TARDIS, a DeLorean, some kind belt/contraption or even Wells' strange machine. In the 19th Century, however, the mere concept of a machine to enable time travel was extremely new. Prior to that, tales of a similar nature were told using dreams, visions and magic (in fact I discovered that only Gaspar y Rimbau's "El anacronópete" used a machine for time travel before this book.)

The machine is not described in any great detail by Wells, but offers glimpses into its make-up of nickel, ebony, ivory and brass, describing its rails, levers and saddle. He never revealed his Flux Capacitor - the closest thing was a rod of "translucent glimmering quartz" referenced several times. The lack of focus on the technology - the machine just works - is perhaps the key to its success. I was also fascinated by the model created - a fully-working miniature version that was sent into the future for no other reason than to show the time traveller's idea to his peers.

So to the future. It was clear as I read on (and backed up by the notes) that this was more than just a sci-fi book. It was more an essay of the ideas the young Wells had formulated on a few subjects, particularly human evolution, wrapped up in a time-travelling concept he had toyed with for years. Unlike Blade Runner, The Time Machine's future is one that I can almost confidently predict I'll never be able to compare to reality: 802,701 AD. That's quite a vision when you compare it to the usual future periods most sci-fi films and books deal with! But Wells goes almost straight to it, despite describing in detail the confusing scenes outside his machine as it zips through the ages. The main part of the story is set in this time, as he describes the time traveller's encounters with the innocent Eloi and the dangerous Morlocks. Aside from describing the ventilation towers servicing the underground environment, there is little mention of technology. Instead, he tells a story of survival, whilst the threads of ideas on evolution are woven in.

The time traveller, as a scientist, strove to understand the strange new world he had been transported to, and it was interesting to read a seemingly-plausible theory for his initial findings. This was soon replaced by a much darker, almost depressing, theory once he'd observed the Morlocks. A world split into two: on top, a carefree, toil-free utopia inhabited by a weak, simple human sub-species; underground, another species, but much more sinister, feeding on the helpless Eloi.

Wells didn't stop there, though. Despite a probable temptation to return his hero immediately to his present, an entire chapter was devoted to an accidental thrust into an even greater future - over thirty million years hence. Here, I really was transfixed with descriptions of a larger, redder sun, huge butterflies and "monstrous crab-like creatures". As he inched on in time, the impression given of a dying, silent world - our ultimate and probable future? - hits home with all the sadness one can muster for an unreachable time.

So who better to judge the ideas over time than the author himself? Written thirty-six years on, the preface in the appendix of my copy gives an interesting insight: "The idea of a social differentiation of mankind into Eloi and Morlocks, strikes him [Wells] now as more than a little crude." Maybe theories and predictions of evolution *have* moved on, but the simplicity and vision of the book will surely make it -appropriately enough - timeless.

The Light of Other Days

If you want a book that's rich in ideas and visions of both past and future, then The Light of Other Days is definitely worth reading. The authors have thrown in the usual future mix of ideas such as retinal implants; brain "tinkering" to cure addictions, rage, Alzheimers and autism; mind accelerators; an always-on connection to an Internet search engine; self-drive cars and programmable tattoos.

There are also insights into possible future political issues such as water wars, sending the royals off to Australia in 2019 after the collapse of the United Kingdom, abandoning the International Space Station and even predicting Geri Halliwell as a UN Secretary! All this is fun reading, providing lots of icing to the cake that is the main tech: wormholes. Whilst wormholes are nothing new, the extent to which Clark and Baxter take their usage is amazing.

Wormholes are manipulated to allow their users to view a location anywhere and, eventually, any time. Their progress and application gets increasingly more advanced and widespread as the book goes on, but the real discussion point is how society changes as a result of their availability and usage. Quite simply, the wormholes make for the ultimate Big Brother future. Anyone can watch – undetected – everyone else wherever they are. In addition, you can also view any moment in the entire history of the Earth. How's that for access all areas?!

The first part of the book deals with the developing technology that, initially, is kept contained within inventor Hiram Patterson's large media corporation OurWorld. He employs the secret tech to gain a huge advantage on his competitors. Being able to secretly spy on anyone, anywhere to get the scoop must surely be every reporter's dream. Of course, it's not long before the success of these almost 'immediately-reported' news stories catch the eye of government agencies. In 2036, extracts from CIA papers go on to tell stories of how the technology is used to go places where man and even robot cannot, such as nuclear core reactors and under Antarctic lakes. It describes its use to aid search and rescue, and even to prevent an electromagnetic pulse terrorist attack on a global scale. Keeping tabs on criminals, terrorists, and fanatic groups is suddenly made cheap and easy. Hiram's powers lead him to be described as the Bill Gates of the 21st century.

The descriptions of advances and benefits of the tech continue, but the real star turn is the discovery that it can be used to see back any moment in time. Think about this for a second: any time, any place. The technology becomes as widespread as the mobile phone is today. Almost everything you've ever done can be viewed by anyone today or in the future. At any moment, millions of people – some of whom aren't even born yet – could be watching your intimate moments. The world and its history became transparent; the lies and sins of the past are there for all to see. Most myths and legends are torn to shreds, whilst only a few remain intact. Truth is the only way forward.

This is where the second half of the book really excels, as the authors bravely reveal their interpretations of the facts of the past as the characters sweep back through history: Abraham Lincoln, Robin Hood, Jesus Christ, through to when we were just algae clinging on to life. Think Time Machine, only in reverse. As a reader, you almost turn the pages expecting to see the secrets of life, the universe and everything, but it is handled well enough to for you to be both satisfied and intrigued by what is suggested. No doubt you'll ask yourself what you would do with the tech if it were as available as, say, GPS is today. There's even a surprise at the end (or should that be start?) detailing the origins of life on Earth, although I found this to be weakly-described and disappointing.

It's hard to judge how this book will stand the test of time. Wormhole technology is just a theory right now and so we may never be able to look back and see if the technology described was accurate. I can try to draw parallels with the Internet, however. Its impact and widespread use was not widely predicted and the effect it has had on the world in terms of connectivity and culture is on a similar scale. I'm sure this technology *would* have the massive effect it describes if the past really was made accessible to all, and would undeniably change the way we go forward. The other technology mentioned throughout is likely to end up a mixture of success and failure, due to its scatter-gun approach. The political predictions are very bold and may be laughed at, especially as some are now just a couple of years in the future.

The Light of Other Days is a worthy read, and although in some sections it suffers from neglecting its characters, it's definitely one to come back to later on in life and see for yourself how it compares.

So what can I conclude from my experiment? The first thing to say is that stating a date for future sci-fi is a bold, but dangerous, thing to do. Whether it really matters that one day you'll see a film or read a book whose future pre-dates your present and may not compare in terms of progress, I guess is a personal choice. Robocop has got round this problem by stating it was nothing more than the near-future, giving it plenty of scope. Blade Runner risks looking hopelessly

optimistic, despite the fact that the date has little significance to the plot. *The Light of Other Days* probably had to mention numerous dates due to the style it was written in, where the omission of exact dates would have looked strange. By giving a date, you then set a time limit in which to gauge all of its predictions of technology and change.

The biggest challenge films have, however, is that they present a definitive visual image to their user. Books, on the other hand, usually offer nothing more than words on a page and allow their user to picture the robots, the spacecrafts, the computers, etc. themselves. My vision of the tech in *The Light of Other Days* will always be fresh in my mind, but if a film of it were ever made, the designers' visions would be set and subject to the decay of time and progress. *Blade Runner* is a beautiful film and fares extremely well today. *Robocop* is darker and more grimy, but is real enough to still feel like a possible future. *The Time Machine's* inherent simplicity ensures its continued success.

It is arguably harder for books to cope with their future users, however, due to the time between publication and when they are read. For instance, *The Light of Other Days* was first published in 2000, yet I only picked it up eight years on. With cinema, DVDs, satellite/cable movie channels and downloadable content, most sci-fi enthusiasts would probably see a future-dated film within a couple of years, if not weeks, of release. Taking this into consideration, I feel books, if written carefully, do rather well in standing the test of time.

Future sci-fi is a risky but often rewarding path a writer or director can take. Some may live brightly in the moment and shine on forever, whilst others collect increasing layers of rust. Given time, some may be even be judged better in the future than they are now, thus ensuring a cool retro tomorrow.

See you in the future!



Creeping Justice

by Susan Murray

I shipped into the mining centre of Aesdur two days before starting my new job with the Colonial Mining Corporation. A cheery Ildorrian wearing a colourful shirt greeted me at the shuttleport.

‘Ella Harper? Welcome to the dust capital of the Orion Spur,’ he grinned. ‘I’m Lanni Massen, I’ll be taking you through the induction process.’ He picked up my holdall. ‘Is this it? Did they lose your baggage?’

I shook my head. ‘That’s the lot.’

‘Short contract, huh?’ He smiled.

‘That’s right.’ I looked around me at the vacant building sites and drab concrete buildings, glad I hadn’t committed to more than twelve months. Extracting the valuable ore from the planet made for a lot of dust and heavy machinery, with hundreds of mechanics to keep things running. The colony was rough and raw and basic. It looked like half a day would be more than enough for me to soak up the local colour.

‘You’re standing next to Aesdur’s first five star hotel.’ Massen pointed to a square of concrete-filled trenches, marked out with a few pegs. ‘Building work’s behind schedule, as you can see. Happens a lot here, you’ll get used to it.’

After I’d filled in the inevitable paperwork at company headquarters Massen showed me to my staff accommodation. He unlocked the door off the street and creaked it open. ‘Seal’s broken. I’ll get Maintenance to replace it, helps keep the dust out.’ I stepped over the drift of fine sand that had accumulated on the stained grey carpet. Massen set my bag down in the centre of the room. ‘I’ll leave you to settle in.’

I considered boarding the next shuttle out as I wandered about the dingy flat, but this was my first colonial placement, I couldn’t afford to foul up. Instead, I pinned a calendar to the wall and began to count the days to the end of my contract; maybe all those psychometric tests for colonial applicants weren’t entirely pointless.

‘Welcome to the Aesdur Division, Harper.’ The direction of Ivan Kellett’s gaze suggested the senior manager was addressing his speech primarily to my breasts; I made a mental note to invest in some baggy clothing. He introduced me to my office-mate, Maura, a stick-thin, middle-aged woman who might have been young when she’d arrived on Aesdur with the first settlers. ‘She’ll show you the ropes,’ Kellett said, with another lingering gaze at my cleavage before he left us to it.

Maura greeted me with a tight-lipped smile. ‘Just keep your head down and your mouth shut,’ she advised me with her dry, forty-a-day voice. ‘Make sure you meet your targets and you’ll be fine.’

