

# CONCEPT

Sci-fi e-zine



**Featuring:**

- **Mind Games** by Dylan Fox
  - **A Second Burial** by Lawrence Buentello
- and more. Plus...**
- **An interview with Lou Anders** from Pyr-SF
  - **Controlling Pace and Flow**





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## Editorial

Welcome to the fifth issue of the Concept Sci-fi Ezine - Concept Sci-fi has now been running for almost a year!

Over the past twelve months I hope you'll agree that a considerable amount of content has been added to the website - and I sincerely hope that you've enjoyed reading it. I'm hoping that there'll be much more to come in the next year as well.

We currently have our [short story competition](#) which is being judged by Sean Williams and I'm hoping to run a smaller, flash-fiction competition later in the year. I also have plans to interview some of the larger publishers and this is all on top of the usual reviews, novel excerpts and the occasional article on writing.

Anyway, enough of my ramblings.

As always if you have any suggestions or comments, please email [feedback@conceptscifi.com](mailto:feedback@conceptscifi.com). And if you'd like to subscribe and get future issues directly to your in-box for free, then visit <http://www.conceptscifi.com>. I hope that you enjoy issue #5.

Gary Reynolds.

Editor.

## Artwork

Stu Driver at <http://obsidianhawke.deviantart.com>

## Fiction

Dylan Fox, Lawrence Buentello, Jonathan Lowe

## Non-fiction

Andrew Males, Gary Reynolds

## Special Thanks To

Lou Anders



# Mind Games

by Dylan Fox

“She won't be long,” Peter tells me.

I'm glad: I didn't come all this way to hear someone being sick, and it's not a nice thing to listen to.

“Mind if I smoke?” I ask.

Peter shakes his head, but looks a little disappointed in me.

“A lady shouldn't smoke,” he tells me. I assume he's talking to me, but I haven't been called a 'lady' since I was five and adults were patronizing me.

I look around. It's a nice room. There's a double-bed, a wardrobe which is older than me, a dresser which matches it and space enough to pace. There's a window which opens so you can breath in the views of the cobbled road, the clean air and the pale winter sunlight. There's thick curtains so you can block it all out.

The en-suite toilet flushes, there's the sound of water running into a basin and the door unlocks.

Peter stops his pacing, and looks up at Talia as she comes back into the room. She refuses to meet anyone's eyes and pushes her long, dark hair out of her face.

“I'm sick of this shit hole,” she mutters. “It's like living in the third world.”

She slumps into a comfortable chair and hugs her knees. Peter goes over and sits on the floor beside her. She lets him take her hand. She feels the warmth and love in it, and smiles weakly.

I go over to the window and open it. The afternoon air is cold, but it's clean. I take in a deep lungful, and start to cough. There's a lifetime of smog and sweat and grease and dirt in my lungs and it doesn't like being disturbed.

Peter and Talia look at me. I take a cigarette out, and light up. It's just cheap smoking mix, but it tastes like home and right now I'm grateful for it.

“How long are we going to have to stay here for?” Talia asks.

Peter is quiet for a moment before he answers.

“Until it's not safe here any more. Then we'll find somewhere else to hide.”

Talia sighs and closes her eyes. Peter squeezes her hand. They think they're being subtle, but the cuff-links on Peter's shirt would pay the rent on this room for a week.

“We went to the doctor,” Peter says, and I realise he's talking to me. I sit on the windowsill so I can breathe my smoke outside.

“They can't find anything wrong with her,” he tells me, “but it's getting worse. The headaches are causing major stress to her whole body. When they took her blood pressure, the doctor's eyebrows raised like he'd caught a dragonfly. She's shaking up.”

“Maybe it's the food,” I say. They look like they're used to the organic stuff, not the stuff grown in stinking vats they've been eating the past few days. Weeks, maybe.

“I got the first headache just before I met Peter,” Talia says. Her voice is tired, like someone fighting cancer.

“What happened before that?” I ask.

Talia shrugs. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” I echo. She shrugs again.

“There was... your brother,” she glances up at me, “drinks, food. I dunno. Just normal.”

“Nothing at all?”

“No,” she says, getting annoyed at me. “Just... drinking, eating.”

“Treatment,” Peter adds.

“Yeah,” she agrees, squeezing his hand. “The day before I met you.”

They exchange a 'just fallen in love' smile.

“You don't think someone going into you psyche, de-constructing your memories and rebuilding them is going to give you a headache?” I ask.

They look at me.

“I never reacted like this when they were doing all the mapping,” she tells me like I'm stupid.

I close my eyes so they can't see me rolling them, and finish my cigarette in silence.

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I'd been unemployed for almost a week when Hugo called. In my defence, it wasn't my fault that I lost my job. The Somniuns have an unfair advantage, I tell myself. They work harder, complain less and actually believe all that

customer service crap. This one called himself Ringo, looked like he came from North Africa somewhere, and sincerely hoped to be the manager in a year. I spent my last day training him and he kept trying to engage with me, but it didn't work because everything he talked about was a lie. By lunchtime, he'd pretty much given up on me and started talking with the other Somniuns instead. They all have the same memory architecture implanted when their immigration is approved and they get their British passports, so it's easy for them to find something to talk about.

My shift finished and my job finished with it. I rode the cart down to the fourteenth floor and let myself into my apartment. Iz was already on her fourth glass of wine, so I knew she'd been talking to her other half. She's a Somniun and he isn't. She's in love.

“Birdy called for you, Jen,” she said.

I checked the answer machine and, sure enough, there was a message waiting for me. Half-a-dozen, actually. All from Hugo Large. I raised my eyebrows--my brother and I don't talk. He has money and a cottage in Paddington Village. I don't have the money to wash my bedsheets.

I played them, and by the end his stoicism had gone and he was crying. Some girl called Talia Sing picked him up at a social mixer, gave him an unforgettable night and then forgot him. He was heartbroken and wanted me to find her and 'talk to her'. We're both women, he reasoned, so I can make her understand. For someone who makes his money near the top of the fourth largest web media group in the city, his understanding of people is really rather poor. I called him back. We talked. He offered to pay my next month's rent if I talk to his girl, and that seemed easier than working for a living so sure, I said, and hung up.

The web knew Talia Sing. She's the adopted daughter of Rajesh Sing. Rajesh Sing runs Natural Harmony, the company the government pay to imprint the Somniun memories onto successful immigrants. Talia lived off the money her parents left behind, managed for her by Rajesh. She's beautiful. From her neck to her breasts to her feet, everything about her seems perfect. I like men, and she gives me goosebumps.

A bit of digging around revealed that she likes men, too. She likes them rich, powerful and at her mercy. She turned up in high-profile divorce cases like a typo. She must have been having an off-night when she picked up Hugo. Just another broken heart to add to her silver chain.

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“Four hundred euros?” Peter asks. He sounds almost incredulous.

“About the cost of her shoes.” I wave the cigarette at Talia's feet. It's my second one. I'm nervous.

“You would burn our lives for...”

“Four hundred euros,” I finish for him. “Plus expenses. I figure that for another hundred. Pretty good for a couple of days' work.”

“But you...” he doesn't understand. He's got memories implanted about truth and love, mercy and humanity.

“How much would Rajesh pay?” Talia asks. I look up at her. She gives me a look that tells me not to fake shock. I shrug.

“More than five hundred euros,” I concede.

“But it wouldn't be clean money,” she tells me. She massages her forehead, trying to calm the crimson waves of pain beating against it from the inside. “You'd be lucky to see a cent of it.”

I nod a little, not committing myself. I met Rajesh when I'd gone to Talia's listed address, and he'd looked like a trapped animal. He'd turned her apartment into chaos looking for her. A few hours after that, his private security goons had given Hugo a few bruises and a split lip. No, it wouldn't be clean money.

Talia gets up, takes her purse out the bedside table and drops a handful of notes into my lap. I catch a glimpse of plenty more where they came from. She sits back down and takes deep breaths.

I take the money out my lap, arrange it into a neat pile and hide it in the palm of my hand. I'm too middle-class to count it, even if my family don't talk to me any more.

“One hundred and twenty,” she tells me. “Your expenses, plus your fare home.”

“And I never saw you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. It takes her a few moments to build up the strength to speak. Peter holds her hand. His face is creased in sympathetic pain. He wishes he could endure it for her.

“Four hundred a month,” she says, quietly. “So let's say five thousand for a year. Twelve instalments, so you don't blow the whole lot on fried chicken or whatever it is you do with your money. One instalment a month.”

I finger the money in my hand. I haven't held this much since my dad gave me the cash deposit for my tuition fees.

Talia's eyes rest on Peter for a moment, and he reassures her that he can afford to throw five grand at me.

“It's a lot of money to not do anything,” I tell them. I flick the cigarette out the window, and watch it bounce over the grass outside. I haven't smelt cut grass for almost seven years, back when I used to earn my pocket money cutting our lawn at home.

Talia takes some pills out her purse and knocks them back without water.

“It's not to keep quiet,” she tells me. She thinks I'm scum. I'm just a drop of grease on the greater gears that turn the world, and she resents having to talk to me. This wasn't the way her life was meant to go.

“We can't leave here,” she goes on. “I can't even touch my own money, because the moment I do Rajesh finds me. All I've got is the cash in my purse. But I feel like I've got six tumours in my head fighting over which one is going to kill me. I can't take it much longer. And you're right: this all sort of started after the first treatment. Maybe... I

haven't been taking the settling drugs, maybe that's it. I've got no idea what combination of them I need. You found us here, and no one else did. So, five thousand euros to stop my head hurting.”

Peter squeezes her hand again.

“And if I can't stop your head hurting?”

“Then you owe me a hundred and twenty.”

“I could walk out of here and get five hundred,” I remind them.

Talia smiles at me. It's the smug grin of someone who's got me figured.

“Yeah, but you're not going to,” she tells me.

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The apartment is empty when I get back. I sit by the window of my shitty bedroom, and stare out. Drozmier Lake is on top of our building, about forty floors above me. It's an old building, put up back when buildings were just buildings. About seven hundred feet from top to tail. Its relative shortness creates a natural dip in the ground above, so it makes sense to fill the dip with water. The neighbouring buildings are taller by a half a dozen floors or so, meaning the pool is deep enough to support fish and there can be a couple of aesthetically pleasing streams flowing into it. In the summer, the villagers sit around its banks and have picnics.

The villages have been around longer than I have. My grandparents were the generation that put them up. Some multinational found they owned a couple of square miles of prime city real estate, and looked for a way to justify filling it with high-rent office space. Turn the space on the roofs into habitable land, some bright spark said. They looked around, and found some sort Merrie England fantasy. The sort of place with a village green, thatched roofs and a wonderful sense of community.

After that, the government annexed the idea and declared it had solved the problem of Britain's over-population. Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, public works funded by private money. The Scramble for Reclamation of roof space quickly became undignified. The middle managers and junior execs snapped the cottages up, and instead of commuting to work for two hours in the morning they just got in an elevator and rode it down to their office.

My parents still live in the quaint cottage they've sold their souls for. Their plan was for me to have my own cottage. School to university to business, cradle to grave just another cog in the machine. But it felt rotten to me. I wanted... I sigh and light another cigarette. I wanted something else.

My window didn't open. The air down here wasn't good for you, and people had a habit of jumping. I don't see sunlight, just the artificial burn of the huge environmental lights. They're growing dim, which means the sun's setting above us. The night lights will come on in an hour or so.



Hugo had called me again. He wanted to know if I'd found Talia yet. He asked me when my rent was due and reminded me that I couldn't afford to pay it. He wasn't subtle. I told him that I had some things I was chasing up and would probably know in a few days. I was talking to five hundred euros straight up, no strings, and wondering if I should be listening to the hundred and seven euros whispering to me from my pocket.

Five thousand a year was twelve regular payments of four-hundred-and-sixteen. No tax to pay, no National Insurance, no student loan. In the last twelve months, rents in my neighbourhood had gone up by an average of thirty-seven euros. So by the end of the year, I'd be getting an adjusted three-hundred-and-seventy-nine a month. There was little-to-no chance that I'd be earning more than minimum wage by the end of the year, so that would be sixty-five hours worth of wages for sitting on my tod. I look at my dirty bed on the threadbare carpet, and then up at the wardrobe full of clothes which are either too big for me or too small, depending at what point in my diet cycle I'd brought them.

