

Inside Story
by Albert E. Cowdrey

Seven years ago, Albert Cowdrey showed us one of the weirder sides of New Orleans in “Queen for a Day.” That story, which first appeared in our Oct/Nov. 2001 issue and is currently posted on our Website, won the World Fantasy Award.

Three years ago, Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans and changed everything ... including the lives of Detectives Fournet and Tobin. Read on and see if those changes are for the better.

By the way, as of this writing, reports suggest that about 500 families displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are still living in FEMA trailers.

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Tough as he was, retired Detective Sergeant Alphonse Fournet admitted that he hadn't been able to handle the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

“Living in Alabama for a month,” he grouched to Chief of Detectives D. J. Tobin. “Wunnerful folks, but how they live! Frying ham in lard. Alla time asking me what choich I belong to. They had a *prayer vigil*, for Chrissake, to apologize to God for pissing him off enough to hit us with Katrina. It's like that guy Cheney shot apologizing for getting in the way of the birdshot.”

It was noon at Ya Momma's Bar & Grill, and succulent aromas filled the air. Tobin, who was picking up the tab, listened patiently but sympathized only to a point.

“You didn't lose your house or nothing, right, Alphonse?”

“I live in Algiers,” said Fournet, as if that were sufficient explanation for his good fortune. “The west bank is the best bank. You oughta loin that, D. J., now you gotta wife and kids to proteck.”

“Maybe I'll think about it. We ain't moving back in the Ninth Ward, I can tell you that. Neighborhood ain't there no more. Traneesha and the kids're still in Houston. She's got 'em in school, and—it's funny, you know? In Texas they expect kids to loin something, even in public school. I always figured public school was just a place where you put kids so's they wouldn't run the streets.”

He paused for a moment while they both meditated on the alien lands

that surrounded them. Then Tobin said, “Okay, we’re all caught up. Now let’s get down to business.”

Fournet held up his right hand, palm flat, like a cop stopping traffic. “Lemme tell you sump’m foist, D. J. It’s nice of you to invite me for lunch, but I ain’t going back to woik, no matter what.”

“What if your city needs you?”

“For what? To help catch some druggies been shooting other druggies? Gimme a break.”

“Nah,” shrugged D. J. “That’s just the self-cleaning oven at woik. Can’t say it in public, but the only useful thing those guys do is kill each other off. No, what I’m talking about is real human people disappearing. Like *phht*. We don’t need no more of that. Besides twelve hundred and something drowned and otherwise dead, the city lost two hundred thousand live ones moved to elsewhere after the flood. We can’t stand to lose no more.”

At this point an elderly man attired in a dirty apron and liver spots shuffled up and deposited on the table two frosty Turbodogs and an enormous bowl of crawfish étouffée. Fournet seized a dented spoon and set to work with gusto.

“Don’tcha know those mudbugs are solid cholesterol?” frowned D. J. He was brown-bagging, and sounded envious.

“You wanna live forever, or you wanna live?”

“Traneesha wants me to be there and still breathing when the kids graduate.”

“So, your wife’s watching you by satellite, or what?”

After brief meditation, D. J. pushed his brown bag away and called out, “Waiter, make it two crawfish.”

That afternoon, back home on Laissez les Bons Temps Rouler Drive, Algiers, Fournet discussed D. J.’s proposal with his wife, Alma. “He says people been disappearing out the FEMA trailer parks, and he wants me to check it out.”

Alma muted Oprah and thought the proposal over. “Well, normally I’d say trailer trash is trailer trash, and who cares? But today, anybody can be

trailer trash. If the Pope lived in Noo Awlyunz, *he* might be trailer trash.”

Together they kicked the proposal around. What impressed Alma was D. J.’s comment on the state of the city.

“We gotta get things back on their feet,” she decided. “Like it is, we ain’t no city no more, we’re a goddamn a-toll. Island One, everything’s fine. Island Two, everybody’s missing. Island Three, no island at all. This can’t go on. We need our people back.”

“Well, maybe I’ll do it. The department’s so short-handed, they even got a use for old fat guys like me.”

“Right. They want you at Tulane and Broad, and I don’t want you around the house supervising me like you been doing. One more piece of good advice outta you, Alphonse, I’m a put Drano in your gumbo. So get your wide butt to work and do something useful for a change.”

This connubial advice settled the matter.

* * * *

On his first day as a Special Deputy, Fournet received a temporary ID, a badge, and an unmarked police car, and set out to visit a Seventh Ward trailer park housing people made homeless by the storm.

The trailers were all small and white and as alike as ice cubes from the same tray. A rent-a-cop seated on a camp stool by the only gate in an encircling six-foot cyclone fence directed him to the dwelling of Mr. Alvin Joule Palumbo.

The door was answered by an undershirted man of middle age who backed deeper into the trailer and invited the detective to follow him.