By the time she’d showed me where the files were kept we’d established we had nothing in common; I knew my way around the computer system, so we had little need to speak to one another, which suited us both. But Maura’s advice was sound: I kept quiet as I counted the days.

I'd been there about a week when Lanni Massen, sporting another garishly patterned shirt, appeared in the office with a new batch of employee details for me to process. He sat on Maura's desk, grinning. 'All on your own?'

'Maura's stocktaking.'

'With the boss?' He winked.

She'd spent several minutes re-applying her makeup before they left. 'You're kidding? Maura and Kellett?' I thought of her sour face when I'd arrived in the office with my younger curves. 'That explains a lot.'

He laughed. 'So, how do you like Aesdur?'

'I'm hoping it'll look better on my CV than it does from the ground.' My answer didn't surprise him.

'I won't be sorry to see the back of the place myself. Are you finding your way around? There are one or two bars that aren't too bad, I'll give you a tour at the weekend if you want.'

Lanni introduced me to a sociable crowd and my life in Aesdur took on a routine of sorts, most evenings spent in one or other of the bars. I often bumped into Lanni around town. We were both just passing through Aesdur and we both had our own reasons for hanging back, but we finally made a date for a meal together.

He stood me up.

A couple of days later I heard he'd resigned and shipped out. It seemed out of character, but for all I knew he could have had a young family waiting back home. Put me in a room full of good-looking strangers and I'll pick the liar, it's a knack I have. Then a couple of invoices in his name appeared on my desk during the lunch break.

'Maura, there must be some mistake, these were left here...'. The bills, from the expensive private medical centre, were for tests supposedly carried out the day after his departure.

'That's right, I was waiting for those, Accounts fouled up again.' She shut them away in her drawer and started chatting about her plans for an off-world shopping trip. We didn't do small talk in our office. She tried to be subtle, but I noticed her take the invoices through to Kellett.

I worked late that night and checked the ledgers once the office was empty. Kellett had authorised the invoices for cash payment: this was no foul-up, this was fraud. I considered reporting what I'd found, but for all I knew the entire office could be in on the scam, possibly even Lanni. In the end I did nothing; petty corruption was a fact of colonial life, I told myself. I was half-way through my first hardship contract by that time, all I wanted was a good reference and the end bonus in my pocket when I boarded the shuttle off Aesdur. I concentrated on keeping my head down and my mouth shut.

A week later Kellett summoned me to his office. He introduced me to Brett Jenson, a recruitment agent.

'This is Ella Harper. She'll act as your fully-expensed guide for the day.' Jenson's handshake was firm; he stood about a head taller than me, sandy-haired, his business suit hung loose from broad shoulders. Kellett cleared his throat. 'I'll meet you both at the Central for dinner at seven.'

'Is this your first visit here?' I asked Jenson as we walked out through Reception.

'That's right. What about yourself?' He juggled his briefcase into his left hand as he held the door open for me.

'Half-way through my contract; I'm afraid you'll find the tourist trail here is a short one.'

'No problem.' He smiled, exuding confidence. 'Where do we go first? How about some legal stimulants?'

‘We’ll start with the Tower, since we’re on expenses - they serve imported coffee there, all the way from Earth. It used to be the spaceport control tower in the early days so the views are pretty good.’ I couldn’t weigh Jenson up. He had an open manner and seemed interested in whatever was said as we walked the short distance through town. He showed a lot of interest in the view from the Tower.

‘You weren’t kidding about the views; the outlook’s spectacular.’ He chose a seat that looked over the mining district. ‘So that’s the Corporation’s quarry there?’

‘That’s right. Everything you see east of the link road, they hold more than half the mineral rights on the northern continent.’

‘All run by Kellett. Is he difficult to work for?’

‘Consistent,’ I hedged, wondering about Jenson as he studied the landscape. The waiter brought our drinks; I watched Jenson examine his grey-green pulpthorn tea. ‘It tastes best with a couple of squirts of lemon,’ I suggested as I poured my freshly brewed coffee.

‘Is it meant to be cloudy?’ He took a careful sip. ‘Hell, that tastes bad.’ He summoned the waiter and ordered coffee. ‘I’ve heard some interesting tales about the local rotgut though, isn’t that made from pulpthorn?’

‘It tastes slightly better once it’s been through a still. And it’s a cheap way of losing a weekend.’

‘You speaking from personal experience there?’

‘You ask a lot of questions. Are you just naturally curious?’ I countered.

‘About some things.’ He smiled. ‘Like why you’re working in a place like Aesdur.’

That made me laugh. ‘I’ve been wondering the same thing. I guess I fell for the spiel in the colonial marketing brochure.’

‘That’s why I’m here: to see how it measures up. I have several hundred Ildorrian workers set to sign contracts with the Corporation and I’m checking out the local conditions. I’d rather get the guys here on the right terms, let them know what they’re getting into. Makes for a lower turnover of labourers, keeps everybody happy.’

Maybe he was telling the truth, I thought.

‘So how about hiring a hoverskiff?’ he suggested. ‘I’d like to drive over the mining district, and maybe take a look up the coast from there.’

‘There’s not much to see, sand and pulpthorn mostly. You’d do better to hire a desert guide.’

‘Kellett’s expecting you to stick with me: saves him the expense of getting me tailed.’

‘If you’re the sort of character my boss wants tailed, do you think I’m likely to drive off into the desert with you?’

‘Would you drive off into the desert with your boss?’

My face gave him the answer to that one.

‘I thought not. Do you enjoy working for the Corporation?’

I hesitated, reluctant to admit the truth, but I suspected Jenson had already guessed the answer. ‘No, not really. I’ll be looking elsewhere when my contract’s up.’

‘Perhaps you should consider giving notice early.’ He stirred his coffee, but didn’t drink it.

‘I’d have to pay back their recruitment costs.’

‘Worse things could happen. I’ve been in this business a long time, you should give it some thought.’ He smiled then. ‘If you’ve finished that expensive coffee we’ll hire ourselves a hoverskiff.’

As we left the Tower I hung back, letting Jenson walk ahead. He turned down the side street that led to where the local hire company was based. For someone new to Aesdur he knew his way around remarkably well. I collared one of the mechanics while Jenson was negotiating terms.

‘Sure, he was here a couple of months back, he’s a sound bloke. We had a skinful down at the miners’ camp; the Ildorrians seemed to rate him.’

I challenged Jenson as he was about to climb into the driving seat of the skiff. ‘You told me you this was your first visit to Aesdur.’

‘The lie was for the receptionist’s benefit, not yours.’ He seemed unperturbed.

‘How does that work, exactly?’ I folded my arms.

‘I prefer to enter negotiations from a position of strength.’

‘An answer like that leaves me with a whole lot of reasons not to get into this skiff with you.’

‘What would your boss say?’

‘If he fires me I don’t have to pay back company costs. Looks like a win-win situation to me.’

Jenson laughed. ‘Can’t argue with that. We’d need to hook up again before seven, though.’

I shrugged and climbed into the skiff, telling myself several hundred Ildorrians couldn’t be wrong.

The coastline was a striking sight, the cliffs dropped sheer for hundreds of metres down to the sea beneath us.

‘There’s a strong undertow along here; anything dropped off these cliffs would end up beached at the river mouth near the miners’ camp,’ Jenson remarked. I waited, deciding there was always a purpose to his words, however obscure. ‘I heard last time I was here that some mine workers’ bodies were found washed up there. That must have caused quite a stir.’

‘I don’t recall hearing about that.’

‘Not even gossip?’

‘Nothing like that. Must have been before I arrived.’

Jenson fiddled with an expensive-looking Satnav device as we continued up the coast. At last he seemed to find the feature he had been looking for and turned inland, landing the skiff by a small outcrop. He took a flat metal object from his briefcase. With a couple of twists it transformed into a spade. Not essential gear for the average recruitment agent.

‘You’d best wait here, I won’t be long.’

‘What’s the spade for?’

He smiled. ‘Digging, of course. Don’t worry, I’ll leave the ignition keys with you.’ He walked a short distance from the skiff and consulted his Satnav, then studied the ground around him. When he began to dig I pocketed the keys and climbed down onto the warm sand.

‘What exactly are you digging for?’

He stopped, his foot resting on the spade, sweat beading on his brow. 'You're better off not knowing.' He lifted a few more shovelfuls of sand, then stopped; he'd found what he was looking for. He scraped aside the sand in the bottom of the hole and then recorded several shots of his discovery with the satnav device. 'Ella, you should leave Aesdur.' There was a hard edge to his voice. 'Just pack a bag and go, tonight. Never mind what the ticket costs.'

I'd heard those words before. 'Lanni said that once, when he was drunk.'

'You knew Lanni Massen?'

Jenson's eyes flicked to the hole in the ground and I knew what I would find there, but I looked anyway.

'He's been shot,' was all I managed to say before my stomach rebelled. I'd never seen a corpse before.

'By a professional; that's known as the triple tap.' Jenson began to backfill the shallow grave. 'Two shots in the torso, a third in the head to make sure. We'll stop at your place so you can pack a bag, then I'll drop you at the shuttle-port.'

'Why?' I struggled to control my roiling stomach.

'Anyone prepared to have a Colonial Bureau agent killed won't chance leaving loose ends. And if you were connected to Lanni you're at risk.'

I didn't bother arguing; we drove back to town in silence.

As soon as I entered my flat I noticed the air smelled of cheap aftershave and stale sweat. I stepped back, colliding with Jenson. 'Someone's been in here,' I hissed.

He produced a compact gun from a pocket and searched the flat room by room. 'All clear. Hurry.'

I crammed a few essentials into a bag, but as I was about to emerge from my bedroom a vehicle drew up in the street outside.

Jenson gestured me back. 'Stay there!'

I ducked down; I'd seen enough of the world he inhabited to comply without question. I heard an almighty crash followed by a rapid succession of shots, then silence. I edged the door open.

Jenson writhed on the floor, clutching his side and bleeding at the shoulder; my front door was shattered, with a stranger slumped face down over the threshold.

Jenson groaned. 'Ella? Is he still armed?'

I grabbed a towel and pressed it to his injured shoulder, glancing towards the body in the doorway. I tried not to look too closely at the congealing mess on the wall above him, or the yawning gap where the back of his head should have been.

'I think he's dead.' I swallowed hard as my stomach roiled.

He struggled to sit. 'Get out as soon as you can. It's not safe here, Kellett has things stitched up too tight. And without proof we can't touch him.' Security sirens pulled up outside. He fumbled in his pocket and handed me a business card. 'That's my number.'

Two medics took over, pushing me to one side; they stretchered him away, and left me kneeling stupidly on the floor, clutching the card in trembling fingers, wondering just how much blood one man could afford to lose.

