

# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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*Mission Statement*

The main goal of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is to keep going. Our other goals are to get a little bit better every year and to catch up with *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*.

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# Contents

## Editorial

In Love Again . . . . .	5
<i>Stephen Theaker</i>	
Contributors . . . . .	8

## News & Comment

China Mieville at Forbidden Planet . . . . .	10
The Very Best of Gene Wolfe . . . . .	10
The Tombs of Telos Are Opened Once More . . . . .	10
Iris Wildthyme to the Rescue! . . . . .	10

## Science Fiction

Quadrant Five . . . . .	11
<i>Anne Marie Gomez</i>	
Newton Braddell: a Constant, Gnawing Hunger . . . . .	35
<i>John Greenwood</i>	
Soldier . . . . .	44
<i>Josie Gowler</i>	
Breaking Out of Sleep . . . . .	45
<i>Barry Pomeroy</i>	

## Horror

Anatomy of a Wounded House . . . . .	55
<i>Douglas Thompson</i>	
The Stairs in the Crypt . . . . .	60
<i>John Hall</i>	

## Fantasy

Bloodbegotten . . . . .	65
<i>Jason Hinchcliffe</i>	

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## The Quarterly Review

### *Books*

The Babylonian Trilogy .....	79
Gunpowder .....	80
The Kill Crew .....	81
The Best of D.F. Lewis .....	82
Curious Men .....	83
Doctor Who: The Writer's Tale .....	83
First and Last .....	84
The Forbidden Tower .....	84
The Airlords of Han .....	85
The Oz Suite .....	86
Thanks and Have Fun Running the Country: Kids' Letters to President Obama .....	87
The Time Traders .....	87
The Witnesses Are Gone .....	88

### *Comics*

Aliens Vs. Predator Omnibus, Vol. 1 .....	89
Powers: Definitive Collection, Vol. 1 .....	89
Showcase Presents: Legion of Super-Heroes, Vol. 2 .....	90
Showcase Presents: Supergirl, Vol. 1 .....	91

### *Television*

Who Wants to Be a Superhero? .....	92
Being Human .....	93
The Quest of Dick & Dom .....	94
Demons .....	94

### *Also Received*

But Not Yet Reviewed .....	95
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## EDITORIAL

# In Love Again

## Stephen Theaker

When I first saw the Sony Reader in Waterstones I was really impressed by the e-paper screen, the way the text looked as if it was printed on the surface – it looked really easy to read. But I wasn't impressed by how sluggish it was – it took ages to move from one option to another. And I made myself look a bit stupid by trying to choose options by touching them with my finger (the Rocket eBook has a touchscreen).

I decided to wait for the Kindle. And wait... And wait...

Eventually my patience ran out and I spent some money I don't really have on a Sony Reader. It's turned out to be the best money I shouldn't have spent since I got a TiVo!

I absolutely love it. What makes all the difference is that where the Rocket eBook was heavier and more cumbersome than most books, the Sony Reader is lighter and less cumbersome than most of them.

The bundled software from Sony is pretty much unusable, and gave me a few early jitters of buyer's remorse, but once I downloaded Calibre the love affair was on. It's now stuffed to the gills with classics from the free CD from Sony, creative commons and out-of-copyright sf from Feedbooks, newspapers created from The Guardian and BBC websites via Feedbooks, epub files from Project Gutenberg, submissions and proofs for TQF and Dark Horizons, pdf review copies from PS Publishing and Eibonvale, ebooks from Fictionwise, not to mention a bunch of music and photos.

I'm stunned at how brilliantly it handles pdf files – I wouldn't have thought it possible. At the smallest magnification setting it shows the pdf as is, and then at medium and large it blows up the main text, doing a marvellous job of ignoring white space and page numbers. It even manages to deal pretty well with a multi-column layout like the one in *Dark Horizons*.

One of the other brilliant features is the ability to have collections, dividing up the files by keywords so you can quickly find any of them. The Sony software doesn't work well with them, but with Calibre you

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can just edit the keywords of the files on the Reader itself to sort them out directly.

Very happy with it indeed...

And then I found the Baen Books free library! Well over a hundred books (many of them omnibuses and gigantic collections) for free download. It left me in tears of joy. I ended up downloading half a dozen books I already own, just because it'll be so much easier reading them this way. See <http://www.baen.com/library>.

If I'd found those same books going cheap in a bookshop, I admit that I would still have bought them. But I would have had a problem finding somewhere for them to go. I long ago reached the point where I had no more room for books in the house. I've got (checks Goodreads) 1,131 paper books to read, and another thousand or two that I've already read. There's nowhere to put any new books, and any time I do put a book down, chances are I'll lose it. For example, I've got a review copy of Conrad Williams' *One* to read, but I've lost it half a dozen times already... On the other hand, I can find any ebooks on the Sony Reader in about ten seconds, and store unlimited numbers of books on the computer.

I'm now free to buy and collect books again without worrying about where to put them. I can donate a lot of the classics I own to charity shops, since they're all on Gutenberg. It's really nice, too, to be able to request review copies and not worry about what it costs someone.

I wrote a bit about this in my editorial for the new *Dark Horizons* – before I got my Reader – and I do still agree with what I said there, that for most people this'll be a solution to a problem they don't have. But for me personally, it's a huge improvement in my life – a lifehack as big as getting TiVo or buying my first PC.

The other day I went over to my wife's parents' house with it, and started reading a book. Then two kids jumped in my lap and I switched to *Little Wizard Tales of Oz* from Gutenberg and read that to them. Then my father-in-law came in, so I let him read the BBC news on it. Eventually the room was empty apart from me so I could concentrate properly and I got started on reading some submissions. It's every book I need it to be...

I've even got the perfect bag to put it in – the Bagbase mini reporter. It's like I'm wearing a tricorder...

Some people talk about the feel and smell of paper books. I can understand that to some extent, but that isn't a love of the literature within those pages: it's fetishism for the way they are presented. The story counts more than the format. The question about the format is how much

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of a barrier it puts between me and the story, how much it gets in the way, how it holds up my reading. We're used to the inconveniences associated with paper books, but, really, they are anything but comfortable and relaxing. Think of all that bother holding the thing open, for starters, especially when reading in bed... Trying to find the right angle to catch the light properly... Keeping your place in the book... Peering at the words sinking into the spine...

After using ebooks for a while even turning the page seems like a time-consuming chore! Reading an ebook (on the right device) can be much more immersive and quite a bit quicker than reading it on paper – it's just you and the story, with no hassle. I've found I read things about 20% faster on the Sony Reader, and it's not because I'm rushing, it's because there are fewer distractions from the actual reading.

I doubt anyone would really find reading a 500pp+ paperback, let alone hardback, more comfortable than reading the same thing on a Sony Reader. Look at it this way: anytime you find yourself needing two hands to read a book, that's a hand more than you need for the Sony Reader!

Another point is that books, just like music, tv, films and photographs, are so much more accessible as files. Then think about the ease of actually buying the books that you want to read. Within a year or two buying



*Some of the books on Theaker's Sony Reader.*

*Smudges on photo caused by a baby's fingerprint.*

any book ever published could take just minutes, instead of years spending trawling second-hand bookshops and eBay.

As far as cost goes, taking into account things like Feedbooks, Project Gutenberg and Google Books – plus initiatives like the Baen Books free library – the average cost of an ebook is much lower than paper books, since anything published more than a hundred years ago is totally free.

The one thing I miss is being able to add notes to what I'm reading (which I could do on the Rocket eBook), but apparently you can get some special accessories for the Sony Reader – a “pen” and “paper”. I'll report back on these novelties in a future editorial, though at first glance they seem much more awkward than using a keyboard...

## Contributors

ANNE MARIE GOMEZ owns a business that designs custom gardens for people's homes. She also raises a variety of flowers from seed and enjoys sharing the seedlings with other home gardeners. Her free time is devoted to writing, writing, and then more writing.

JOSIE GOWLER has had short stories published in *Delivered* and *Linkway* magazines. Her specialties are weird tales set in the East Anglian Fens and science fiction short stories; sometimes the two overlap.

She's currently working on a trashy coming-of-age space opera.

To pay the bills, Josie works as an accountant in the Civil Service, but please don't hold that against her, she asks.

JOHN GREENWOOD propped TQF up for many years, keeping the magazine going with his generous contributions until it was ready to take its first steps into wider world. His stories can be found in most previous issues.

JOHN HALL is best known as a Sherlockian scholar, and a member of the International Pipe Smokers' Hall of Fame. His numerous literary interests include Raffles, Sexton Blake, H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James. He is the author of *Special Commission*, a medieval murder mystery. Previous stories by John appeared in TQF23 (“Shaggai”), TQF25 (“In the Vale of Pnath”) and TQF26 (“The Burrower Beneath”).

Ever since JASON HINCHCLIFFE was a kid growing up in the middle of a forest in Cayuga, Ontario, he's had dreams of becoming a writer. Not much has changed since then, except instead of being a geeky and funny-looking child, he's blossomed into a geeky and funny-looking adult. To

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support himself, Jason works as an editor at a legal publisher in Markham. If it wasn't for the Bank and all their pesky rules (pay the loans, pay the mortgage), he'd spend his time reading Dickens novels, writing, and watching all the movies that having a job tends to prevent a person from watching. This year has been an incredible writing-year so far – stories are forthcoming in *Kaleidotrope*, *580 Split*, the *Nashwaak Review*, and also *Candlelight, a Dark Anthology of Horror, Science Fiction, and Fantasy*. Jason owns two cats that sleep way too much.

BARRY POMEROY (see below with bison), is an itinerant English professor, boat designer and builder, traveller, carver, sometime mechanic, carpenter, and web designer. As a writer he is responsible for *Multiple Personality Disorder*, a long poem in dialogue, and the novel *Naked in the Road*, and his shorter work has been or will be published in magazines such as *Cosmetica*, *Bards and Sages*, *Insolent Rudder*, *Tart*, *Tiny Globule*, *Writing Shift*, *Uterior*, *Oddville Press* and *Word Catalyst*. “Breaking out of Sleep” is from the short story collection *Isolates and Survivors*.



DOUGLAS THOMPSON won the Grolsch/Herald New Writing Award in 1989, and second prize in the Neil Gunn Writing Competition in 2007. His stories have been widely published in magazines and anthologies, most recently *Ambit*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Subtle Edens* and *Dark Horizons*. “Anatomy of a Wounded House” is from his first novel/collection *Ultrameta* which will be published in August 2009 by Eibonvale (see [www.glasgowsurrealist.com/douglas](http://www.glasgowsurrealist.com/douglas)).

STEPHEN THEAKER is the eponymous editor of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. He wrote all of this issue's reviews, which explains their reliance on words such as superb, exciting and well-written. He is also the editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society.

## NEWS & COMMENT

### China Mieville at Forbidden Planet

China Mieville is pretty close to the top of the list of authors I think I'll probably like very much, if I ever get around to reading one of their books. Also on that list: Alastair Reynolds, Clark Ashton Smith, Dan Simmons, Rudy Rucker and Cory Doctorow.

Anyway, Forbidden Planet have emailed to say that he will be appearing at their London store on April 30, at 6.00 pm, to sign and read from his new novel, *The City & The City*. More details can be found on the Forbidden Planet signings page: [www.forbiddenplanet.com/signings](http://www.forbiddenplanet.com/signings).

### The Very Best of Gene Wolfe

Gene Wolfe is a writer very close to the top of my list of "authors I love who I haven't read enough of". For some reason I never got around to reading the third or fourth volume of *The Book of the Long Sun* and I haven't read anything since. But I'm very tempted by the announcement of *The Very Best of Gene Wolfe*. There's a regular version from Tor and a special, signed edition from P.S. Publishing which includes an extra story ("Christmas Inn").

### The Tombs of Telos Are Opened Once More

Telos have announced several more titles, including *Monsters Within: The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Doctor Who 2008*, by Stephen James Walker, covering the fourth series of Britain's greatest contribution to world culture. What about Shakespeare, you ask? Well, I reply, where would Shakespeare have been if the Doctor hadn't saved him from the carrionites in season three?

### Iris Wildthyme to the Rescue!

In Planet of the Dead we saw Doctor Who's latest chum scooting around in a bus, but real fans know that the original bus-wielding companion was the mysterious Iris Wildthyme. She may or may not be a Time Lady, but one thing's for sure: *The Celestial Omnibus* is on the way, an entire book devoted to her adventures. It features stories by Steve Lyons, Mags L. Halliday and the character's creator Paul Magrs, and many others. There's even an introduction by Katy Manning, who played Iris with memorable gusto in the Big Finish audio adventures. The book is due out this month.

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## SCIENCE FICTION

# Quadrant Five

Anne Marie Gomez

Jeandra, clenched hands on hips, surveyed her home. Only a few of the furnishings would be transported to the R9-12 Galaxy Cruiser, along with her clothes and personal items. On the floor sat a single case with clothes for the one week journey. She knew any display of protest over the forced move was futile; two guards stood outside to escort her to the landing dock.

At doorways all over the city pairs of armed men waited to accompany winners of the Culling Lottery. Advertised as the chance of a lifetime, residents on each planet in Quadrant One had the opportunity for relocation. The government put every adult's name into the population selection computer. The Lottery was triggered when the census revealed the population had increased beyond a specified maximum; the winners were shipped to one of the colony planets elsewhere in the galaxy.

As an investigative reporter for the last non-government news agency she'd dug deep into the Lottery; the discoveries had shocked her. Yesterday morning she'd found proof the government used the system to expel dissidents. She tugged at the gold loop in her left earlobe. No one would ever read that story; she'd been selected for relocation to Aires Seven in Quadrant Three. Jeandra's high profile and popularity put the government censors on high alert; they'd given her only a few hours' notice. Not enough time for any volatile protest by friends or avid readers of her editorials.

The guards bundled her into a vehicle belonging to the Space Security System. Despite the heat of the double suns, Jeandra shivered. Thirty minutes later she joined the crowd at the dock. She knew the rest of those selected would be from a variety of jobs and careers: the intent of the lottery being to keep a varied populace at their new home. Ordinary people, unaware of any sinister government motives. She chewed her lower lip as she studied their faces. Seeing a familiar face, she quickly looked away.

Ninety-nine other people clustered in small groups in the morning

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heat. None of the guards left. They formed a circle around the dock; two hundred uniformed men, stunners held ready. One by one the people stepped through the air lock into the transport.

After everyone had boarded, the captain and crew walked around, smiling and greeting the passengers as if this were some kind of vacation trip. Jeandra ignored them. She sat near the front, a few feet from the command centre; she buckled her safety harness and waited for the crew to take their seats. The captain tapped her shoulder and handed her a small, paper-wrapped package. "I'm sure you'll find some way to use this." He laughed as he walked away.

She heard the familiar whoosh of the air lock closing followed by a low rumble. Tiny lights flashed on the captain's console and the engines boomed to life, the sound so loud she knew they must be at full throttle. Jeandra realised their ship had been placed on some kind of automatic drone control. In less than a minute they were free of the gravitational pull of the planet and headed for deep space.

A man's voice cursed. She heard a woman crying. A cacophony of voices filled the cabin. Harsh angry words assaulted her ears. Shocked murmurs drummed against her forehead. An icy sensation filled her fingers then crept up her arms. Fear roiled in her stomach. The package slipped off her lap and thudded against the floor near her feet. Only curiosity about its contents prevented her from kicking it away. She unbuckled the harness and retrieved the package. Scrawled across the paper in red ink, someone had written her name; underneath they'd printed "former investigative reporter". In the space of one heartbeat her fear drowned in a wave of anger.

"A going away present?"

Jeandra stared at Algon, the friend she'd recognised on the landing dock. They'd spent considerable time together since graduating from university almost eight years ago. Even though he'd majored in Intergalactic History, he allotted half the days to pursue his love of engineering. Yet he always found time when she needed his help on some project. She handed him the package and waited for his reaction.

He said, "This proves your theory."

"I guess they expelled two dissidents this time."

"I prefer to call myself a free thinker."

Dark brown eyes met her gaze. She rolled her eyes at him. "Open it, would you?"

Inside they found a compact Unicode Secretary Notekeeper with a rechargeable battery. Algon read the single entry. "We found it necessary to keep your files and notes. You won't need them where you're going."

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Maybe next time you'll keep your reporter's nose out of the government's business."

Jeandra grabbed the edge of the notepad. "I'll heave this down..."

"Stop! If they took everything you might need this." He shoved his fingers through his hair. "Did you know we were on a drone ship?"