“So this is what a FEMA trailer’s like,” said Fournet, wedging his belly through the door. “It’s uh, compact, I guess the word is.”

“F’sure,” said Palumbo. “Where else can you sit on the terlet, fry an egg and watch TV, all at the same time?”

“So, you contacted the po-leece about a missing neighbor?”

“Yeah. That was a week ago. What you all been up to in the meantime?”

“Fightin’ crime,” said Fournet, though without conviction. “Tell me about this neighbor of yours.”

“Her name’s Miz Zeringue.”

“Zerang,” muttered Fournet, hauling out his notebook.

“Spelled Z-E-R-I-N-G-U-E. Don’t ask me why.”

Fournet wet the tip of a pencil stub on his tongue and inscribed the name. “So she’s been missing a week?”

“More like two. I mean, nobody knows each other in this damn place, and if she hadn’t been a good neighbor and brought me a bowl of toitle zoop when I had the flu, I wouldn’ta noticed she was gone at all. I went to retoin her bowl (you know how ladies are about their kitchenware) and when she didn’t answer the door I put it down on the step and left. But after it sat there for three days, I got worried about her and asked the guard to check out her trailer. When we seen it was empty and her milk was sour, I called the po-leece.”

He added darkly, “I think her disappearing had something to do with the thirteenth trailer.”

“The what?”

“You happen to count how many trailers are in this row?”

“No. The guard just said, ‘End a the row is Mr. Palumbo,’ so I never counted.”

“Well, there’s twelve. Only the night she musta disappeared on, there was thirteen. And don’t look at me like I’m nuts, neither. I’m a grown-up man, I don’t use dope, I don’t drink no more than I have to to get along with my wife and daughter in Jackson and me living in a sardine can trying to oin a living while I sue the goddamn Friendly Neighbor Insurance Company that wants us to take \$3,034.59 in settlement of a hundred-thousand-dollar claim.”

He paused for breath.

“Anyway, that night I woiked late at Home Depot, and come back about ten o’clock and just automatically stopped at number twelve. And

yeah, I noticed there was another trailer beyond it at the end of the row, but I thought, well, today they musta brung in another one. Meanwhile I was trying to open the door, only my key wooden toin the lock. Then this voice inside says, 'Whozat messing round with my door?'

"I said, 'Your door! I live here.' With that the door opens, and it's the black guy lives next door and he's got him a butcher knife in his hand and he says, 'Mr. Palumbo! Whatchoo want this time a night? I thought you was a boiglar.' I apologized and went to the last trailer, and that toined out to be mine. So I figured the new trailer must be someplace in the middle of the row, though how they squeezed it in without disconnecting and moving all the others I couldn't figure. And next morning when I counted again, there was only twelve trailers just like always. I guess," he added resentfully, "you don't believe me."

But Fournet—recollecting a case he and D. J. had worked, involving a necklace that behaved like a boa constrictor—was better than Palumbo thought at believing the unbelievable. He said slowly, "This Miz Whatsit. She woiks late too?"

Palumbo nodded vigorously. "At Rite-Aid. They lost so many employees she double-shifts lotsa days to make money to pay a lawyer so she can sue *her* insurance company."

"Then if the new trailer was right next to hers, she might of walked into it by mistake?"

"You quick on the uptake," said Palumbo gratefully. "She mighta found the door on the new trailer unlocked and thought, 'Whoa! Did I forget to push the button?' So she stepped inside, and that was when they grabbed her."

"They who?"

"They whoever. You wanna beer?"

"Why not?"

"Well, if you back out the door just a second and gimme some space, I'll get one for you."

In the hours that followed, Fournet visited three more trailer parks where residents had disappeared. The missing included a construction worker named Harry J. Symms, a beignet cook named Mary Margaret

Trudeau, and an aspiring rap artist whose real name was Bill Snyder but who called himself Bluddy Slawta.

Harry's roommates were deeply concerned about him, and Mary Margaret's co-workers wanted to offer a \$500 reward for her safe return. Bluddy Slawta's neighbors begged Fournet not to return him if he were found, and after listening on an iPod to the artist's latest, "Ho's and Bitches Need to Die," Fournet heartily agreed.

Sunset had arrived with a saffron sky and hysterical traffic was clogging all the main arteries of the city when Fournet, heading home to Algiers, heard the opening chords of "Blueberry Hill" erupting from his cell phone. (The cop car's radio had perished during Katrina and had never been replaced.)

Fournet popped the gadget open and glued it to one ear, meantime steering onto an Expressway onramp. "Yeah? *Watch out, Butthead!*"

"What?" The voice was D. J.'s.

"People don't know how to drive no more. I'd like to run that character in. Talking on a goddamn phone while he's driving the freeway."

"So are you."

"Yeah, but I'm doing my duty. What's up?"

"That foist lady on your list. What her name was again?"

"Zerang. Z-E-R-I-N-G-U-E, Zerang."