Security had to let me go after two days, but, like Kellett's people, they followed me everywhere. So I made the only choice I could: I went back to work. I got a few sideways looks when I walked into the office, but I kept my head down and my mouth shut and did what had to be done as I counted the days.

I took to eating at a restaurant near the shuttle-port, I needed some kind of routine outside work and crowded bars no longer felt safe. I ordered my meal then went down to the bathroom, as I did every evening. But tonight I pushed open the fire door and slipped out into the deserted back street. I tried to look calm as I walked to the shuttle-port and joined the queue of passengers waiting to board.

Just before launch time, heart pounding, I slid into my seat and fastened the seat belt. The engines fired up and I gripped the bag on my knee as we accelerated out of Aesdur airspace. I slipped my hand into my pocket where Jenson's card lay; I'd heard nothing since that day in my flat. Once the shuttle docked I'd be safe to contact the Colonial Bureau and hand them the papers proving Kellett's fraud. Maybe then I'd learn if Jenson had survived his injuries. And maybe the sight of Lanni's half-buried corpse would stop haunting my dreams.

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Susan Murray is a serial house renovator turned part-time student who lives in rural northern England with her family, two cats, dog and sundry uninvited spiders. Once she has completed the first draft of her novel she hopes to finish tiling the bathroom.

Writing Realistic Dialogue

by Gary Reynolds

Introduction

Evidence presented to me in both novels and short stories suggests that dialogue is one of the hardest parts of fiction writing. Both novice and experienced authors seem to get it wrong from time to time – some more often than others. This can present itself in a number of ways:

- You have to re-read what was said before it makes sense.
- You read a piece of dialogue and then think to yourself 'they just wouldn't say that - it doesn't seem right'.
- You are thinking 'come on, spit it out already'.

Sound familiar? I thought so. Dialogue is hard to write. Fact. But it's not impossible.

Comparison to the real-world

So let's get one thing clear upfront. Dialogue in fiction is not the same as real life conversation. Let me repeat that so it sinks in. Dialogue is NOT the same as real-life conversation. But it should read like real speech.

In real-life, you make small talk - at least most people do. You ask how someone's weekend was, whether they watched *Battlestar Galactica* last night and so on. You talk because it's sociable and enjoyable.

Characters in fiction should never, never talk for the sake of 'making conversation'. They should talk for one reason and one reason only - to move the plot forward. That doesn't mean that the conversation needs to be tremendously exciting all the time, but it should move the story along.

For example:

"Hey, John, fancy coming back to mine for a beer?"

The above snippet of dialogue isn't exciting. Who cares whether John fancies a beer, but it does allow you to switch scene from the current location to someone's house. And that's important.

A small aside - Motivation Reaction Units

The above paragraph is my way of saying that dialogue should always be part of a Motivation Reaction Unit. For the uninitiated, let's introduce MRUs here...

- At the highest level you have your story - let's say it's a novel.
- A novel has chapters and each chapter tells a defined part of your story.
- Each chapter contains scenes and sequels.
- A scene is where the action occurs.
- A sequel is the character's reflection on the preceding scene. They digest what has happened, think about it, resolve to do something about it, etc. When the time comes to act, we're back into the next scene.

- Each scene and sequel contains multiple MRUs. So an MRU is one of the smallest components of your story that can be considered 'self-contained'. Each MRU follows the following format:
 - Something happens.
 - Someone reacts.

That's it - at least at a high level. MRUs will be discussed in more detail in a future article.

The point as far as dialogue is concerned is that it should be part of an MRU. If it's not, then it has no place in your story. And if it *is* in your story, then make sure it's not overly verbose or waffly. Keep it tight.

Style

The 'style' of your dialogue should be appropriate to the story and story-world. For example, a romance novel will probably contain more lengthy dialogue sequences that touch upon emotions than a sci-fi novel would.

So how do you determine what is appropriate? Read other books in your genre – a lot of them – and study how the dialogue is structured and what it tries to achieve. It's also worth bearing in mind that the way people speak changes over time, so:

- Try to read novels released in the last ten years.
- When writing your own dialogue, avoid the use of slang. It will date your story.

Formatting

As the Editor of Concept Sci-fi, I see a lot of problems and uncertainty when it comes to writing dialogue. Let's take a look at an example that beginning authors often get wrong:

WRONG: “I hate you.” He said.

CORRECT: 'I hate you,' he said.

Note there are two differences above. The first is that the dialogue appears in single quotes. This is now the accepted norm for fiction. The second is that the words 'he said' are part of the same sentence as the preceding words. So there's no capitalisation on 'he', and 'you' ends with a comma (inside the speech mark). Periods should also appear inside the speech marks, e.g.

He stared at her for a moment. 'Oh, you think so.'

And when someone new starts speaking, start a new line (indented). Consider the following:

Paul looked at her. 'What are you going to do?' She stared blankly. 'I don't know, Paul.'

And compare this to:

Paul looked at her. 'What are you going to do?'

She stared blankly. 'I don't know, Paul.'

Which is easier to read? You need to take time to learn how to punctuate your dialogue correctly, otherwise you risk alienating the reader (if you manage to get past the Editor and actually get your work published).

Accents

Most people have a regional accent. Some are strong, some barely noticeable. Portraying an accent when writing dialogue can be immensely useful. It can give you an idea of a person's background and how they're likely to react in a given situation. You can even use readers' stereotypes of people with different accents to your advantage by making them react in a completely different way. But don't over-do the accent.

Consider the following example:

'Wa' y'all doin' 'ere.' - Yikes!

'What y'all doing here.' - Much better.

You also need to ensure that all of your characters don't sound alike when they talk. This can become very boring and repetitive for the reader. Using an accent in moderation is a good way around this problem. Using grammar is another. People use different grammar when they speak (and they rarely speak using grammatically correct sentences).

If you find you are struggling to make your characters' speech individual, try giving some of them an unusual word or phrase that only they use. But do this sparingly.

Tags

What's wrong with *'he said'*? The short answer is nothing. So why do some many authors insist on using a wide array of tags to try and bring their dialogue alive. 'She gushed', 'he exploded', 'she exclaimed'. These can all sound out of place and make the reader cringe – and if they cringe you're losing them.

There is a school of thought which says that 'he said' and 'she said' are all you need. If you need something more descriptive, then try including an adverb, such as 'she said softly'.

Information Dumps

Don't do it! An information dump is where you have two characters talking and the sole purpose of the exchange is to fill in some back-story for the reader.

You can usually identify an information dump in dialogue quite easily. It will often start with 'As you know...' or some similar phrase.

Readers don't like this and, frankly, it's a little bit lazy. If you need to fill in some back-story, find a more subtle way of doing it.

Umms and Ahhs

When you converse in the real world, you have to think about what you're saying. Your speech rarely comes without the occasional 'uumm' or 'aaahh' as you struggle to find the words you're looking for.

In fiction, this is boring. Use it **very** sparingly.

Pacing

Dialogue can be used for more than just showing a verbal interaction between two people. Here are a few pointers:

- Dialogue between two people without narration is speedy. So use this if you need to pick up the pace.
- Monologue is usually read slower.
- Dialogue with narration is slower still.

- There is a difference between a character whose words dissolve with '...' and those which get terminated abruptly with a '!'. Use them appropriately and to your advantage.
- Page after page of pure dialogue can be tedious. Break it up with some action, e.g.

'Hey, get off me!' She backed away from him, eyes locked on his.

Identifying your speaker

Ever read a long piece of dialogue, only to get half way through before you figure out who's talking? We've all been there!

It's important to get your speech-attribution tags in as early as possible. Identify up-front who is talking, and then remind the reader every fifth or sixth exchange (or less) so they can easily keep track, e.g.

'Hey, what's going on?' said John.

Emily looked at him and smiled. 'Not much. Fancy catching a movie?'

'Sure. What you want to watch?'

'Dunno. What's on?'

His forehead creased for a moment, trying to recall the listings from the evening paper. 'I have no idea!'

Getting it right

If you consider all of the above, then I think that you'll be able to write more realistic dialogue. But how do you know whether you've got it right. There's one simple piece of advice that I can offer – read it aloud.

If it sounds right when you read it aloud, then it probably is right.

Have fun!



Attack From Behind

by Michael Kechula

“I’m sorry, Sir, but you can’t go in there,” said the Marine Guard. The President’s in an important conference.”

“Hold on, Sergeant. Don’t you recognize me?”

“Yes, Sir. You’re General Sims, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I’m sorry, Sir, but I have explicit instructions from the President himself that he’s not to be disturbed.”

“This is a vital matter of national security!” the general said, pushing the Marine aside and opening the conference room door.

“What the hell –” yelled the President, who was on the floor playing Tiddlywinks with his six year old son.

“Sorry, Mr. President. We’ve intercepted a signal from somebody claiming to be the Emperor of Mars.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Yes, Sir. Might have something to do with all those UFO sightings over the White House last night.”

“What does the message say?”

“Stop sending space probes,” the general read. “They’re affecting our weather and scaring our children.”

“How many probes have we sent to Mars so far?”

“Two.”

“Somebody’s bitching about two lousy probes? Nonsense! Our probes showed that Mars is totally lifeless. I’ll bet this is the raving of a save-our-solar-system crackpot who’s found a way to bounce signals off Mars. Can you send a message over the same frequency?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Send this one: ‘We got your message. Next time you’re in town, we’ll have a barbeque in your honor. Bring the wife and kids.’ Oh, and add this: ‘Do you like your chilli mild or hot?’”

That night, General Sims was ushered into the Presidential Bedroom.

“I’m Sorry to wake you, Mr. President. “We intercepted another message from the guy who says he’s the Emperor of Mars.”

“What’s it say?”

“Be reasonable. Our weather is getting worse. Our children are afraid to go outside. Many are getting sick. Their pet Wurpsuls are dying at an alarming rate. Millions of our children are weeping. Stop this Wurpsul genocide immediately. Don’t force us to take hostile action.”

“Damn!” said the President. “This is probably a terrorist diversion. Tell Homeland Security to raise the terrorist alert level. Double air cover over our cities. Send a new message.”

“What do you want to say, Mr. President?”

“Just three words: ‘Up your kazoo!’ Dammit, I’m loosing sleep over a crackpot!”

After reading the President’s message, the enraged Emperor of Mars dispatched 10,000 troop carrier squadrons to penetrate Earth’s atmosphere. By morning, the sky was filled with so many criss-crossing chem-trails a heavy fog fell covered the entire globe.