What would I do with sixty-five hours a week?

The door opens, and then clicks shut again. Iz throws her keys in the pot by the door and shouts a 'hello baby' to me. She knocks on my door.

“You found that girl?” she asks.

“Maybe,” I say as she lets herself in and sits on the bed.

“The girl I saw in the restaurant was definitely the one in the picture you showed me,” she says. “She was eating dinner with Peter Bonerau like it was sex already. Peter and I went to the same school. He had different teachers to me, and she got raised fur about him talking to the staff. Hell, I'm just there to fix the software, hey? You really not find her? Not much luck for two day's work.”

I grind my cigarette out on a dinner plate.

“How's Felix?” I ask her.

She sighs. “He's okay today.”

I nod. Her lover has the sort of paranoia it takes a five-year-old ego to sustain--he's so important that the entire world is out to get him.

“Oh, post came for you while you were out,” she says. She tosses me the chip. I look it over. It's nondescript.

“How was work?” I ask her. She likes to talk and, when I'm being honest with myself, I like to let her.

“Oh, a party,” she says with a sigh. “Q3 sales and purchase gone up like genie smoke. Poof! So I spend half-an-hour telling them I can get the files back, and another half-an-hour telling them why it's going to cost them so much. I leave them to make their minds up in the end. They want to redo it rather than pay me? That's fine with me.”

They should be paying her double for what she's doing. If she was willing to move address, they would. But then she'd be too far away from Felix.

“You going to read your letter?” she asks, pointing at the chip.

“Maybe,” I say. “I'm going to make a call.”

“Sure,” she says. “Instant meal tonight for me. Can't be arsed with cooking.”

I drop the chip on my bed, drag the phone into my room and call Hugo. He answers after a dozen rings.

“You found her?” he asks.

I shake my head. His fuzzy face scowls at me on the screen. In my income bracket, picture-over-IP is almost a luxury, despite only displaying about four pixels a minute.

“I need you to do me a favour,” I tell him.

“You're supposed to--”

“Poke around Natural Harmony. You have contacts. Your girlfriend's running from something and if I know what, it might tell me where to find her.”

He exhales slowly, just like Dad does when he's pissed off but too middle-class to show it.

“And just what am I looking for?”

“I don't know,” I confess. “Anything...odd, I suppose. Any senior execs getting divorced. Litigation against them that suddenly disappears. Sudden U-turns on policy or politics. Anything you wouldn't expect.”

He glares at me.

“Or get one of your bloggers to do it. Some guy who still believes in all that, 'truth for the public good' crap. Tell them you've heard a whisper.”

“I'll see what I can do,” he says, and rings off.

I drag the phone back, and Iz is sitting in-front of the TV, an instant chicken korma on the plate in her lap. I open the freezer, and put one on for myself.

“What's the time?” I ask.

“Quarter-past-eighteen,” she tells me.

The oven lets me know that my dinner's done.

“You got any plans tonight?”

“Eat my dinner, catch up on my soap operas and go to bed,” she tells me, honest as ever.

“You fancy a trip out?” I ask.

“Where to?”

“Natural Harmony HQ. Talia went missing after the first treatment, and now Rajesh is going bat-shit crazy. I want to know who signed her treatment off.”

Iz turns to look at me as I sit down with my dinner.

“You did find her, then?”

“She had some second-gen memory treatment done, and the next day she just disappears.”

“Oh!” Iz's eyebrows shoot up. “Memory surgery?”

“You know about it?”

“Sure, I have a cousin who's flatmate works in a psychiatric hospital.” By cousin, she means some other Somniun she's talked to at some point.

“It's for real crazies,” she explains, “like people who are there because they've killed their family. Anyway, memory surgery is something they're trying to get the crazies to agree to go through. It's not just normal imprinting, it's cutting out or changing the experiences that made them go crazy.”

“The buzz on the blogs is that it's dangerous.”

“Hm, tinfoil hat brigade. Government signed it off,” she tells me. She trusts the government--she's been imprinted too.

“Well, it needs to be signed off by four senior psychiatric consultants,” I say. “I guess the rules are a bit more lax for crazies. Hey, can you get into the computers and find Talia's medical record?”

Iz laughs. “You've been watching too many movies, Jen. I'd need direct access to the server chips so I can use their software without using their hardware. You get me to the government servers and hey, I'll make your student loan go genie too.”

“Worth a try,” I say. “I'm going to get a nap. We're going to reccy Natural Harmony about one.”

“What's 'reccy'?”

“A poke around,” I explain.

Just before I close my bedroom door, I hear her ask, “you said 'we'--you mean you and me?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I'll figure something out before we go.”

I strip naked and get into bed. I try to think clearly but my head is full of one thousand fifty euro notes.

Yeah, they look pretty.

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I wake up and watch the chip Iz gave me earlier. It doesn't change my plans.

“Iz!”

I don't get an answer.

“Izabelle!”

“I hear, I'm here,” she mumbles back through the wall. She's been talking to Felix again.

“Dress smart,” I tell her. “Too smart.”

I put on the trouser suit Hugo gave me as part of his plan to get me into his world. I look at myself in the mirror. Lapel pin. Make-up. By the time I finish, I quite fancy myself. It's nice to know I scrub up well.

Iz is in the living room, waiting for me to explain. She's dressed up in her immigration interview suit, looking like it's the first day of school. She looks a bit like mutton dressed as lamb.

“Come on,” I tell her, leading the way.

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Natural Harmony's lobby is large. Two floors high, it's almost big enough to have a lobby of its own. Night light streams in through the tall, seamless windows. All the offices work on three shifts of eight hours, and everything else in the undercity works to accommodate them. The first shift starts at one, the second at nine, and the third at seventeen.

The reception desk is a smooth crescent of plastic, matt grey. Three people sit behind it, each wearing a suit which makes mine feel deeply inadequate. There's a waiting area with a dozen expensive chairs, a table, television, pot plants and a coffee machine. Maybe twenty feet away from the front desk, there's security guards and bullet-proof glass that you need a swipe card to get through. The guards look carefully pissed off as they watch the steady stream of people coming in and going out.

Beyond the glass, there's another waiting area, more pot plants, another television and a bank of lifts with their own carpet. The carpet is deep red and stain-free. Screwed to the wall there's a list of floors and which one has what laser-etched onto a thin bronze plaque.

“Erm, hello?” I ask one of the receptionists. The accent's the one I grew up with, not the one the undercity has given me. The expensive suit looks up at me. “Erm...” I shuffle uneasily.

“Yes?” he asks. He's got caffeine-sharp eyes--staring down the second-half of a sixteen-hour shift.

“I'm--I mean we're here for the work experience?” I tap Iz on the arm and she looks up from the Somniun receptionist she's talking to. The lack of locals willing to actually work for a living means that they're getting everywhere these days. You could almost have sympathy for those British Nationalist Party idiots.

“My name's--”

“Floor six-B” the receptionist tells me. “Give your names to the security guards, and they'll swipe you through.”

I smile gratefully and trot off, swinging my hips. Iz makes her excuses and follows. The guys who work there don't think twice about walking into us. We make up a couple of names, flash smiles and a bit of leg to the guards, and they open the doors for us. Iz sits while I grab myself a coffee, looking nervous, trying to make small talk with the guys waiting for the lift. She fidgets and grabs herself a water. She calls me over, and she whispers. I make hand gestures and try to hug her. She pushes me away and runs out the building. Helplessly, I follow. First day nerves. Not unusual.

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“You sure we're not in trouble?” she asks on the way back. “They record everything. For security. If they look--”

“They won't,” I tell her confidently. “Why would they?”

“You said--” she glances around the cable car at the other passengers and lowers her voice. “You said we were expected. They're going to know that we weren't.”

The cable car continues its slow, steady journey between the buildings of the undercity. After this, we've got two monorails to catch, and lot of lifts to ride in.

I turn the coffee cup around in my hand, re-reading it for the twelfth time.

“Don't worry,” I tell her.

“Why?” she demands, glancing around again.

“Because we're going home, getting changed and going back. Worry about it all in one go--it's far more efficient.”

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I get back and there's two missed calls for me. I return them in chronological order, and Peter tells me that they've had to move. He promises the new address as soon as he can safely get it to me. Talia's not much better, maybe a bit worse. Her temper's certainly the worse for wear--I hear her bite Peter's head off at least twice while we're talking. I don't know about her body, but their relationship isn't going to last much longer. I tell him I'm looking into it and to have my money ready.



The second call is from Rajesh. I tell him that I'm working on that too, and to have my money ready. He reminds me his goons know where I live. I thank him and ring my brother. It's half-three in the morning and he's not pleased to take my call.

“What'd your lucky find out for me?” I ask after he's finished cursing me out. It's only been a couple of hours, but that's more than enough time for someone who knows how to pick the diamonds out the rough of the web.

“Nothing,” he snaps.

“Nothing at all?” My heart sinks.

“No,” he says. “The only interesting thing that happened is one of their accounting execs took a swan dive out a cable car a week or so ago.”

It's better than nothing, but only just.

“You got a name?”

“Erm...” he disappears from the screen and I can hear his mobile bleeping. “Paulinson. Cherub Paulinson. Caught paying for whores with his company card and took a jump rather than get fired.”

“Isn't that a bit of an over-reaction?”

Hugo shrugs. “He loses all benefits if he gets fired, and no one's going to employ him at anything other than junior level. He was on a band seven salary. He takes a dive and his family get two years worth of his salary, tax-free, plus pension benefits. Pretty sensible, if you ask me.”

“No strings of suspicious disappearances?” I ask hopefully. “Massive fraud investigations? Hitmen on the company payroll? Secret arms contracts for foreign governments? Anything that's going to scare your girlfriend away?”

I see him wince. “Haven't you found her yet?”

I ring off.

I find Iz mostly naked in her bedroom. She squeals and grabs at the duvet.

“Nothing I haven't seen before,” I tell her.

“What? When?”

“What size are you?” I ask by way of an answer. “Fourteen? Sixteen?”

“Fourteen.” She's staring at me, wondering how serious I was being.

I go back into my room and dig out a couple of old boiler suits. They're both size fourteen, which is a size too small for me, but that's just fine. For a moment, I stare into my bottom draw like it contains some answers. It's full of uniforms from jobs past. There's at least a dozen in there, from coffee monkey to rent collector to courier to plant

waterer. My life for the past five years has been a series of pointless jobs that have ditched me after six months. I've been like an overweight frog, hopping from lilly pad to lilly pad, jumping off before my weight makes them sink.

Maybe if I get a kiss from my prince charming, I'll turn back into a princess and we can live in his castle in the suburbs, where there's no undercity and no villages, just clean air, sea views and tilled earth. Where people really don't have to lock their doors when they leave, because if you can afford to live away from the cities you can afford to rob people without breaking the law. The Somniuns are imprinted to work hard and earn enough money to live in the villages and then be content. The people living in the suburbs don't want foreigners living in their streets, and they're the ones who make the rules.

I sit down on my bed. My parents took me to the suburbs when I was young. Dad paid the toll and drove through. I had my face pressed against the glass as we went past the mansions and quaint shops. I look back at my drawer. I'm good in shops. Got plenty of experience. They have apartments above them, I remember. I'd earn my keep, work the shop and live above it. Maybe one day have my name on the letterhead. That's something to aspire to. That's something worth selling my soul for.

I sigh, close my eyes and force myself back to the present. I go back to Iz's room, and hand her a boiler suit. She's standing there, entirely naked.

"Now you've seen it all," she snaps, somewhere between hurt and angry. She takes the suit from me.

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We turn up again in Natural Harmony's lobby at half-eight.

"Oasis Vending, sixteen-B," I tell the receptionist, making sure it's neither of the ones we spoke to earlier. She looks up at me and blinks, her eyes almost screen-blind. All three of them are working doubles and barely alive. Caffeine--or something stronger--is the only thing keeping them animate.

"I'm sorry?" she says, taking in my boiler suit.

The dawn lights are in full bloom outside, the whole city lit up in warm reds and golds, and the clouds of smog and sweat which hang around the higher levels are glowing like halos.

I sigh, turn around and look at Iz--who's doing a very good job of looking tired and impatient--and turn back. I check my watch.