"Well, she been found. She was wandering around in the flooded area out by Paris Road. I don't mean it's flooded now, but it was flooded bad, and it's still empty except for the wreckage. Some National Guard guys on a routine patrol looking for looters spotted her and brung her in."

"She okay?"

"Yes and no. She's alive, and she wasn't mugged or raped. But she had her clothes on backwards."

"What?"

"Shoit and pants next to her skin, bra and panties on the outside. Her

clothes were inside out, too—also her shoes. And she’s talking in reverse.”

“Whatchoo mean, in reverse?”

“You got a bad connection? By in reverse I mean in reverse. At Judah Touro when they asked her how she was feeling, she said, ‘Won doog leef I, doog lear.’ Took ‘em a while to figure out she was saying, ‘I feel good now, real good.’ I mean, she wasn’t babbling or nothing, she seemed like a nice sensible lady, just politely talking to them, only in reverse.”

Fournet sighed. Another screwball case. “She’s still at Touro?”

“Yeah. Let her rest tonight, check her out tomorra morning. Okay, Alphonse?”

When Fournet reached home, Alma was tasting a bubbling caldron of red beans and Cajun sausage. Frowning critically, she added a hefty dash of Tabasco and asked, “So where you was at today?”

“On some of the other islands,” he said, and popped his first Turbodog of the evening. After one swallow, he added, “It’s wild out there.”

* * * *

The interview took place in a comfortable solarium of Touro Hospital.

Mabel Zeringue turned out to be a plump widow of forty-six with a cap of neat brown hair just starting to gray, and missing contacts that caused her to lean and peer at Fournet as he questioned her. She was wearing clean pajamas and a blue wrapper that Mr. Palumbo had brought her from the trailer park, so that she wouldn’t have to be interrogated wearing the paper doily provided by the hospital.

To Fournet’s relief, overnight she’d recovered the ability to speak in the usual manner.

“They tell me I was kind of incoherent yesterday,” she admitted. “I just don’t remember. I do remember those nice Guardsmen picking me up. One of them looked a lot like my Alvin, who’s in Eye-rack.”

“You gotta boy in the service?”

“No, he’s with Boots and Coots. They fix oil wells and pipelines after the insurgents blow them up. They all pretty busy, them.”

Fournet forbore to ask whether she meant the insurgents or the repairmen, assuming that—since they made work for each other—both must be active. Instead, he zeroed in on the subject of the interview.

“I hear you was missing from your trailer for a while, Miz Zeringue. You remember anything about that?”

She frowned. “No, I really don’t. I remember my trailer was unlocked one night, and that scared me a little. I thought about going back for the guard, but then I thought, ‘Oh heck, I been so tired, I bet I just forgot to lock it.’ So I went in. And the next thing I remember, I was walking down this blacktop road, feeling kind of, you know, disorientated, and then the National Guard came by. I asked them how I got there, but they didn’t seem to understand me.”

The interview continued for another fifteen minutes without turning up anything solid. Except for one thing—last night she’d had a bad dream in which somebody named Evert (“You know, like Chris Evert, only he didn’t pronounce it right”) had been coming to do something that scared her. But she woke up before he got around to it, whatever *it* was.

“What this Evert looked like?” Fournet inquired.

“I never actually saw him. I just heard this creepy voice say he was coming.”

“Creepy voice, huh?”

“Sort of cold and dead. You know, like the voice on the phone that says, ‘Your call is *very* important to us.’”

Before exiting the hospital, Fournet spoke to the harried-looking psychiatric resident who’d examined Mrs. Zeringue. He confessed that the case puzzled him.

“I figured she must have had an episode of stress-induced amnesia. Lots of stressed-out people wandering around these days. But she was missing for two weeks, so that explanation washes out. Oh, she’s amnesic all right, but the case is totally atypical. Barring a brain injury or tumor that doesn’t seem to exist, amnesia shouldn’t last that long. I just don’t know what happened to her. That business of talking backward—that really got me. Yet her CT scan’s normal. In fact, everything’s normal, except—”

“Except what?”

“Well, besides talking backward, she kept clearing her throat. An ENT checked, and there was a small amount of bruising inside her trachea, about what you’d get from having an endoscopy.”

He explained the term, then hurried off about his business, which seemed to consist of nothing but crises.

At noon Fournet again joined D. J. for lunch at Ya Momma’s. To the hovering waiter, who since yesterday had changed his apron but kept his liver spots, he said, “Shrimp po’boy, large size, dressed, with extra mynez.”

Having made sure that D. J. would get his money’s worth when he paid for the lunch, Fournet took out his notebook and reported everything he’d learned about the missing people, the thirteenth trailer, and so forth. At the conclusion he grouched, “I might of known you’d hand me something wacko.”

“Ain’t nobody better than you, Alphonse, when it comes to wacko cases,” D. J. assured him. “So whatchoo gonna do next?”