By the time the fog cleared, 1,000-bazillion Martian, microscopic, nano-robot bugs covered every square inch of Earth’s surface. Vicious and razor-clawed, they were indestructible. Even worse, they were so tiny their presence went undetected.

After removing and burying their minuscule parachutes, the nano-robot bugs penetrated every sewer system, garbage dump, trash pile, dung heap, port-o-potty, and outhouse on Earth. Within hours, they obliterated Earth’s entire rat population.

The Emperor signaled Earth. “Because of your stubbornness, we’ve massacred all your children’s favorite pets. Now YOUR children will weep.”

The President released the Emperor’s message to CNN. Upon hearing it, billions of Earthlings roared with laughter.

“Rats our kids’ pets? Martians are raving idiots,” many said, while celebrating Global Rat Genocide Day, a holiday hastily declared by the Amalgamated Nations.

While Earth celebrated, the President ordered the Space Agency to send another probe to Mars.

Martian weather worsened. Children’s fright increased. Many sickened to the point where their greenish skin turned blotchy blue-gray. Millions more Wurpsuls died.

In retaliation, the Emperor ordered his microscopic robots to infiltrate one of Earth’s most cherished commodities. Within hours, 100 million Earthlings died from vicious robot attacks while using toilet tissue.

“This is a national emergency!” yelled the President over TV. “We’re under massive attack from behind! Don’t use any wipes until Homeland Security declares it’s safe to do so!”

Unfortunately, thousands of space scientists and personal hygiene product developers had wiped vigorously that morning upon arising. Their demise at the hands of nano-robots caused the total collapse of Earth’s space programs and personal hygiene research programs.

Earthlings everywhere mourned the loss of toilet paper. Wailing and gnashing of teeth could be heard from Pole to Pole. Every attempt to devise suitable replacements, such as aluminium foil, plastic wrap, wax paper, newspaper, and foliage was sabotaged by Mars’ nasty, microscopic robots.

News of Earth’s scatological catastrophe and inability to launch additional probes reached Mars. The Emperor rejoiced.

All of Earth’s probes on Mars were located and destroyed.

Soon afterwards, Martian weather returned to normal, Wurpsuls stopped dying, and Martian children played outside again.

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Michael A. Kechula’s fiction has been published by 107 magazines and anthologies in Australia, Canada, England, and US. He’s won first prize in 7 writing contests and placed in 5 others. His book, “A Full Deck of Zombies--61 Speculative Fiction Tales,” is available as an ebook at www.FictionWise.com and www.BooksForABuck.com. Paperback version available at www.amazon.com.



Daddy's World

by Walter Jon Williams

One day Jamie went with his family to a new place, a place that had not existed before. The people who lived there were called Whirlikins, who were tall thin people with pointed heads. They had long arms and made frantic gestures when they talked, and when they grew excited threw their arms out *wide* to either side and spun like tops until they got all blurry. They would whirr madly over the green grass beneath the pumpkin-orange sky of the Whirlikin country, and sometimes they would bump into each other with an alarming clashing noise, but they were never hurt, only bounced off and spun away in another direction.

Sometimes one of them would spin so hard that he would dig himself right into the ground, and come to a sudden stop, buried to the shoulders, with an expression of alarmed dismay.

Jamie had never seen anything so funny. He laughed and laughed.

His little sister Becky laughed, too. Once she laughed so hard that she fell over onto her stomach, and Daddy picked her up and whirled her through the air, as if he were a Whirlikin himself, and they were both laughing all the while.

Afterwards, they heard the dinner bell, and Daddy said it was time to go home. After they waved goodbye to the Whirlikins, Becky and Jamie walked hand-in-hand with Momma as they walked over the grassy hills toward home, and the pumpkin-orange sky slowly turned to blue.

The way home ran past El Castillo. El Castillo looked like a fabulous place, a castle with towers and domes and minarets, all gleaming in the sun. Music floated down from El Castillo, the swift, intricate music of many guitars, and Jamie could hear the fast click of heels and the shouts and laughter of happy people.

But Jamie did not try to enter El Castillo. He had tried before, and discovered that El Castillo was guarded by La Duchesa, an angular forbidding woman all in black, with a tall comb in her hair. When Jamie asked to come inside, La Duchesa had looked down at him and said, "I do not admit anyone who does not know Spanish irregular verbs!" It was all she ever said.

Jamie had asked Daddy what a Spanish irregular verb was – he had difficulty pronouncing the words – and Daddy had said, "Some day you'll learn, and La Duchesa will let you into her castle. But right now you're too young to learn Spanish."

That was all right with Jamie. There were plenty of things to do without going into El Castillo. And new places, like the country where the Whirlikins lived, appeared sometimes out of nowhere, and were quite enough to explore.

The color of the sky faded from orange to blue. Fluffy white clouds coasted in the air above the two-storey frame house. Mister Jeepers, who was sitting on the ridgepole, gave a cry of delight and soared toward them through the air.

"Jamie's home!" he sang happily. "Jamie's home, and he's brought his beautiful sister!"

Mister Jeepers was diamond-shaped, like a kite, with his head at the topmost corner, hands on either side, and little bow-legged comical legs attached on the bottom. He was bright red. Like a kite, he could fly, and he swooped through in a series of aerial cartwheels as he sailed toward Jamie and his party.

Becky looked up at Mister Jeepers and laughed from pure joy. “Jamie,” she said, “you live in the best place in the world!”

At night, when Jamie lay in bed with his stuffed giraffe, Selena would ride a beam of pale light from the Moon to the Earth and sit by Jamie’s side. She was a pale woman, slightly translucent, with a silver crescent on her brow. She would stroke Jamie’s forehead with a cool hand, and she would sing to him until his eyes grew heavy and slumber stole upon him.

The birds have tucked their heads

The night is dark and deep

All is quiet, all is safe,

And little Jamie goes to sleep.

Whenever Jamie woke during the night, Selena was there to comfort him. He was glad that Selena always watched out for him, because sometimes he still had nightmares about being in the hospital. When the nightmares came, she was always there to comfort him, stroke him, sing him back to sleep.

Before long the nightmares began to fade.

Princess Gigunda always took Jamie for lessons. She was a huge woman, taller than Daddy, with frowzy hair and big bare feet and a crown that could never be made to sit straight on her head. She was homely, with a mournful face that was ugly and endearing at the same time. As she shuffled along with Jamie to his lessons, Princess Gigunda complained about the way her feet hurt, and about how she was a giant and unattractive, and how she would never be married.

“I’ll marry you when I get bigger,” Jamie said loyally, and the Princess’s homely face screwed up into an expression of beaming pleasure.

Jamie had different lessons with different people. Mrs. Winkle, down at the little red brick schoolhouse, taught him his ABCs. Coach Toad – who *was* one – taught him field games, where he raced and jumped and threw against various people and animals. Mr. McGillicuddy, a pleasant whiskered fat man who wore red sleepers with a trapdoor in back, showed him his magic globe. When Jamie put his finger anywhere on the globe, trumpets began to sound, and he could see what was happening where he was pointing, and Mr. McGillicuddy would take him on a tour and show him interesting things. Buildings, statues, pictures, parks, people. “This is Nome,” he would say. “Can you say Nome?”

“Nome,” Jamie would repeat, shaping his mouth around the unfamiliar word, and Mr. McGillicuddy would smile and bob his head and look pleased.

If Jamie did well on his lessons, he got extra time with the Whirlikins, or at the Zoo, or with Mr. Fuzzy or in Pandaland. Until the dinner bell rang, and it was time to go home.

Jamie did well with his lessons almost every day.

When Princess Gigunda took him home from his lessons, Mister Jeepers would fly from the ridgepole to meet him, and tell him that his family was ready to see him. And then Momma and Daddy and Becky would wave from the windows of the house, and he would run to meet them.

Once, when he was in the living room telling his family about his latest trip through Mr. McGillicuddy's magic globe, he began skipping about with enthusiasm, and waving his arms like a Whirlikin, and suddenly he noticed that no one else was paying attention. That Momma and Daddy and Becky were staring at something else, their faces frozen in different attitudes of polite attention.

Jamie felt a chill finger touch his neck.

"Momma?" Jamie said. "Daddy?" Momma and Daddy did not respond. Their faces didn't move. Daddy's face was blurred strangely, as if it been caught in the middle of movement.

"Daddy?" Jamie came close and tried to tug at his father's shirt sleeve. It was hard, like marble, and his fingers couldn't get a purchase at it. Terror blew hot in his heart.

"*Daddy?*" Jamie cried. He tried to tug harder. "Daddy! Wake up!" Daddy didn't respond. He ran to Momma and tugged at her hand. "Momma! Momma!" Her hand was like the hand of a statue. She didn't move no matter how hard Jamie pulled.

"Help!" Jamie screamed. "Mister Jeepers! Mr. Fuzzy! Help my Momma!" Tears fell down his face as he ran from Becky to Momma to Daddy, tugging and pulling at them, wrapping his arms around their frozen legs and trying to pull them toward him. He ran outside, but everything was curiously still. No wind blew. Mister Jeepers sat on the ridgepole, a broad smile fixed as usual to his face, but he was frozen, too, and did not respond to Jamie's calls.

Terror pursued him back into the house. This was far worse than anything that had happened to him in the hospital, worse even than the pain. Jamie ran into the living room, where his family stood still as statues, and then recoiled in horror. A stranger had entered the room—or rather just parts of a stranger, a pair of hands encased in black gloves with strange silver circuit patterns on the backs, and a strange glowing opalescent face with a pair of wraparound dark glasses drawn across it like a line.

"Interface crashed, all right," the stranger said, as if to someone Jamie couldn't see.

Jamie gave a scream. He ran behind Momma's legs for protection.

"Oh shit," the stranger said. "The kid's still running."

He began purposefully moving his hands as if poking at the air. Jamie was sure that it was some kind of terrible attack, a spell to turn him to stone. He tried to run away, tripped over Becky's immovable feet and hit the floor hard, and then crawled away, the hall rug bunching up under his hands and knees as he skidded away, his own screams ringing in his ears . . .

. . . He sat up in bed, shrieking. The cool night tingled on his skin. He felt Selena's hand on his forehead, and he jerked away with a cry.

"Is something wrong?" came Selena's calm voice. "Did you have a bad dream?" Under the glowing crescent on her brow, Jamie could see the concern in her eyes.

"Where are Momma and Daddy?" Jamie wailed.

"They're fine," Selena said. "They're asleep in their room. Was it a bad dream?"

Jamie threw off the covers and leaped out of bed. He ran down the hall, the floorboards cool on his bare feet. Selena floated after him in her serene, concerned way. He threw open the door to his parents' bedroom and snapped on the light,

then gave a cry as he saw them huddled beneath their blanket. He flung himself at his mother, and gave a sob of relief as she opened her eyes and turned to him.