"Look," I tell her, my accent thick with undercity, "we knock off after this job, so can we make this easy? Sixteen-B. Machine not making coffee happen. Jammed or summit, I dunno. Some suit, erm..." I check my clipboard, "MacEvoy. Eugene MacEvoy, one of her lot--" I wave at Iz.

The receptionist stares at me. There's nothing happening behind her eyes. The other two receptionists are busy talking among themselves.

“Just give us a couple of them temp passes, there,” I point at them, “and we’ll get Genie’s coffee machine working, ‘kay?’”

“You’ll have to sign for them,” she says.

“Excellent,” I say, and lean over to take the book from her desk. I sign a name.

“Juliet!” I snap, tapping the book. “Make your mark.”

Iz skulks over like a teenager and scribbles a name in the book. The receptionist takes the book back and hands us our passes.

“I’ve checked on our system, and Mister MacEvoy is on floor sixteen-B,” the receptionist tells us.

I give her a sympathetic smile. “Home time soon, sweets. C’m on, sleeper.”

Iz follows me through the security doors, scowling at my casual racism. The guards don’t even look at us. We wait for an empty lift to arrive, make sure we’re the only ones using it and step inside.

Iz drops the maintenance duffel bag on the floor, and I rummage through it for the key I borrowed from one of the posh suits who walked into me earlier. I put it in the slot.

“Floor seventy-three,” Iz says, checking the list on the wall.

We ride the lift to floor forty-one, and change to another empty one. The floors all look the same to me. Half-grown cube farms, glowing monitor screens, people squawking into telephones, morale-crushing partitions, dying plants on people’s desks. Each individual looks like a dying cell in a doomed organ that’s running itself into the ground. Just like Talia’s body is.

We get out at floor seventy-three, our boiler suits discarded and our business suits on display. We walk out confidently like we belong there, and no one argues. Iz leads the way through the maze of corridors, desks and middle-management offices as she follows some engineer’s instinct to the server room. The door’s locked with a pass-key, but she shouts at a balding middle-manager until he phones someone to give it to her. She almost looks like she’s enjoying herself. I lock the door again behind us.

“What did you tell him we were doing?” I ask.

“Chip-set compatibility upgrade,” Iz tells me.

“How long will that take?”

“If I was going to do it for real? Maybe forty minutes.”

“And how long before someone notices that their chip-set hasn’t been upgraded?”

Iz laughs. “Something will break and they'll blame us in the next few days. System like this, it's only ever a couple of days before something breaks. Look at it! Someone found some hardware and some software, put it in a blender and made a server-system out of it.”

She takes her terminal out her bag, and starts arranging things so she can use her hardware and their software.

“I sometimes worry about my job, hey? But then, I see things like this--in such a huge company--and I think, 'no, I'm safe'.” She chuckles to herself.

“Right-ho,” she says after a few moments. “What do we do now?”

“Look for anything to do with Talia Sing, or Peter Bonerau. Anything. Failing that, look for Cherub Paulinson, band seven accountant. He killed himself about a week ago, something about abusing company expenses.”

“Hm, they caught him for that? That's like arresting someone for littering in a landfill.”

She leaves me with that thought while she works. She clicks her tongue occasionally and hums snatches of songs to herself. I plug my own terminal into hers, and occupy myself by reading over her shoulder. It's mostly machine code, but it beats staring at a wall.

She says my name after about half-an-hour, and I jump.

“I have an interest,” she says.

“What?” I snap.

“Look...” she points to her screen, and I go over and look.

“Paulinson ordered a report into a discrepancy between the amount of immigrants processed, and the amount of settling drugs accounted for. According to the brief, there were far too few drugs being used for the amount of imprinting they were doing.”

“Grab a copy of it--” I start.

“Can't,” she says.

“Huh?”

“It's not there,” she tells me. “That's the interest. Look--the report was signed off as completed a couple of days before Paulinson died. But it's not there--not here.”

“So someone's deleted it?”

She shakes her head. “They're running a Karter-based server.”

I wait for a moment before asking. “So?”

"It's a government system," she explains. "Preservation of Information Act--you can't just delete something. It gets put in a special compressed archive file until the year-end, when it gets burnt to hard disk, which then goes into storage. But I've checked the archive, and there's nothing. It's just vanished."

"Someone's moved it to a hidden folder?" I suggest.

She gives me a look which tells me to give her some credit.

"Can you find out the discrepancy?"

She thumbs through files.

"Paulinson mentions something about two-hundred units in an email, here..."

Our forty minutes are up.

"Grab a copy of it," I tell her. "Of all his emails, if you can. Anything about Talia?"

She shakes her head. "Just her appointment card. Time and date."

"Grab that too," I tell her. "It's time to go."

"Sure, sure," she says. "Five minutes and then we walk out like rain in February."

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When we get back home, I take a shower to try and wash the last few days out of my hair. I cover myself with cheap body wash and run cheap shampoo through my hair. I don't come out feeling clean, but at least I feel less dirty. The towels need washing. Iz is in bed already.

I put some folk music on my headphones and, as I'm drip-drying, sit down to rummage through Cherub Paulinson's emails. At about half-fourteen, I make a couple of calls and try to get some sleep.

My head is full of noise and I wish I could shut it off. Fragments of conversations that I've had or heard or imagined rain through my tired consciousness. They mix with images, with thoughts, memories of growing up when I felt loved and before I started feeling trapped. The receptionist's face takes the place of my mother's. The announcer from the cable car reads Paulinson's emails out in that strange staccato voice of hers. For a few moments, I imagine Talia holding me tight and telling me that everything is going to be okay, that her headaches have gone away and we can find a little house somewhere in Cornwall. I imagine I'm stuck in Somnia, the city that only exists in memory implants. I imagine that I'm one of their personality archetypes destined to be part of thousands of different childhoods, but a different person in every one. I think about my shop in the suburbs, where people treat you like a human being and there's no danger of a Somniun coming along and taking your livelihood away from you.

My alarm wakes me up. I check Iz's room, but she's not there. She's either at work or holding Felix until his nightmares go away. It's just as well--I don't think I could face her this evening.



I wash my face with cold water, get dressed in the cleanest clothes I feel comfortable in, and head up to the village.

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Rajesh is sitting by the side of Drozmeir Lake, a bag of bread sitting on the bench beside him. He has a piece in his hands, and is tearing bits off and throwing them to the ducks. It strikes me as obscene to be feeding the ducks at night. His face is tired and harried, his hair showing signs of wear. He's been biting his fingernails. He doesn't see me until I sit down beside him.

“Where is she?” he demands. I take out an old fashioned piece of paper with an address on it. Beneath that, it has a list of the imprints Peter was given when his immigration was approved--it came up when Iz was digging up Paulinson's emails, and Rajesh can't get to it without leaving a paper trail. Paulinson knew about the report, and he had an accident. Peter might know and, well, sometimes the imprints just go screwy and the Somniuns go crazy. It's easy to tear something down when you built it.

I put the paper away again before he can take it. It's evening-going-on-night, and there's people jogging and walking their dogs. Witnesses.

“Twenty thousand?” I ask. “Cash?”

He nods, and gestures at two people failing to look inconspicuous a couple of dozen yards away from our bench.

“You little runt,” he spits, throwing some more bread to the ducks. I help myself to a piece, and bite a corner off.

“I want a little shop,” I tell him. “A grocers, I think. Out in Cornwall somewhere. Somewhere away from the cities. A little business I can work in until I retire and give it over to my kids.”

“Nice dream,” he snorts.

“What would happen if a parliamentary committee found you guilty of mismanagement of Natural Harmony?” I ask.

He tenses visibly, even the muscles of his face going hard.

I answer for him: “Unlimited fine and up to fifteen years in prison.”

He glances over to his goons.

“Cherub Paulinson's emails were interesting, really,” I say casually, taking another bite of my piece of bread. “I know I'm not an expert, but he seemed to think--if I'm reading them right, of course--that you were saving money by not giving the Somniuns the right amount of settling drugs. He was worried about a time-bomb of poorly imprinted Somniuns, ticking away and waiting to explode. Of course, it doesn't work like that. The Somniuns have to attend regular check-ups to make sure they're doing okay, and something like that would be picked up.”

“Then stop thinking,” he snaps. “Give me the information I'm paying you for, take your money and sod off.”

I glance at his face, and hope it's paranoia behind the anger and not just more anger waiting for me.

“Second generation memory augmentation is interesting, too,” I tell him, taking my chances. “It relies on identifying the correct memories very exactly, removing the right bits and replacing them. You need to have a *perfect* map of the subject's mind before you start. Of course, having such a detailed map lets you see where the non-active areas are. The bits of the subconscious that we wouldn't know we were missing.”

“Why don't you just--” he starts.

“Or if they were replaced,” I continue. “By, say, a report that was going to lead to a parliamentary inquiry into the discrepancy between the amount of settling drugs being ordered, and immigrants being processed.”

His jaw locks, and he stares hard at his goons. They're just waiting for a sign.

“Only of course, we *would* miss that little bit of our subconscious. We'd probably feel like our head was full of tumours, all fighting each other to see which one was going to kill us.”

I finish my bread and take another piece. It's soft and still warm from being baked.

“The parliamentary inquiry would probably realise that you couldn't under-prescribe settling drugs,” I went on. “If I was on that parliamentary inquiry group, I'd start looking for the next easy answer--after all, they're normally the right ones. The first one that comes to my mind--and this is just me, of course--is that the number of settling drugs is right for the number of Somniums actually being imprinted, which means that the number of Somniums being reported as imprinted is wrong.”

I pause, and frown for effect. “Isn't your company paid per head that you successfully process? Or at least, per head that you *claim* to successfully process?”

Rajesh is quiet for a long time. The ducks get bored and waddle off. I lean back and watch the clouds in the sky. I never really noticed that I missed them. They drift through it, entirely oblivious to us humans beneath them.

“What's to stop me just throwing you out a cable car?” Rajesh asks eventually.

“You know my brother?” I ask. “Oh, of course you do--your hired goons tried to beat Talia's whereabouts out of him when they couldn't find her. I've sent him all the files, everything I know. If I'm not back by tomorrow morning, my computer will transmit the password to unlock them. Of course I can't prove anything, not really, but it doesn't take proof to start a blog-fire. Just reasonable doubt. The tinfoil hat brigade like conspiracies, and the government has been looking for a reason to bring Natural Harmony under their direct control for a while now.”

“What do you want?” His voice is tight enough to break.

“Twenty thousand gets you a piece of paper,” I tell him. “You can put it on your mantelpiece and stare at it with all the free time you'll have when the politicians make a very public example of you, and even your own company won't give you a job as a mail boy.”

I give that a few moments to sink in.

“I'd like a little grocers in the suburbs,” I say. “Somewhere by the sea, away from the cities. That would get you Talia, Peter, and all the files I've got with your names on them. For your eyes only, so to speak.”

I stand up and brush the crumbs off my clothes.

“I expect you'll need some time, won't you?” I ask. Rajesh doesn't answer. “To, you know, arrange everything. Anyway, you know my number. Give me a call. Don't leave it too long, though: Rent day is coming up.”

I turn my back on him and leave him to the ducks.

I can't believe I held my nerve. By the time I get to the lift my hands are shaking like I've got Parkinson's.

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“Are you sure this will work?” Peter asks, holding Talia's hand tightly. She looks grey and drawn. One of the tumours has won and is claiming its prize.

I open my mouth to answer, but there's a deafening roar from outside as another plane takes off. I've never been this close to them and, I'll be honest, they scare me.

“If it wasn't going to work, Rajesh wouldn't have offered to pay up,” I tell them, my words spilling out like water down the drain. “If Talia died, there'd be questions and he was too paranoid to risk them.”

And Talia was right: Money from Rajesh wouldn't be clean. The minute he had the files and the happy couple, he'd crack me over the head, tie me in a sack and dump me in the nearest river. Taking his money would be suicide, but he wouldn't have offered it if the report couldn't be safely removed and Talia put back to normal. Otherwise he could just let nature run its course with her, and deal with the awkward questions without spending a cent.

Peter nods.

“The Chinese memory surgeons will be able to dig the report out of my Talia's mind?” he asks.