"I had no idea about anything. They hand delivered my notice yesterday evening."

"You know what this means, right?"

"My first guess is we aren't being relocated anywhere in Quadrant Three."

"My thoughts exactly. They use drones for Quadrant Five. We'll have enough fuel to land and a little to spare, but not enough to travel to any other Quadrant." He drummed his fingers against the back of her seat. "Remember the first time you read about Quadrant Five in Science Class? We joked the scientists didn't know a Quadrant meant four."

"The professor set us straight real fast. I can still hear his stern voice telling us that a whole new area has been discovered, and that Quadrant Five would undoubtedly be followed by Six, Seven and Eight."

"Never thought we'd actually see it."

"We need to talk to the other passengers, come up with some kind of plan. Who knows what we'll find when we land."

"Or where we'll land. No one's ever returned from a drone ship flight to the far Quadrants."

Jeandra twirled the gold loop in her ear. She leaned close to him. "I found something else the day before yesterday. Now no one will ever know the truth behind the lottery, what the government has really been doing."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Later. I don't want anyone else to hear."

Algon raised his arm and spoke in a firm, loud voice. "We need to have some quiet."

Jeandra smiled. He never failed to grab everyone's attention. Perhaps because at six feet seven inches he towered over most people. She barely reached his shoulder. Jeandra left running the meeting to Algon; she'd observe people, check their reactions to the situation. A young woman two rows back stood up and pointed at Jeandra. "You're a reporter, I've seen your face in magazines and on the news."

Another woman stood up. Her blue eyes were half-filled with tears. The woman's voice rose to a high pitch. "What are we going to do?"

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What's going to happen to us? Are we going to die out here?" Jeandra dubbed her "Miss Hysterics".

"I like the way you reported on the government." A middle-aged man stood up, quickly glanced about the room and then sat down. He jumped up again. "You didn't hold back any punches. I think you should take charge, we need someone to organise us."

Jeandra held up her hand. "I'm a reporter not an organiser." She smiled and motioned to Algon. "He'd be great for the job."

Someone waved two arms in the air. A stoop-shouldered man stood up. He punctuated each sentence with both hands. "Why do we need a leader? Everything's fine. We'll be landing soon then we'll have our new homes."

Jeandra said, "In case you haven't noticed, this is a drone ship. No crew. No one but ourselves. It's my assumption we aren't landing anywhere for several weeks."

A woman – about thirty – stood up. She tugged at a small necklace, winding the links around one finger. "I'm Medine. I teach at... well, I was a teacher." She visibly swallowed. "How can we choose a leader when we don't know each other?"

The middle-aged man stood and wagged his finger at Medine. "Who's going to be in charge? You?"

"No. I thought we could think of ourselves as a committee with sub-committees. It would give us a chance to get to know each other."

Algon said, "What kind of committees?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Meals. Inventory. Medical. Supplies. Things like that."

Algon pursed his lips as if to whistle. He raised his hand. "If this sounds good to anyone else, raise your hand."

Most of the people agreed. Many passengers volunteered to form or join a sub-committee. Jeandra wrote everyone's assignment in the electronic secretary. A physician and nurse would inventory medical supplies and equipment. Two college professors volunteered to pore through the available data for any maps and information regarding their destination. Three women accepted the task of gathering the personal information of each of the passengers. Another group would catalogue any items that might be useful once they landed. Jeandra entered her own name in Algon's "Search Committee". Algon recruited a computer expert, Hesdo, to help search the ship's computer for ways to circumvent the drone pilot. A star map of Quadrant Five became a priority.

Jeandra left the passenger section and rode the small inter-deck transport to the middle section, one level below. In addition to the food stored

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in the hold, ample provisions filled the galley storage bins. Six people hunched around a food preparation table planning a thirty day menu. On the same level she found passenger sleeping quarters, a reception area, and recreation room.

The next level down contained the crews' quarters, but these were secured by the drone system. Two levels below, just above the hold, she found the engine room also locked. Jeandra's futile attempts to enter increased her frustration.

In the main cabin she found Hesdo. She tapped his shoulder. "I need a favour."

"Sure. What's the problem?"

She handed him the electronic notebook. "Is there any way to see if this has been tampered with or has any listening devices implanted?"

He raised his eyebrows and blinked twice. "In four days no device would work. We'll be too far from Quadrant One. I'll check it, if that'll make you feel better."

"Please. And could you keep this between the two of us?"

"Not a problem." He used a small probe and examined the outer cover. Next he opened each panel and placed some kind of electrode inside. As he opened the back to expose all the innards, she wondered if it would even work again. She rubbed the gold loop in her ear and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"Clean as new. Nothing altered in any part of it."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it."

She curled up in a chair and made her first entry in the notebook. *These passengers will be my new neighbours. My only neighbours. They seem to be ordinary folks. Each of them simply wants to make a new home. Start their new life. I hope to never have to tell them what I discovered. The purpose of these forced migrations.*

Jeandra met with Algon after the first meal. "Everyone is cooperating. They seem to enjoy having something to do."

He shoved his hands in the side pockets of his flight pants. "If our suspicions are correct, we'll enter Quadrant Five in four weeks."

Five days later Jeandra tracked down each volunteer and entered their reports and assessments in her notebook. She spent the afternoon in her cabin evaluating the information. A buzz on the cabin intercom announced a visitor. When she opened the door, Algon grinned at her. "Your supper, miss."

"Food? For me?"

"It's way past meal time. Knowing you, I figured you were buried in a mound of papers. Eating will replenish your brain power."

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Jeandra laughed. "I guess I am hungry. This is what we've found out. All outside communication systems have been dismantled." She bit into a slice of fresh bread and shoved a paper toward him.

"I figured they'd leave us isolated. Any good news?"

"We've enough food stored in the hull to last a year. Adequate medical supplies are on board. Despite your computer expert's best efforts, the drone navigation system couldn't be circumvented." She took another bite.

"In other words we won't starve while we hurtle through space to our unknown destination. Do you want to tell them or shall I?"

She rubbed the gold earring with her thumb. "Tomorrow morning. They can digest the news along with their breakfast."

Algon tapped the nearest stack of papers. "Time's up."

"For what?"

"I've given you five days to tell me what else you discovered about the lottery." He smiled. "Just in case you feel some doubt about telling me, I brought this along." He pulled a bar of chocolate from his pocket and waved it under Jeandra's nose. "Think of it as a gift."

"More like bribery." She tried to grab the bar, but he held it out of reach.

"If you don't want it, I suppose I could eat it." He unfolded one edge of the silver paper.

"I'd planned on telling you." She reached out her hand. "In fact now seems like the perfect time."

Algon grinned and passed the chocolate.

"I suppose the information doesn't matter. Not for us anyway. It'll be important in twenty or thirty years." She bit off a corner of the candy.

"We'll still be around in twenty years. Most if not all of these people will be here and their children."

Jeandra nibbled an edge of the chocolate. She licked a tiny sliver from her lip. "I found the government records for the Culling Lottery. Maybe some overzealous clerk combined files from different departments. I don't know how it happened, but I discovered highly classified documents dating from the earliest lotteries through last year."

She unhooked her gold earring and handed it to him. "Slide the back hook into the port on the notebook."

Algon chuckled. "You stole the data?"

"I made a copy. No one knows."

The data appeared on the small screen. Jeandra stood up while he read it. After several minutes she heard the faint buzz when he turned the notebook off. Algon handed her the gold loop. He wrapped his arms

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around her, resting his chin on the top of her head. "If the government knew you found that, they..." His voice broke. She felt his body tense. "They'd never have let you go. You'd be locked up somewhere. Or dead."

After twenty days passed, Jeandra curled up on her bed and scanned her notebook entries. Day six: *lost at cards twice*. Day seven: *We picked great cooks! Scrumptious chocolate cake after dinner*. Day eight: *Medine started a reading group. I declined*. Day nine: *finally won one game of cards*. Day eleven: *I avoided Miss Hysterics at mealtime*. Day fourteen: *I'm bored beyond Aires!!!* Day twenty: *Offered to help in the kitchen. I must be bored*.

She wrote for day twenty-five: *Most of the passengers are coping well. A few struggle with depression. Considering the seriousness of the situation, everything is going smoothly*.

On the thirty-first day a computer voice hailed them over the ship's communication network. "The ship will be landing in one hour at the settlement of Desniade on the planet Rahr."

Jeandra clenched her hands. She felt the rapid pulse of her heart and tried to breathe slowly to calm herself. Someone knelt in front of her, but her eyes couldn't focus. She felt a trickle of sweat drip down her neck. A roar sounded in her ears. Algon took her hands in his. "At least we are landing somewhere and not just floating off into deep space."

"No one there will know we're arriving."

"Our ship has clear markings; no one will mistake us for marauders."

She forced a smile. Only after he took his own seat did she allow a few tears to trickle from her eyes.

After their space craft landed Jeandra's hands stopped shaking. Hesdo raced toward the command centre. She knew he was twenty-five, but he looked like a sixteen-year-old, with his mussed carrot-red hair, bright blue inquisitive eyes and endless freckles. Hesdo sat in the captain's chair; he tapped the glass console, scrutinised various panels, and then a grin spread across his face. He jumped up and waved his arms in the air. "I was right! As soon as we landed the drone disconnected. We now have full control of the ship."

A cheer erupted from the passengers.

Algon squatted next to Jeandra with a big smile. Before he could speak she grabbed his arm. "Wait. Let them enjoy the moment."

After a full two minutes Jeandra jabbed him with her elbow. "Go ahead."

He stood up. "This means we can use the ship for shelter until we've explored the settlement and surrounding region."

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A man said, "But what about the other settlers? Can't they give us the information we need?"

"Of course. The big question is whether there are any other settlers here. Once ships leave Quadrant Three no communication is possible. We've no idea what we'll find. I'll form a landing party for a quick investigation of the immediate area. Hesdo can search the data banks for information. Maybe our kitchen crew can make us a celebration dinner for tonight."

Jeandra joined Hesdo. "What else did you discover?"

"The ship's security systems belong to whoever commands the captain's chair." He patted the chair. "I volunteer."

"For the moment you can be chief of security. I've got to find Algon." She found him leaning against the door to the crew's compartment. "What are you doing in here? I thought you were going exploring."

Without a word he pushed against an oblong panel beside him and the door slid open. "I am. But I had a hunch I'd find these in here." He pointed to a complete cache of weapons. "Just in case an unpleasant surprise waits somewhere on Rahr, I think we should take stunners."

"Who knows how to use them?"

"Simple as eating cake. Come on. I'm giving free lessons."

Jeandra joined five men and two women for a quick lesson. Algon said, "I guarantee these are not lethal, just painful."

Once outside the ship, Jeandra saw on their left two other galaxy cruisers, parked about six hundred yards away, of a type that hadn't been in service for more than seventy years. The landing pad must have extended a half mile in every direction. Buildings rose sixty feet on all sides. Domed roofs reflected the late morning suns.

Jeandra shielded her eyes with one hand and gazed at the sky. On their home planet the two suns seemed only a few feet apart, though she knew this was an optical illusion. Rahr had two large suns in the eastern sky with a smaller sun, only a fourth their size, midway between them. The sky seemed to be painted a pale yellow and not a single cloud or vapour trail crossed it.

Algon said, "Let's see if we can find a door or gate."

They walked to the closest building and discovered three unlocked doors. One accessed a room with rows and rows of empty shelves. Every twelve feet a window faced the outside perimeter, but they were covered with black cloth and offered no view. The second door accessed a small storage room with only a broken air hose lying on the floor.

The last door opened to a small corridor with a door on the opposite side. An uncovered window let in enough sunlight for them to find their

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way. When Algon opened the far door, Jeandra squeezed past him and received her first glimpse of Desniade. The settlement had been built fifty yards beyond the landing pad. All the single story brown buildings were round, as if someone had taken giant balls and cut them in half. Evenly spaced, the domes sat in a large circle with small curved paths leading to the centre. Trees dotted the landscape, their huge spreading branches covered in pale amber leaves.

Jeandra counted ten circles of domes; each circle had twelve buildings. In the distance, behind a haze of heat and dust a range of mountains thrust their dark grey peaks toward the sky. Silence permeated everything like sand in a windstorm.

Jeandra said, "Where is everyone?"

Algon shrugged his shoulders.

"Do we just start knocking on doors?"

"Let's divide into three groups and meet back here in an hour. Each group can take one of the circles."

Jeandra joined Algon and one of the other men. They chose a circle to the right, followed the path to the first structure, and then stopped to check their surroundings. The buildings were identical except for a small uniquely coloured triangle in the centre of each door. She rapped on the door. No one responded. She made a fist and pounded. "No one's here." No one answered at any of the twelve domes.

"I've always liked blue," Jeandra said. She walked to the door with the blue triangle and pushed it open. Curved benches lined three walls, a small table sat in the middle of the room, and a painting of the distant mountain range hung near a window. A doorway led to a kitchen with a large table. Another door led to a small hall where three doors opened to sleeping rooms. Everything seemed to be in place. Mattresses on top of beds. Dishes and non-perishable food in the cupboards; but no personal items of any kind were found.

When they regrouped each told the same story. Algon said, "I think we should check the seven other circles. Let's not assume anything." But they found nothing different. Puzzled they sat in one of the domes and discussed the situation.

Jeandra opened her notebook. "We have lots of questions. What we can't find are any answers."

One of the women said, "If they died from some space virus or had been attacked by renegade aliens we'd have found bones or signs of battle. Everyone has simply vanished."

Algon said, "They'd know others would be sent here, maybe we missed something. A clue of some sort. Or a log book."

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Jeandra opened her mouth to speak, but she heard someone yelling outside. Startled she swivelled to face the door. Algon, stunner in hand, opened the door. "Hesdo, what're you doing here?"

"I found some very interesting information in the data banks. Figured since you were scouting around you might want to check it out."

"Sounds like you found more than we did."

"According to the data banks six ships have been sent here in the past twenty years." He grinned at them.

"Six? But there were only two ships on the landing pad."

"And those two ships are from at least seventy-five years ago, if not longer," Jeandra said.

Hesdo trailed close behind Jeandra as they crossed the landing pad to the two old galaxy cruisers. Up close the wear and age was more evident. The air lock opened and Algon peered inside. "Nothing odd so far," he yelled back over his shoulder.

"I'm coming, too." Jeandra hurried to the air lock and stepped inside the old cruiser. Stale, musty air tickled her nose. "It's like stepping into a history book. I've only seen pictures of these old ships."

"Same here." Algon stuck his head out the air lock door and motioned the others forward. "We can use your help to search this ship."

They divided into the same teams. Jeandra searched the crews' quarters. She pulled every drawer and cupboard open; turned chairs upside down; and even searched the showers. "Think like a reporter," she muttered. Despite the dusty floor, she knelt beside each bed and raised the mattress. In the captain's room her efforts yielded a reward, a folded piece of paper which she tucked inside her jumpsuit.

Finished with the first ship, she hurried to the other cruiser. Her hopes high, certain these rooms would provide more information, she searched everything twice; but the rooms provided nothing. Disappointment weighed heavily on her when she joined the others in the galley.

Algon asked, "Does anyone have anything of interest?"

Hesdo raised his hand. "I searched the ships' data banks. All I could find is their flight logs."

A bearded man – Jeandra couldn't recall his name – slid a faded brown envelope across the table. "This was tucked under a bracket beneath a table in the recreation room. I haven't opened it yet."

"Go ahead. Let's see what's inside."

The man unfolded the flap and removed a folded piece of paper. Shown on it were what seemed to be star formations. Jeandra had no idea what galaxy it could be. Nothing looked familiar.

Jeandra laid her own discovery out on the table. Four words in a sin-

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gle column had been written on the paper. Abode. Constellation. Heat. Similar. "I found this beneath the mattress in the captain's quarters."

One of the women said, "I didn't find anything, but I noticed some things. All the weapons, food, and blankets are gone, which is to be expected. But pieces of the thruster engine and light speed energiser are also gone from both ships."

"Both communication consoles were removed, along with wires and cords. Plus the micron back up and main generators are gone. Only a small rechargeable power pack was left in each ship." The man who reported this rubbed his temple with one hand. "But we didn't see any evidence of power or communication systems in any of the dome houses. What did they do with everything?"

Hesdo said, "An even bigger question is what happened to the other cruisers. At least eleven are missing."

"Eleven? How did you come up with that number?"

"The logs on both ships are still available. This ship arrived first. A complete description of the Desniade settlement is given and matches exactly what we saw. But when they arrived five other ships were here on the landing pad. The other ship we examined arrived a year later. That's seven plus the six during the last twenty years. And who knows, maybe even more before that."