“Something wrong?” Momma said. “Was it a bad dream?”

“No!” Jamie wailed. He tried to explain, but even he knew that his words made no sense. Daddy rose from his pillow, looking seriously at Jamie, and then turned to ruffle his hair.

“Sounds like a pretty bad dream, trouper,” Daddy said. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“No!” Jamie buried his face in his mother’s neck. “I don’t want to go back to bed!”

“All right, Jamie,” Momma said. She patted Jamie’s back. “You can sleep here with us. But just for tonight, okay?”

“Wanna stay here,” Jamie mumbled.

He crawled under the covers between Momma and Daddy. They each kissed him, and Daddy turned off the light. “Just go to sleep, trouper,” he said. “And don’t worry. You’ll only have good dreams from now on.”

Selena, faintly glowing in the darkness, sat silently in the corner. “Shall I sing?” she asked.

“Yes, Selena,” Daddy said. “Please sing for us.”

The birds have tucked their heads, Selena began to sing,

The night is dark and deep

All is quiet, all is safe,

And little Jamie goes to sleep.

But Jamie did not sleep. Despite the singing, the dark night, the rhythmic breathing of his parents and the comforting warmth of their bodies.

It *wasn’t* a dream, he knew. His family had really been frozen.

Something, or someone, had turned them to stone. Probably that evil disembodied head and pair of hands. And now, for some reason, his parents didn’t remember.

Something had made them forget.

Jamie stared into the darkness. What, he thought, if these *weren’t* his parents? If his parents were still stone, hidden away somewhere? What if these substitutes were bad people – kidnappers or worse – people who just *looked* like his real parents. What if they were evil people who were just waiting for him to fall asleep, and then they would turn to monsters, with teeth and fangs and a horrible light in their eyes, and they would tear him to bits right here in the bed...

Talons of panic clawed at Jamie’s heart. Selena’s song echoed in his ears. He *wasn’t* going to sleep! He *wasn’t*!

And then he did. It wasn’t anything like normal sleep – it was as if sleep was *imposed* on him, as if something had just *ordered* his mind to sleep. It was just like a wave that rolled over him, an irresistible force, blotting out his senses, his body, his mind . . .

I *won’t* sleep! he thought in defiance, but then his thoughts were extinguished.

When he woke he was back in his own bed, and it was morning, and Mister Jeepers was floating outside the window. “Jamie’s awake!” he sang. “Jamie’s awake and ready for a new day!”

And then his parents came bustling in, kissing him and petting him and taking him downstairs for breakfast.

His fears seemed foolish now, in full daylight, with Mister Jeepers dancing in the air outside and singing happily.

But sometimes, at night while Selena crooned by his bedside, he gazed into the darkness and felt a thrill of fear.

And he never forgot, not entirely.

A few days later Don Quixote wandered into the world, a lean man who frequently fell off his lean horse in a clang of home-made armor. He was given to making wan comments in both English and his own language, which turned out to be Spanish.

“Can you teach me Spanish irregular verbs?” Jamie asked.

“*Sí, naturalmente,*” said Don Quixote. “But I will have to teach you some other Spanish as well.” He looked particularly mournful. “Let’s start with *corazon*. It means ‘heart.’ *Mi corazon,*” he said with a sigh, “is breaking for love of Dulcinea.”

After a few sessions with Don Quixote – mixed with a lot of sighing about *corazons* and Dulcinea – Jamie took a grip on his courage, marched up to El Castillo, and spoke to La Duchesa. “*Pierdo, sueño, haría, ponto!*” he cried.

La Duchesa’s eyes widened in surprise, and as she bent toward Jamie her severe face became almost kindly. “You are obviously a very intelligent boy,” she said. “You may enter my castle.”

And so Don Quixote and La Duchesa, between the two of them, began to teach Jamie to speak Spanish. If he did well, he was allowed into the parts of the castle where the musicians played and the dancers stamped, where brave Castilian knights jostled in the tilting yard, and Señor Esteban told stories in Spanish, always careful to use words that Jamie already knew.

Jamie couldn’t help but notice that sometimes Don Quixote behaved strangely. Once, when Jamie was visiting the Whirlikins, Don Quixote charged up on his horse, waving his sword and crying out that he would save Jamie from the goblins that were attacking him. Before Jamie could explain that the Whirlikins were harmless, Don Quixote galloped to the attack. The Whirlikins, alarmed, screwed themselves into the ground where they were safe, and Don Quixote fell off his horse trying to swing at one with his sword. After poor Quixote fell off his horse a few times, it was Jamie who had to rescue the Don, not the other way around.

It was sort of sad and sort of funny. Every time Jamie started to laugh about it, he saw Don Quixote’s mournful face in his mind, and his laugh grew uneasy.

After a while, Jamie’s sister Becky began to share Jamie’s lessons. She joined him and Princess Gigunda on the trip to the little schoolhouse, learned reading and math from Mrs. Winkle, and then, after some coaching from Jamie and Don Quixote, she marched to La Duchesa to shout irregular verbs and gain entrance to the El Castillo.

Around that time Marcus Tullius Cicero turned up to take them both to the Forum Romanum, a new part of the world that had appeared to the south of the Whirlikins’ territory. But Cicero and the people in the Forum, all the shopkeepers and politicians, did not teach Latin the way Don Quixote taught Spanish, explaining what the new words meant in English, they just talked Latin at each other and expected Jamie and Becky to understand. Which, eventually, they did. The Spanish helped. Jamie was a bit better at Latin than Becky, but he explained to her that it was because he was older.

It was Becky who became interested in solving Princess Gigunda’s problem. “We should find her somebody to love,” she said.

“She loves *us,*” Jamie said.

“Don’t be silly,” Becky said. “She wants a *boyfriend*.”

“I’m her boyfriend,” Jamie insisted.

Becky looked a little impatient. “Besides,” she said, “it’s a puzzle. Just like La Duchesa and her verbs.”

This had not occurred to Jamie before, but now that Becky mentioned it, the idea seemed obvious. There were a lot of puzzles around, which one or the other of them was always solving, and Princess Gigunda’s lovelessness was, now that he saw it, clearly among them.

So they set out to find Princess Gigunda a mate. This question occupied them for several days, and several candidates were discussed and rejected. They found no answers until they went to the chariot race at the Circus Maximus. It was the first race in the Circus ever, because the place had just appeared on the other side of the Palatine Hill from the Forum, and there was a very large, very excited crowd.

The names of the charioteers were announced as they paraded their chariots to the starting line. The trumpets sounded, and the chariots bolted from the start as the drivers whipped up the horses. Jamie watched enthralled as they rolled around the *spina* for the first lap, and then shouted in surprise at the sight of Don Quixote galloping onto the Circus Maximus, shouting that he was about to stop this group of rampaging demons from destroying the land, and planted himself directly in the path of the oncoming chariots. Jamie shouted along with the crowd for the Don to get out of the way before he got killed.

Fortunately Quixote’s horse had more sense than he did, because the spindly animal saw the chariots coming and bolted, throwing its rider. One of the chariots rode right over poor Quixote, and there was a horrible clanging noise, but after the chariot passed, Quixote sat up, apparently unharmed. His armor had saved him.

Jamie jumped from his seat and was about to run down to help Don Quixote off the course, but Becky grabbed his arm. “Hang on,” she said, “Someone else will look after him, and I have an idea.”

She explained that Don Quixote would make a perfect man for Princess Gigunda.

“But he’s in love with Dulcinea!”

Becky looked at him patiently. “Has anyone ever *seen* Dulcinea? All we have to do is convince Don Quixote that Princess Gigunda *is* Dulcinea.”

After the races, they found that Don Quixote had been arrested by the lictors and sent to the Lautumiae, which was the Roman jail. They weren’t allowed to see the prisoner, so they went in search of Cicero, who was a lawyer and was able to get Quixote out of the Lautumiae on the promise that he would never visit Rome again.

“I regret to the depths of my soul that my parole does not enable me to destroy those demons,” Quixote said as he left Rome’s town limits.

“Let’s not get into that,” Becky said. “What we wanted to tell you was that we’ve found Dulcinea.”

The old man’s eyes widened in joy. He clutched at his armor-clad heart. “*Mi amor!* Where is she? I must run to her at once!”

“Not just yet,” Becky said. “You should know that she’s been changed. She doesn’t look like she used to.”

“Has some evil sorcerer done this?” Quixote demanded.

“Yes!” Jamie interrupted. He was annoyed that Becky had taken charge of everything, and he wanted to add his contribution to the scheme. “The sorcerer was just a head!” he shouted. “A floating head, and a pair of hands! And he wore dark glasses and had no body!”

A shiver of fear passed through him as he remembered the eerie floating head, but the memory of his old terror did not stop his words from spilling out.

Becky gave him a strange look. “Yeah,” she said. “That’s right.”

“He crashed the interface!” Jamie shouted, the words coming to him out of memory.

Don Quixote paid no attention to this, but Becky gave him another look.

“You’re not as dumb as you look, Digit,” she said.

“I do not care about Dulcinea’s appearance,” Don Quixote declared, “I love only the goodness that dwells in her *corazon*.”

“She’s Princess Gigunda!” Jamie shouted, jumping up and down in enthusiasm. “She’s been Princess Gigunda all along!”

And so, the children following, Don Quixote ran clanking to where Princess Gigunda waited near Jamie’s house, fell down to one knee, and began to kiss and weep over the Princess’ hand. The Princess seemed a little surprised by this until Becky told her that she was really the long-lost Dulcinea, changed into a giant by an evil magician, although she probably didn’t remember it because that was part of the spell, too.

So while the Don and the Princess embraced, kissed, and began to warble a love duet, Becky turned to Jamie.

“What’s that stuff about the floating head?” she asked. “Where did you come up with that?”

“I dunno,” Jamie said. He didn’t want to talk about his memory of his family being turned to stone, the eerie glowing figure floating before them. He didn’t want to remember how everyone said it was just a dream.

He didn’t want to talk about the suspicions that had never quite gone away.

“That stuff was weird, Digit,” Becky said. “It gave me the creeps. Let me know before you start talking about stuff like that again.”

“Why do you call me Digit?” Jamie asked. Becky smirked.

“No reason,” she said.

“Jamie’s home!” Mister Jeepers’ voice warbled from the sky. Jamie looked up to see Mister Jeepers doing joyful aerial loops overhead. “Master Jamie’s home at last!”

“Where shall we go?” Jamie asked.

Their lessons for the day were over, and he and Becky were leaving the little red schoolhouse. Becky, as usual, had done very well on her lessons, better than her older brother, and Jamie felt a growing sense of annoyance. At least he was still better at Latin and Computer Science.