I nod. “Anything you can get in this country, you can buy in China. The red dollar rules. Hell, we brought our equipment from them.”

An announcer tells us that the Air China flight is boarding. Peter looks at me.

“Jennifer, the money Talia promised you... the five thousand euros...”

“Yeah, I was thinking cash,” I say. “Certain people may ask questions about regular deposits to my account.”

Peter looks at me so pitifully. “All the money I have, I need to pay for Talia's treatment.”

“Yeah... but the money you owe me--”

“I don't have it, I'm so sorry Jennifer,” he tells me. “I have nothing. Just Talia, and hope.”

I stare at them for what feels like a long time. Four days, and nothing to show for it. Not even the easy five hundred I had guaranteed from Hugo.

Talia coughs pathetically and Peter holds her tighter.

“You burnt through all the cash Talia had, too, huh?” I ask, remembering the notes she threw at me first time we met.

Peter looks blank for a moment. Then he nods, takes the purse out the hand luggage and gives it to me with a smile. Maybe the stress is getting to him and he just forgot. I'd like to think that.

I take it, but I'm too middle-class to look in it. It feels very light.

“It's really not much, but--” Peter starts.

“Everyone's going,” I tell him. “You're going to miss your flight.”

“Thank you,” he whispers. He picks Talia up, and a uniformed attendant carries his hand luggage for him.

I watch them go, and leave as quickly as I can.

When I'm safely in the train going home, I look in the purse. Four hundred euros, plus one hundred for expenses. It's almost poetic.

It's also not bad for four days' work. Makes me wonder how many other people have problems they need solving.

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*Dylan lives in north-west Wales with a pack of animals, and a very understanding girlfriend. He's had a few short stories published in places like Bewildering Stories and The Nautilus Engine, and is looking forwards to being able to say he's had 'many' stories published.*

*While writing this one, he was listening to the Manic Street Preacher's 'Everything Must Go', and Paul McCartney's 'Ram', and would highly recommend both. He has a blog at: <http://dylan-fox.blogspot.com/>. It's a seed and he's waiting to see if it grows.*



## Concept Sci-fi 2009 Short Story Competition

For those of you who missed the announcement in the last edition, Concept Sci-fi is running its first annual short story competition - your chance to win £100 and some signed goodies!

This year Sean Williams, author of the *Astropolis* series and numerous Star Wars books, will be judging the competition. He's also responsible for setting the theme...

*Frank Zappa once said that everything in the universe is part of one great big note. He wasn't far wrong. There's music in the earth's core, in the sun's atmosphere, even in the roiling fire of the Big Bang. There's music in our interior lives too, in the stories we tell. "Music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable", according to Leonard Bernstein, which makes it a perfect tool in the writing of space opera--my true but not my only love.*

*Way back in the late 1980s, I had to choose between two lives: one writing words and another writing notes. In an alternate universe, there's a version of me beavering away at a new symphony, or the score to a Hollywood movie. Here, the closest I get is putting Gary Numan lyrics in the mouths of my characters, and dreaming.*

*Dream for me. Tell me the note that ripples through spacetime in the wake of an f1l cruiser. Convey to me the songs that alien cephalopods whistle in their jovian soup. Give me the music of the spheres as you hear it. When the echoes fade, we'll all be richer for it.*

The competition costs £3.50 to enter and all short-listed entries will be published in a special edition of the ezine. The winning entry will be decided by Sean and announced on the Concept Sci-fi website, with the winner receiving £100 (GBP) and signed copies of *Saturn Returns*, *Earth Ascendant* and *The Grand Conjunction*. So, what are you waiting for? To view the competition details, please visit <http://www.conceptscifi.com/competition.htm>

Good luck everyone!





# 88 Miles Per Hour

A column by Andrew Males

## Red Dwarf - Concepts

*"Don't give me any of that 'Star Trek' crap. It's too early in the morning."*

First shown in 1988, and continuing for eight series until 1999, non-fans of the series may be forgiven for thinking that Red Dwarf was little more than a comedy set in space. This, after all, was the initial idea by writers Rob Grant and Doug Naylor, and it's no secret that each episode strives hard for golden one-liners of the kind heard in the likes of *Blackadder*. To compare it to the sophistication of "serious" sci-fi series such as *Star Trek* seems unfair. Some might even see it as inferior to another, earlier, cult comedy sci-fi: *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. But dig behind the laughs and you'll find a great imagination, ingenious plots, good execution of standard sci-fi concepts, and tech that could grace the best the genre can offer. With the Easter Special just finished airing, it's a good chance to demonstrate all this here and remind people of the quality that is Red Dwarf.

I've been a big Red Dwarf fan since its first few episodes. It arguably ran out of steam with the last two series which explored different avenues in terms of characters and styles, but the ideas shone throughout. In my opinion, Red Dwarf was always best in its simplest form: four characters, plus the ship's computer and a single concept lasting one episode. Curry slob and the last human alive Dave Lister (Craig Charles, *Coronation Street*), cowardly hologram Rimmer (Chris Barrie, *The Brittas Empire*), uptight service android Kryten (Robert Llewellyn, *Scrapheap Challenge*) and self-obsessed Cat (Danny John-Jules, *Blade II*) all joined the slightly deranged computer Holly (stand-up comics Norman Lovett/Hattie Hayridge) in the majority of episodes. (Kochanski (Chloe Annett) later joined from Series VII.) The plots from this time and place- three million years into the future, lost in the middle of outer space - ranged from the clever, to the surreal, through to just downright silly. But the sci-fi was always there.

## Time Travel

*"Ignore him! He's a complete and total nutter! And he's only got one testicle!"*

Does the lure of time travel prove too much for the writers of every sci-fi series eventually? RD was no exception. *Timeslides* is one of the classics and an episode up there in my top ten. This is a standard concept of time travel and the

ability to change the future, or, more importantly, the crew's present. The method is simplicity in itself: photographic film developed using fluid that had mutated over the millions of years gave the slides the ability to come alive. Silly? Yes. Possible? No, surely not. Fun? You bet! Project the slide and watch it move as if it were film...but you can also step inside it and join in! The clever limitation was that the dwarfers could go into the slide and do anything within it, but couldn't physically go outside of the boundaries of the picture. After showing one of a famous Hitler address in which Lister appears behind him taking the mickey, they soon realise that they can actually change history based on their actions. Lister has an idea of going back in time, meeting his younger self and making him a millionaire by telling him to invent something he knows will be successful in the future. Timelines change, Lister *does* become that millionaire, leaving Rimmer all alone on the ship. Questions of determinism and causality are asked, but in the end, like all classic sitcoms, it ends up with everything back to normal.

*Tikka to Ride* mixed the two well-visited entertainment ideas of time travel and the JFK plot, ending in what must be the most unique theory of all - the president was actually shot by himself! Didn't think of that, Mr Costner, did you?

Probably the funniest time travel moment is in *Out of Time* where they use an acquired time drive that can jump to absolutely anywhere in time. They engage it to go to medieval times...and it duly does. Expectations abound as they look out the ship's porthole to drink in the fantastic visions of a past long gone, and see... just blackness and stars. They're in the 15<sup>th</sup> century all right - but they're still in the middle of nowhere in deep space!

## Memory Implants

*"The woman I loved most in the whole world had her tongue down your ear. The most romantic thing I've ever had down my ear is a Johnson's baby bud."*

One of my all-time favourites is the under-rated *Thanks for the Memory*, where Lister, having realised what an utter failure in love Rimmer has been, gives him eight months of his life as a memory implant. Lister gifts Rimmer an affair with one of his old girlfriends so that he'll wake up believing that it was he who had been so much in love many years ago. This ends in disaster, of course, giving poor Rimmer total heartache when he is later informed that it was never him who Lisa Yates made love to six times in one night in a hotel in Southport, but in fact Lister. One lot of memory erasure later, and it was as if it all never happened...if it wasn't for the black box they find later that tells the story.

As a concept, though, it's quite intriguing - I'm sure we've all got friends with an experience we'd love to share in!

## Virtual Reality

*"It's McGruder. She got pregnant so this morning she made me marry her and this afternoon we had seven kids. Bliss."*

VR features in quite a few episodes, but true dwarfers will have close to their heart the concept as shown in *Better Than Life*. They're stuck on a spaceship with no destination and little to do with their time except play Junior Angler and fantasise over Wilma Flintstone, so you can't blame them for immersing themselves in a VR game that promises them everything they want. Food, women, motorbikes, fame - it's all there for them; anything they desire. The plot is actually

just a vehicle for clearly demonstrating just how messed up Rimmer's psyche is: it won't believe he can ever be happy so it has to make things go wrong! Suddenly, while everyone else is having their fantasies come true, Rimmer's turns into a nightmare. Horrible wife, screaming kids, threatened by a hammer-wielding taxman, and the three of them buried in the sand up to their necks, faces smeared in strawberry jam about to be eaten alive by killer ants!

It does raise the interesting question: what would your mind create if you could have any fantasy you wanted? Would you even dare to dream out your wildest fantasy?

Although used in other episodes (one with the groinal attachment - and I wouldn't bet against this existing in real life!) VR played a part in the biggest trick on its followers in *Back to Reality* series V season finale, which had the whole crew dying early on in the episode. "Game Over" filled the screen. It proceeded to tell us that in fact the crew had just been playing a VR game all along. RD was just a game. Or was it?

### **Body Swaps**

*"Oh smeg! What the smeggin' smeg's he smeggin' done? He's smeggin' killed me!"*

Swapping minds or bodies in two people is a common concept, exploited in films such as *Freaky Friday*, *The Hot Chick* and *Vice Versa*, and RD certainly wasn't the first with *Body Swap*. It did, however, have the twist that it gave Rimmer - as a hologram incapable of touch - his first chance to eat, drink and go crazy. He does so in Lister's body - via excellent lip-synching throughout - and becomes so obsessed with his new-found senses that he just doesn't want to give it back.

*Holoship* also uses a twist on this theme via a mind patch. Rimmer takes on the intellect of a dead officer in order to pass an exam to get on a hologram ship whose society is based on constant, guilt-free sex (can you blame him?)

### **Teleportation**

Lister: *"Why don't we scrape away this mortar here, slide one of these bricks out, then using a rope weaved from strands of this hessian, rip up a kind of a pulley system so that when a guard comes in, using it as a trip wire, gets laid out, and we put Rimmer in the guard's uniform, he leads us out, we steal some swords, and fight our way back to the 'bug.'"*

Kryten: *"Or we could use the teleporter."*

RD shied away from teleportation in most of its episodes, preferring instead to have the low-tech, crappy spacecrafts to shuttle the crew from the main ship to various moons and other locations. This provided more scope for danger and how-to-get-in-a-jam situations that frequented the many series. However, they did later come across a matter transporter which did the job via what looked like a glorified four-player console adapter that everyone had to touch in order to transport its users. As with most things RD, and also common to the general portrayal of teleportation, things don't always work out exactly as planned.

### **Parallel Universes**

*"If I'm understanding correctly, it appears that, in their universe, it's the men who give birth to the babies. And as we are in their universe, you could very well be possibly up the duff, laddie!"*

How many times have you asked yourself if there was another version of you in another universe? Do you think there's a near-infinite number of you's out there? Maybe another version of you is getting laid right now as you read this. Again, RD tackled this a few times, most obviously in *Parallel Universe*, where the crew met their opposites, much to their general dismay. With most of nature's laws reversed, Lister ends up pregnant, somehow later giving birth to twin boys.

*Dimension Jump* first displays one of RD's best-loved side characters: Ace Rimmer. The complete hero, and the total opposite of our Rimmer we all know and loathe. The transformation of the character was brilliant, clearly demonstrating Chris Barrie's talent, but again exploring the idea of multiple versions of you based on decisions taken or not taken in life.

So what if most of Red Dwarf was low-tech, had low-level humour and didn't take itself seriously. Maybe people new to it today looking at episodes performed twenty years ago will feel the same "what's-so-special-about-it anyway" that I did coming late to Hitchhiker's. But the ideas were sound, sometimes original and occasionally copied by the greats (I've seen Star Trek episodes much later heavily influenced by RD concepts.) Rob Grant and Doug Naylor showed what could be done with limited resources, and for even more detailed plots and laughs I'd thoroughly recommend any of the Red Dwarf novels which extend the RD universe even more. The DVDs, too, offer more than the usual fillers, and the cast commentary - usually laughing at the various states of Chris Barrie's hair - is worth the money on its own.