They discussed the question while downing two Turbodogs each. Then the food arrived. While D. J. nibbled his relatively modest oyster loaf, Fournet used Tabasco and ketchup to complete a monster sandwich comprising a halved French loaf, twenty-four large fried shrimp, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and gobs and gobs of extra mayonnaise. Then he devoured it all, down to the last flake of crust.

His meal would have left an anaconda inert for a month. Fournet, on the contrary, felt ideas beginning to percolate the more he ate. *That comes*, he told himself, *from eating brain food*, and he resolved to ask Alma to fry him a half-dozen catfish for dinner. Finally he spoke.

“You asked me what I was gonna do next.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Right now, I’m gonna go home and have me a nap. Good food desoives to settle. Then this evening after dinner, I’m gonna go out and visit trailer parks. One by one them rent-a-cops are gonna walk around with me and count their goddamn trailers, and if they find an extra, I’m gonna walk into it and see what I find.”

“Well, you be sure and take your personal Glock.”

D. J. specified *personal* because Fournet, as a mere Special Deputy, wasn't authorized an official firearm. D. J. had, however, gotten him a concealed-weapons permit.

“Wouldn't leave home without it,” Fournet assured him.

D. J. ordered a last beer for each of them, and when the bottles arrived, raised his and toasted Fournet. “Whenever the young guys at Headquarters ask me where I loined po-leecing, I tell 'em I had me a great partner who taught me everything I know.”

Fournet was not embarrassed by the praise. He merely acknowledged the salute by raising his own Turbodog. Facts were, after all, facts.

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The first four parks yielded nothing but the glaring tedium of white cubes under vapor lamps. It was in the Seventh Ward, in the same park where Mrs. Zeringue had lived, that a new rent-a-cop—a glum, somewhat toadlike gent named Scramuzza, wearing the uniform and shoulder patch of the Junkyard Dog Protective Service—reluctantly counted his trailers, and came up with one extra.

“Now how the hell that got in here?” he demanded.

Fournet might have said something about fishermen who like to return to spots where they've had a bite before, but instead decided to get rid of the guard. Uniform or not, shoulder patch or not, to him the guy was a civilian, and therefore by definition worse than useless if for any reason things got rough.

He said, “Maybe you better get back and watch the gate. We don't need no strangers waltzing in to complicate things.”

He watched Scramuzza waddle away, staging a kind of flicker-on, flicker-off departure as he vanished into the ebon shadows of trailers and reappeared in the shafts of cold light between. Then Fournet turned back to the trailer in question. It looked exactly like any other FEMA trailer except, as Scramuzza had pointed out, that it lacked the essential power and water and sewer hookups, and was therefore unfit for human habitation.

He checked and reholstered the Glock under his armpit, climbed the two metal steps to the door, and touched the knob. It turned smoothly, the door opened, and he stepped into—or rather, as he discovered, *through*—a panel of darkness. A sudden flare of intense light forced him to blink, and when his eyes opened—

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He was standing on an immense plain, sandy and painfully bright, even though no sun was visible. Far off, dust-devils whirled and dispersed, formed again and repeated their dance into oblivion. Like them, Fournet did a slow rotation, finding no trace of the trailer—or anything else—except more dust and sunless light.

Confronted with such a backflip in reality, a man of earlier times would have gone into fits. But Fournet—both a cop and a survivor of the Twentieth Century—had been programmed all his life to expect miracles, especially unpleasant ones. True, his heartbeat rose and his palms felt slick, but he ordered himself to calm down. He thought he knew where he was.

“Now how,” he demanded, “did I get to Roswell Frigging New Mexico?”

He was still awaiting an answer to this question when a shining cube emerged from the ground, shedding sand and dust and taking form as a penthouse like the one at the top of an elevator shaft.

Two gleaming metal doors opened, and a small personage stepped out. With a bobbing walk that caused him to flounce his gleaming cloak of emerald feathers, he approached Fournet and paused, cocking his head with its two button-bright eyes first to one side, then the other. A flexible extension resembling a beak opened, and a lilting, bubbly voice not unlike the liquid accents of a mockingbird emerged.

“Fear not,” piped the creature. “You have entered a civilized realm where it will be your great joy to assist the progress of science. You may call me Mr. Green.”

“What else?” muttered Fournet.

So he wasn't in Roswell. He took a deep breath and argued down a moment of rising panic. He told himself that, yeah, being a victim of alien abduction wasn't exactly lunch at Ya Momma's, but it wasn't inconceivable, either. In fact, it was a lot like late-night TV, just better colorized.

This reflection stopped him from shooting Mr. Green—Fournet’s usual response to the unexpected—and yet things were sufficiently disturbing to make him slide his fat right hand under his two-button wash ‘n’ wear jacket, grip his Glock, snap off the strap covering the holster with his thumb, and prepare to open fire at the first sign of trouble.

“Please to step this way, my good sir,” the creature was burbling along. “Our building is the most prominent in this great city.”