Jeandra asked, "Is there any possibility the prior arrivals had enough fuel to travel to another planet or star system?"

"None," Hesdo said. "Fuel supplies are automatically added to the logs by the computer system. No ship had enough fuel to travel to another planet. But I discovered another interesting piece of information. Apparently when this relocation program first began, a drone satellite was placed in a sequential orbit pattern in each Quadrant. Twice a year it passed over each settlement enabling a short window of contact."

Jeandra tapped her fingers on the table. "So they could pass information. They weren't isolated like we are now."

"Right. But after the third ship arrived seventy years ago, they asked permission to dismantle their ships. They explained it was important to use all the materials, generators, wires and especially the communication system for the settlement."

Algon said, "In effect they broke off all further communication."

"The last entry from the drone satellite was an acknowledgement plus a best of luck statement, and..." He smiled. "The drone would no longer be in orbit."

Jeandra said, "That's what the settlers wanted."

The cooks had made a banner proclaiming *We Arrived!* After every-

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one ate Jeandra stood up. "We'll give you a report on what the 'Search Committee' found. Afterward we need input from all of you. Suggestions are welcome. Comments. Questions. We don't necessarily have the answers, but maybe together we can find a solution."

With his engineering background Algon presented the information in an orderly fashion. Jeandra could almost see his outline in her mind. How different from her own process for solving dilemmas and finding solutions to problems. She smiled. Algon described it as organised chaos. She gathered all the information she could find, posed questions, created possible scenarios, and sought out seemingly unrelated information. At some point she'd have an epiphany and the answer would pop into her mind. Of course there were the times when no solution ever appeared.

The discussion of Algon's report mirrored her own thoughts. No one had any solutions and the paramount question remained. Why had the settlers sought isolation and then disappeared? Let alone the next puzzle; what happened to the missing eleven ships? Jeandra left as soon as the meeting ended. After a full day of exploring, talking and rehashing questions she needed solitude.

Unlike some people who paced when deep in thought, she preferred to kick off her boots, stretch out on something comfortable, and think. With her hands behind her head she let the questions and possibilities swirl in her mind like oil paint and water. They met and touched but didn't mix. Sleep snuck up on her before an hour had passed.

Jeandra sat in the chair next to Algon in the galley. In front of him, lined up like oversized playing cards, were twelve pieces of paper. Each one had a word on top with a list of phrases beneath. "Our jobs?" she asked.

"You could call it that. But you'd be wrong." He laughed.

Jeandra wagged one finger at him. "Be nice if you want my help." She leaned in front of him and read the words. Who. What. Why. When. Where. How. The words were repeated on the last six pages. "How very journalistic it sounds."

"I thought you'd appreciate it." He splayed his fingers over six pages. "This is for the mystery of the need for isolation. The other pages are for the missing galaxy cruisers."

"Let's do the isolation ones first. We know who, when, and how. I thought about it until I fell asleep and am no nearer a solution."

Algon reached up and touched her gold earring. "Do you think those settlers knew?"

"Dear Aires! Maybe they did. Or had suspicions. We can't tell anyone. Not yet. Not unless we have to. I think it would just stir up fear."

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Algon patted her arm. "Our secret for now."

"We have even less information about the missing ships."

Hesdo pulled up a stool and sat across from them. "Has anyone solved the burning questions?"

"No," they replied in unison.

"I'd like to examine the data banks in the other ships again."

Jeandra said, "Is there a way to print out any of the data?"

"If we can get those power packs recharged maybe I can. Did you have something particular in mind?"

"Star charts."

"I can get those for you from our ship."

"Great. No rush, whenever you have a chance."

"I'll do them now." He grabbed a handful of dried fruit and left.

Algon laced his fingers together and rested them on the table. "A minimum of eleven galaxy cruisers are missing. I tried to figure out how much material that is. I gave up; the math was too much for me this early in the morning. Whatever the answer might be, it just leaves us with another question. Where is everything? We didn't see even one piece of a cruiser yesterday when we searched the dome houses."

"Maybe they didn't take them apart."

"You heard Hesdo's report."

"But maybe that was part of the 'how' for them to be able to disappear. Just because they asked permission to dismantle the ships didn't mean they did. And why did they leave two here? We haven't even addressed that question yet."

Before Algon could answer, the members of yesterday's landing party joined them. One of the men said, "Ready and waiting for your orders, sir."

"I hope you're kidding with that sir business."

"Sounded good. Besides, someone has to be in charge, and I sure don't want it to be me. I like having someone else to blame when things don't go as planned."

"I'm open to suggestions."

"We thought a thorough search of the settlement and check for power supply and water."

"What about you, Jeandra, going with them back to the settlement?"

Before she could answer another man joined them. "Jeandra, I'm Chalder, a farmer by trade. Yesterday I used the scanner goggles and checked the surrounding area and found what might be a water source and maybe the farm land."

She stood up. "Can you show me?" Jeandra knew this man worked

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outdoors. His tan had barely faded during the journey. She wondered what shade his hair would be without the bleaching effect of the sun.

He led her to a corner of the landing pad. A narrow opening, exactly at the corner, revealed two metal ladders leading to the upper outside edge of the buildings. "I figured there had to be a way up. How else could they make roof repairs?"

"Right." Jeandra followed him up the ladder. A narrow ledge with a handrail followed the roof line.

"You can walk around the entire pad on the walkway. Gives you a great view, especially with these." He handed her a pair of scanner goggles. Below were the perfect circles formed by the dome houses. Chalder pointed beyond them. "Halfway between the settlement and the mountains is a large crater. I think that might be a water source. Can you see the large pipes laid on the ground?"

Jeandra nodded her head. "But they end after about a hundred yards."

"Either they put the rest of the pipe underground, maybe to protect it from harsh elements, or they found a natural aqueduct and only needed to pump the water that far. Won't know for sure until I can check it out."

He moved a few feet further on the walkway. "Over here is a better view of land they might have used for farming. See how the surface is mostly level and no large rocks are visible? Seems to me they cleared the land for planting. Those trees on the far boundary might be fruit trees; they seem to be neglected, mostly dead wood now."

"Maybe they're native to this planet."

"The rows seem too straight. I'd like to go check it out so we'd know for sure."

"That'd be helpful. Don't go alone."

Back at the ship Jeandra found several pieces of paper shoved under her door. She spread them on her bunk in numerical order. Hesdo had provided star charts from every angle of this ship. With the three suns as a focal point, she compared them to the chart found hidden in the recreation room. They didn't match.

She needed to talk to Hesdo, but he wasn't at the computer centre. The captain's chair sat empty, a few lights blinked on the console, with a spectacular view through the window. Jeandra sat in the chair and stared at the pale yellow sky. No stars or planets were visible, she'd have to wait until the suns set; she craned her neck sideways but couldn't see the suns from this angle either. Everything on the glass panel was a complete mystery to her. How in the name of Aires did anyone remember what was what? Her curiosity kicked in. She left their ship and headed for the two parked on the edge of the landing pad.

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Jeandra chose the ship that arrived first. It didn't have fancy seats but the layout in the passenger section mirrored the newer model. Not a single amenity or anything even remotely suggesting luxury could be seen. Other upgrades must have been made to the engine, rockets, computers and living quarters in the newer ships. She sat down in the captain's chair. The window had an impressive view; the three suns were visible, with the smallest one exactly in the middle.

She saw the exact same view in the other cruiser when she stared out the window from the captain's chair. The three suns lined up with the smallest one perfectly centred. *How could that be? Wouldn't it be slightly different since the ships were parked side by side?* Back outside she realised the second ship had landed at a different angle which gave it the same view as the first ship.

Algon joined her. "I searched the ships again. Not only are parts missing in the engine rooms, but all the wiring has been removed. These ships will never fly again."

Jeandra placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry; if it wasn't for me you wouldn't be stuck here."

"What are you talking about?"

"They must've discovered my exposé on the lottery. If they found that, it's a pretty good chance someone realised you were my source."

"I knew the risks involved." He traced the outline of her chin with one finger. "Besides, this is a grand adventure, better than any we could've ever dreamed up. We've a mystery to solve, places to explore, and a group of people to meet somewhere. Maybe we can start the Rahr News Agency together."

Jeandra tucked her notebook in a pocket and joined the passengers gathered in the galley. Chalder gave the first report. "Where the row of pipes ends I found a valve which can direct the water either to an irrigation ditch for the farm land or to an underground aqueduct. At the edge of the crater the water system has been closed. I didn't open it because I have no idea if the pipe system still works. We'll need to check all the domes for leaks once we open the valve."

The man who directed the search of the domes said, "We found water sources in every dome. In each galley area we found a cupboard with several holes drilled in the back. I believe this was the site of their small generators; power would have been routed to each room. The generators and all the wiring are gone."

Miss Hysterics spoke up from the back of the room. "I think they were all taken hostage by a renegade band of aliens."

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Jeandra cringed. She wanted to gag that woman. Instead she spoke in an even tone. "But there's no sign of struggle anywhere."

"If they were overwhelmed by a huge force they'd have just given up."

"But how do you account for the missing generators in their homes? The ships that have vanished?"

"You don't know for sure there were generators. And the aliens refuelled the ships and took them. Any day now they'll come for us. We'll all be slaves on some planet in another universe!"

Before Jeandra could reply she noticed Hesdo. He stared at the large monitor which had the same view as the captain's chair. She craned her neck sideways to see what captured his interest. Instead of an incredible spectacle of stars the screen had gone blank. No: on closer scrutiny the image swirled and shifted. "A dust storm!"

Eleven days later the storm abated, but powerful gusts of wind blew for another five days. When they opened the air lock and stepped outside all evidence of the storm had been blown away, everything looked the same. Jeandra said, "Maybe now we know why they wanted to leave. I wonder how often this happens?"

Algon rubbed his arms. "Even once a year would be too much for me."

"Chalder told me that more than once a year would make it impossible to grow enough food."

"Let's get busy; we don't know how long we have until the next dust storm."

"I'm hoping the solution to the code is on one of those old ships' computers."

Algon raised his eyebrows. "Code? You mean that paper you found? You looked at those words every day of the storm. You studied, perused, and dissected them. Abode. Constellation. Heat. Similar. See? Even I know them."

"The solution is somewhere, and I intend to find it."

"Hesdo put them through our ship's computer system. No match, no secret code, nothing. They are just four words. Nothing more."

"But what if their significance was put on the other computer? Just waiting for whoever found the paper to look them up."

"I guess it's your perseverance that makes you such a good reporter."

She smiled. "Come on. Let's go find out."

The first computer revealed nothing. The real disappointment hit when the second one did the same. Her reporter's gut told her the words were important, yet everything she tried came up a failure. Everyone had

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seen her poring over the list, rearranging letters and words, scrambling all the letters together, but nothing had worked. She'd received lots of encouragement, smiles, a few suggestions, and even a couple of pats on the back. Now what?

Back in the galley she sipped reconstituted freeze dried juice and stared at the page. Chalder sorted seed packets across the table. "You seem awful serious, Jeandra. What's got you tied up in a knot?"

"I'm stymied. Stuck. Blocked. Thwarted." She resisted the impulse to wad up the paper and throw it across the room.

"Those words again?"

She nodded.

"You know, I always did wonder why people sometimes use fancy words when a plain one will do." He moved one of the seed packets to a pile. "Guess I'm just a simple man."

"These aren't fancy words."

"Depends on how you use them, I guess. Take that first one. Abode. Who uses that except maybe in a book? If I was asking someone over for a meal, for instance, I wouldn't say 'come on over to my abode'. I'd ask them to come to my house or home."

"I see your point."

"Constellation sounds like some astronomer talking. Why can't it just say 'look at all them nice stars'? I suppose heat is alright. But similar sounds like it's caught between almost and the same. Make up your mind, I always say, and then speak it like it is."

Jeandra's heart thumped. She tucked the paper in her pocket and retrieved the old star chart before finding Hesdo. He listened to her request and shook his head but followed her outside. Algon leaned against the side of the ship, lost in thought. She had to ask him twice before he heard, then he followed her and Hesdo to the old cruiser.

Jeandra said, "Hesdo, if you gave me the star charts from this cruiser would they be different to the ones you already gave me from our ship?"

"Slightly, because this ship is parked at a different angle."

"Does the computer look out the window and print what it sees?"

"No, the images will be from its memory bank."

"When it landed seventy some years ago?"

"Right. Like a page from history. Or a photo in this case."

"Can you get them for me?"

"Give me a moment; I have to power back up."

The console purred to life. Beneath the glass circles, triangles, squares and lines of red, blue, green and yellow appeared. They pulsed and flashed in random patterns. Hesdo touched the glass and a yellow circle

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turned to red. Each time he touched the glass the shapes changed colour or disappeared. He laid his palm on the upper right of the panel and then with a slight whir several pages emerged next to the glass. She picked them up and went to the ship's galley where she spread them on the top of a table. The men followed her and stood to one side.

She pulled out the old star chart, carefully unfolded it and laid it next to one of the pages, then another, and another. When she compared it with the fourth page she smiled. "A match!"

Hesdo leaned closer and pointed to the page on the table. "This one shows the three suns, yours just has stars."

"I know. This is only part of that picture, just the stars between the two large suns."

Algon leaned across the table. "Everything seems larger because this old chart is a closer view, taken when the ship hadn't landed yet. Remember, we call them star charts, but in reality they show everything. Moons. Suns. Planets. Even asteroids if they are in some kind of orbit." He touched the bottom of the old chart, his finger resting beneath the lowest orb shown. Only part of it was visible, about thirty percent of the curved upper edge. "This must be a planet from the size of it, much too large for an asteroid." He peered closer then studied the newer chart beside it. "Something isn't right."

Jeandra held her breath and chewed her lower lip. She waited and watched as the two men compared the charts. All she had was her intuition, while they had the scientific knowledge. *Was it even possible?*

"This planet," he said, "is in the exact position of the third sun."

"No way." Hesdo shook his head. "Never has a planet become a sun. A sun might burn out the way stars do, and might be reclassified a planet, but never the other way around."

She pursed her lips together. "Perhaps it's an illusion created by the settlers."

Neither man responded, they simply stared at the charts. Algon exhaled and took a long slow breath. "Any ideas how they could accomplish such a feat?"

"Not really. I thought with the two smartest men on board standing here, you'd at least have a possible idea."

"Ahhh, she's hoping by heaping compliments on our heads we'll think harder, Hesdo."

"Can you do some of your famous math and calculate if the planet on the old chart is the same size as the third sun?"

He answered with a lopsided grim. For ten minutes she waited while the two men talked, thought, wrote equations, and then discussed the

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results. At last Hesdo sat in the captain's chair and punched numbers in the computer. On the monitor strings of numbers competed with each other, racing in columns from top to bottom. When the mathematical marathon ended, a chart emerged showing the three suns of Rahr. In the upper right corner a small square with black dots blinked twice; the square enlarged until it rested on top of the original image. The black dots lined up in size, proportion and location with the three suns.

Algon said, "How did you figure it out, Jeandra?"

"Some comments Chalder made about the meaning of words. He sees things in a much simpler fashion than we do. The four words were a clue. Abode. Constellation. Heat. Similar. Translate them to Home, Stars, Heat, the Same." Jeandra grinned. "I thought it might mean the stars that provide the heat here are the same as the ones at home. Two suns rather than three. Add that idea to the exact views out the captain's windows in the two old cruisers and I thought maybe..."

He tipped his head to the side, chuckled, and then gazed at the screen. "We know why the settlers left. Now we know where they might have gone."

"But how did they get there with no fuel?"

"They had some fuel left, just like we do. Enough for a one way trip to an unknown planet with no guarantee it even has breathable air let alone the means to sustain them with food."

Hesdo joined the conversation. "How did they create the illusion of a third sun? And why?"

Three hours later Jeandra leaned back in the chair. "We aren't any closer to figuring it out. All I have is a headache from thinking so much."

Algon tossed his pencil on the table. "If they did hide the planet, we'll find out how when we get there. We don't need to work it out from scratch. And my stomach's been growling for an hour. Let's go eat."

Hesdo stood up and stretched. "Maybe Chalder can solve this one, too."

"I wish," said Algon.

Outside they stopped and peered at the suns. Even with their new information they still looked like three suns. In the galley of their own cruiser most of the passengers still sat at the tables. Jeandra said, "Let's have a meeting and get their input."

Algon patted his abdomen. "I need some food in my stomach first." He downed a nameless green concoction in four large gulps then waved everyone to silence. After he presented the findings, the questions began, the same ones over and over, the ones without answers.