Maybe the new Easter specials will be the end of RD, but one thing's for sure, though - Red Dwarf deserves its place in TV sci-fi history as both an innovator and a series which added fun to some classic concepts.

Smoke me a kipper...

For further information on Andy, check out his website at <http://www.andrewmales.com>



# A Second Burial

## by Lawrence Buentello

It is never easy losing a child. These were the first words the minister said to Marygay when they clasped hands in the chapel. He was to give the prayer, and of course she'd approved every word of the service. She was micromanaging again, as her husband would have said had they still been married. He couldn't attend the service, being so far away in another country, but he offered her his sincere condolences. He was your child, too, she'd said, and to this he had no response. He'd repatriated to France, of all places, and she often thought he'd done so just to have an ocean between them. Still, they'd been through the same ritual twenty years before, so she couldn't blame him entirely for not wanting to endure the same emotional pain for a second time.

In the chapel the technicians had placed the large screen before the pews, so that his still image looked down on the mourners. He was such a beautiful young man, she'd thought when she carefully arranged the flower stands on either side of the screen. He was so athletic, so intelligent, with a gentle smile and large brown eyes filled with such understanding of the world. He was never a brilliant scholar, but he'd earned his degree in only three and a half years, and was looking forward to the future. The last conversation they'd shared before the accident concerned his decision to take a position in Washington—they'd argued for an hour about his leaving the state, and leaving her behind. But how could she place her desires over her son's future?

The mourners wandered into the chapel, some her friends, some her ex-husband's friends, some her relatives from Missouri. She sat in the first pew by the screen and gazed back at them occasionally, dabbing at her tears with a handkerchief. His death had been such a shock—a car accident on his way home from a football game. A drunk driver, no less. The call reached her just a little after midnight. She'd spent the rest of the night weeping uncontrollably. Of course, they said this was always a possibility, that art must imitate life, but she never dreamed it would be her child. Not again. Losing a child in infancy was heartache enough, but losing a grown son was devastating. All the memories and experiences they shared, the school assignments, the holidays, the birthdays, the tears and the laughter of their lives. And now it was over. She would never speak to him again.

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The minister began the benediction, and spoke so wonderfully, so musically. The lyric of religion was a comfort to her now, though the tears came again, and she closed her eyes against the sight of her son's face on the screen. The minister spoke of Nathan's accomplishments, his participation in sports, his easy nature and happy outlook on life. The words



were enough to break her heart. Twenty-one years of caring for him and now she had to finally let him go. She wasn't certain if that was even possible.

When the minister finished speaking, he walked to the pew and sat next to her. She held his hand as the Re-Life representative stepped behind the lectern.

The representative cleared his throat and nodded to those gathered before him.

We have come here today, he said, to say farewell to Nathan Michaels, beloved son of Marygay. Twenty years ago my company gave a new life to Nathan, a life Marygay nurtured and protected with her very soul. The program was beautifully detailed, inspired by Marygay's wonderful suggestions, and the unpredictable qualities of the Re-Life System. For twenty years Marygay watched her son grow from an infant, to a boy, and finally to a young man, a young man whose life was so sadly terminated by a tragic accident. We would all love to keep Nathan alive, but the very nature of the preciousness of life demands we accept the random tragedies of the program just as much as we have to accept the tragedies of life. We all grieve with Marygay, but we also know that she has had twenty wonderful years with Nathan, twenty years she never would have enjoyed with her child had she accepted his death in infancy. But now, we must conclude the proceedings and leave Nathan to his rest.

Marygay squeezed the minister's hand as she wept bitterly. Why did she have to lose her son again? Why did she have to endure the pain for a second time? But she never would have known the delight of raising him, of sharing the joys and sorrows of his life, if she hadn't created him anew. Now that was over, he would be gone forever. Still, she thought, staring up at the beautiful young face on the screen, she wouldn't have traded a moment of his life for a lifetime free of the pain she now suffered. Her husband never understood how she felt—how anyone felt who embraced the program. She would have died of loneliness when Nathan lost his life as a baby so suddenly—she would have wasted away inside her depression. She couldn't have any more children. Her husband knew this, and still he refused to bless her desires. But the people in the company knew how important it was to her, how precious it was to participate in her son's continued life. *Her* son, the child to whom she gave birth, alive to her in every way, his holographic image growing as a normal child would grow, crying, laughing as an ordinary child would cry and laugh. She was able to touch him, embrace him through the magic of sensory gloves, she was able to feel his cheek against hers through the tactile interface of the sense-cream. She watched him come and go from the house as a teenager, and then enjoyed his visits from college on holidays when they discussed his latest girlfriend, his classes, or his dreams and aspirations. For twenty years she'd shared his life—how could anyone fail to understand the joy this gave to her?

But now it was over, and the representative reached into the pocket of his coat and brought out a small disk. He raised it slowly to the screen, to the image of her smiling, happy son.

Into your hands we commend his spirit, the minister muttered—she bit her lip and squeezed his hand again. How could she lose the same child again—

Good-bye, Nathan, the representative said as he pressed a button on the disk. Your program is now permanently deleted.

The image faded from the screen, leaving only a field of pearly light.

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*Lawrence Buentello's work has appeared in numerous publications, from Andromeda Spaceways In-Flight Magazine to Zahir, and he continues to produce fiction in a variety of genres.*

*He is the co-author (with John Buentello) of Binary Tales and Reproduction Rights.*

*He lives in San Antonio, Texas.*



# Controlling Pace and Flow

## by Gary Reynolds

Welcome to the fifth article in my series aimed at beginning writers. Getting into writing can be difficult. Often editors are too busy to provide constructive criticism on each submission they receive and this can leave some people feeling unsure about their writing and what they can do to improve it.

In this situation, there are a few things that you should consider doing. You can join a critiquing group, read lots, write lots and **study your craft**. This article takes a look at some techniques you can use to control the pace and flow of your fiction. Here's the article...

### Introduction

Ever read a book or a short story that just didn't feel right? The sentences appeared to be correctly formed, the characters seemed believable and the plot made sense. But something just didn't 'gel'. Chances are, there was something wrong with the pace and flow of the story.

So what do I mean by 'pace and flow'? Essentially they are what makes a story feel natural to read. It's what gives a story its rhythm. It's one of the techniques an author uses to control how you feel and the speed at which you read a particular scene.

### Controlling the pace at which people read

Let's take a look at a couple of really bad examples to illustrate this point...

*I took my time eating my dinner. Slowly eating. Bite after bite. Chewing each one thoroughly. Never going fast. Just taking it slow. Steady. Never in a rush. First peas. Then potatoes. Eating my way methodically through my dinner. Never too quick. Never too slow. Just about right. Wouldn't you say?*

*The man rushed up to me and shoved the knife into my abdomen with such speed and ferocity that I didn't really have time to react at all. In fact, I just stood there, watching helplessly as he plunged the knife deep into my stomach with the blood pouring out onto the pavement in a long red dribble that seemed to go on forever.*

Which of the above two paragraphs did you read the quickest? Chances are, you read the one about someone eating their dinner much quicker than you did the other. Clearly, we want to achieve the opposite effect...except with good fiction rather than the rubbish examples that I came up with on the train!

The point here is that sentence length can have a direct bearing on the speed at which readers get through a particular scene. A slow love scene will have long, descriptive sentences that move the story along at a sensual, trickling pace. A woman being chased through the woods by an axe-wielding murderer will have short, punchy sentences that move the scene along at a breath-taking pace that leaves the reader as breathless as the woman.

As a writer, you need to learn how to do this effectively, and one of the best ways of learning is to read, read and read. Learn how published authors control the pace of a scene. Study it and imitate them. Practice enough, and you'll discover your own voice and leave the imitating behind altogether.

## **Interspersing backstory and dialogue in an action scene**

When it comes to writing fiction, there are no strict rules. Some ways of doing things are, however, more accepted (by readers, editors and publishers) than others.

It's perfectly fine to intersperse a bit of backstory into an action scene. Equally, you can put a little dialogue into an action scene. But, as with the first point in this essay, you need to consider the pace of the scene and only include *what's appropriate*. The results of **not** doing this can be frustrating for the reader, or even unintentionally comical.

Imagine that a small, vulnerable shuttle is being chased through an asteroid field by a large destroyer class ship...

*Trak yanked hard on the controls, sending the un-shielded shuttle banking hard to the left. He knew that he was seriously out-gunned. His only chance was to out-manoeuver the hulking cruiser and hide out in the asteroid field.*

*He wiped the sweat from his brow and sent the shuttle into a controlled spin, flipping the front round and down, narrowly missing the edge of the nearest rock that went hurtling past the cockpit.*

*His co-pilot let out a small yelp of surprise that reminded him of his pet dog back on the Jovian moon. How he'd loved that dog.*

*He recalled taking it for a walk when he was no more than a child. Long, summer days playing with him in the back garden of the newly-terraformed planet. Memories of trying to wrestle the ball from his mouth...*

Oh my! I'm sure that the problems with this scene are clear. It starts off well enough, but quickly deteriorates. It's not that the reader doesn't care about Trak's dog (although that might also be true). What's more clear is that the reader doesn't care about Trak's dog at this moment in time. What they care about is whether they're going to evade the cruiser and if so, how they're going to do it. You need to make sure that your scenes have a clear objective and that they get there without going off at a distracting tangent.

## Less dialogue during action sequences

Hopefully, the title of this section speaks for itself. Essentially, there are two major units within a story; scenes and sequels....

Scenes are where something happens. An event occurs and the protagonist reacts, or the protagonist initiates an event and everyone else reacts.

Sequels happen after scenes. They're the aftermath. In a sequel, the protagonist reflects on what has just happened, considers their options and plans what to do next or determines how they feel about what just occurred. Most novels will tend to follow the pattern of scene, sequel, scene, sequel and so on.

Dialogue can occur in either a scene or a sequel. However, generally speaking you'd expect to find more consecutive lines of dialogue in a sequel. In a scene, the dialogue is more likely to be shorter and interspersed with action-based events. Doing otherwise can often interfere with the pace of the story.

By far the easiest way to study this is to pull a few of your favourite books off the shelf and re-read them, taking particular care to identify the scenes and sequels and to note how the authors handle dialogue in both instances.

## Mixing backstory or narrative with dialogue

One of the more common mistakes that I see when reading novels and short stories occurs when authors try to include backstory or narrative in a scene that is dialogue-heavy. And you might be surprised to hear that, in my opinion, this is a trap that professionals and skilled amateurs fall into more often than the beginning writer [I'll explain why in a moment]. The problem here is simple:

*'Hi,' said Fred.*

*'Hey how's it going?'*

*Mark didn't really care how Fred was doing. All he really wanted to do was let his mind run away with thoughts of what he was going to be doing later. Letting them run endlessly around his head.*

*On*

*and on*

*and on*

*for many*

*many*

*many lines*

*until finally the reader reached a point where so much narrative had taken place that they've completely forgotten the start of the conversation and can't really be bothered to go back to the start and remind themselves, so they skip to the start of the next scene.*

The author has lost the reader.

And the reason that professional authors get this wrong more than amateurs is that they're more skilled at interspersing backstory with dialogue—it's just that sometimes they overcook it. Amateurs on the other hand, tend to focus on dialogue when they're writing dialogue, and then include narrative either side of the chunk of speech. Doing it this way allows the dialogue to flow more freely and makes it easier to read.

## Using beats

In story-telling, a beat is an action tag that accompanies a piece of dialogue. Consider the following:

*'I really like stewed martian bugs,' said Frank.*

*'Oh please,' said Mark **screwing up his nose.***

Here we use the phrase 'screwing up his nose' to show some physical movement in the scene. Equally, we might show one of the characters walking over to a table, or pouring themselves a drink.

The idea behind using a beat is that it (a) keeps the reader grounded in the real-world and (b) avoids endless lines of dialogue and nothing else. As the writer, you can use beats to move the physical part of your story along at a controlled pace while your characters talk about something relevant. However, a word of caution—use beats sparingly. Over use can make your fiction really dull to read. To see if you've got the balance right, try reading your scene aloud, or ask someone else to read it out-loud while you listen. You'll know almost instantly where you've got it right and where you've got it wrong.