Again Fournet searched the vacant distance, looking for the great city but not finding it. Mr. Green proceeded to clear things up.

“It extends some ninety-seven stories down, and its architecture is generally admired. I must apologize for bringing you in via the basement, but do not despair. You are bound for a brief stay in gleaming laboratories where comfortable, fully anesthetized experimentation upon your body will help us prepare yet another entry for our great online encyclopedia, *Anatomy and Physiology of Five Hundred More or Less Intelligent Species*. Pray step this way.”

“Whoa!” thundered Fournet in his best cop voice—abrupt, gravelly and intimidating. The limits of Mr. Green’s command of English immediately became apparent.

“Woe? Woe is you? Do not feel that way, good sir. You will be returned exactly to your point of departure, unharmed and with all incongruous memories erased.”

“Not woe,” said Fournet with disgust. “*Whoa*, like stop. Foist of all, you don’t really retain people to where they come from. You put Miz Zeringue ten miles away where she coulda been mugged or raped, except that the muggers and rapists from that neighborhood all got flooded out, so they still in Houston and Little Rock.”

“Oh dear,” said Mr. Green. From the cloak of feathers emerged two damp-looking seven-toed hands, which he began wringing. “Oh dear, oh dear. We must have drifted from our coordinates. How terribly blush-making.”

Despite the enormous disadvantages Fournet faced—finding himself in another world, dimension and/or universe—the cop suddenly felt a surge of confidence. Whatever in the hell else he might be, Mr. Green was a wimp.

Fournet took a menacing step forward. “And I ain’t here to assist your goddamn encyclopedia.” He pulled out his temporary ID with his left hand and flashed his badge. “I’m here in an official capacity, see? I represent the, uh—”

Chief of Detectives didn’t seem impressive enough, and mayor, governor, president—even Rex, King of Carnival—seemed somehow to fall short when dealing with aliens.

“I represent the *Emperor*,” he averred, “and he wants to know what the hell you thinking about, snatching his subjects without his permission.”

“Oh dear,” said Mr. Green for the third time, and wrapped his arms around his upper body. Though probably a mere instinctive self-protective gesture, the move caused Fournet more alarm than any threat could have. Plump as Mr. Green was, his pale thin forearms wrapped seven times around him.

“Jeeeeeesus Key-rist,” Fournet muttered. “A four-foot-high parakeet made of rubber bands. I never seen nothing like that, even on *Dr. Who*. What the hell I’m a put in my report, assuming I ever get to make a report? They’ll think I’m nuts at Tulane and Broad.”

But that was no reason to let Green off the hook. Taking a deep breath, Fournet again stepped forward, forcing himself almost into the alien’s spongy beak. Glaring down at him, he barked, “Well?”

“I must,” the creature warbled weakly, “take you to our Official Spokesman, whose mastery of your primitive yet complex tongue will enable him to explain the situation far better than I.”

“About frigging time somebody did,” growled Fournet, and allowed himself to be bowed into the shining cube.

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The elevator had a very peculiar motion. At times it seemed to be moving sideways, and there was at one point a loop-de-loop feeling, after which Fournet found that down had become up—or, at any rate, that his head rather than his feet was now leading the way toward his destination.

The shining doors opened on a kaleidoscope of senseless patterns, which spun, righted, and resolved themselves into a room somewhat like

the behind-the-counter workspace of Fong's X-Quisite Hand Laundry in Algiers. A stainless-steel track hung from the ceiling, along which bundles wrapped in translucent plastic moved from right to left at a slow but steady pace.

The conveyor halted, and from between two bundles emerged a being that looked somewhat human, though only in the limited sense that a porcelain figurine looks like a shepherdess. Unlike Mr. Green, who—whatever else he might be—was clearly a living creature, the faux human spoke in a manufactured voice exactly (as Mrs. Zeringue had said) like the telephone voices that offer callers a menu that never quite meets their needs.

"You wish to enter a complaint?" it asked. Mr. Green stepped back a pace, happy to let the android (or whatever it was) field Fournet's wrath.

"Yeah. I do." Fournet then repeated his line about the wrathful emperor.

"What is your emperor's name?"

"Bush the Second."

"The name is not unfamiliar. However, we have almost completed our studies and contacting him now would be superfluous."

Fournet hardly registered the refusal. He was staring at the now motionless bundles, and suddenly demanded, "*Hey! Are those people?*"

"Some of them."

"Look—what the hell is your name—"

"You can call me Mr. White."

"Well, White," said Fournet, drawing his Glock, "you got about six seconds to try and convince me you ain't running a slaughterhouse here."

"These entities," said Mr. White, gesturing at the bundles with a cool white porcelain hand, "are not dead. They have merely been everted—that is to say, turned inside out—and packaged in an anesthetic solution whilst awaiting examination."

"Oh well, that makes it okay," said Fournet, with heavy irony. "So

whatchoo been everting people inside out for anyway?”