The next morning Medine approached Jeandra. "I'm a school

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teacher.” She peered over her shoulder at a group of people engaged in a discussion. “Everyone has possible solutions based on scientific data gathered from computers and advanced technological information. So I didn’t want to speak up.”

Jeandra pasted her best reporter smile on her face. “Everyone’s input is important. Think of it like a puzzle, we each might have a piece and without it we won’t get the answer.”

“One of your unanswered questions reminded me of those silly logic problems kids love to solve. You know those ones that ask if you have so many man-eating beasts and people with stunners, and each beast can only carry one person how do you get everyone across the lake without being eaten? I think the fuel problem might be solved in the same way.”

“The problem isn’t exactly with the fuel. Each ship has enough fuel to get to the planet. The dilemma is why would they be willing to go to a strange planet with no way to get back? For all we know they’re all dead up there.”

“If they took all the fuel from the two ships out on the landing pad and put it in one cruiser there would be enough fuel to go there and come back. If the planet had a life sustaining atmosphere, they could return here and tell the settlers.”

Jeandra stared at the woman.

“And everyone could climb on board their ships and fly to their new home.”

All the data for fuel, distance and size of the planet had been verified. Hesdo presented the reports and asked for questions. Jeandra studied each person and evaluated them with her reporter’s eye. Soft spoken or loud. Shy or gregarious. Timid or adventurous. Impetuous or sensible. And everything in between. Each one understood they all faced a momentous decision, because if they’d reached the wrong conclusions the ship would be lost in deep space – or it would burn up on that third sun.

Nobody would be required to leave Rahr. But who’d want to stay here alone? No one could answer the question about how the settlers created the illusion of the third sun. Somehow it didn’t seem important. Why they’d gone to such elaborate lengths to disappear while leaving a string of clues troubled them. Jeandra fingered the gold loop in her ear. If they asked again, she’d tell them why.

One of the cooks stood up. “I think we should stay. We can grow food and there’s plenty of water.”

Hesdo said, “What about the dust storms?”

“One storm. We can survive that. Who knows, maybe they only have

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them once every five years.”

Chalder stood up. “Whoever planted those orchards left soon after they were planted. They were never pruned.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

Several people began shouting. One woman stood up then collapsed to the floor sobbing.

“I don’t want to go. Please, can’t we wait a few months?”

“We have to go, there’s nothing for us here.”

Algon stood up and called for silence. Several minutes passed before everyone sat down.

Algon began to hand out small slips of paper. “No one’s being forced to leave. I only need to know how many so we can divide the provisions between those staying and leaving.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “No names, no comments. Either a yes or no. Some of you might change your mind tomorrow. In the morning each of us will give our final decision. My mind is made up, and I’ve agreed to pilot the cruiser.”

Some of the passengers covered the paper with one hand as they wrote. Others gave a quick glance at those near them before putting pencil to paper. A few sat still as if paralyzed, unable or unwilling to write. At last they did and the papers were collected. Algon and Hesdo counted them twice.

Part of Jeandra thought she should be taking notes for a story, but she sat motionless with her hands folded in her lap. Algon stood up. “Eighty-seven said yes, thirteen said no.”

Miss Hysterics jumped up and began yelling. “We can’t go. Don’t you see what’ll happen? We’ll die up there. Die!”

Jeandra shut her eyes. She didn’t have the patience to deal with her. When she opened her eyes the woman stared right into her face. “You’re the famous reporter. Why are you here? Who sent you? I bet you’re some kind of spy!”

“For the love of Aires, calm down. I didn’t choose to be here.”

“We’ll be trapped up there. You said so yourself. No communication. The government can’t find us, let alone help us.” Her face crumbled as a hundred tears streaked down her face.

Chalder stood up. “I’m glad they won’t be able to find us. It’s like my grandpa said all those years ago.”

Jeandra studied the farmer. “What did your grandpa say?”

“If you ever get the chance to be free of them, go my boy, and never look back.” The man’s skin flushed right through his tan. “It’s what his own dad told him.”

“When did your great-grandpa tell him that?”

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“My great-grandpa won the lottery. He got sent to Quadrant Three. Those were his last words to his son.”

Hesdo said, “But they could’ve sent communications anytime they wanted.”

Chalder smiled. “I think you missed some history classes. Back then, Quadrant Three was as isolated as Quadrant Five is now.”

At the far edge of the cabin Medine stood up. “I wrote yes on my paper, but now I’m having doubts. What if we’re wrong? Why not just stay here? There are houses and water. We’ll be fine.”

Jeandra waved her notebook at them. “I wrote down a lot of questions. We found some answers.” She threw the notebook on the nearest table. “Before I left Quadrant One, I found some information you all need to hear.”

She slammed one hand against the back of a chair. “The early settlers here on Rahr knew that someday the government would be able to send patrols, like they did in Quadrant Three. It might be years, but it would happen.” Jeandra pounded the table with one fist as she spoke. “I think they knew or suspected what happened to the first settlers sent to any planet.” Jeandra’s voice grew louder. “If any valuable minerals were discovered, government troops enslaved the population. They used them to excavate the planet, deplete it of everything of use. Any survivors were abandoned and left to starve. The government declared the planet uninhabitable, dangerous, and out of bounds for future explorations.”

Miss Hysterics jumped up. “You’re just trying to scare us. You want everyone to fly off and die up there. Why should anyone believe you?”

Jeandra unhooked the gold loop in her ear. She twirled it round and round her index finger, then tossed it to Hesdo. “In there are the actual reports by our government detailing what they found and how many settlers died. From the very first lottery until now they’ve continued their enslavement policies whenever valuable minerals and ores are discovered. The lottery isn’t just to reduce our population. It’s to explore and exploit. The lucky ones are sent to a planet with no valuable resources.”

Chalder stood up. His shoulders slumped forward as he spoke. “You’re telling me that the government murdered my great-grandfather?”

Jeandra nodded. The farmer covered his face with both hands. When his sobs stopped she said, “I don’t know how they made that third sun up there, but now we know why. Personally I’ll be grateful if I never see a government ship again.”

In the morning, Jeandra replaced the star chart and yellowed paper in the old spacecraft. Inside their spacecraft she found ninety-nine passen-

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gers. She waved at them then sat in her seat and watched Algon and Hesdo prepare for take off. They touched the glass panel and the engine roared to life; a moment later the thrusters lifted the space cruiser from the landing pad.

Their ship made the journey in four hours. Jeandra felt the thrusters engage and knew in a few seconds they would be floating in orbit around the planet. Unless it really was a sun. If she'd made a mistake, they would all die. Algon's voice interrupted her thoughts; he spoke four words over the communication system. "It is a planet." Shouts and cheers erupted amidst a thunderous applause. A few people jumped up, hugging those sitting beside them. She heard someone crying. Someone tapped her shoulder, and she saw Chalder beaming at her, tears running down both his cheeks.

He clasped her hand and said, "I'm sure glad we were right."

"Me, too."

They had to float in orbit until they reached the back side of the planet. The last of the fuel would be used for the landing. Jeandra tensed in her seat, clenching her hands together. She closed her eyes when the ship broke orbit and began its descent; within two minutes the cruiser landed.

The original landing party stepped through the air lock. Jeandra's head jerked from side to side as she surveyed the landing pad, a mirror image of the one they had left. Buildings rimmed the outside edge and two space cruisers sat side by side. Like mechanised robots they walked toward three doors. One opened to an empty room with shelves. Another to an empty storage room. The third door revealed a hallway which led outside. Twelve brown dome buildings formed a circle; there were ten circles. In the distance she saw mountains looming high, their peaks like fingers pointed toward the bright yellow sky.

She peered through scanner goggles and saw a large lake with pipes extending across the sand. "Thank Aires. I see crops growing in fields and an orchard with well tended trees. Let's go tell the others."

Algon said, "Wait."

Jeandra lowered the goggles. A group of four men and seven women approached them from the dome buildings. "Welcome to New Rahr."

Four weeks later Jeandra evaluated their progress. After intensive training, a team of ten people from their ship now managed the pump system which provided water for the dome houses and irrigation for the crops. Chalder's transition to running the farms went as smooth as honey. Algon supervised the production of rocket fuel at the base of the mountains. Hesdo maintained the elaborate system of mirrors that created the sun illusion, and began to prepare for the day when they might

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need to fool more than the naked eye. Everyone else had found a niche that suited their skills. She had one more article to write, and then the first edition of *The New Rahr News* would be ready.

The so-called missing settlers would leave today. They planned to colonise a planet on the outer edge of Quadrant Five.

Algon sat next to her. "Are you making good use of your government issued notebook?" He laughed before she could answer. "I remember when you wanted to toss it."

"Lots of good notes in here." She slid it in her pocket. "I was thinking..."

"Oh, that could be a dangerous thing."

"Think you're funny? Really, get serious for a minute. They waited three years for us to arrive; I suppose we should expect the same. Maybe longer."

"We won't have to worry about sand storms or renegades attacking us."

"Best of all, no government satellites or drones."

"And we can communicate with all the settlers who've been here before us. They were smart to cut off all ties with our home planet. We can explore all of Quadrant Five, maybe even beyond. Who knows what we'll find?"

"You were right Algon. Who could've ever dreamed up such a grand adventure? If someone had offered me this job, I'd have said no." She tugged on the gold loop in her ear. "I'm glad I'm here."

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## SCIENCE FICTION

# Newton Braddell: a Constant, Gnawing Hunger

John Greenwood

For a man in love, there can be few greater hindrances to a successful courtship than his own inability to confess his passion to his beloved. Add to this a reputation for mental instability, and to cap it all an unsightly physical disfigurement, and the reader can readily appreciate the difficulties I now faced.

The straggly length of black-green foliage that now grew from a narrow fissure in my skull was flourishing, and tiny new leaves appeared daily along its stem. I was intensely self-conscious of it, all the more so because I could not easily inspect the wound myself.

Miss Lavender, I hardly need mention, did her best to disguise her revulsion, and was more attentive than she had been previously. She made me a matching set of slippers and dressing-gown from spare lengths of tent fabric in a startling shade of green. No such garments existed in the Citihallian wardrobe; Miss Lavender had fashioned them after my description of the slippers and dressing gowns of Earth. Unavoidably, never having seen the genuine articles, Miss Lavender's approximation of loungewear hung oddly on my frame, with unexpected bulges, and the slippers were not as comfortable as my hiking boots. I cherished them all the same, handiwork of my sweetheart, and wore them daily, but could not help thinking that these were the kind of gifts given to an invalid, out of pity rather than passion.

No meaningful diagnosis of my illness was possible: Yewtree assured me that he knew of no comparable condition in the annals of Citihallian medical history.

"That does little to reassure me," I told the physician.

"Oh, I wasn't trying to reassure you," said Yewtree breezily. "I just thought you would find it interesting."

It was an irksome trait in my new friend's character that I had just

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begun to notice. While his was an essentially warm and generous personality, he did on occasion exhibit a curious blindness to the tender spots of others.

I suggested that the Citihallians' centuries-long isolation from the ecosphere beyond their volcano might explain their ignorance of this disease.

"It's possible," said Yewtree with little apparent concern. "Who knows? Perhaps we are all destined to play host to these parasites." He laughed. "Maybe I should get one of those bandages, to stop the seeds from implanting themselves in my skull!"

We were not the only ones party to this conversation, and as a result of Yewtree's incautious remarks, many of our party spent the next few months with their heads tightly bandaged, not an inch of hair uncovered, to protect themselves against what were variously called seeds, spores and burrowing tics.

There was no evidence to suggest that their precautions had any benefit, since none of the other exiles, bandaged or otherwise, showed symptoms similar to my own. As I pointed out to Mr Yewtree in confidence, the disease was equally likely to be contracted from some microscopic particle entering the body through the respiratory or digestive systems. I did not want to alarm my fellow travellers unduly, and so asked Mr Yewtree to keep these speculations to himself. But my friend was not a man naturally given to discretion, and within a week of our conversation I noticed several Citihallians with handkerchiefs tied across their mouths and nostrils. It may have been no more than coincidence, and I decided not to confront Mr Yewtree about it. In contrast to his earlier prescription, Yewtree now advised me to leave the wound open to the fresh air as much as possible.

"It will help the healing process," he explained. "Keeping the wound covered up with that unsanitary bandage is probably what has led to this subsequent infection. Whatever this organism is, it obviously thrives in dark, humid conditions. A bit of fresh air and sunshine and it will probably wither away in a few days."

The plant did not wither away, but continued to grow until it hung down my back like a ponytail. Within a month it had reached my waist, its large, fleshy leaves flapping about my elbows. While we were out on the road, I could tuck the vine discreetly into the back of my coat, but at night it was a nuisance. I had always been a light sleeper, and now I frequently woke to find the parasite's tendrils wrapped tightly around my neck, or around my chest and arms.

The disease itself did not cause me physical pain, unless the leaves or

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stem of the plant were themselves crushed or tugged. When this happened I felt the pain as sharply as though I had been injured myself. In a sense this was true. The parasite – plant, animal, fungus, whatever manner of organism it was – had become an extension of my own nervous system. I was acutely sensitive to any potential threat to the plant, on account of the agonies it would cost me. It felt as though my teeth had been removed and the nerve endings below exposed to the unfriendly elements. When Mr Yewtree offered, half in jest, to snip the growth off where it emerged from my skull with a pair of shears, I shrank in horror and made him vow that he would never attempt such an operation.

Moreover, I could feel the plant growing, could sense new leaves, dark and velvety sprouting forth. This was a novel, almost pleasant sensation, and once I caught myself gently stroking the young, heart-shaped leaves. It was an unhealthy habit that had to be immediately curtailed, I told myself.

While there was no evidence as to the origins of the parasite, I had my suspicions. The Rumbia beetle larvae were the most obvious suspects. Those microscopic insects had made their nest inside my brain since I drank infected water in desperation, while stranded in the desert. The hallucinatory episodes brought on by this colonisation of my synapses had all but ceased when I became the guest of City Hall, and I began to hope that my sufferings, in this regard at least, were over. I had even entertained the possibility, suggested to me by Mr Yewtree, that my condition was a phantom, a confidence trick dreamt up by Eunós for his own inscrutable ends. Were psychoactive drugs, slipped into my food by my former servant, responsible for my periodic descents into madness?

But no: the creeper emerging daily from my skull, embedding its roots deep within the chemo-receptors of my brain, cast that theory into doubt. A far more likely explanation was that the beetle larvae had entered a new phase in their development. I had never heard of an organism that mutated from animal to plant as part of its life-cycle, but I knew next to nothing about the subject. This was Kadaloor, and just because the trees and people here looked familiar, I could not expect the whole ecosystem to conform to my preconceptions. Neither botany nor entomology had featured heavily on the curriculum during my time as a student at Spaceflight Academy, and I cursed my superiors for what seemed an unforgivable oversight in their planning.

What was to be done? Mr Orchard tried to keep my spirits up by suggesting that we might happen upon communities of humans familiar with my condition, and who might offer a remedy. I appreciated his optimism, but it was a slim hope. Since crash-landing my spacecraft on Kadaloor,

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City Hall was the only human civilisation I had discovered, and perhaps they were the last. Marsiling had been a primitive, the lone survivor of a backward tribe. Pockets of these wretched hangers-on might well have been scratching out a living in caves or isolated valleys, but such medicine as they possessed would be rudimentary to say the least.

“Don’t despair,” said Mr Orchard. “Something will come up. We have really no idea who now inhabits the outside world.”

But the days marched on, and the landscape rolled beneath our weary feet, and we met nobody. It was as though Kadaloor was a virgin Earth ripe for human colonisation, the kind of planet dreamt about by my forefathers during the last, desperate years of the old Empire, a new home for humanity.

One unexpected consequence of my condition was that my origins on Earth were treated with less scepticism. The Citihallians had never witnessed such a queer development, and it was argued, particularly amongst the younger exiles, that this was evidence to support my claims. It hardly needs pointing out that their logic was faulty, and in a society dedicated to the pursuit of the rational this was unusual in itself, but I was simply relieved not to be faced at every turn by disbelief, pity or mockery. The more level-headed, such as Mr Orchard, saw no reason to revise their earlier opinion of me. Even these I hoped to convert, if I could only secure some kind of proof.

The reader might well ask why I felt it so important an issue, when there were more pressing matters clamouring for my attention, to wit, the parasitical growth attached to my brain and the threat of annihilation by Punggol missiles.