## Info Dumping

There are examples of info dumping in fiction everywhere. Little, or large, snippets of information that are either thrown into the story at inappropriate times or are completely irrelevant to the story but have been included because the author thought about them and wants to share the depth of his or her thinking with you the discerning reader.

I'm sure you've all experienced the situation where you've got to the end of a paragraph, or even multiple paragraphs, and wondered exactly why you've just been told the evolutionary history of an alien planet over the last five thousand years.

Don't get me wrong...minor info dumping is OK—provided it's relevant to the story. But it's best to try and keep the information succinct and away from action scenes or scenes that are heavy with dialogue as it can detract from the overall aim or purpose of the scene and can certainly interfere with the pace and disrupt the flow.

My overall advice for beginning writers is to avoid info-dumping, which is easier said than done. Re-read each of the paragraphs in your story and ask yourself what it accomplishes. Is it there to purely provide background information? If the answer is 'yes', then you might want to consider re-writing it. Re-work the paragraph or scene so that it's more action-centric, where the backstory isn't the main focus, and you'll improve your fiction no end.

## **Short stories versus novels**

Finally, a few words on the differences between short stories and novels. Clearly, a novel is a tad longer than a short story, so the pace of your short fiction needs to be regulated appropriately.

In a short story of say twenty pages, I don't want to get to page ten or fifteen before anything interesting happens, because the chances are that I'll never get to page ten—I'll have found something better to read. A slow burning novel that gradually picks up pace is fine; the readers paid for the book, they're invested in it and are likely to read at least the first 100 pages. With short fiction, you need to give the reader something up front. Something to grab them by the balls from the word go. In short story writing, the opening hook is SO important and you can use it to set the pace for almost the entire story.

When it comes to short fiction, you also want to consider the art of info-dumping quite carefully. A lot of novels today come in threes; the Astropolis series by Sean Williams, the Parrish Plessis series by Marianne De Pierres, the Avery Cates series by Jeff Somers (third book out later this year), so I don't mind a page or two of info dumping – I'm in for the long haul, not a quick fix. With a short story it's different. Give me two pages of planetary history in a short and I start to lose faith in the author and begin to wonder if they're able to pace their story correctly.

The items above are food for thought for the beginning writer. If you want to learn more, then check out the 'For Writers' section in the Concept sci-fi bookshop for some great books that go into these topics in far more detail.

Happy writing!



# An interview with Lou Anders from Pyr SF

by Gary Reynolds



*Just to provide a bit of background, can you tell us a bit about yourself and your experience in the world of editing/publishing and also a bit about Pyr and Prometheus Books?*

After a stint in theatre in London and Chicago, I started out in journalism in Los Angeles, working first as a freelancer and then as the LA Liaison for Titan Publishing, covering shows like Deep Space Nine and Babylon 5 for their various licensed magazines. I spent about 3 days a week on the sets and in the offices of these shows, conducting over 500 interviews across 5 years. During that time, I also wrote scripts with a partner (we had a standing invitation to pitch Voyager whenever I liked), and though we had several things under option, nothing ever got made.

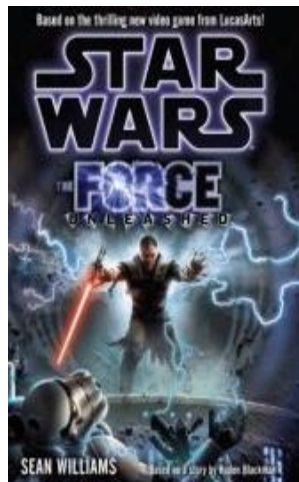
Out of all that media experience, I landed a job as the content editor (later Executive Editor) of Bookface.com, a startup in San Francisco that was launching an online publishing website. It only lasted one glorious year, but in that time I met and worked with an incredible number of science fiction and fantasy authors (the thinking being that SF authors would be more open to new technologies. They were, though romance authors had them beat!) When the bubble burst, I found that I had a lot of contacts in SF, and so I transitioned into traditional publishing, editing a number of short fiction anthologies (the first pro-rate one being, *Live without a Net*, for Roc). On the strength of this, I was hired in March 2004 by Prometheus Books to build them an SF&F imprint.

Prometheus is a strong nonfiction publisher, a mid-sized press that began in 1969 (they are celebrating their 40th anniversary this year), and has a long-standing commitment to science, rationalism, humanism, etc... as well as a long friendship from such departed greats as Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov. They wanted to get into fiction publishing, were advised that they should pick a genre niche over general fiction, and felt science fiction was a good match with their aesthetic.

We launched Pyr one year later, in March 2005 (we're celebrating our four year anniversary this month), and I'm proud that in that time, we've put out over 60 titles (in over 75 editions/bindings), and have shown up in all the award categories



- Hugo, PKD, World Fantasy, Campbell, the other Campbell, etc... We've been praised in the pages of Time magazine, and by more than one Pulitzer-prize winning author, and are really gratified by the degree - and speed! - by which we've been embraced by the SF&F community. We've also expanded the line twice in that time and are looking at doing so again.



***Concept Sci-fi's focus is science fiction. How have you seen the sci-fi market change over the last few years? What is the sci-fi market like today?***

Genre fiction in general is performing very well in this recession, as indeed it has always been said to do in difficult economic times. SF&F has had the fewest layoffs, and I'm told by at least one major chain buyer that his section of the store is all that's moving. I think that SF&F is as healthy as it's ever been, and SF is doing well in all its forms. Just recently we've seen works as diverse as Star Wars: The Force Unleashed (pictured), Paul of Dune, and Anathem make the New York Times best-seller list, at least two of those debuting at # 1. And when you think about the range of content in those three books, you begin to realize how mainstream SF has truly become. That being said, it is a hard time for debut authors in SF (more so than in fantasy), making it all the more important for wanna be SF authors to work in the short form, have a good agent, and write at the top of their form, about which more below.

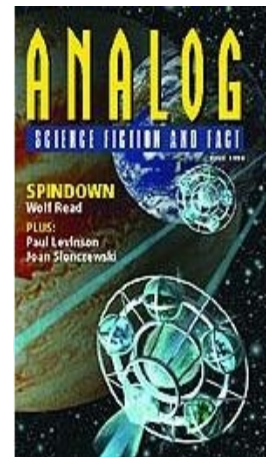
***What are the most common mistakes/turn-offs that you see in novel submissions?***

There are degrees of mistakes. The most common is sending a blanket email that omits or misspells the editor's name, and gives the impression that the sender has no idea who they are sending it too, going out wide, with no idea of the recipient's needs or tastes. I get a lot of submissions that mistakenly assume we publish mystery, or YA, etc... I always recommend that new writers pick up a copy of [Locus magazine](#) for its "Books Sold" section, that details who sold what type of book via which agent to which editor at which house. Just a few months skimming that column will give you a very good idea of who is buying what and help you target your work effectively.

The second, and perhaps larger turn-off, is when a non-genre agent sends me a query letter that begins something like, "If you are like me, you find that most scifi has flat, wooden and uninteresting characters, but this novel is different!" The corresponding mistake is when an author sends a query letter explaining how they refuse to be pigeon-holed with genre and have instead written a brilliantly, uncategorizable novel. I am in genre publishing for a reason - because I like and appreciate genre books. Don't insult me and my taste by telling me it's no good and offering me something I'm not looking for!

***So a writer's finished their sci-fi novel and wants to try and get it published. This is where a lot of people get stuck. What, from your point of view, is the best/recommended approach for them to follow?***

Get an agent. For one thing, I (and most houses) won't consider your submission without an agent, and even for those that do, that means they have a big pile of unagented submissions that they only dip into once or twice a year when it reaches Herculean proportions. You really need an agent to be taken seriously, and that means an established literary agent, preferably one who has a track record in SF, and not your friend or relative (!) who agreed to "act as your agent." I don't think this is the best approach, I think it is the only approach.



And yes, it's very difficult to land an agent and the competition is fierce. In which case, I maintain that the short fiction scene is still a very good place to break in. Publishing short fiction in places like Asimov's, Analog, F&F, Interzone, Strange Horizons, etc... is a very good way to build an audience, develop your voice, garner awards, etc... to help put you on the radar of an agent and an editor.

And never, ever, self publish or use a vanity press, unless you have next-to-no aspirations of placing that work elsewhere.

***What's the single most important piece of advice you could give to someone who is currently writing their first novel?***

Read in the genre. And read outside the genre so you don't get myopic. Don't reinvent the wheel. I can't tell you the amount of people who approach me in public and tell me they are working on the most amazing novel I'll ever read, and when I ask them who their influences are tell me either Tolkien or Asimov (and when grilled, haven't read beyond these authors, both of whom have been dead for decades.) You need to know what is selling now to today's readers, and you need to develop your writing skills, one way to do so being to see how other writers grapple with various technical problems.

Finally, and this is the easiest to say but the hardest to do, be brilliant. The problem with 99% of the manuscripts that I see is not that they are bad, but that they are merely competent. I get hundreds of competent, professional, adequate manuscripts that manage to tell a story across 400 or so pages with reasonable narrative command. But I buy only the 1% that rises above this and becomes something unputdownable. Because if it doesn't hook me on the first page and keep me hooked, it won't hook that potential reader whose picked it up off the shelf or browsed the first chapter online either. And as hard as it is to do, brilliance will always out. The cream does rise to the top.

## ***What does Prometheus Books look for in a submission?***

That brilliant 1%.

Seriously, we're looking for a very narrow cross-section. We are interested in commercially-viable books that will appeal to a large audience. At the same time, we have worked hard to acquire a reputation as a publisher that offers books that are, as one fan put it, "a slightly richer, more engrossing read" or a slightly above-average standard of prose and storytelling. So what we are looking for is that cross-section of superiorly-written works of commercial appeal. Which is why I'm a pretty hard sell and reject a lot of work that is good, but not great.

## ***Why should an author choose Prometheus Books over another publisher?***

As a mid-sized press, we can often bring a level of attention to a book that might get lost in the shuffle at a larger house, and a level of distribution/exposure that might get lost at a smaller one. Plus, we make a great looking package.

## ***What do you offer that makes you stand out in the market place?***

It's hard to talk about yourself modestly, so maybe I should let others do it. We're fond of the Bookgasm.com quote that, "Pyr is quickly becoming the standard by which all other sci-fi imprints are judged." Or, to quote the 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz, "Pyr books has in a few short years become the imprint to beat in the science fiction and fantasy fields." Or, to quote Pat's Fantasy Hotlist, "The market is no level playing field, and yet year in and year out Pyr titles manage to stand out from the competition." Or Stargate: Atlantis writer/co-executive producer, Joe Mallozzi, who says Pyr is "an imprint marked for offering up some of the best Fantasy and SF being written today."



## ***How many new authors do you/can you take on per year?***

We will publish around 28 books in 2009, and we're looking at expanding that again in 2010. In 2009, there will be 2 debut authors, and another 4 or so that are new to the US market.

## ***What can we expect to see from the Pyr imprint over the next twelve months?***

A lot. We're really excited about our debut author Matthew Sturges, whose [Midwinter](#) was called "Tolkien meets Abercrombie meets Chadbourne", and we'll be bringing Mark Chadbourne himself to America with the much-anticipated publication of his Age of Misrule trilogy (World's End, Darkest Hour, and Always Forever) in trade paperback in three consecutive months in May, June, and July.

We're also debuting James Enge's phenomenal Blood of Ambrose in April, a darkly humorous swords & sorcery novel in the vein of Joe Abercrombie and Scott Lynch. [Sean Williams' epic fantasy The Hanging Mountains](#) and [Ian McDonald's highly-acclaimed Brasyl](#) will both shortly come out in trade paperback. May, June and July will also see our first foray into mass market paperback with Joel Shepherd's Cassandra Kresnov military SF series (Crossover, Breakaway, Killswitch), and the summer will see Justina Robson's Chasing the Dragon and Mike Resnick's Stalking the Dragon.