“It makes their anatomy and physiology so much easier for our scientists to study. Following examination, they are reverted and returned unharmed to preset coordinates in their own sector of the multiverse.”

Fournet received this information with the incredulity of a bellboy gazing at a dollar tip. “How you can turn people inside out without killing them?” he demanded.

“The bubble universe in which we reside is a nine-dimensional topological space where such eversion is possible, indeed routine, because of the perfect elasticity of what I suppose you would describe as ‘matter.’ The relative rigidity of your universe was at first quite confusing to us. In an early experiment we tried to evert a brahma bull through his posterior aperture, and as a result our laboratory had to be rebuilt practically from the ground down.

“Fortunately, we have learned from our first crude efforts, and have now refined our technique. As a courtesy to Bush the Second,” Mr. White went on, “I will introduce you to a recent acquisition, so that you can see he is quite unharmed.”

White gestured, a trapdoor appeared to open in midair, and a young man thumped down on the floor. He sat up, evidently dazed, and Fournet had leisure to note the F-word tattooed in Gothic lettering on his forehead, the varicolored plugs and rings inserted into his lips and ears, and his dreadlocks splashed randomly with bleach. He wore clothing pre-dirtied and pre-torn by the manufacturer, including clown pants with the waist adorning his crotch and crotch embracing his knees. His underpants had apparently been made from the altar cloth of a desecrated church—at any rate, they bore the inscription IHS. His T-shirt read *bluddy slawta*.

“Oh shit, it’s a effing cop,” groaned Bluddy. “Every effing place I go there’s effing cops, even effing here!”

White very properly ignored him. “And this is our everter, Grot.”

Out of the shadows advanced an organism that, like the duck-billed platypus or the Compassionate Conservative, appeared improbable at first glance and still more improbable at second glance. Seemingly an uneasy cross between a very large chicken and the business end of a squid, Grot grasped the floor with skinny four-toed feet, while his five sucker-laden tentacles spread and writhed. Four small golden eyes like the brass buttons

on an expensive blazer gazed at Fournet without expression.

Bluddy continued to babble, even though nobody was paying attention. “Eff aliens, eff cops, eff every effing thing,” he declared, in a passionate statement of his basic philosophy of life. But to enunciate it in Fournet’s presence was a mistake.

“Why don’tcha,” the cop suggested to Mr. White, “tell Grot to show me how he does it? On this guy here, for instance.”

Mr. White gestured commandingly. Bluddy let out a yelp, which was unwise, because Grot seized the opportunity to shove a tentacle down his throat. After a long moment filled with gargling sounds, Grot everted the rapper with one smooth yank.

“Soitny see what *he’s* made of,” murmured Fournet, noting the rapper’s shrunken heart, diseased liver, and swollen spleen.

Meanwhile Grot plucked a transparent sack of anesthetic goo seemingly out of midair and dropped the rapper in. Another stage-magician pass with an unemployed tentacle caused the appearance of a small, gleaming mechanism that he ran along the top of the sack, sealing it with a hiss and the smell of seared plastic. Finally, he hung the bundle from an alligator clamp on the track. The track gave a lurch, and the parade of everted beings moved slowly on to whatever awaited them in the laboratory.

Anxiously, Mr. Green asked Fournet, “You perhaps find the process moderately sick-making?”

“Not after all the raw ersters I’ve ate. I guess Bluddy’s clothes and shoes are inside out, too?”

“I presume you refer to the coverings, exterior, artificial, with which your species comes so strangely equipped?”

“Yeah. Them.”

“I suppose so,” shrugged Mr. Green. “As a life scientist, I am not concerned with artifacts.”

Fournet had about two dozen more questions to ask, but putting them into words presented an unexpected problem. Suddenly he’d begun to feel unwell.

He did manage to ask Mr. Green why he'd selected New Orleans for his fishing trip, and when he was going to quit snatching its already battered citizens. In reply, Green launched into a warbling disquisition, the basic idea being that disaster sites always made good places to look for laboratory subjects because with lots of people gone a few more were seldom missed, and—

And something. By now Fournet was feeling definitely uncomfortable, as if a large fist was slowly closing on his insides. Were the aliens attacking him? He stared at Grot, but all the everter's tentacles appeared to be unoccupied. Mr. White had withdrawn a few steps and sunk into statue-like immobility. Green was, of course, babbling away, though only a word here, a word there, really came through anymore.

Then really strange things started happening. The X-Quisite Hand Laundry broke up into the kaleidoscopic mess it had been originally. Grot multiplied into five or six images revolving around each other in a Ferris wheel effect. White turned inside out, showing that he was exactly the same within as without. Green's feathers each grew a staring golden eye, like the tail of a peacock.

They messing with my mind, thought Fournet. He raised his Glock and, like a cross-eyed man trying to aim at the moving figures in a shooting gallery, squeezed off a round each at Green, at White, and at Grot. But the shots sounded more like the clash of tinny cymbals than honest explosions and the bullets, instead of doing damage, drifted lazily and quite visibly into orbits around the three aliens.