But the Punggol had vanished, and with every day that passed without their reappearance, the threat receded from the forefront of my mind. The colonisation of my synapses was naturally a source of worry, but as one human amongst others it was impossible not to become preoccupied with the concerns that have always occupied human minds, namely courtship, friendship and status.

One morning as we prepared to begin another day’s march, I was gratified to overhear a couple of Citihallian children refer to me as “the alien”. Perhaps they were too young to know that I could understand every word they said thanks to my Dover and Somerset device, and they dashed away when I tried to interrupt their conversation. I had wanted to clear up some ambiguity about the English word my translation machine had provided. Did they mean extraterrestrial, or merely an outsider? The youngsters did not hang around long enough for me to put the question, but “alien”, however nuanced, was preferable to “madman”.

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I could never have expected Miss Lavender to love a madman. Could she love an alien space traveller? Surely there was some glamour there I could exploit, some romantic association, if only I could convince her that I was not deluded, or deceiving. But she always skirted the issue, and looked embarrassed whenever I brought up the topic of Earth in our conversations. My opportunities to spend time alone with Miss Lavender were distressingly rare, and even when I was afforded such chances, my attempts to develop a closeness were always thus thwarted. I tried to interest her in my comparisons between the landscapes of Earth and Kadaloor, the inexplicable similarities in flora and fauna. Miss Lavender would listen politely and change the subject.

There was no doubt that I was irretrievably and disastrously in love. That much alone was clear. Otherwise I was rudderless, aimlessly mooning and moping in her footsteps. I had no concrete plans for the future, other than a desire to rid myself of the plant-like growth on my brain. The rest of the Citihallian community similarly lacked direction. Now that they had escaped from the Punggol attack with spectacular success, the groups of survivors had gradually amalgamated, until within a couple of months the entire city was marching in one almighty column, leaving no small amount of devastation in their wake. Had the Punggol wished to track us down, they would have had little difficulty following our trail. When a group of fifty thousand individuals decide to strike camp, there is little point trying to disguise their presence. Some Citihallians (and I concurred with them) thought it might be safer were we to split into smaller units again, as we had when we first left City Hall, but they were in the minority and their warnings were ignored. The Citihallians had developed a passionate, almost superstitious belief in the fundamental unity of their civilisation. Any attempt to divide this wandering nation was anathema.

Where were we going? For a while we sought out other human communities with whom we hoped to find shelter and friendship, but it soon became clear that Kadaloor no longer belonged to men and women. People began to talk vaguely of finding some fertile valley in which to found a new community, and by degrees this took the form of more concrete demands. Through processes that remained a mystery until the day I parted company with the Citihallians, a decision was taken to seek out a new homeland. City Hall was not, and had never been a democracy. The Citihallians were governed by a committee of those citizens most advanced along their therapeutic journey to complete sanity. I could not help but be reminded of the Philosopher Kings of Plato's *Republic*, but

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of course my friends had never heard of the Athenians, and probably suspected me of inventing them.

No member of this powerful committee was elected: elevation depended on the outcome of a series of psychological evaluations. Who made up this governing body, where and how often they met, and how they came to their decisions, I never discovered, and my companions showed little interest in the matter. But somehow decisions were made, and once made they filtered down through an inscrutable hierarchy of therapists and analysts, until they reached the rank of file of citizens, and eventually to the lowest status group of society, of which I found myself a member: the certified insane.

The location of this homeland was spoken of in the loosest possible terms. The Citihallians' maps were taken from the City Archive, and centuries old. I myself placed little trust in the copies that were circulated throughout the camp, with an irregular cross-hatched area of lowland, many weeks' march away, marking our destination. But the Citihallians were less sceptical, and it was widely believed that our destination was an area of unparalleled natural beauty and fecundity. Some became zealots for this cause, drawing artists' impressions of this unsighted homeland, and even composing poems extolling its unwitnessed charms. I have so far refrained from using the phrase "promised land", but I was uncomfortably aware that this epithet sprang to mind every time the Citihallians spoke of the place.

The astute reader would be justified in demanding to know how a civilisation that prided itself on its irreligious sanity could suffer such a collective lapse of judgement. I asked myself the same question a thousand times. Currents deep within the collective consciousness of the Citihallians were shifting, brought on by their sudden exile and the strange hand fate had dealt them. It seemed that their prized rationality was a hothouse flower, now wilting in the more bracing weather of the outside world.

Nonetheless, I still held my companions in high regard. I was fortunate that Mr Yewtree, who had become my closest companion since Eunós's unexplained disappearance, took a more Laodicean attitude towards these prophecies. Despite his impetuous character and occasional thoughtlessness, I had grown to value his friendship. In fact it was rather because of these flaws that I esteemed him. While clearly a man of high intelligence, he cared little for the obsessive self-analysis of his peers, and took more of an interest in the natural world around him than he did in the relentless rounds of psychotherapy to which we were all bound. As a born Citihallian, Yewtree's belief in the perfectibility of the

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human psyche was deeply ingrained, but he wore his loyalty to the cause lightly, and preferred to spend his time making collections of birds' eggs or pine cones, or in observing the indigenous wildlife of the areas through which we trekked.

While exploring the rolling hills surrounding what turned out to be our final camp, Yewtree and I discovered a hidden pond, almost perfectly circular and teeming with fish. We spent several pleasant afternoons here, angling with varying success, and cooking our catches over an open fire with equally uncertain results.

Strange to say, I missed Eunos. Despite his austerity and android aloofness, and all the betrayals and deceptions that now stood between us, it was impossible to forget the trials we had survived together, and such shared experiences inevitably form bonds that are not quickly broken. Whether he still felt any affection towards his master – whether he had ever felt it, or was even capable of affection – these questions were still unanswered. I was thankful that I had Mr Yewtree's company to distract me from such gloomy speculations.

It was not until later that I understood quite what a debt of gratitude I owed to Yewtree, as my relations with the rest of the Citihallian exiles began to sour.

It all began with a misunderstanding over food. The elders of City Hall had made careful plans about the rationing of food in the event of an evacuation, and in the first few days following the Punggol bombing raid these plans had been scrupulously followed. Their parsimony drew little criticism, at least to begin with, as many of the evacuees had brought rations of their own. But once these private reserves had been squandered in those early days of feasting and celebration, the strict rationing began to bite. The Citihallians were a people grown used to plenty and variety. The emergency food stocks, composed mainly of dried, tasteless cereals, were bound to disappoint them, and every meal was accompanied by grumbles about the size of the portions. Many were tempted by the unfamiliar fruits and berries we passed on our marches, or by the large, wild ruminants of a distinctly ovine aspect, who appeared unafraid of humans, and could barely be bothered to heave themselves out of our path.

My ineptitude with the cutlery wheel continued to be a source of acute embarrassment to me, but I refrained from joining in the general chorus of belly-aching. The last thing I wanted to do was to draw attention to my inability to feed myself in polite company.

Raffles, the pet snake-mouse who had accompanied me on my travels ever since Eunos and I quit Woodland Heights, had no such cause for

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complaint, for the morsels that flew from my cutlery wheel formed the bulk of his diet. Though he ate more heartily than I did at these communal meals, the creature did not appear to put on any weight, but was as lithe and vigorous as ever. Mealtimes were the only occasions when I could be sure of Raffles' whereabouts. When not skulking under my chair scavenging for leftovers, I had no idea how he spent his time. He ranged around the camp, I supposed, hunting insects and smaller mammals.

My own nocturnal activities were similarly secretive. To assuage my hunger, I was forced to visit the cook-tents at night, once I was reasonably sure that the rest of the exiled city was asleep. There was a system of watches in place, but I knew their routines, and they had grown careless. It became my nightly habit to catch up on meals I had missed earlier – missed quite literally as they had ended up on the floor, or in Raffles' stomach.

One night, on my way to one of my regular nocturnal haunts, a communal larder tent hidden in the shadows of trees at the edge of the camp, I began to suspect that I was being followed. Instead of investigating, or returning to my bed, I shook off my suspicions and followed my appetite. It was only when I was arm deep in a mobile refrigerator unit, my mouth full of dry crackers, that I heard footsteps and an exclamation of surprise and disgust. I turned to catch the briefest glimpse of a figure in the open tent flap before it vanished. I froze, mid-chew, like an animal disturbed during grazing. That was a mistake, for by the time I had recovered my wits and dashed outside, the figure had disappeared amongst the rows of tents.

At the time I thought little of the encounter, and returned to my clandestine snacking. Mine was not the only rumbling stomach propelling its owner out of bed in search of supplements to the stipulated rations. Several times before I had seen, or more often heard, small groups of picnickers whispering to one another from within the cook tents. I had always tiptoed away before my presence could be noted. On this occasion, I concluded my meal and snuck back to my tent, hoping that I wouldn't encounter my surprise visitor again on the way back.

I found my bed before anyone found me. It was not the first time I had got lost in the camp. In a city of virtually identical tents, that was hardly surprising. As my head hit the pillow I heard Yewtree snoring soundly, and I told myself that was still a guest of these people, and must desist from these night-time excursions.

It was not until the next morning that I understood how ill-timed such good intentions were. I was sitting with Mr Yewtree and Miss Lavender

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at breakfast when Mr Orchard approached our table in the open-air dining area, accompanied by two Citihallians I did not recognise. Orchard looked strained and tugged at his moustaches restlessly.

“That’s him,” said one of his companions, a short, mousy-haired woman.

“Are you sure?” asked Orchard.

“Well, he’s hard to mistake, isn’t he?” said the woman. “I mean, because of that... thing.”

She pointed to the back of her head with an expression of disgust, and I realised she was referring to the trailing plant growing from my skull, which was now so long that it had to be carefully wound up and tied in a sort of bun.

“What’s all this about?” asked Yewtree, standing up and looking cross.

I didn’t speak, though I could have answered him easily enough.

“Well, Mr Braddell, this is rather awkward, but I’m afraid to say that you have been accused of theft.”

“Theft?” I asked. “Theft of what?”

For a moment I dared hope that they had got the wrong man and were on the trail of a more serious miscreant.

“Theft of our most precious resource!” said the woman. “Our food!”

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# Soldier

## Josie Gowler

I want to be a soldier, when I grow up.

Usually veterans stay out in the hard-won New Territories, so when one moved to the next block on our little world of Satellitia, it was all us kids talked about for a week. I won – or was it lost? – the draw to go and talk to her.

“Ask her which battles she was in,” said Dave. He’s got a wallchart showing all of them. Little colour-coded flags display our wins and losses: a blaze of reds and blues in a halo round the inner system.

“Ask her whether she killed anyone,” said Clare. She’s always into guts and gore.

“Ask her how she got hurt,” said Theo.

So here I am, hovering outside the supermarket like a robot waiting to be assigned a task, chewing my thumbnail. I watch her buy her groceries. She’s got a steel exoskeleton round her leg, the hard edges showing through her trousers, but she still needs a stick to walk. She’s about as old as my dad, only dad never went to fight; don’t know why.

Her mouth’s closed, the clench of her jaw showing that movement is painful, but I reckon that admitting defeat would be much worse for a soldier like her. At the checkout, she fumbles with her stick, her shopping basket, both of them getting tangled in her coat, until the man behind her in the queue lifts the basket onto the counter for her. She looks annoyed and relieved at the same time.

She leans on the stick, her left knee turned inwards, giving her a rolling gait as she limps out of the supermarket. A clang on the walkway marks each slow yet resolute step. She’s got a huge scar running from her left temple right down to her collar. The skin is puckered around it, and her jaw is lopsided.

I step out in front of her. She stops. Her head tilts down to look straight at me, the scar pulling her skin and distorting her ruined face further. There’s a long pause. I’m caught in the gaze of her bright blue eyes. All the questions I want to ask her freeze on my lips. Why would she want to speak to me? Her eyes lighten and I realise she is smiling at me.

I step back and she goes on her way. I turn and watch her slow limping walk.

But I still want to be a soldier.

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## SCIENCE FICTION

# Breaking Out of Sleep

Barry Pomeroy

Sleep was the first. It was the first hole that I looked through to see. It was a huge pillow, rolling across the room from the teacher. A huge pillow with its many arms waving, and when it got closer pulling at me, and then pulling me under, until the teacher was there.

Other ones came. Like Food. Another soft one. A long thin one that reached from the top to the bottom of everything to coat its different colours and scratchy or liquid self through me. Soon I came to call that eating.

I told the teacher about the holes, the holes through which the world is seen and watched the scratching. I watched him scratch the yellow stick against the book, making the books that I was reading. This is how I learned.

Learn was the biggest hole of all. It was bigger than the hole by where I slept where I pressed my eye and watched the world get alternately bigger and smaller, darker and lighter. I watched tiny teachers come and go until the world got cold. Then no more came. When the teacher said Learn, the word hung over me, a hole waiting to pull me in. I told the teacher that Learn was the biggest hole, and watched the scratching. When the teacher said Learn, it was like Sleep. It hovered in the room, vast and without a shadow. It vibrated slightly over me, then descended over my head and I was outside my hands, watching them take up the books and turn the pages. I watched the books turn leaf by leaf until the pages were done and another book was taken until the Learn had lost its hole. Until through the hole of word, like that by my bed, it was dark, and the book was taken from my hands, which lay still.

Those were my memories, now that making memories makes sense. I found holes in the books, and many of them hung over me. I watched murder and betrayal, the spurt of blood and tears, the scenes so far away I could barely see them. I watched a man and a woman couple. I watched the frantic nature of their limbs, as they were trapped in the words,

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caught by sex and fuck and love until the words let them go and they were still.

Perhaps because of the word Learn, sent as it was by the teacher across the room, sent to me as though it were a huge gift, or a dog come to lick me out of sleep, I learned to evade some words. Sleep was the first word. Being first it was the most powerful. It had lain across me like a blanket ever since I could remember, when the world through the hole was still warm, before the nail points on the wall turned white and when my breath was still invisible. Sleep would be sent across the room and although at first I reached for its pillow, was wrapped willingly in its many arms, I began to evade it. It was huge, and grew more powerful the more I tried to twist aside when the word reached for me, its soft hole promising bed and darkness. I tried running, and would wake stretched on the floor where it had caught me, blanketed still in the word that I could not escape. Sometimes I stood still, let it wash over me, its whispered promises drowned out by my own noises, but it still wrapped me. The etcher scraped with the pencil, made his own holes in the books, about me, I think.

I got away from Sleep by not trying. I was lying on the bed, looking at the hole in the wall, looking at the world, when Sleep came too early. It caught me as I saw a thing flicker past, too close to me to be ignored. Sleep came rolling across the floor towards me, sent by the teacher. Although it rolled like my bed, noisy and huge, I was waiting by the hole in the wall. The thing had come back, and only for a moment I saw a tiny hand, I supposed, reach around the edge of the hole, and I reached for it. This hole was unlike the others. This hole, I suddenly realised, didn't do things to you. It was somewhere else. I reached, there was a puff of wind, which came either from the thing outside or from Sleep, deflating on the floor beside my bed. When I looked up, the teacher, who was never gone, had left.

I was alone. I had seen alone in the books brought on by Learn. In those books it was both good and bad, one of the confusing holes in books. It was a vast plain broken only by the monotony of self, the loneliness a small word but persistent, like cold water on your body, washing over, getting into every crevice. But alone could also be the late nights of book making, the escape from others, the joy of not being watched. I felt that loneliness. The room echoed with the teacher's absence. With the absence of words.

I got up. Unwatched, I went towards the books, and took one in my hands. I did it, without the word Learn to push me, to make my hands take a book. The book was empty though, and my fingers went through

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the edges of the paper while I tried out the word Learn on my tongue. I tried it like I had tried others, but unlike Food it didn't fill me with anything. It made an empty sound instead, like when I scraped my fingers on the metal wall. I put the book back, so the teacher could not know, for I had seen that in the books before, the sneakiness of the alone. I paced my cage, like the animals in the books.

The chair where the teacher sat was not warm, not like where I sit, and I sat there. I looked at my cage without the teacher. It was small, and the same on all the walls except one, and when I went to it I realised it was a door. It had the handle I had read about, and when I turned it, locked came into my mind, pushed forward by all the other words that waited. It was locked.

I walked around my cage, I found Food and unlike Learn it was a word which retained its sweetness. At last I was ready to look out into the world again, the tiny hole in the wall waiting for me and beckoning. Hole. A word like alone, that once you are against it, once you are peering through it, you can see everything. I lay down and woke with the teacher back, the word Wake still hovering in the air. Although I couldn't see it, I knew that Wake was there every day. It waited on the other side of Sleep.