“I dunno,” Becky said. “Where do you want to go?”

“How about Pandaland? We could ride the Whoosh Machine.”

Becky wrinkled her face. “I’m tired of that kid stuff,” she said.

Jamie looked at her. “But you’re a kid.”

“I’m not as little as you, Digit,” Becky said.

Jamie glared. This was too much. “You’re my little sister! I’m bigger than you!”

“No, you’re not,” Becky said. She stood before him, her arms flung out in exasperation. “Just *notice something* for once, will you?”

Jamie bit back on his temper and looked, and he saw that Becky was, in fact, bigger than he was. And older-looking. Puzzlement replaced his fading anger.

“How did you get so big?” Jamie asked.

“I grew. And you *didn’t* grow. Not as fast anyway.”

“I don’t understand.”

Becky’s lip curled. “Ask Mom or Dad. Just *ask* them.” Her expression turned stony. “Just don’t believe everything they tell you.”

“What do you mean?”

Becky looked angry for a moment, and then her expression relaxed. “Look,” she said, “just go to Pandaland and have fun, okay? You don’t need me for that. I want to go and make some calls to my friends.”

“*What* friends?”

Becky looked angry again. “*My* friends. It doesn’t matter who they are!”

“Fine!” Jamie shouted. “I can have fun by myself!”

Becky turned and began to walk home, her pale legs rapidly scissoring against the deep green hillside. Jamie glared after her, then turned and began the walk to Pandaland.

He did all his favorite things, rode the Ferris wheel and the Whoosh Machine, watched Rizzio the Strongman and the clowns. He enjoyed himself, but his enjoyment felt hollow. He found himself *watching*, watching himself at play, watching himself enjoying the rides.

Watching himself not grow as fast as his little sister.

Watching himself wondering whether or not to ask his parents about why that was.

He had the idea that he wouldn’t like their answers.

He didn’t see as much of Becky after that. They would share lessons, and then Becky would lock herself in her room to talk to her friends on the phone.

Becky didn’t have a telephone in her room, though. He looked once when she wasn’t there.

After a while, Becky stopped accompanying him for lessons. She’d got ahead of him on everything except Latin, and it was too hard for Jamie to keep up.

After that, he hardly saw Becky at all. But when he saw her, he saw that she was still growing fast. Her clothing was different, and her hair. She’d started wearing make-up.

He didn’t know whether he liked her any more or not.

It was Jamie's birthday. He was eleven years old, and Momma and Daddy and Becky had all come for a party. Don Quixote and Princess Gigunda serenaded Jamie from outside the window, accompanied by La Duchesa on Spanish guitar. There was a big cake with eleven candles. Momma gave Jamie a chart of the stars. When he touched a star, a voice would appear telling Jamie about the star, and lines would appear on the chart showing any constellation the star happened to belong to. Daddy gave Jamie a car, a miniature Mercedes convertible, scaled to Jamie's size, which he could drive around the country and which he could use in the Circus Maximus when the chariots weren't racing. His sister gave Jamie a kind of lamp stand that would project lights and moving patterns on the walls and ceiling when the lights were off. "Listen to music when you use it," she said.

"Thank you, Becky," Jamie said.

"Becca," she said. "My name is Becca now. Try to remember."

"Okay," Jamie said. "Becca."

Becky – Becca – looked at Momma. "I'm dying for a cigarette," she said. "Can I go, uh, out for a minute?"

Momma hesitated, but Daddy looked severe. "Becca," she said, "this is *Jamie's birthday*. We're all here to celebrate. So why don't we all eat some cake and have a nice time?"

"It's not even real cake," Becca said. "It doesn't *taste* like real cake."

"It's a *nice cake*," Daddy insisted. "Why don't we talk about this later? Let's just have a special time for Jamie."

Becca stood up from the table. "For *the Digit*?" she said. "Why are we having a good time for *Jamie*? He's not even a *real person!*" She thumped herself on the chest. "*I'm* a real person!" she shouted. "Why don't we ever have special times for *me*?"

But Daddy was on his feet by that point and shouting, and Momma was trying to get everyone to be quiet, and Becca was shouting back, and suddenly a determined look entered her face and she just disappeared – suddenly, she wasn't there any more, there was just only air.

Jamie began to cry. So did Momma. Daddy paced up and down and swore, and then he said, "I'm going to go get her." Jamie was afraid he'd disappear like Becca, and he gave a cry of despair, but Daddy didn't disappear, he just stalked out of the dining room and slammed the door behind him.

Momma pulled Jamie onto her lap and hugged him. "Don't worry, Jamie," she said. "Becky just did that to be mean."

"What happened?" Jamie asked.

"Don't worry about it." Momma stroked his hair. "It was just a mean trick."

"She's growing up," Jamie said. "She's grown faster than me and I don't understand."

"Wait till Daddy gets back," Momma said, "and we'll talk about it."

But Daddy was clearly in no mood for talking when he returned, without Becca. "We're going to have *fun*," he snarled, and reached for the knife to cut the cake.

The cake tasted like ashes in Jamie's mouth. When the Don and Princess Gigunda, Mister Jeepers and Rizzio the Strongman came into the dining room and sang "Happy Birthday," it was all Jamie could do to hold back the tears.

Afterwards, he drove his new car to the Circus Maximus and drove as fast as he could on the long oval track. The car really wouldn't go very fast. The bleachers on either side were empty, and so was the blue sky above.

Maybe it was a puzzle, he thought, like Princess Gigunda's love life. Maybe all he had to do was follow the right clue, and everything would be fine.

What's the moral they're trying to teach? he wondered.

But all he could do was go in circles, around and around the empty stadium.

"Hey, Digit. Wake up."

Jamie came awake suddenly, with a stifled cry. The room whirled around him. He blinked, realized that the whirling came from the colored lights projected by his birthday present, Becca's lamp stand.

Becca was sitting on his bedroom chair, a cigarette in her hand. Her feet, in the steel-capped boots she'd been wearing lately, were propped up on the bed.

"Are you awake, Jamie?" It was Selena's voice. "Would you like me to sing you a lullaby?"

"Fuck off, Selena," Becca said. "Get out of here. Get lost."

Selena cast Becca a mournful look, then sailed backwards, out the window, riding a beam of moonlight to her pale home in the sky. Jamie watched her go, and felt as if a part of himself was going with her, a part that he would never see again.

"Selena and the others have to do what you tell them, mostly," Becca said. "Of course, Mom and Dad wouldn't tell *you* that."

Jamie looked at Becca. "What's happening?" he said. "Where did you go today?"

Colored lights swam over Becca's face. "I'm sorry if I spoiled your birthday, Digit. I just got tired of the lies, you know? They'd kill me if they knew I was here now, talking to you." Becca took a draw on her cigarette, held her breath for a second or two, then exhaled. Jamie didn't see or taste any smoke.

"You know what they wanted me to do?" she said. "Wear a little girl's body, so I wouldn't look any older than you, and keep you company in that stupid school for seven hours a day." She shook her head. "I wouldn't do it. They yelled and yelled, but I was damned if I would."

"I don't understand."

Becca flicked invisible ashes off her cigarette, and looked at Jamie for a long time. Then she sighed.

"Do you remember when you were in the hospital?" she said.

Jamie nodded. "I was really sick."

"I was so little then, I don't really remember it very well," Becca said. "But the point is –" She sighed again. "The point is that you weren't getting well. So they decided to –" She shook her head. "Dad took advantage of his position at the University, and the fact that he's been a big doner. They were doing AI research, and the neurology department was into brain modeling, and they needed a test subject, and – Well, the idea is, they've got some of your tissue, and when they get cloning up and running, they'll put you back in –" She saw Jamie's stare, then shook her head. "I'll make it simple, okay?"

She took her feet off the bed and leaned closer to Jamie. A shiver ran up his back at her expression. "They made a copy of you. An *electronic* copy. They scanned your brain and built a holographic model of it inside a computer, and they put it in a virtual environment, and –" She sat back, took a drag on her cigarette. "And here you are," she said.

Jamie looked at her. “I don’t understand.”

Colored lights gleamed in Becca’s eyes. “You’re in a computer, okay? and you’re a program. You know what that is, right? From computer class? And the program is sort of in the shape of your mind. Don Quixote and Princess Gigunda are programs, too. And Mrs. Winkle down at the schoolhouse is *usually* a program, but if she needs to teach something complex, then she’s an education major from the University.”

Jamie felt as if he’d just been hollowed out, a void inside his ribs. “I’m not real?” he said. “I’m not a person?”

“Wrong,” Becca said. “You’re real, alright. You’re the apple of our parents’ eye.” Her tone was bitter. “Programs are real things,” she said, “and yours was a real hack, you know, absolute cutting-edge state-of-the-art technoshit. And the computer that you’re in is real, too – I’m interfaced with it right now, down in the family room – we have to wear suits with sensors and a helmet with scanners and stuff. I hope to fuck they don’t hear me talking to you down here.”

“But what – ” Jamie swallowed hard. How could he swallow if he was just a string of code? “What happened to *me*? The original me?”

Becca looked cold. “Well,” she said, “you had cancer. You died.”

“Oh.” A hollow wind blew through the void inside him.

“They’re going to bring you back. As soon as the clone thing works out – but this is a government computer you’re in, and there are all these government restrictions on cloning, and – ” She shook her head. “Look, Digit,” she said. “You really need to know this stuff, okay?”

“I understand.” Jamie wanted to cry. But only real people cried, he thought, and he wasn’t real. He wasn’t real.

“The program that runs this virtual environment is huge, okay, and *you’re* a big program, and the University computer is used for a lot of research, and a lot of the research has a higher priority than *you* do. So you don’t run in real-time – that’s why I’m growing faster than you are. I’m spending more hours being me than you are. And the parents – ” She rolled her eyes. “They aren’t making this any better, with their emphasis on *normal family life*.”

She sucked on her cigarette, then stubbed it out in something invisible. “See, they want us to be this *normal family*. So we have breakfast together every day, and dinner every night, and spend the evening at the Zoo or in Pandaland or someplace. But the dinner that we eat with *you* is virtual, it doesn’t taste like anything – the grant ran out before they got that part of the interface right – so we eat this fast-food crap before we interface with you, and then have dinner all *over* again with *you* ... Is this making any sense? Because Dad has a job and Mom has a job and I go to school and have friends and stuff, so we really can’t get together every night. So they just close your program file, shut it right down, when they’re not available to interface with you as what Dad calls a ‘family unit,’ and that means that there are a lot of hours, days sometimes, when you’re just *not running*, you might as well really be *dead* – ” She blinked. “Sorry,” she said. “Anyway, we’re *all* getting older a lot faster than you are, and it’s not fair to you, that’s what I think. Especially because the University computer runs fastest at night, because people don’t use them as much then, and you’re pretty much real-time then, so interfacing with you would be almost *normal*, but Mom and Dad sleep then, cuz they have day jobs, and they can’t have you running around unsupervised in here, for God’s sake, they think it’s unsafe or something...”