For just an instant Fournet wondered if his problem was internal—if the stress of being abducted had finally sealed shut the last minuscule openings in the arteries he'd spent decades blocking with mayonnaise and fried stuff. Of course, he instantly rejected the notion that his lifestyle might be at fault, but at that point all thought came to an end. He experienced a kind of soundless explosion—a pain so intense he couldn't feel it, a blast of darkness instead of light. While hundreds of Grots and thousands of golden eyes looked on, he keeled over and hit the floor.

"Oh, how joy-making!" cried Mr. Green ecstatically. "The representative of Bush Second is dead! What an opportunity is ours! The diplomatic stand-off will soon be over!"

Reverting to his native language, he poured out a symphony of trills and whistles that set Grot—actually, there was only one of him—and Mr. White into furious motion in all nine of the local dimensions. Other

attendants raced in from the laboratory, which was either coexistent with this room, or just next door, or several light-years away, depending on how you wished to look at it. Meanwhile, viewing the hoopla from above was none other than—

* * * *

Fournet himself.

* * * *

He'd always been contemptuous of so-called near-death experiences. Yet he had to admit that actually going through the process was novel and interesting. True, he felt a sense of regret tinged with grief at detaching from the large form spread out picturesquely on the floor. *I had me some good times with that old guy, him*, he thought.

Then, grief fading, he rose to the elevation of a skybox in the Superdome. From this eyrie he gazed down upon beings of the most improbable forms crowding around the corpse. Like, he mused, a bunch of Mardi Gras Indians rubbernecking the latest victim of a drive-by shooting, back in the old days when Ninth Warders were more apt to die by fire—gunfire, that is—than by water. Still, he really didn't want to see Grot do his thing to a body for which he still felt a kind of residual sympathy. Instead, he decided to take this opportunity to go sightseeing in the great city that the fat little feathered fag, Mr. Green, had spoken about.

Turning away, he drifted toward a wall that opened like a dental patient at his approach, and emerged into the vast darkness of an everted planet. The silver and ebony towers of an immense city hung like stalactites, juttied out like accusing fingers, and rose like stalagmites from an interior that made Carlsbad Caverns, which Fournet had seen once on a trip with Alma, look like a pot-hole. Crowds of beings that seemed to have no permanent shape thronged the streets, occasionally turning inside out like the pockets of arrestees being searched by Criminal Sheriff's deputies.

Perhaps for gastronomic reasons, Fournet focused on one creature—a kind of ultimate oxymoron, a giant shrimp that was truly gigantic—and watched it toe-dance through the crowd, waving its long feelers while strings of lights along its sides flashed in harmonic patterns of mustard and mauve resembling a 1960 jukebox. From time to time, the creature ejected its insides (including masses of fluorescent roe), swallowed itself, turned right-side out again, and continued on its way. Accompanying the whole process were sounds sometimes like the

bagpipes at a cop's funeral, sometimes like the partially blocked plumbing at Parish Prison.

Actually, thought Fournet, the process *was* sort of sick-making, when you came right down to it. *No*, he decided, *I can't get used to this goddamn place, it's even weirder than Alabama.*

He wanted to return to wherever he'd left his body, but what did returning mean, exactly? If he approached something, it drifted away; if he turned away from something, it followed in his slipstream, like flotsam trailing the Algiers ferry to the dock.

How *does* a former human escape from a nine-dimensional topographical space, or whatever the hell Mr. White called it? Was this to be his, Fournet's, own version of Eternity, drifting forever through an alien universe, like an LSD junkie taking an eternal bad trip at an everlasting Mardi Gras?

He was preoccupied with this metaphysical question when he felt a tug. The tug strengthened into a definite pull. Instinctively he resisted, but the pull became a yank, a drag, a haul. A syncopated drumbeat that was somehow familiar began and strengthened until it deafened him. He roared, but made no sound; he threshed around, but couldn't combat the force. He felt like a leaf caught in Katrina; he felt like dust sucked into a Hoover; he felt like a cockroach trapped in the vortex of a toilet. He—

* * * *

...was walking along Paris Road, with Bluddy Slawta at his side. He knew it was Paris Road because a sign still clung to a crazily leaning lamppost. All around stretched a wild growth of willows and ragweed filled with chanting frogs, sonorous cicadas, and the ridgepoles of shattered houses.

"Maddog," Fournet muttered.

How had he gotten here, anyway? The last thing he remembered was stepping into a FEMA trailer in the Seventh Ward. He checked, and found himself properly dressed—size XXL Fruit of the Looms and a much-laundered tee on top, then a clean white-on-white shirt with the buttons and collar inside, a narrow knitted tie like the first birthday present Alma had ever given him—indeed, it *was* the first birthday present she'd ever given him—and finally, lying comfortably next to his skin, an inside-out

wash 'n' wear summer suit. So at least he didn't look funny.