When the teacher said Learn I waited for my hands to take the book although I remembered that they would find nothing, the books having been emptied the night before. But they were filled again, and I was soon soaring over pastures and cattle, peering into the night-time secrets of homes, viewing massacres and parades, all of it impossibly small so it could fit into the book that had been clear the night before.

When Sleep came soaring across that night I was ready, but it outsmarted me. It waited by the hole, and even while the pencil scratched across the book and I ducked my head away, Sleep jumped out from the hole and reached me. Hours passed, I supposed, before I woke with the other word, the bookend word Wake echoing in the room. It was many nights, many days of this unending routine that reached far back into my past, this Learn and Sleep and Wake, broken only by Food and its reach into me.

Many days later I evaded Sleep again, this time by needing to go, the liquid stream in me strong and wanting out, and me resisting. I knew Sleep was coming. I'd heard the teacher prepare the word, thaw it out and send it freshly melted across the room, the dish it was on still cricking from the heat. But I heard Sleep coming and I had to pee. I needed to splash into the white dish by the door. Sleep got sidetracked by that wish, until its pillowed arms fell against the porcelain and into the jar,

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into the stale days of pee and used food. I almost laughed. The teacher was leaving, so I kept quiet, remembering the books where the animal pretends to sleep. I remembered the man who is dead but alive when another's back is turned, the woman who doesn't want to hear the words fuck and sex and love and so lies still. Sleep drifts over all of them but is unable to get a grip on their bodies. I heard Sleep go by and crash into the bowl and once again I was walking in the alone. The room was bigger without the teacher, and perhaps I'd even been moved, for I was starting to realise that there could be other rooms. If the books could have them, then perhaps the book I was in could have them too.

My now bigger room was different in other ways. The teacher had forgotten to empty the books and although I couldn't see any pictures in them, I could see the tiny scrawls that could have been pictures, if they weren't scrambled. The teacher had only mixed them, had taken the colourful images of life and replaced them with lines and dashes, dots and wiggles. I knew that soon the teacher would forget to empty them, and then, when Sleep had no power over me, I could just walk away into a book. I would catch the teacher napping, I decided and I lay down to sleep, my eye near the tiny hole, waiting for the thing to come back.

The next day was the most eventful day of all, since every one of my fistful of days were the same. When the teacher was talking, making holes appear in the very air through which tiny scenes were visible, I saw, on the wall behind the teacher, a picture which didn't come and go in accordance to the sounds. I began to lose interest in the teacher's images, and they blurred and faded, still hovering in the air and staining the light coming from the ceiling, but more like my clouded breath in the air when the nail pricks were white and cold.

The only image that remained firm was the one behind the teacher: a tiny person, walking carefully and tentatively down the wall. The teacher's words flowed around me but I had one of my own now, I decided, and I wanted to stick with mine. Human, I called it, for it was too small for a man, and I was delighted to see it swim into focus when the teacher stopped talking to scratch in the book with the pencil.

This could all have been sufficient. I would have been satisfied with this new word come crawling down the wall, even if the teacher, finally having no words, had not jumped. Screaming, and brushing the careful human from where it had crawled on the chair, he crushed it into the floor. I was shaking and breathing hard, like when I was in a huge detailed book. And for the first time I was standing on the other side of the floor. I was standing by teacher and the human traces were still on the planks. I was shaking, but even with the scattered word of shaking

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pulling me from place to place, I could see that I was taller. I was much bigger than the teacher, and bigger by far than the human on the floor, its legs wiggling in the tiny hole that is death.

Teacher said Food, and I turned obediently from death, but Food had no hold over me. I ate like a machine, like the eating machines I had seen in books, and thought about the human. The world was not just the holes in books. The teacher never reacted to the holes, except to pencil scratch when I mentioned them. The world was not just the hole in the wall, which showed the far away scenes like those of books. The world, even here in my cell, my new word for the closed feeling of the walls, was fraying apart, like the sheet I had taken to picking at while I was supposed to be sleeping. Something was invading. The word human felt appropriate still for the tiny thing on the floor, but it was something more too, and that I didn't have a word for. It made the teacher scream; it made me cross the floor, which I could only do at night if Sleep could be tricked. It was somehow much bigger than the thing on the floor. I watched the teacher shuddering while the thing was scraped and then lifted into the white dish where it spun away into nothingness by the rush of water.

The world was full of holes, I realised. Maybe not ones with things in them, like the books, or even the hole in the wall, but ones where things came and went. I ate food, and it later came out of another hole rather than the one that it went into. I had at first thought this was a separate procedure, but now I realised it was the same. I remembered seeing the yellow of one food, the white of another, in the processed food I had excreted. Likewise, my cell was a hole, which allowed the passage of the teacher, coming and going with the words Sleep and Wake. That meant, and I got sneaky as I realised, calming the excitement of my hands as they chattered on the table, that I had come from outside this cage. Like the animals in the zoo, like the man in the cell, and the woman in the house, I came from outside the hole, and like them, or at least some of them I had seen, I might be able to leave.

The teacher watched me closely that entire day and scratched the pencil. I tried to appear casual, even dropping some food and scooping it up, as I sometimes did when distracted, but everything had changed. My show wasn't convincing, even to me. I was obsessed with leaving the hole, and that possibility was burning through my mind and tearing aside all the old words, looking only for those like escape, free, and hammer and claw. I looked for ones sharp enough to make holes in concrete, to swim the channel to safety, to pull aside the bars on the window,

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although I had no idea what bars were, outside of books and only the fuzziest idea of a window.

The teacher watched me the rest of the day, and I made many blunders, the worst of which was staring down into the bowl looking for the human, showing that I remembered. When the teacher let the word Learn go, it came across the room with all of its old vigour, slammed against the bed and table expectantly. But distracted, it was only with the greatest difficulty I could set aside my own images and take up the tired scratches in the books. The teacher noticed, and repeated Learn until the scratches resolved themselves, before my eyes, into holes of meaning. A man became upright and leaned into the book to lift out the device he was working on, and a girl danced through the breeze that trickled past the pages. A tractor reared up ugly and loud, tearing aside the neat rows of letters with its popping noise and monstrous purpose, until I was afraid it would swallow the man and the girl, distracted as they were by their own interests.

When Sleep came I was ready to fight, to rebel, I said to myself, hoping the word would lend some extra power to my struggle, but instead Sleep overcame me. It was bigger tonight, and softer, more billowy, and even the tiny hole in the wall was no match for it. It was somehow less substantial and stronger, as though the things I couldn't see had taken on more power.

When Wake was sent back across from where the teacher waited by the wall, I sat for some time, going through the rituals of my behaviour but without interest, trying to remember why today was different. Then I realised I had crossed the floor yesterday, and I remembered why.

The day dragged on, as if every task, the teacher's long talks, the Learn of books, their pointlessly faraway pictures, were a mere impediment to the day's ending. Finally, the day was set aside and I laid on my bed and waited for Sleep to come, one eye to the hole in the wall, where green grass, I supposed, was waving. Sleep came, but it proved ineffectual against the waving lines of grass and bushy trees. Sleep bounced against the walls, the teacher went to the door, and I listened to the clashing sound of the door clicking, which was like the word unlock, and the footsteps retreat. Heavy with my new knowledge of the world, I sat and looked to where the human had been. Tiny, almost infinitesimal, that human had changed everything, had gone before me to where the water went. It had swirled down to where I could not follow, since I was too large to fit into the white bowl. The toilet, I corrected myself, the books having only recently supplied the word, its nastiness belied by the clean white sweep of the bowl, by the clear rushing sound of the water.

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When I went to the books to check on their contents, to check how I had been tricked this time, I found them full, even as they were when the teacher threw the word learn. I fell into the books and with the sparse light that came from the ceiling, I read and learned. Undirected by another's command, I paused, reflected, and they again resumed. I looked for particular words, delighting when I saw how an image of toilet could resolve itself into a scattering of letters, a code only I could read. Outside, was two words brought together, confirming my suspicion that the sense of secrecy in the sound *es* in *escape* moved naturally towards the cape of getting away. Likewise *cell* and *cage* were locked words, their small still letters betraying their true nature. They were the opposite of, I noticed for the first time, *tree* and *grass*, the upward striving of the tree implicit in its leaning towards the tall *t*, and *grass* sinuous and covering.

When *Wake* was spoken I was in my bed, and I rose only slowly, the word having no power over me now. I let the books piled around me fall and saw the word *surprise* hide on the teacher's face. Even the word *hidden* has the quick sense of being tucked away, of secrecy and even fear. I replaced the books one by one in the familiar patterns of colour and height, realizing as I did so that the stories went on one shelf and the books of word explanations onto another. The last shelf was reserved for those books that were neither. They explained without reference to words, as though the words were transparent, holes into the obvious. *Obvious* was such a complacent word, brimming over with the confidence of speech, although you could see it hid its speaker in its last letters, exposed the *us* for whom the obvious was necessary. The last books hurt to read and seemed to contain secrets, although I could not sort them from their words, vast cryptic words that hung in the air like polysyllabic curses. Words to hurt people with.

The teacher asked me today. Asked me to tell about the books. So I described the holes, realising I had to stay hidden. I said the holes hid the world, but the tired explanation meant nothing to me now, and that was becoming clear. The teacher said *Learn* and I took up a book I had leafed through the night before, but its story was empty, its words effortlessly pointing to the fuzzy images of its simple story. I threw down the book, let its ridiculous images slide away when its covers closed and I lifted a book from the bottom shelf, one of the difficult ones. The teacher was watching me, but I didn't stop. I opened the book and read, not for understanding, but with stubbornness, a word like a fist through a wall, repeatedly, through a hard wall. I chewed the words until the images began, shyly at first, to poke through from the other side. I even lifted the book

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to look at the cover, to see if the pictures were like those in the wall, but when the teacher noted my action with scratching, I did it no more.

I read through the day, the teacher's eyes alert upon me, the pencil scratching. Although food time came and went without the word, I fed myself as I read. The hard bread was like my book, difficult to chew, grainy, but perhaps containing nutrient once I got it inside me.

The teacher left without leaving the word Sleep to guard me, and I was at first suspicious, a word whose sibilant sound was true to my feelings, whose involved ending was like my own, indivisible from the present. I sat through the long night, if that's what it was, poring through the book, pouring like water pours, although they were written differently. I leaked over graphics and spilled into the dark corners of glossaries. I seeped gradually into the more difficult words, or they into me, until I fell exhausted, a word of leaving and dropping, onto my bed, too tired to turn my head to glimpse the hole.

My days spun quickly past, and although I had almost forgotten the human, it hovered in my mind. It was somewhere in the back, where the dreams are, my books said, although mine were as yet fuzzy, only beginning to snap into focus, like a piece of wood upon your hand. I was reminded more forcibly of the human, and the implications of inside and outside and egress, the word opening into endless space, when the teacher came with another teacher. I had never seen two. I had not dreamed, for all my books, that it was possible to make another one, and yet here was another. In the corner of my apartment, a word altogether too large for my tiny cell but I liked its expansiveness, stood a tall and wide machine. I was shown the flavour of its controls by the other teacher, which I could see now, from my closer view, was different than the first. They were not duplicates, but rather each poorly formed models of an original. The word original evoking beginning, just like evoke brings up images of egg and yoke.

The new teacher was smaller than the first even, and therefore was much smaller than me. Although the new teacher was nervous beside me, I began to see that it was a woman, for all of its chattering and twitching. It had the bulges on the front I had seen in the books, and smelled as I had been expecting, the word smell making me breathe deeply. That meant, I supposed, that the other, first teacher was a man. It was only later that I began to realise the full implications of this discovery, for at the moment I was being tutored in the use of the new machine.

Pressing at first one and then another of the controls, the keys, I was told, a word that brought escape rather than sound to my mind, would cause noises to burst from the machine. I pressed one after another and

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it was only with the greatest difficulty that I recalled myself. When I was instructed to press some of the keys in sequence, I was gratified – a word that has both gift and the sound of satisfaction in it – to hear what I was told was pleasing music. Music dropped around the room, lounged on the bed and watched us, lifted the foot of the woman teacher, tinkled in the ceiling where the light came in. Music became the room, and after a time they left me and I continued through the night, making music.

Then next day, after a restless sleep on my bed where I had tossed and turned, like a ship at uneasy anchor before a storm, I was pulled by my cable back to the shore of Wake. In my small apartment there was a crowd. I counted five, a word synonymous with fingers, standing. They were all small, some larger, and others wide, and they all made noises at me that only slowly fell into words. They pointed me towards the new machine, the piano, a word that fell far short of what it had to do, although I ignored them to piss. I had just learned piss, and it well described the feeling of emptying and the sound in the bowl. When I turned to the piano the five were still there, although subtly uneasy, but they soon forgot that in the sounds I was able to pull from the dull word of piano.

The books were forgotten by the teachers, their most recent toy taking all their attention. But now I was able, since Sleep was kept at bay for longer, to look through the difficult books at night. That is how I began to suspect the truth. There was an outside. The books did not merely create, a word that inhibits imagination even as it constructs the image, they described. They wrote into being the world, and the world was, as the presence of the different teachers implied, wider than my apartment. The memory of the human returned to me. I began again to look at the hole by the bed, although now I looked for information. I tried to match the images of the hole with those of the books. Only the flimsiest connections could be made between the words that were reluctant – a word which is itself reluctant to be said – to describe one another.

The next day I was taken out through the door to a larger piano on its side, a grand piano. The word implied that it was bigger but it was actually smaller, and this was a surprise to me. I had been forced into clothes, the constraint in the word covered me and stifled my body. Although I had trained my face to show no surprise, I couldn't resist – the act of holding against implicit in the s sound and the final t – looking around when I saw the larger chamber and the many people waiting. My teacher led me to the piano and I played as I had been taught, and then, as I always did, I trailed off into my own meanderings, until a shrill – itself a word like a needle through your ear – noise sounded from behind me.

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I turned to see a teacher, my woman teacher, pulling a stick across a wooden shape on her body. I went over to see, and although I towered over her, she handed me the wooden body of what was another, much smaller piano. I held it as she had, and ignoring the curious eyes, just as I had the frost covered nail heads through my wall, I pulled the stick across the strings. I had lifted the piano top when the teacher was not watching so I knew the machine tapped on the strings, but mimicking my woman teacher I pulled the stick and was rewarded by the same shrill sounds. It hurt the ears and more than a few in the audience laughed. But I tested out all the permutations – an involved word with many layers and edges – of sounds the strings could make. I used my fingers as I'd been shown, and the wooden device, the violin – its tiny body matching the sharp sound of its name – cried through the same sounds as the piano. I went on to meander, and the crowd sat still, and when I had finished they slapped their hands together in what I supposed was pleasure, although I readied myself for defence.

Outside my apartment, I learned, was a world full of violins and teachers, full of sounds. That is where the piano came from, and the rustle of food bags. That is where the water rushes to with the eager piss and more reluctant excrement, its slow word clinging to the side of the bowl. Tonight, I have decided, I will go outside the wall. I will see what this other world holds. I have read about breakouts, and I am resolved to break out of the thin walls near my bed. I will take blankets and food, and the clothes they gave me when they took me to play for the crowd. I have one of the food bags and I have filled it with yellow and brown food, and bread, a softer word than I would expect such a hard surfaced food to have.

All I have to do is finish writing this book. Once I am on the outside I will travel light, as I have read about, which is both travelling towards the light and is somehow quicker, and so I will not need this story. Instead, I will leave it here, hidden amongst the hard books, the ones on the bottom shelf. If this apartment, which I can now call a cell, has another occupant – one who fills the space, one who has chosen to be here the word implies – they might find my story and plan their own escape. They might sort from it a collection of images more useful than the top row books, more coherent than the middle row books, and containing more meaning than the bottom row books. I will leave the violin, although it was intended for me to take it. The outside, I now know, is full of violins and pianos, full of spreading grasses and longing trees, full of rushing water that endlessly fills bowls, and full of words and their audience. I am departing. Which is both breaking away from something,

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something from which I have come, and going towards. It carries the same sound as running, inviting, giving.

I go in search of the word ocean, with its rolling sound, and of bird, its quick movement implied in the suddenness of the short word, and of home, a roundness of sleep but without sleep's implied forgetfulness. Home is rather like hope, and hop. It is somewhere beside the restlessness of ocean and the quick alertness of hope. It is a short distance away, a mere hop.