We'll also be bringing Ian McDonald's landmark Desolation Road back into print with a stunning new cover from Stephan Martiniere. Moving into the fall, we'll see the US debut of Paul McAuley's Clarke-nominated The Quiet War, the US debut of James Barclay's Raven series, the third installment in Tom Lloyd's epic Twilight Reign series, the start of new fantasy series from both Mark Chadbourn and Joel Shepherd, another novel from James Enge, a wonderful space opera from Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and the culmination of Mike Resnick's five-book military SF (the culmination of the five-book story arc, if not the end of the Starship series.) And that should be enough reading for anybody's year! [keep an eye on the [Pyr blog](#) for further updates]

### *Any final words?*

I'd like to add if I may that if the odds on getting published seems discouraging, they are! The job of an editor isn't to make everyone with a manuscript into a published author, and getting published is no guarantee of success. The job of an editor is to acquire the absolutely best books he/she can for his house and his readers, and his responsibility is to those authors whose work he/she has already acquired, not to those who would like to sell him/her something. But as harsh as that is, quality really does out in this field. When someone comes along who blows our socks off, we all know, we all see, we all want. So while it's hard to be brilliant, if you're at the top of the game, you'll make it. Believe me, there is always room for another good book, and nothing so excites an editor as being reminded why we all read! And, really, if your book isn't good, isn't something you can honestly see sitting shelved alongside the greats of the SF&F field, then why are you writing it?

[For further information, visit the Pyr website.](#)



# The Beacon

by Jonathan Lowe

The Flamingo is a Fifties era horseshoe-shaped former motel made of concrete block, lit by neon snakes of flickering light. I pause, listening to the sound the engine of my Camaro makes, hissing steam onto the cracked asphalt of the parking lot. When most of the luster has left the Tucson skyline, I finally get out to stand beside the fence surrounding the empty pool. As I stare into the cracked and shadowed deep end, an ice machine somewhere behind me chugs to life. I walk towards it, then, open the stainless steel flap of the storage bin, and reach in for an ice donut.

I rub the ice against my temple, and close my hand into a fist around it, then I rap three times on the door but not loudly. More like a fugitive might, wary of the wrong attentions. A shifting sound comes next, followed by approaching footfalls. So I loop the melting ice lump in an underhand pitch, then watch it arc and drop into the darkness like a dead comet into a black hole.

When the door opens, I feel a sudden false smile stretch my face, like a muscular twinge at an electrical shock.

"Mark," Eddie says in mild surprise, then, "What's wrong?"

"It's a long story," I say. "But if you let me in, I promise the Reader's Digest version."

Eddie seems to consider that, standing there in his underwear, already prepared for another night of channel flipping. *Real friends or imaginary ones?* It's a tough decision, but he's delayed too long making it. He steps backward with a sallow look of defeat, as though reminded that he's turning into the kind of loser profiled on Cops. Another paunchy alcoholic without enough self respect left to shave or wear shoes in public.

I walk straight to the couch and slump onto the discolored red suede. Looking down at the empties and scattered newspapers on the floor, I feel Eddie's gaze on me now, like someone studying a stranger. An intruder. Not a former Catholic school chum at all, but a balding, middle-aged life insurance salesman. When I don't move or speak, he decides to sit too. Slowly, on the arm of the couch, at the far end. "What is it, anyway?" he demands in a nicotine octave, a look of irritation replacing former concern.

Looking directly into his eyes, I decide he now resembles Matt Dillon, gone to seed. Twenty years ago women may have noticed him, but no longer. Only the desperate ones, now. Back in the day, we might have been Dillon and Damon clones,

planning an adventure to Mexico on motorcycles. Before he met a waitress named Darlene, of course. Before he experimented with a reckless marriage and a rancorous, soul-sucking divorce.

"I was just at Kitt Peak," I tell him.

"Where?"

"The mountain out to the southwest with all those telescopes? I took the night viewing program. The one where they introduce you to constellations, let you look through the small Visitor Center scope at Saturn, and maybe some nebulas. Only it wasn't enough for me. So I wandered over to the cafeteria and starting talking to this astronomer. Eric something. We talked for half an hour, then he invited me up to the radio observatory where he and a colleague were measuring velocities of globular clusters orbiting various galaxies."

Eddie blinks at me now, the way he always did whenever I'd indulged my geek obsession in the past. Only this time he doesn't hold the look, and instead nods 'here we go' to himself, free of the burden to disguise his boredom. Ever the sports fan.

"Thing is, when I got there, though, he tells me to sit and starts asking me questions."

An uncomfortable pause, then Eddie asks, "What questions?"

"About my background. You know, where I went to school. Do I have a girlfriend. That kind of thing."

A single nod in reply. "Why would he care about St. Ignatius? Did you tell him Father Carlisle tried to molest us, too?"

"Actually, I did."

He peers at me as if looking down into a well. It reminds me of the way the astronomer peered, too. *Who is less likely to be believed than an invisible middle-aged loser with a beer belly and a visible stain of lost potential?*

I take in a breath and exhale it slowly. "Okay," I say, gearing up for the kicker. "I don't know how else to put it. This Dr. Lohman or Lehman or whoever, he had a decision to make."

"Decision?"

"Yeah." I run a slow hand through my thinning hair, then swallow hard before adding, "A decision about whether he and his colleague should reveal that they've heard a signal. A beacon, actually. I mean from deep space. From. . . beyond our solar system."

The laugh I expected is delayed. Instead, Eddie's look is more like he's gazing into a mirror.

"Get out," he whispers at last.

I ignore the suggestion, as I must. "Eddie, look, " I urge. "I'm sorry I haven't called you in so long, but I don't know who else I can go to with this. The signal, I mean, it's. . . really unique. Not like some Morse code or radio noise at all. More like a digital echo, with a wavelength that's either so short or so long it looks flat. They think it's something new. A

quantum beacon, using gravity waves as a carrier. You remember me saying we still don't know what gravity is precisely, right?"

"We?"

"Scientists. Scientists don't know. Like Einstein. He said gravity was a curvature of spacetime, remember? But it also gets transmitted by something they call a graviton, traveling at the speed of light. Or maybe not. They still don't have that worked out completely. It's partly a mystery. Anyway, one theory is that gravity may also pass instantly between two objects. Like these gravitons escape four dimensional spacetime to traverse the distance by way of a fifth dimension. Which might be one reason why the universe is expanding faster. Because gravity is weakened by this."

Eddie pinches the bridge of his nose, then shakes his head as though dislodging a wasp. "I just can't deal with this. . . stuff much longer," he informs me.

I take a deeper breath. "I understand, so I'll get to the point. There's a couple astronomers up on Kitt Peak, Eddie. Couple a' rich geeks never had to work a stockroom or drive a cab for a living. Anyway, they've discovered a transmission that couldn't come from any natural source. They didn't need a supercomputer to decode what it is, either. It's a warning aimed in the direction of where a gamma ray burst has shot out from the poles of a giant exploding star."

At last, Eddie erupts in spontaneous laughter. It's a surprisingly bitter laugh, too. Full of disdain, and not a little pity. "Bravo," he says, while slowly clapping. "What's the punch line—that it's a Saturn probe or HBO satellite broadcasting a rerun of *Lost in Space*?"

"No. You don't understand. They've identified the star we'll see explode, because the warning is like a video clip. They can see it happen, like an advance preview, repeating over and over. Not a pulsar with detectable radiation, but a kind of digital wink. And get this. If they're right, the only reason they can see this warning at all is because we're in the path where it's being broadcast, along the same narrow channel that the gamma rays will come. So it's like a real-time message they intercepted the night I wandered in, wondering who to tell, and what it's apparently saying is that whoever is in the way will be fried when the radiation arrives."

Now Eddie's head wobbles around a bit, like the Miss Piggy dashboard ornament in my Camaro. The cynical grin he levels at me is like a weapon. "And yer just sittin' there, buying all this? Didn't think to ask'em how the broadcasters survived the radiation themselves? Are they gods or what?"

"No. Didn't I just tell you? The star has already exploded, but the broadcast is coming from outside the narrow polar alignment where all the energy is focused."

The explanation causes Eddie to look down at his feet. A confused expression takes over his face as the weight of my revelation sinks in. To clarify, I tell him that although the signalers are closer to the exploded star than to Earth, Eric believes they're safe due to their position relative to the hypernova. Finally, that this horrific explosion has sent out—within seconds—a beam of energy equivalent to a billion years of natural radiation from the sun, and that such a beam can knife through the cosmos for hundreds of light years, cleansing whole parsecs of budding life.



"That may also explain why nobody's detected an intelligence until now," I conclude. "Life rarely gets a chance to develop before some star explodes like this in the vicinity. Maybe mankind has just been lucky, so far. Out here near the edge."

Eddie gifts my summation with a half chuckle. "And now our luck is gonna change for the worse—that what you're saying?" He huffs. "News flash, buddy. So far, for me? Just more of the same."

I shake my head. "Maybe not, if we break the story first."

His eyes narrow into a squint, as if reading the headlines below his feet. The haphazard newsprint spread out like blotters in a bird cage. "How's that?"

"If we learn which star has exploded before they get the guts to go public. . ." I leave the sentence unfinished.

Curiosity in his gaze. "If we learn?"

I point at the paper lying on the floor. "There's a global warming symposium this weekend, out at Starr Pass. This Eric guy will be there. I overheard him mention it. What if we go there with a micro-recorder, and you pose as an astronomer who's checked out the beacon already? We'd find out quick if it's for real, and how much time we have, depending on our distance to the signalers."

"You're joking, right? Now you want me to pose as an astronomer at a global warming conference? There's a punch line coming next, right? Or is that it?"

"Hey, you've listened to me gab enough over the years, haven't you? I'll prep you on what to say. Wouldn't have to be much. If you get him alone, without his colleague there, you could imply this other guy—this Bill guy—is an old friend, a former classmate."

"You mean, like us?"

"That's right, we haven't spoken in years, but then this thing happened, and you checked it out on the Green Bank radio telescope, and confirmed it. Hush hush. Green Bank's in Wisconsin, by the way. Pretend the star's exact distance is unclear, which is likely. Get him to name it somehow. We get his conversation on tape and we can go to ABC or CBS, Eddie."

His laughter assumes a weary, cynical edge. "How do you know this guy ain't goin' there to reveal it himself?"

"I don't know, maybe he is. But he may still be fishing for advice about the timing or the intensity, like he was with me about public reaction. It's a big story, after all. The biggest. If he's wrong about his timing, or about his interpretation of events, his career's screwed."

"And if he's right?"

"Depends. Could be a hundred years before any radiation arrives. Or longer. There aren't too many stars big enough to go hypernova in this part of the galaxy, so if the star is far enough away, maybe the energy isn't catastrophic. Maybe it



just lights up the night sky like the full moon, and we lose NFL satellite coverage. He could have great, great grandkids by then. But we need to know the star, Eddie. And where the signal is coming from. Then at least we'll be in the ball park, instead of out on the street."

A long pause, then, "You're nuts, and so is your plan."

I nod in agreement, and not even reluctantly. "Nuts, yeah, but it's all we got."

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The Marriott Resort at Starr Pass is a billion dollar edifice fashioned of beige stucco, with marble floors and chandeliers the size of my Camaro. I wear a shirt and tie, and Eddie's got on the suit jacket he wore to his dad's funeral two years before. He can't quite button it closed now, but with a clean shave and shined black church shoes he almost passes for an astronomer at the eccentric end of the spectrum.

We're late on this clear, bright Saturday, having walked up the long circular drive after my Camaro overheated half a mile away. Security is already set up outside the ballroom, so we stand at one of the long windows nearby. One that overlooks the lap pool and the 18th green.

"Just be cool," I advise. "If I spot Bill Reynolds...I mean, if he's here, I'll get him aside somehow. Try my own play. You stick with Eric Lullman. Focus on that picture we downloaded from the net."

Eddie pulls out the photo paper I'd given him, and studies it. "Five eight, hundred fifty?"

"Thereabouts." I smile nervously. "It'll be fine. Just remember to push the record button before he sees you."

"I'm not stupid, you know."

"I know you're not. You just think you are. Now, you were at Cal Tech with Bill when, exactly?"

Eddie rolls his eyes at the question.