His shoes, however, hurt. Having the heels on the inside might not be the best arrangement, though offhand he couldn't think of a better one. Also, the rough blacktop surface of Paris Road was shredding the orthopedic socks he wore to combat varicose veins. He paused and bent over to check his ankles, finding to his surprise that the customary pattern of blue vessels had disappeared, along with the puffy white swelling, resembling cottage cheese, that he was used to. Most remarkable of all, when he straightened up, his head didn't spin and he wasn't gasping for air.

Huh, he thought, and said, "Wonk ooey, doog lear leef I," to his companion. Instead of answering like a human being, Bluddy glared at him with contempt and loathing. He erected the middle finger of his right hand and, to Fournet's astonishment, began jabbing it hard and repeatedly into his own eye, yelling as he did so, "Cuff ooey! Wo! Cuff ooey! Wo!"

"Elohssa," muttered Fournet. Then he forgot both his puzzlement and his obnoxious companion, as a Hummer full of gum-chewing Guardsmen turned into Paris Road and headed toward them.

* * * *

When D. J. arrived at the hospital next morning, he found Fournet awaiting him in a private room, with Alma and a neat young resident in green scrubs at his side. She had brought and Fournet had donned enormous new pajamas covered with little red arrow-pierced hearts inscribed, "Love Ya, Babe."

Hearts, or at any rate the blood vessels leading to them, were on the resident's mind, too. He was checking a printout of some ultrasound tests and saying, "Sir, you have the most beautiful circulation I've ever seen in a man your age. Your arteries must be wide open, without any plaque buildup whatever. It's almost as if they'd been scrubbed."

"That's becuz I eat right," said Fournet complacently. "Incidentally, Doc, you can tell the noice to take that stuff"—he gestured at the hospital breakfast, resting on the bedside table—"and feed it to a gator. They'll eat anything."

"Don't you worry, Sweetheart," said Alma. "I lost you for two whole weeks, but now we going home. I'ma fix you a real breakfast—three eggs over easy, grits with a big lump of butter, pork sausage and buttermilk biscuits and about a gallon of chickory coffee with Half-and-Half and plenty

sugar.”

“And fresh-squeezed urnge juice,” added Fournet. “Gotta keep healthy.”

He turned his attention to D. J. “I know you gonna ask me where I been at. The short answer is, I don’t know.”

D. J. shrugged. “Wherever it was, you musta done good there, because we got all our people back. Mary Margaret Trudeau was found taking a stroll along the levee in Jefferson Parish in her pantyhose and D-cups. Harry J. Symms showed up for woik yestriddy with his company demolishing wrecked houses in Lakeview. Didn’t even know he’d been away, and when the guys started making a fuss over him, he looked confused and kept saying, ‘Attamassaw? Attamassaw?’”

The resident interjected, “I was just about to ask Mr. Fournet if he had any sequelae to his experience. Any aftereffects,” he explained.

“Well,” said Fournet, “I had me a weird dream last night.”

“Nightmare?”

“No, just weird. An octopus had grabbed my Glock—by the way, D. J., you all ain’t found that, have you?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Well, you owe me for it. I lost it in line of duty. Anyway, the octopus kept messing with it, and it blew off a tentacle. Soived him right.”

“Anybody can’t shoot,” said D. J., “shouldn’t have a gun. Look, Alphonse, we appreciate you coming back outa retirement to take this on and tie it up like you did. Now we got us another little problem—”

“No,” declared Alma. “You ain’t taking my sweetheart away from me again. The answer is no. Unnerstand? N-O means no.”

“Okay, okay. But see, there’s some people moved back into Noo Awlyunz East, and they’re the only ones for miles around, and they say at night they hear all these folks got drowned crying for help inside the wrecks of their houses. I know it sounds nuts, but—”

“No,” said Alma for the third time. “We got to save the living, right, but

we also got to let the dead go. Otherwise we'll never get over Katrina. So D. J., you just go on back to Tulane and Broad and let Alphonse get dressed and come home with me. This adventure is over."

"You just hoid from the boss," said Fournet, swallowing his saliva, which had begun running at thought of the promised breakfast. "Over is over."

* * * *

This was true, except for Bluddy Slawta. His superhit *Eff the Effing Multiverse* was hailed by *The New Yorker's* discerning rap critic as "a powerful statement of rebellion and rage, filled with a searing sense of personal vulnerability and metaphysical disillusionment."

More important, it sold by the gazillion and lifted him high into the hip-hop firmament. Soon he was endorsing presidential candidates in such time as he could spare from promoting his new and popular brand of men's underwear—intended, of course, to be worn on top of one's outerwear.

All of which proved, as Fournet told Alma one evening over a meal that began with oysters Rockefeller and went on from there, that the universe really *must* be kind of inside out, after all.