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## HORROR

# Anatomy of a Wounded House

Douglas Thompson

I tried to cry out as you left, but my throat had gone dry as sand. No tears came at all as I stayed facing the closed door afterwards, the frosting of its glass bending reality like a snowstorm of white light. Instead, the drains stopped working, and the water ran out. Coincidence? The house, so recently purchased, had doubtless not intended to be landed with me alone, had not bargained on this sudden change of plan. So it should have come as little surprise that it would immediately turn on me and lash out.

I might have enjoyed the tears, the little salt parcels of warmth. They might have melted this edifice: a face of ice that could only grow colder over coming days and months. Eventually I would become a glacier of numbness, a diagram of a human being, a grey abstraction, but for now there was the plumbing to attend to.

Perhaps it was the plumber himself who started the transformation. I expected him to be like all the others before: to crawl beneath the floor at some exorbitant hourly rate, and emerge a few minutes later with a broken pipe in his hand. But instead he ripped up several floorboards in

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every room, showed me a secret lake that had been building up there for years, then promptly left. He was too busy, he had to leave on another job. The whole visit had taken less than three minutes, even though he had somehow managed to leave several cigarette butts in every room. But my whole life had been changed. I felt both violated and strangely exhilarated, like I had received a visit from a surrealist priest, a kind of initiation. He told me to leave the floorboards up to let the basement drain away, and not to use the water. He never came back.

Hours, then days went by, as I sat on the floors, contemplating the ragged holes and the torn planks, the chilly darkness exposed beneath. I was drawn against my will to the raw edges of the broken wood, like open wounds that I was scratching, itching. Eventually, I picked up a hammer from where the plumber had left it, and, remembering his practised technique, began to lift a few more floorboards. I prised and ripped and pulled, soon enjoying the feeling of destruction, carrying with it as it always does a certain freedom from consequences, from the burden of reconstruction, or from the bother of thinking about it.

How could all that water have flowed beneath us unnoticed? Every bath or shower or washing cycle, everything we thought we were ridding ourselves of was merely building up, amassing into a secret ocean of darkness, unheard and unsmelt beneath us, beneath the multiple layers of domestic routine and laminate flooring. Everything that we had thought was throw-away, ephemeral, was really just making out a long detailed charge-sheet, an indictment to be read out against us later. The music of running water, supposedly incidental, had been the song of our lives. Now I felt as if the plumber had been St Peter. I felt as if I had been judged, and then abandoned to purgatory.

So I bought floodlights and heaters and dehumidifiers. As the waters receded I climbed down onto the solum and began to tentatively explore it. Standing in the mud, I saw each room from a new perspective, with the floorboards at chest height. I had discovered a new house beneath the house I thought I knew. I hurried home from work every night, not daring to tell anyone about my new frontier, my all-absorbing hobby.

The worst thing about it was the darkness and dampness and cold so I knew I had to conquer these things first or I could never move forward. My plumber had abandoned me as a kind of test, of that I felt sure, and I was determined not to fail in my trial. I lifted more floorboards, I got the solum dry and well-lit, and then one day I came home with a car boot full of paint cans. I suddenly knew with absolute certainty that my dirty secret needed to be made part of the house now, to be integrated into normal domestic life, habilitated.

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It took me about a week and a half, but I painted it all blood-red: the dried clay, the compacted soil, the engineering brick, the underside of the joists, everything. The topside of the floorboards and the rest of the house I left just as they were, but it was the underbelly that I wanted to uncover, to make voluptuous and vibrant. I wired up permanent lighting and prised many of the remaining floorboards apart until a spectacular effect emerged: each room could be lit solely from below; by red light in striking shards and silhouettes emerging through the filigree floorboards.

I had the feeling that I was only just getting started, and began to worry that the neighbours might get wind of my adventures. I sewed all the curtains shut, not with thread but with broad leather straps; the effect was almost fantastical, oversized, as if looking at laced-up boots or the back of the corset of some Victorian governess.

What little water I had been able to use since the plumber left, I had now diverted into a little pond under the floor towards the back of the house. It occurred to me that the whole network of copper water pipes throughout the house was now empty and redundant, a waste of something elaborate and secretly beautiful. I returned from work the next evening with a car boot full of bags of sand. Now I devised a way to turn the entire house into a kind of hourglass: if I topped the tank in the attic up in the morning then I could have an entire day of fine white sand slowly falling out of every tap and shower head throughout the building, and draining gracefully away down plugholes and drains. The sound was peaceful, mellifluous even, the visual spectacle pleasing; like a ruined ancient city after some bloodless apocalypse.

This inspired me to smash open some of the sanitary ware: with the sink cut through, it was then possible to observe the beauty of its cast shape, the perfection of its compound elliptical curves. The further sand released by this fissure onto the bathroom floor was like a strange dry fountain; which I arranged to drain away slowly into a pipe under the floor.

Returning all this sand to the attic each morning was a logistical problem that I solved by removing more floorboards and ceilings and fixing a block and tackle to the attic roof trusses that I could then see from where I stood on the ground floor. I raised enough excess sand by this method to also allow for some to pour slowly from above into each of the hall cupboards each day until their doors spilled open around tea-time, making a spectacular vista to welcome my return home each evening; like being lauded by an avenue of opening and welcoming arms.

I became curious as to what other networks might lie buried under the

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skin of my house, and what I could do to uncover them. Ever since we had first entered the house I had noticed the intermittent tendency of some power points to fail, some lights to trip a fuse in the main board. Beginning with these, I followed the route of every wire I could find, chiselling out the plaster that had concealed its course all these years. Once exposed, these veins and arteries of coloured wires seemed too beautiful to hide again, so I sealed them back in with clear resin, rendered flush like clear rivers of glass, windows onto secret channels of fire, meandering, elongated.

I could see you weren't coming back by now, months had gone by after all, and I began to find our furniture and clothes an irritation. I began with the bed. I shuffled it into a vertical position and then screwed and bolted it onto the living room wall. Then I set it alight. I watched in awe, as if in slow motion: the spread of the greedy orange tongues, the blooming of black ash, the blowing of tatters peeling off like batwings. The smoke needed to be quickly released so I sledge-hammered open a ragged slot in the external wall then another in the opposite corner, to encourage a through-draught, which quickly resembled a force-ten gale. In this space I experimented with further burnings, of tables and chests of drawers, sometimes dowsing the flames half-way, marvelling at the picturesque transition from varnished veneer to charred carbon, the gruesome torsos and severed legs of furniture one could retrieve from the brink of oblivion.

I needed somewhere new to sleep, so I brought home a large quantity of rope, real thick white rope that might once have rigged a galleon. I felt as if I was leaving port on an exhilarating voyage. I knocked some more holes in the walls and floors. I stretched about thirty or forty spans of the rope in various long diagonals through the house from arbitrary points on the external walls, anywhere I could get a secure hold by looping or tying into brickwork or joists. Gradually I found that all these disparate paths, no matter how fabulously chaotic to the eye, nonetheless naturally coalesced and criss-crossed about a central point that magically emerged. And there, after weeks of weaving, I found my cradle, as comfortable as a hammock slung on the palms of a south sea island: an intersection of balanced forces, where I could hover in space all night at the centre of the house. Now just a single vertical rope left hanging was sufficient as a ladder on which to make my ascent every evening into my spider's web.

I had always wanted to see the stars from my bed, and now what was there to stop me? Skylights and dormers seemed too prosaic. Instead I simply applied random violence, just as I had to the walls and floors, and

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quickly produced a ragged and dangerous-looking puncture a few metres across, through which the rain fell unopposed for a while, usefully topping up my limited water supply. Then I used the transparent resin again, and with the aid of timber shuttering cast the whole opening closed in beautiful waterproof plastic, hard and clear as glass.

It was beautiful to lie, bouncing comfortably in open space, beneath the stars and moon, in such exquisite and perverse freedom. It inspired me. I took the television apart and re-wired its constituent parts without their polite plastic housing: the exposed cathode-ray-tube I then hung in space on a rope of its own and set swinging every night like a topical pendulum, spouting news as it went, throwing fabulous flickerings of light through the dimly-lit house. It moved nearer then further away from me, as the mood or the moment suggested, a distressed little beacon, skinned alive, its guts exposed.

Next I started coming home with the car piled high with another strange cargo: pieces of plastic replicas of human beings. Borrowed and begged from the back door of department stores, I gradually assembled an army of tailor's dummies that I placed, akin to the statues in the tomb of an ancient Chinese ruler, side by side like soldiers standing up to their chests in the blood-red basement void. Their expressionless faces made a formidable array, peeking out of holes in the floor of every room, dressed in the discarded clothes, the extensive wardrobe, of you and I.

Finally, I realised that my house was approaching a level of perfection in which I would no longer be willing to leave it. I carefully weakened an area of wall from the inside in preparation, then on one final Friday evening I drove the car straight off the end of the driveway and crashed through the walls into the study, where the floor joists creaked then gave out, the bonnet sliding straight down into the glowing crimson undercroft, the boot and spinning rear wheels left cocked angrily in the air like a dying wasp.

Unexpectedly, I had twisted or even broken an ankle, maybe cracked a rib, but as I climbed aloft again like a caterpillar into my forgiving cocoon of ropes, I realised that I didn't really need these things anymore. I had drip-feeds now, slung from the attic rafters: one of rainwater from the roof, another of baby-food from a gallon-tank in the loft. What more mobility would be necessary?

Perched in my new nexus I could see at last that my house was an organism and that I could interface with it and with the elements that underpinned it: those of fire, wind, earth and water, and beyond these commune also with the stars and the moon and the other mute guardians of God's imponderable universe. Sticking wires into each ear that led to

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tv and radio aerials on the roof, and an internet cable up my anus for good measure, I closed my eyes to the sweet bedtime music of humanity's incessant whisperings, the hourly news bulletins, its lullaby of endless suffering. I smiled and slept again, waiting for doomsday.

Somewhere far below me in the gloom, draped with cobwebs: I knew the vital organs had long since stopped working; the boiler and central heating choked with sand, the fridge-freezer entombed in its own ice, the gas fire and hob disconnected. The clocks had stopped, the body of the house was exquisitely dead, but I was the dormant micro-organism within it, the seed of destruction whose time to bloom had come.

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## HORROR

# The Stairs in the Crypt

John Hall

In the spring of a year late in the 1920s, a young man named Edmund Fiske took the lease of an empty house in a little old town in Arkham County. The Depression was not properly over, and the property was cheap; not that it mattered to Fiske, who was a rich man, despite his youth. The house appealed first to his sense of the curious, as being ancient and ramshackle, but it was large and comfortable as well.

Fiske did not mix much with his neighbours, but pursued his obscure academic interests amongst his own books or in the library of the university in the city twenty miles off. And indeed he had few neighbours, for many of the young folk had left the little town to seek their fortune elsewhere.

There was a small church at the end of the lane on which stood Fiske's house, and Fiske attended the morning service every Sunday, partly because this was the only time he saw his neighbours, and partly because of the love of the curious which marked his character. Certainly it was not from any strong religious conviction – which, truth to tell, would have sat ill with some of his researches. The church dated from the mid-

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dle of the seventeenth century, and was dedicated to St Michael and All Angels, a circumstance which itself intrigued Fiske, quite apart from the quaint architecture and decoration. The only slight drawback was the pastor, an aged man much given to stern warnings about the fate in store for sinners. Then, too, there was a stout oak door which evidently led to a crypt; this door was closed with a chain and padlock, and old Pastor Hayes refused point-blank to let Fiske explore the crypt.

The sexton, a man named Oakmore, as old as the pastor and as fervent in his religion, stood nearby whilst Fiske sought, and the pastor refused, the necessary permission. Oakmore was a near neighbour of Fiske in the little lane, and he walked the few score of yards back home with him. "Pastor's right," observed Oakmore, as they walked. "I know you young chaps won't have it, but us old 'uns know there's things that should be left undisturbed."

Fiske very naturally asked, "Why?" and "What?" and so forth, but got no satisfactory reply.

So matters stood in the autumn of that year, when an outbreak of influenza swept the little town. Most recovered, but Pastor Hayes succumbed. Now, although Fiske was not what we might call religious, he knew two men who were. One, his uncle, lived in the city and was high in the general assembly of the congregation which the pastor had graced. The other, the Reverend Mr Green, was an old friend of Fiske's from his school days, and was currently helping to run a shelter for the less fortunate in another, larger, city in another state. It was an easy task, then, for Fiske in effect to arrange for Green to take over the custody of the parish.

"You'll find things different here, Tom," said Fiske, as they stood together outside the church.

"Indeed, it looks peaceful enough." Green found as he lit his pipe. "The dedication intrigues me; St Michael and All Angels is common enough in England, mainly on old pagan sites, but that is unusual over here. I should not have thought the place was old enough to have a pagan site."

"Witchcraft, perhaps, though I never heard of it here?" mused Fiske. "Or an Indian sacred place, something of that sort? Intriguing. And, by the by, there is an old crypt in the church..."

A week or so after Green arrived, then, we see the two of them, with old Oakmore hovering in the background, making "Tsk! Tsk!" noises, unlocking the rusty padlock, and taking off the heavy iron chain. With some trepidation, and the aid of flashlights, they went down the duty steps.

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“There’s a light switch,” said Green doubtfully. “Must have had electricity laid on almost when it was invented!”

Needless to say, the light did not work. But their flashlights showed a cardboard box with bulbs of an old-fashioned sort in one corner, and – with a chair and much mutual advice – they put in a “new” bulb, and tried again. This time the light came on, and they took a look around.

I do not know just what they had expected; skeletons, coffins, instruments of torture from the days of the witch trials, perhaps. What they saw was this: the ceiling was painted a deep blue and marked all over with silver stars arranged into constellations – though none that either man had seen before. There seemed, indeed, to be zodiacal imagery, but there were thirteen – not twelve – divisions, and again these were not entirely familiar. Here was Cancer, to be sure, or something very crab-like; but next came a constellation shaped like the classical dragon; and next a panther, or perhaps jaguar. In the darkest corner, too, was a cluster of stars that formed a strange and pretty well obscene figure of an hermaphroditic human; and next to that, a curious thing that looked like an octopus or devil-fish.

The walls, every one, were painted, covered with great murals that had evidently been inspired by the church’s dedication, and had equally evidently been painted in the last quarter of the previous century. Angels, their wings protruding from the Pre-Raphaelite notion of medieval armour, fought and vanquished devils, imps, and demons beneath scrolls and banners bearing suitable biblical texts in Gothic script. Some of these imps and demons, too, were passing strange. Some were conventional enough, but in dark corners – overshadowed by the angelic figures, and sketched so lightly as to be difficult of distinguishing accurately – lurked curious things that would puzzle any student of marine flora and fauna. And some that would bring a shudder of horror to the most prosaic.

The masterpiece was on the wall furthest from the steps by which they had entered the crypt. Here was St Michael himself, almost twice life size, clad *cap-à-pie* in silver armour and with gold sparks shining from the blade of his drawn sword, which was engraved all over with strange patterns. The saint stood before an archway, beyond which was a staircase. But the perspective was odd; the viewer seemed to be looking vertically down the stair-well, and the stairs seemed to twist and turn, and to go down to infinite depths. The staircase was not empty; in the turnings and corners, dimly sketched, were more of the strange unearthly figures that could be seen here and there on the walls.

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“Guarding the gate of heaven, perchance?” hazarded Green. “Letting the faithful in?”

Fiske muttered something like, “Or that of hell, keeping – others – out?” He laughed shakily when his friend turned to look at him.

“Well, it’s spectacular, all right,” said Green, “although some of the folk I’ve met here might not approve. And, indeed, I’m half tempted to have some bits painted out –”

“Oh, no!” said Fiske, who had a hatred of vandalism. “A false ceiling, if you must, or just keep it locked up.”

“Hmm. Later; for now, I’ll have to see about some screens, and arrange the lighting. Yes, and some bunting, that will do very well.”

“For what?” asked Fiske.

“Why, for my Nativity, of course. This is the very place, a little straw, a few ‘flats’ – painted scenery, you know – and this will be the very stable!”

“Begging your pardon, sir?” This was Oakmore, who had followed them down reluctantly, and who could contain himself no longer. “It might not be my place, sir, but – well – I wouldn’t bring no children down here.” When they asked why not he took refuge in, “Damp, sir. Damp and airless. Especially after the ‘flu,” he added persuasively.

Oddly, Fiske tended to agree with the sexton. “It is a touch mephitic,” he argued. “And the subject matter of the paintings, and all.”