She paused, then reached into her shirt pocket for another cigarette. “Look,” she said, “I’d better get out of here before they figure out I’m talking to you. And then they’ll pull my access codes or something.” She stood, brushed something off her jeans. “Don’t tell the parents about this stuff right away. Otherwise they might erase you, and load a backup that doesn’t know shit. Okay?”

And she vanished, as she had that afternoon.

Jamie sat in the bed, hugging his knees. He could feel his heart beating in the darkness. How can a program have a heart? he wondered.

Dawn slowly encroached upon the night, and then there was Mister Jeepers, turning lazy cartwheels in the air, his red face leering in the window.

“Jamie’s awake!” he said. “Jamie’s awake and ready for a new day!”

“Fuck off,” Jamie said, and buried his face in the blanket.

Jamie asked to learn more about computer and programming. Maybe, he thought, he could find clues there, he could solve the puzzle. His parents agreed, happy to let him follow his interests.

After a few weeks, he moved into El Castillo. He didn’t tell anyone he was going, he just put some of his things in his car, took them up to a tower room, and threw them down on the bed he found there. His Mom came to find him when he didn’t come home for dinner.

“It’s dinnertime, Jamie,” she said. “Didn’t you hear the dinner bell?”

“I’m going to stay here for a while,” Jamie said.

“You’re going to get hungry if you don’t come home for dinner.”

“I don’t need food,” Jamie said.

His Mom smiled brightly. “You need food if you’re going to keep up with the Whirlikins,” she said.

Jamie looked at her. “I don’t care about that kid stuff any more,” he said.

When his mother finally turned and left, Jamie noticed that she moved like an old person.

After a while, he got used to the hunger that was programmed into him. It was always *there*, he was always aware of it, but he got so he could ignore it after awhile.

But he couldn’t ignore the need to sleep. That was just built into the program, and eventually, try though he might, he needed to give in to it.

He found out he could order the people in the castle around, and he amused himself by making them stand in embarrassing positions, or stand on their head and sing, or form human pyramids for hours and hours.

Sometimes he made them fight, but they weren’t very good at it.

He couldn’t make Mrs. Winkle at the schoolhouse do whatever he wanted, though, or any of the people who were supposed to teach him things. When it was time for a lesson, Princess Gigunda turned up. She wouldn’t follow his orders, she’d just pick him up and carry him to the little red schoolhouse and plunk him down in his seat.

“You’re not real!” he shouted, kicking in her arms. “You’re not real! And *I’m* not real, either!”

But they made him learn about the world that *was* real, about geography and geology and history, although none of it mattered here.

After the first couple of times Jamie had been dragged to school, his father met him outside the schoolhouse at the end of the day.

“You need some straightening out,” he said. He looked grim. “You’re part of a family. You belong with us. You’re not going to stay in the castle any more, you’re going to have a *normal family life*.”

“No!” Jamie shouted. “I *like* the castle!”

Dad grabbed him by the arm and began to drag him homeward. Jamie called him a *pendejo* and a *fellator*.

“I’ll punish you if I have to,” his father said.

“How are you going to do that?” Jamie demanded. “You gonna erase my file? Load a backup?”

A stunned expression crossed his father’s face. His body seemed to go through a kind of stutter, and the grip on Jamie’s arm grew nerveless. Then his face flushed with anger. “What do you mean?” he demanded. “Who told you this?”

Jamie wrenched himself free of Dad’s weakened grip. “I figured it out by myself,” Jamie said. “It wasn’t hard. I’m not a kid any more.”

“I –” His father blinked, and then his face hardened. “You’re still coming home.”

Jamie backed away. “I want some changes!” he said. “I don’t want to be shut off all the time.”

Dad’s mouth compressed to a thin line. “It was Becky who told you this, wasn’t it?”

Jamie felt an inspiration. “It was Mister Jeepers! There’s a flaw in his programming! He answers whatever question I ask him!”

Jamie’s father looked uncertain. He held out his hand. “Let’s go home,” he said. “I need to think about this.”

Jamie hesitated. “Don’t erase me,” he said. “Don’t load a backup. Please. I don’t want to die *twice*.”

Dad’s look softened. “I won’t.”

“I want to grow up,” Jamie said. “I don’t want to be a little kid forever.”

Dad held out with his hand again. Jamie thought for a moment, then took the hand. They walked over the green grass toward the white frame house on the hill.

“Jamie’s home!” Mister Jeepers floated overhead, turning aerial cartwheels. “Jamie’s home at last!”

A spasm of anger passed through Jamie at the sight of the witless grin. He pointed at the ground in front of him.

“Crash right here!” he ordered. “*Fast!*”

Mister Jeepers came spiraling down, an expression of comic terror on his face, and smashed to the ground where Jamie pointed. Jamie pointed at the sight of the crumpled body and laughed.

“Jamie’s home at last!” Mister Jeepers said.

As soon as Jamie could, he got one of the programmers at the University to fix him up a flight program like the one Mister Jeepers had been using. He swooped and soared, zooming like a super hero through the sky, stunting between the towers of El Castillo and soaring over upturned, wondering faces in the Forum.

He couldn’t seem to go as fast as he really wanted. When he started increasing speed, all the scenery below paused in its motion for a second or two, then jumped forward with a jerk. The software couldn’t refresh the scenery fast enough to match his speed. It felt strange, because throughout his flight he could feel the wind on his face.

So this, he thought, was why his car couldn’t go fast.

So he decided to climb high. He turned his face to the blue sky and went straight up. The world receded, turned small. He could see the Castle, the hills of Whirlikin Country, the crowded Forum, the huge oval of the Circus Maximus. It was like a green plate, with a fuzzy, nebulous horizon where the sky started.

And, right in the center, was the little two-storey farm house where he'd grown up.

It was laid out below him like scenery in a snow globe.

After a while he stopped climbing. It took him a while to realize it, because he still felt the wind blowing in his face, but the world below stopped getting smaller.

He tried going faster. The wind blasted onto him from above, but his position didn't change.

He'd reached the limits of his world. He couldn't get any higher.

Jamie flew out to the edges of the world, to the horizon. No matter how he urged his program to move, he couldn't make his world fade away.

He was trapped inside the snow globe, and there was no way out.

It was quite a while before Jamie saw Becca again. She picked her way through the labyrinth beneath El Castillo to his throne room, and Jamie slowly materialized atop his throne of skulls. She didn't appear surprised.

"I see you've got a little Dark Lord thing going here," she said.

"It passes the time," Jamie said.

"And all those pits and stakes and tripwires?"

"Death traps."

"Took me forever to get in here, Digit. I kept getting de-rezzed."

Jamie smiled. "That's the idea."

"Whirlikins as weapons," she nodded. "That was a good one. Bored a hole right through me, the first time."

"Since I'm stuck living here," Jamie said, "I figure I might as well be in charge of the environment. Some of the student programmers at the University helped me with some cool effects."

Screams echoed through the throne room. Fires leaped out of pits behind him. The flame illuminated form of Marcus Tullius Cicero, who hung crucified above a sea of flame.

"O tempora, o mores!" moaned Cicero.

Becca nodded. "Nice," she said. "Not my scene exactly, but nice."

"Since I can't leave," Jamie said, "I want a say in who gets to visit. So either you wait till I'm ready to talk to you, or you take your chances on the death traps."

"Well. Looks like you're sitting pretty, then."

Jamie shrugged. Flames belched. "I'm getting bored with it. I might just wipe it all out and build another place to live in. I can't tell you the number of battles I've won, the number of kingdoms I've trampled. In this reality and others. It's all the same after a while." He looked at her. "You've grown."

“So have you.”

“Once the *paterfamilias* finally decided to allow it.” He smiled. “We still have dinner together sometimes, in the old house. Just a normal family, as Dad says. Except that sometimes I turn up in the form of a werewolf, or a giant, or something.”

“So they tell me.”

“The advantage of being software is that I can look like anything I want. But that’s the disadvantage, too, because I can’t really *become* something else, I’m still just ... me. I may wear another program as a disguise, but I’m still the same program inside, and I’m not a good enough programmer to mess with that, yet.” Jamie hopped off his throne, walked a nervous little circle around his sister. “So what brings you to the old neighborhood?” he asked. “The old folks said you were off visiting Aunt Maddy in the country.”

“*Exiled*, they mean. I got knocked up, and after the abortion they sent me to Maddy. She was supposed to keep me under control, except she didn’t.” She picked an invisible piece of lint from her sweater. “So now I’m back.” She looked at him. “I’m skipping a lot of the story, but I figure you wouldn’t be interested.”

“Does it have to do with sex?” Jamie asked. “I’m sort of interested in sex, even though I can’t do it, and they’re not likely to let me.”

“*Let you?*”

“It would require a lot of new software and stuff. I was prepubescent when my brain structures were scanned, and the program isn’t set up for making me a working adult, with adult desires et cetera. Nobody was thinking about putting me through adolescence at the time. And the administrators at the University told me that it was very unlikely that anyone was going to give them a grant so that a computer program could have sex.” Jamie shrugged. “I don’t miss it, I guess. But I’m sort of curious.”

Surprise crossed Becca’s face. “But there are all kinds of simulations, and...”

“They don’t work for me, because my mind isn’t structured so as to be able to achieve pleasure that way. I can manipulate the programs, but it’s about as exciting as working a virtual butter churn.” Jamie shrugged again. “But that’s okay. I mean, I don’t *miss* it. I can always give myself a jolt to the pleasure center if I want.”

“Not the same thing,” Becca said. “I’ve done both.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I’ll tell you about sex if you want,” Becca said, “but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Yes?”

Becca hesitated. Licked her lips. “I guess I should just say it, huh?” she said. “Mom’s dying. Pancreatic cancer.”

Jamie felt sadness well up in his mind. Only electrons, he thought, moving from one place to another. It was nothing real. He was programmed to feel an analog of sorrow, and that was all.

“She looks normal to me,” he said, “when I see her.” But that didn’t mean anything: his mother chose what she wanted him to see, just as he chose a mask – a werewolf, a giant – for her.

And in neither case did the disguise at all matter. For behind the werewolf was a program that couldn’t alter its parameters; and behind the other, ineradicable cancer.

Becca watched him from slitted eyes. “Dad wants her to be scanned, and come here. So we can still be a *normal family* even after she dies.”