Historians often recall moments when time seemed to stand still: The poised guillotine above the neck of Marie Antoinette. The turning moment at the battle of Waterloo. The quiet desert before the first atomic bomb test. Such a hush is mine when I finally witness, from a restroom alcove at the Marriott Starr Pass Resort, the sandy-haired geek astronomer named Eric Lullman approach Eddie Marcel—former alter boy turned aging bar hop. Lullman wears a beige polo shirt and dark blue slacks. His gait is determined, but his expression unreadable. When Eddie's hand comes up, before the two meet at the broad window, I feel my body tense. My mouth fills with cotton. I strain to hear actual words, but intervening voices muddy the edge of perception.

Suddenly there is a pause as people pass by, eclipsing my view, and I'm reminded of seeing an impressive photo of local group galaxies, taken by Hubble, yet gazing past them at the galaxies in the background. At the barely visible little spirals

and blips in the Ultra Deep Field, considering that any of them might be bigger, brighter, and more mysteriously close to the Big Bang than those taking up most of the foreground. So at the instant of revelation, I miss seeing Eric's face. When they part, Eddie doesn't react at all. If anything, Eddie seems oddly frozen in place. I, too, am suddenly aware of colors and textures. Of movement. Like the rise of Eddie's hand to his cheek, as though at being struck. Then Lullman casually joins the others heading into the ballroom, past two men checking I.D. badges, and it's over.

Traffic falls off. The doors whisper shut. Now Eddie stands alone at the window, looking down at the pool below the long window. . .

I walk stiffly toward my old friend, realizing that only four minutes have elapsed, although Eddie's encounter has changed him profoundly, somehow.

"What?" I ask. "*What?*"

Eddie doesn't turn toward me, but continues to stare downward, past his feet. I follow his gaze. At the pool below, a middle-aged man beneath them is rubbing oil onto a girl's back. Her forearms are crossed above her head. Her feet are slanted inward, her toes pointing toward each other like she's been anesthetized. Her tanned legs seem flawless and cellulite free. The man's gray head bobs above hers as he works.

"Something you'd like to tell that guy?" I say, not sure if I want to know.

Eddie blinks and impotently works his jaw muscles. A straining pressure. The answer is having an unexpected effect. Like a poison. After a moment, he finally opens his mouth and enunciates one word, precisely and slowly. So I can't mistake it.

"Deneb," he says.

I am staring at him as the name reverberates inside me, like a low-caliber bullet entering my brain and rattling around inside my skull, making connection. *Deneb*. It is a slow bullet, as in the Sade song. It renders me mute while my spine and limbs spread both the reality of the name and its significance outward to my tingling fingers and toes. Partly, it's that Eddie would not have known to say the name. Mostly, though, it's the star itself—one of the most intrinsically brilliant in the galaxy, burning with the ferocity of 160,000 suns. A blue white supergiant, Deneb resides at the apex of the Northern Cross, as I recall. A star anyone can see by naked eye. I try to remember an estimate of its distance, but then Eddie looks over at me, and meets my gaze.

"It's real," he says, still struggling against the awe of the revelation. He glances past me at the thick wooden ballroom doors. "And they're planning to announce it in there, at the conference."

"They are? But where's his partner Bill?"

"Parking the car."

I'm struck again, a double blow. I look back down at the man below us in disbelief. Finished with administering the girl's sunscreen, the gray-haired Lothario leans back, settles onto his lounge chair, laces hands behind neck, then seems to smile up at us, aware of the attention. It is an ironic smile, offered in the bliss of ignorance.

"What about the beacon? Did he tell you where the signal originates?"

Eddie doesn't answer. Only shakes his head. Once, then again.

"You mean there's nothing else, just...Deneb?"

He nods slightly, as if that's enough. And it is, for him. For a man who has just about given up on life, the next disaster is half expected, although the magnitude is surprising. "What happens now?" he whispers.

I squint up at the sun, trying to imagine Deneb in its place. For such a megastar to nova in the most horrific way possible, the radiation emitted would surely be enough for it to be glimpsed by creatures living in galaxies other than our own, albeit in some impossibly distant future. But would it also be enough to boil away the Earth's water, and much sooner?

"I don't know," I admit, and then turn to face the ballroom doors. "I wonder if anyone in there knows, either."

Eddie rubs at his forehead, as though trying to erase the past ten minutes. "How long have we got, then?"

The question seems sincere. I glance at my watch, out of compulsion. Then the irony of the habit hits me, and I think about all the thirty second ads I've watched over the years for burgers and SUVs and styling gel and rap albums. Finally, I imagine an alternate universe where I'm a real astronomer instead of an insurance salesman, and Eddie's a pitchman for Jack Daniels instead of just a drinker of the stuff. "Look on the bright side," I hear myself say. "The Iraq War Debt may never come due after all. Wars over the Middle East will end, too, once the ozone and the oceans are gone."

"That's not funny," Eddie contends.

"Sure it is," I insist, in reckless realization. And then I indicate the sun, which now illuminates a whole new and ludicrous world, thanks to a relativistic wink from the heavens. "Everything's funny, don't you see? It always was, buddy. We just didn't know it, thanks to Sister Sarah and Father Carlisle."

Not amused, Eddie looks over my shoulder at someone's approach. I turn to see Bill Reynolds, clown colleague of Eric Lullman—the second man of the tag team who'd tested my response to one part of the horrible truth they were now here to reveal. Reynolds, checking his wrist watch, ducks into the restroom, carrying a briefcase.

I stare in fascination at the space where man and briefcase have disappeared. Then I accept the opportunity as my cue to guide Eddie toward our ironic and inevitable destiny.

"Where we going now?" Eddie wants to know.

"To find the source of the beacon."

Reynolds recognizes me, too late, as the loser they'd tested with their secret. His briefcase is locked, we discover, but Bill soon blubbers that Eric has the key. After the moment of impact—my fist to his nose—we also learn that the source of the warning could be Gamma Cephei, a third magnitude type K star at a distance of 45 light years, known to possess a Jupiter-sized planet. What is unknown is whether the system also includes a smaller rocky planet with oceans and intelligent life that has transmitted a quantum gravity wave signal along an axis in Earth's direction. Or whether the beacon Eric and Bill intercepted is coming from a far more distant world, circling star C4548-8+21. If the former, Earth has less than 45 years before the radiation from a detonating Deneb reaches it. If the latter, the time could be even less, or very much more.

"It depends," Bill Reynolds squeals, blood gushing from his nose as Eddie holds him from behind.

"On what?" I demand. "On how far the second star is to Deneb?"

"Yes, yes," he confesses. "On this side of Deneb, or on the other, farther away."

I grin, despite myself. His answer makes obvious sense. It's all neat and tidy, now. Whether the world ends with a bang or a whimper—and whether sooner or later—is anyone's guess, but you can't have everything. Why risk petitioning Congress to launch the Space Interferometer Mission early, so that parallax could measure the exact distance before disclosing? If the press could track down some blond starlet's lost love child across four continents, it would surely crack the biggest story in the history of mankind, and in a way they couldn't control.

"But why disclose here?" I ask. "Is there a Nobel Prize committee member in the audience or something?"

Reynolds nods mechanically, afraid I'm going to hit him again.

I tap the briefcase on the floor beside me with the toe of one shoe. "And you need this evidence to bolster your claim?"

He drops his head in reply, folding like a victim in a horror film or gangster flick. So I don't hit him. We just tie him up. On the way out of the ballroom area, though, I feel an odd rush of elation as we stride past the lobby, and leave the resort. With inhibitions and self doubts suddenly erased, I commandeer a pink Hummer by posing as a valet.

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The Arizona Daily Star has a central news desk, and it's to this desk that I've summoned a reporter from the local ABC News affiliate TV station via cell phone, en route. Unfortunately, it's the FBI who've beat them there. Two tall, unsmiling men dressed like finance reporters or CEOs. We're escorted into a side conference room, where we're handcuffed and told to wait for some ominous third party.

"I thought a press room was a safe zone," I comment, "like a church is for illegal aliens."

"You thought wrong," the first man says.

"So much for freedom of speech. Who are we waiting for, then?"

No answer. Instead, the sullen Val Kilmer look-alike glances at me and evokes a look of pity. Then he loses the expression, and looks over my head at the wall, his hands folded in front of him like an art museum guard, or an agent from *The Matrix*. I glance at my old buddy, turned unwitting accomplice. Poor Eddie only hangs his head, shaking it slowly at the floor. He'd trusted me, and my plan. But then he didn't really know what I planned to do once we got to the press. Or what else I knew now, too.

"I demand to see a reporter," I say, as a test. "We have evidence of an impending catastrophe."

No response from Kilmer. Not even a blink. Obviously, he's dealt with nut cases before, probably in this very room. Or the one we're all waiting for has.

"Aren't you even curious?"

He regards me finally, but I can't detect any interest in his eyes, yet. It's more as though he's observing a bug about to be dissected.

"You know, all the other news here doesn't matter any more," I tell him, matter-of-factly. "The story they've got in the works about some wacko flashing candy at school kids? Or the governor cutting a ribbon on a down town hotel? Or a rubbernecking pileup on Interstate 10? It's all meaningless now."

Maybe he expected me to be hysterical or fearful, as the others had. But my calm, self-assured tone is new. I can tell by the smallest detectable glint of curiosity that animates the muscles in his forehead.

"And if you're thinking this is a Homeland Security matter, think again," I add. "Because it's bigger than that."

At this he blinks. "Really," he says.

His partner touches his forearm, but he shakes it away as though dislodging a mosquito.

"Oh yeah," I tell them both, this time. "So if it's the NSA coming, there's nothing they can do about this. Got nothing to do with terrorism, okay? Although you could say, like what I told that reporter by phone, that it does involve an explosion. Evidence of which we have in a briefcase."

"A nuclear device?"

"No, I said it wasn't man-made." I turn to Eddie for feigned support, but Eddie's head rests in his hands, oblivious to me. "Didn't I say that? Didn't I make that perfectly clear?"

Of course I've made very little clear, having revealed nothing about the beacon, or the return message from the constellation of Vela, directly opposite Deneb on the other side of the Earth. The one that might be interpreted, *Thanks for the warning*. I figure, to buy our silence just on that one, we were due a million bucks each, tax free. Not to mention a retirement bungalow on the beach in San Carlos, Mexico.

After a prolonged hush, someone in the next room turns on a radio. Barry Manilow. I look up and chuckle, when it hits me that it's the wrong channel. That, indeed, every channel on the dial has been the wrong channel, and that what we should have been listening for wasn't limited by the ironically slow speed of light. Perhaps if we'd tuned to the right frequencies around the same time as the first radio was invented, there might have been time to save ourselves. But the only ones who know for sure are the ones who'll one day—decades from now—start receiving all of the sitcoms, war reports, dance contests, and reality shows we've been beaming through the vast void. And it's anyone's guess what they'll think of our final swan song.

"Where's the briefcase now?" Kilmer's clone suddenly wants to know.

I glimpse the flesh-colored wire behind his ear, and realize someone must have just finished tossing the stolen Hummer in the parking lot.

"A safe place," I say.

"And you came here because. . .?"

"I'm stupid, obviously. To think that maybe we could sell the story."

"That is stupid. Newspapers don't buy stories, they report them."

"Do they? I'm not so sure. Maybe they only report what you let them. Or what their corporate sponsors want them to print." I pause, getting no response to a futile strain against my handcuffs. "But that's another story," I conclude. "Not nearly as important as the one I'm offering you, now."

A faint smile. "For a fee, you mean?"

"That's right," I tell him. "A kill fee. It's what they pay to authors when they contract to buy a story, and then don't run it."

"And what makes you think we. . . I mean *they*. . . wouldn't want to run it?"

The question, of course, is my cue to smile back. And to remain silent.

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*Born in Minneapolis, Jonathan Lowe has lived in Ormond Beach, Florida, Greenville, S.C., and Tucson, Arizona. He has published fiction and non-fiction in dozens of magazines, from Omni to Sky & Telescope, with awards from the S.C. Arts Commission, Roger C. Peace Foundation, and Writer's Digest. His short plays have been produced on stage or in audio drama format for airing on radio, while a short film "Ghostly Mozart" was produced for the Greenville Symphony's Mozart Festival. An audiobook reviewer since 1995, Lowe maintains the website JustSayNoWay.com, and is author of Postmarked for Death, Awakening Storm, Fame Island, and Geezer.*