Jamie was horrified. “Tell her *no*,” he said. “Tell her she can’t come!”

“I don’t think she wants to. But Dad is very insistent.”

“She’ll be here *forever!* It’ll be awful!”

Becca looked around. “Well, she wouldn’t do much for your Dark Lord act, that’s for sure. I’m sure Sauron’s mom didn’t hang around the Dark Tower, nagging him about the unproductive way he was spending his time.”

Fires belched. The ground trembled. Stalactites rained down like arrows.

“That’s not it,” Jamie said. “She doesn’t want to be here no matter what I’m doing, no matter where I live. Because whatever this place looks like, it’s a prison.” Jamie looked at his sister. “I don’t want my mom in a prison.”

Leaping flames glittered in Becca’s eyes. “You can change the world you live in,” she said. “That’s more than I can do.”

“But I can’t,” Jamie said. “I can change the way it *looks*, but I can’t change anything *real*. I’m a program, and a program is an *artifact*. I’m a piece of *engineering*. I’m a simulation, with simulated sensory organs that interact with simulated environments – I can only interact with *other artifacts*. *None* of it’s real. I don’t know what the real world looks or feels or tastes like, I only know what simulations tell me they’re *supposed* to taste like. And I can’t change any of my parameters unless I mess with the engineering, and I can’t do that unless the programmers agree, and even when that happens, I’m still as artificial as I was before. And the computer I’m in is old and clunky, and soon nobody’s going to run my operating system any more, and I’ll not only be an artifact, I’ll be a museum piece.”

“There are other artificial intelligences out there,” Becca said. “I keep hearing about them.”

“I’ve talked to them. Most of them aren’t very interesting – it’s like talking to a dog, or maybe to very intelligent microwave oven. And they’ve scanned some people in, but those were adults, and all they wanted to do, once they got inside, was to escape. Some of them went crazy.”

Becca gave a twisted smile. “I used to be so jealous of you, you know. You lived in this beautiful world, no pollution, no violence, no shit on the streets.”

Flames belched.

“*Integra mens augustissima possessio*,” said Cicero.

“Shut up!” Jamie told him. “What the fuck do you know?”

Becca shook her head. “I’ve seen those old movies, you know? Where somebody gets turned into a computer program, and next thing you know he’s in every computer in the world, and running everything?”

“I’ve seen those, too. Ha ha. Very funny. Shows you what people know about programs.”

“Yeah. Shows you what they know.”

“I’ll talk to Mom,” Jamie said.

Big tears welled out of Mom’s eyes and trailed partway down her face, then disappeared. The scanners paid a lot of attention to eyes and mouths, for the sake of transmitting expression, but didn’t always pick up the things between.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We didn’t think this is how it would be.”

“Maybe you should have given it more thought,” Jamie said.

It isn’t sorrow, he told himself again. It’s just electrons moving.

“You were such a beautiful baby.” Her lower lip trembled. “We didn’t want to lose you. They said that it would only be a few years before they could implant your memories in a clone.”

Jamie knew all that by now. Knew that the technology of reading memories turned out to be much, much simpler than implanting them – it had been discovered that the implantation had to be made while the brain was actually growing. And government restrictions on human cloning had made tests next to impossible, and that the team that had started his project had split up years ago, some to higher-paying jobs, some retired, others to pet projects of their own. How his father had long ago used up whatever pull he’d had at the University trying to keep everything together. And how he long ago had acquired or purchased patents and copyrights for the whole scheme, except for Jamie’s program, which was still owned jointly by the University and the family.

Tears reappeared on Mom’s lower face, dripped off her chin. “There’s potentially a lot of money at stake, you know. People want to raise perfect children. Keep them away from bad influences, make sure that they’re raised free from violence.”

“So they want to control the kid’s entire environment,” Jamie said.

“Yes. And make it *safe*. And wholesome. And –”

“Just like *normal family life*,” Jamie finished. “No diapers, no vomit, no messes. No having to interact with the kid when the parents are tired. And then you just download the kid into an adult body, give him a diploma, and kick him out of the house. And call yourself a perfect parent.”

“And there are *religious people*...” Mom licked her lips. “Your Dad’s been talking to them. They want to raise children in environments that reflect their beliefs completely. Places where there is no temptation, no sin. No science or ideas that contradict their own...”

“But Dad isn’t religious,” Jamie said.

“These people have money. Lots of money.”

Mom reached out, took his hand. Jamie thought about all the code that enabled her to do it, that enabled them both to feel the pressure of unreal flesh on unreal flesh.

“I’ll do what you wish, of course,” she said. “I don’t have that desire for immortality, the way your father does.” She shook her head. “But I don’t know what your father will do once his time comes.”

The world was a disk a hundred meters across, covered with junk: old Roman ruins, gargoyles fallen from a castle wall, a broken chariot, a shattered bell. Outside the rim of the world, the sky was black, utterly black, without a ripple or a star.

Standing in the center of the world was a kind of metal tree with two forked, jagged arms.

“Hi, Digit,” Becca said.

A dull fitful light gleamed on the metal tree, as if it were reflecting a bloody sunset.

“Hi, sis,” it said.

“Well,” Becca said. “We’re alone now.”

“I caught the notice of Dad’s funeral. I hope nobody missed me.”

“I missed you, Digit.” Becca sighed. “Believe it or not.”

“I’m sorry.”

Becca restlessly kicked a piece of junk, a hub-cap from an old, miniature car. It clanged as it found new lodgement in the rubble. “Can you appear as a person?” she asked. “It would make it easier to talk to you.”

“I’ve finished with all that,” Jamie said. “I’d have to resurrect too much dead programming. I’ve cut the world down to next to nothing, I’ve got rid of my body, my heartbeat, the sense of touch.”

“All the human parts,” Becca said sadly.

The dull red light oozed over the metal tree like a drop of blood. “Everything except sleep and dreams. It turns out that sleep and dreams have too much to do with the way people process memory. I can’t get rid of them, not without cutting out too much of my mind.” The tree gave a strange, disembodied laugh. “I dreamed about you, the other day. And about Cicero. We were talking Latin.”

“I’ve forgotten all the Latin I ever knew.” Becca tossed her hair, forced a laugh. “So what do you do nowadays?”

“Mostly I’m a conduit for data. The University has been using me as a research spider, which I don’t mind doing, because it passes the time. Except that I take up a lot more memory than any real search spider, and don’t do that much better a job. And the information I find doesn’t have much to do with *me* – it’s all about the real world. The world I can’t touch.” The metal tree bled color.

“Mostly,” he said, “I’ve just been waiting for Dad to die. And now it’s happened.”

There was a moment of silence before Becca spoke. “You know that Dad had himself scanned before he went.”

“Oh yeah. I knew.”

“He set up some kind of weird foundation that I’m not part of, with his patents and programs and so on, and his money and some other people’s.”

“He’d better not turn up here.”

Becca shook her head. “He won’t. Not without your permission, anyway. Because I’m in charge here. You – your program – it’s not a part of the foundation. Dad couldn’t get it all, because the University has an interest, and so does the family.” There was a moment of silence. “And I’m the family now.”

“So you...*inherited* me,” Jamie said. Cold scorn dripped from his words.

“That’s right,” Becca said. She squatted down amid the rubble, rested her forearms on her knees.

“What do you want me to do, Digit? What can I do to make it better for you?”

“No one ever asked me that,” Jamie said.

There was another long silence.

“Shut it off,” Jamie said. “Close the file. Erase it.”

Becca swallowed hard. Tears shimmered in her eyes. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“And if they ever perfect the clone thing? If we could make you...” She took a breath. “A person?”

“No. It’s too late. It’s...not something I can want any more.”

Becca stood. Ran a hand through her hair. “I wish you could meet my daughter,” she said. “Her name is Christy. She’s a real beauty.”

“You can bring her,” Jamie said.

Becca shook her head. “This place would scare her. She’s only three. I’d only bring her if we could have...”

“The old environment,” Jamie finished. “Pandaland. Mister Jeepers. Whirlikin Country.”

Becca forced a smile. “Those were happy days,” she said. “They really were. I was jealous of you, I know, but when I look back at that time...” She wiped tears with the back of her hand. “It was the best.”

“Virtual environments are nice places to visit, I guess,” Jamie said. “But you don’t want to live in one. Not forever.” Becca looked down at her feet, planted amid rubble.

“Well,” she said. “If you’re sure about what you want.”

“I am.”

She looked up at the metal form, raised a hand. “Goodbye, Jamie,” she said.

“Goodbye,” he said.

She faded from the world.

And in time, the world and the tree faded, too.

Hand in hand, Daddy and Jamie walked to Whirlikin Country. Jamie had never seen the Whirlikins before, and he laughed and laughed as the Whirlikins spun beneath their orange sky.

The sound of a bell rang over the green hills. “Time for dinner, Jamie,” Daddy said.

Jamie waved goodbye to the Whirlikins, and he and Daddy walked briskly over the fresh green grass toward home.

“Are you happy, Jamie?” Daddy asked.

“Yes, Daddy!” Jamie nodded. “I only wish Momma and Becky could be here with us.”

“They’ll be here soon.”

When, he thought, they can get the simulations working properly.

Because this time, he thought, there would be no mistakes. The foundation he’d set up before he died had finally purchased the University’s interest in Jamie’s program – they funded some scholarships, that was all it finally took. There was no one in the Computer Department who had an interest any more.

Jamie had been loaded from an old backup—there was no point in using the corrupt file that Jamie had become, the one that had turned itself into a *tree*, for heaven’s sake.

The old world was up and running, with a few improvements. The foundation had bought their own computer – an old one, so it wasn't too expensive – that would run the environment full time. Some other children might be scanned, to give Jamie some playmates and peer socialization.

This time it would work, Daddy thought. Because this time, Daddy was a program too, and he was going to be here every minute, making sure that the environment was correct and that everything went exactly according to plan. That he and Jamie and everyone else had a normal family life, perfect and shining and safe.

And if the clone program ever worked out, they would come into the real world again. And if downloading into clones was never perfected, then they would stay here.

There was nothing wrong with the virtual environment. It was a *good* place.

Just like normal family life. Only forever.

And when this worked out, the foundation's backers – fine people, even if they did have some strange religious ideas – would have their own environments up and running. With churches, angels, and perhaps even the presence of God...

“Look!” Daddy said, pointing. “It's Mister Jeepers!”

Mister Jeepers flew off the rooftop and spun happy spirals in the air as he swooped toward Jamie. Jamie dropped Daddy's hand and ran laughing to greet his friend.

“Jamie's home!” Mister Jeepers cried. “Jamie's home at last!”