But Green had his heart set on a Nativity. There were just enough children in the little town to do it properly, and he set to work. There was but one baby, that of Mrs Van Neumann, who refused outright to lend it; but Green made shift with a rag doll, owned by Sukie Walters, who refused to be parted from it. Sukie was thus made the Virgin Mary, whilst Patsy Norton, who had filled that role, became a wise man, a demotion which she accepted without demur on condition that she had a beard which would sweep the floor.

The first week of December was clear and bright, and one Saturday morning Fiske attended a rehearsal. The cast was depleted, for there was some junior sporting fixture at a school in the next parish; but Sukie was there, and Bobby Turner, in his wise man costume though he had been told it was not a dress rehearsal, and a couple of shepherds.

“Mostly to get the scenery right,” said Green, wielding a paint brush and moving certain painted boards here and there. He gestured with the brush. “Oh, sorry! Turpentine will fix that. I’ve left St Michael, you see, I thought him quite appropriate. And safe,” he added, glancing at the four of five children nearby.

Fiske strolled over to the great mural, wanting another look, for he had

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not – for some reason – been into the crypt since he and Green opened it up.

As he looked, it seemed to Fiske that the artist had been highly skilled, in a perverse sense. The perspective of the stairs was almost three-dimensional, so that Fiske felt a distinct uneasiness, a vertigo, as he gazed into those infinite depths. Indeed, the ground seemed to shift, making him stagger slightly. He put his hand on the wall to steady himself – only it seemed to him that there was no wall there. Fiske hastily stepped back, and turned away – with a struggle, for the effect was quite hypnotic.

“All right, old man?” Green asked him.

“Yes, just a bit faint, or something. A bit close in here. Tom, did you feel anything... odd... just now? A tremor, something of that kind?”

Green frowned, and shook his head. “Most probably the pipes for the central heating,” he said, for the church was heated by a strange antique arrangement of stoves and pipes, which Green had already grown to hate. “I’ve noticed it before.”

“Tom, I’ll have to go outside and get some air. Look here,” Fiske added reluctantly, as he made for the stairs, “I don’t know that I’d want a child of mine down here for very long.”

Green looked at him, but said nothing. Fiske went up the stairs, and out into the church yard. As he leaned on an ancient gravestone, trying to collect his wits, he felt a peculiar sensation. Almost he could have sworn he heard a low rumble; almost he could have sworn that the ground shifted once more beneath his feet.

Old Oakmore happened to be digging up weeds in a corner nearby, and he too looked towards the church, a curious look on his face.

“You felt it too?” It was said before Fiske could think about it.

Oakmore nodded, silently.

“We’d best take a look.”

And they did. First the two of them, then the sheriff, then the county police; then the strange, silent men from Washington, who hid their identity behind mysterious groups of initials. The crypt, of course, was empty; of Green, and the children, there was not the least trace.

When the official investigation was over, Fiske persuaded his uncle to let him take a look at the crypt. Assisted by Oakmore and a couple of sheriff’s men, he broke down the wall on which St Michael and the staircase were painted.

Behind the bricks they found a stone arch of great antiquity; and beyond that, another flight of stairs – only seven of them – ending in a solid block of stone. Not “stones” in the sense of a wall, with cement and

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what have you, but a single, huge block of some black stone. From a distance it looked like a close-grained granite, but up close had the appearance of obsidian; certainly their crowbars could not put a scratch in it. There they had to stop, and perhaps it is as well.

Oh, and on the bottom step they found a rag doll, which they recognised. They told one another that it must have been in the crypt, unnoticed, and that one of them had knocked it into the excavation; but they said this with lowered voices, and no conviction, and they did not look at one another as they said it.

Fiske moved away soon after. And others, too, the parents of the missing children especially, thought it best to move to new surroundings. So the little town did not long survive after the strange incident. Old Oakmore was one of the last to go, headed for his nephew's place in Idaho. As he made to get into the truck that was taking his few sticks of furniture, he looked at the church – now pretty much derelict – and muttered that some things were better left alone. The driver, an uncultivated man, merely spat out his quid of tobacco and reflected that the old man was rambling.

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## FANTASY

# Bloodbegotten

Jason Hinchcliffe

The nobleman was foolish to think he would pass unnoticed here. The simple farmer's smock and earth-coloured breeches might have made him invisible among his own kind, but to men bound to such trappings each day, they made him all the more conspicuous. The tavern-dwellers stared at him now with a brazenness not permitted outside. And beneath their hatred, he only grew more self-conscious of the unnatural newness of his clothes and the manner in which the coarse fabric hung from shoulders untoughened by work – the perfect whiteness of his skin and

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his very bearing that revealed a birth into nobility and a life completely free of material want.

When the door opened behind him bringing a chill breeze to his neck, Voskh wanted only to turn and walk the few steps outside. It was hardly any distance at all, crossed in a moment. Within an hour's time, he could be safe in the parlour of his decidedly un-modest home, far removed from these *common men* and their unwashed stink.

The time for escape was past, however. Having been seen, he was therefore incriminated, and to leave now would add cowardice to his other so-called crimes.

Even so, he knew before entering their midst he would not be harmed. As he moved, the farmers and mill-workers barred his path until the last possible second only to part before him like water, drawing closed behind as he passed. The crowd ended abruptly, and Voskh found himself standing before a table in the room's furthest corner, set apart from the other furnishings as though the rest of the world had consciously shrunk away.

The man seated opposite was not what he expected. Though Voskh was not so ignorant to trust every whispered rumour, the stories had prepared him for a monster. Instead, he looked upon a man barely out of his teens with a fragile, boyish beauty and a slender frame that seemed hardly capable of the almost mythic feats with which it had been credited.

The nobleman smiled, allowing a shade of contempt to enter his expression.

"You are Samuel?" he asked.

The veneer cracked when Samuel offered a chair by pushing it forward with his foot, and the startled nobleman stumbled backward with a tiny frightened squeal. His embarrassment at once gave way to outrage as he thought of those behind him and imagined them staring, smiling at his weakness. It was a dangerous moment for Voskh, and might easily have led to ruin if not for the arrival of a pleasant-looking, immensely pregnant serving girl, who, taking care to avoid looking directly at either man, placed two full tankards of wine on the table.

"I ordered nothing," Voskh snapped.

"I'm sorry sir," she stammered, blushing a deep red. With a formal grace made absurd by her bulk she curtsied, balancing her tray awkwardly with one hand. Then, offering no further explanation, she fled.

Voskh sat down with as much dignity as he was able to summon. He felt Samuel watching him – measuring him, perhaps – and his ridiculous

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disguise. Instinctively he knew that whatever control he might have wanted over this situation was lost.

“I wish to purchase your services,” he proclaimed.

“You desire a murder?”

“I desire justice!”

Samuel’s laughter was a sibilant hiss. “Every man that comes to me prattles of *justice*. Do you want a rival murdered in council? No – then perhaps your wife is losing her beauty, and you wish to replace her with a comelier bride? Tell me, what crime has irked your worthy sensibilities?”

The nobleman pressed both hands on the table, leaning forward until Samuel was a mere arm’s length away. His voice deepened and lost its aristocratic lilt.

“Do you realise to whom you speak, sir?”

“Your name is of little concern to me, *Master Voskh*. What matters is the weight of your purse. And if you are not careful, a time will soon come when even your bountiful means cannot afford me.”

Hearing his name spoken aloud, Voskh eased into his chair and breathed out the last of his pride. He produced a small cloth sack tied with twisted strands of velvet and shook it so the coins clinked hollowly together.

“This should be adequate,” he rumbled, dropping it onto the table. For the first time in his four and a half decade existence, Voskh came close to understanding *shame*, and wondered if justice or revenge or whatever its label was worth staring into a murderer’s eyes and feeling like the aberration.

It was this feeling, perhaps, which compelled him to explain.

“My daughter served in a great house,” he began, “where she was placed to improve her prospects. For many months she went unnoticed. Even when she worked within a hair’s breadth of her lord, he barely acknowledged her. Last week, something changed. He spoke to her, complimenting her beauty. She ran home that night to tell me, and we celebrated, believing she was taken into his favour...”

Voskh looked at the glass in front of him as though seeing it only then, and took it up, drinking thirstily, setting it down again only once it was emptied. “He followed her into a guest-room one evening where she was collecting laundry. She sensed him behind her but knew not if it was proper to address him, so she kept working until she felt him take hold of her arm...”

“He did not just rape her... When she would not stop crying, he struck her, and when she begged him to let her alone...”

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Unable to continue, Voskh allowed the quiet to have its way. There was nothing left to be said. In vain he scoured Samuel's face for any indication of the man's thoughts, but there was only the same coldness, the same absence.

Only this time there were words, too.

"Who do you wish to die?" asked Samuel.

"Dorgrimr..."

The name was so immediate and uttered with such ease that for some moments it seemed to pass without notice.

There was no warning before Samuel clutched at Voskh's throat and dragged him forward. He tried to cry out but could not draw breath. With his cheek pressed onto the damp stinking table, Voskh could only think how little it mattered anyway. Certainly the other patrons must have seen the attack, or at the very least heard his chair crashing to the ground. Yet no one came to his aid. There was only the hand that closed ever more tightly until his vision blurred to red.

"You are too much like your kind, Voskh." Samuel's lips practically brushed his ear. "And I am tired of your petty rebellions. If you want the king's head, you will have to take it for yourself."

In what would have been Voskh's last second of consciousness, the pressure was gone, and the air came ripping down his throat with exquisite force. He staggered back to see Samuel coming toward him once again. The slightest touch and Voskh crumpled. The gold-filled purse hit the floor beside his head.

Staring up at the ceiling, splayed out amidst the grime and spilled beer, Voskh was surprised at the thought which entered his head. He wondered why no one laughed.

The next night, Voskh returned to the tavern a changed man. Gone were his earlier attempts at subterfuge and the awkward haste with which he eventually fled. Rather than avoid the staring peasants this time he stared back, warning them away with almost physical power. Those who looked closely saw in his face the etchings of a furious struggle from which he had emerged sleepless, and haunted, but possessed by a will that served to remind them of their own inferiority.

It was hardly surprising that few took note of the thin, ghost-like figure at his side. Samuel, however, noticed her at once, and having noticed her, could not bring himself to look away. Every part of the noble's story was written in the girl's slow and tentative steps and her down-turned face, in how she clung to her father so tightly she seemed without substance of her own. She held back as they drew close, whispering some-

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thing that caused Voskh to drop one hand to the brilliantly-gleaming dagger worn openly at his waist.

"I have brought my daughter to show you," Voskh announced. He swept the hair back from her face with a surprising lack of tenderness. The girl raised a hand to her cheek but there was no hiding what she wished to hide. Starting from her temple and curving around her jaw, the entire side of her face was swollen purple and yellow. A small stream of tears leaked from her eye and disappeared somewhere down her neck, the flow so constant she made no effort to stem it. Something had been broken inside.

"Look at her!" demanded Voskh. "Do you see what her *master* did?"

Though at first the daughter looked only at the floor, a momentary glance in Samuel's direction lingered too long and suddenly her world was drained of sound. She sensed her father's presence but only thinly, without form. With this man staring at her, this stranger, she felt almost safe, in a way that no man had ever made her feel. And she could not place the reason why, unless it was because he looked at her differently from how a man normally should, because he was not looking at her at all, but rather through her – even *inside* her.

The spell was broken by Samuel's voice, raised in gentle questioning, and Aria knew he spoke only to her.

"Do you wish Dorggrimr to die?" he asked.

Her father answered for her, sputtering: "Of course she does!"

Samuel's gaze flickered from the girl only an instant but it was enough to silence Voskh, who muttered an apology and stepped compulsively back. Left alone, Aria teetered for a moment like a fledgling calf and Samuel was overcome with the urge to help her – but something in her look made him pause: a flash of the pride that was so condescending in the father, but changed in her by what she had endured. Not pride, anymore, but a quiet resignation.

In this way too she spoke: "When I was little, my mother would take me walking with her through our lands. Our favourite place was a field of grass abandoned by the farmers and left to grow until it reached higher than my chin. We would lay beside one another for the whole afternoon sometimes, not quite touching but close enough we only needed to reach out to know the other was there. We did not always speak, but other times my mother would talk for hours, telling me stories her mother once shared with her, over and over again so I could someday pass them on to children of my own.

"Three summers ago my mother died. I am no longer a little girl, and many years have passed since we visited our place, but after her death I

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started going there and laying as we used to, staring up at the clouds, waiting for her words to come with the wind until I felt her beside me, hidden by the grass. But I will not go there again.”

Even the most savage lands have places that offered sanctuary – houses once inhabited by gods, but in those godless times holding merely the faintest whisper in their deepest cracks and shadows. The outside world stayed where it belonged, either from some remembered respect or else sensing there would be nothing to gain from invading the barren walls.

However, this did not mean that man, simply by entering the church, was safe from the turmoil that otherwise haunted him. For some, not peace nor sleep nor prayer offered respite. Look only so far as the *priest*, and watch him during those hours when the soul was meant to rest, thrashing about on his bare straw mattress as though defending himself against overwhelming enemies: teeth clenched, hands balled into fists, lashing out with huge sweeping blows that never seemed enough to keep his attackers at bay.

The flailings stopped, and the sleeper betrayed his wakefulness by the evenness of his breath. Slowly he cracked open his eyelids and peered into the almost perfect dark. The only sounds were the dry rasp of his own breath and, outside, the faint and gentle thrumming of crickets. His muscles grew tense, waiting, years of unuse barely diminishing their need to act.

Closing his eyes, he opened them to the figure of a man looming over the bed, perched on a heavy oak chest like an angel about to take flight. The priest smiled, enjoying the absurdity of this image, for he recognised at once the intruder's identity.

“This is a house of peace, Samuel. We do not welcome those who bear weapons here.”

“My apologies, Jerod.” Samuel chuckled as he hopped down from his perch. “I will remember next time.”

Jerod only grunted his disbelief as he rose from bed and walked over to a hulking, ruined wardrobe. Letting the blanket fall he wrapped himself in a simple, dark-gray smock pulled tight around his waist with a length of rope. From politeness, Samuel averted his eyes, too late however to miss seeing the lines of newly-healed scars across the priest's stooped and emaciated shoulders, and here and there traces of much older wounds, ones too deep to have been dealt by any kind of habitual penitence.

“Follow me,” Jerod commanded.

Obediently Samuel fell in step behind him. They left the tiny bedroom

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and crossed into the only other room still habitable in the doomed building, the word *habitable* of course depending on the particular fall of light. It was many years since the founders died off, and, facing a congregation hardly faithful in the best of times, their chosen disciples had abandoned the cloth one by one. Soon there would be nothing left but walls and blackened rubble, and the only visitors a congregation of ghosts.

Picking his way slowly through the dark, Jerod walked to the altar and took up a crucifix in his hands, dipping his head to put the chain about his neck.

Samuel cringed. "I am not here for confession, tonight."

Jerod hesitated but still dropped the crucifix in place. "With us it is one and the same. As a priest, I may listen without judgment. As a man..."

Pulling two cups from a cupboard behind the altar, Jerod filled them with wine from a dust-laden bottle and handed one to his friend. Samuel smiled his thanks and brought the wine to his lips, drinking quickly in an effort to diminish its foulness. Where the first cup only burned, the second lessened to a dull pleasing fire. They sat across the aisle from each other in the pews, Jerod upright and rigid with his head slightly bowed, Samuel relaxed and lounging, legs stretched out on the bench in front of him.

"How can you abide this life, Jerod?"

The question surprised Jerod, so rather than venturing an answer he merely waited, having learned anyway that his friend rarely said anything without a purpose already in mind. Sure enough, no sooner did Jerod resolve not to speak when Samuel took the need from his hands.

"When I first came to this place," he said, "you were a mere servant of servants. You were the quietest of them all and therefore I took you for the strongest, and it is no surprise to me that you are all that is left. Each morning you wake with the dawn, lighting the proper candles, preparing the proper rituals. If a vagrant wanders inside to escape the cold you offer him a blanket, and if he is hungry you give him your last scraps of food. You sacrifice everything for them... but not even for their sake because what you do makes no difference in the end. They will continue on their same path as always."

"It is not for them I sacrifice," answered Jerod carefully. "I serve a promise made years ago, which I dare not betray."

"To your god?"

"No. To no one. To myself."

"Then why keep it, if it brings you nothing?"

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Jerod looked at his friend curiously, thinking he heard a glimmer of anguish in his voice: but whatever it might have been was gone, the face expressionless, the eyes open but staring blankly past the altar to the huge iron cross hanging upon the wall.

"I was different once," explained Jerod, "as we were all once different. I never contemplated faith until one day I saw this building from the road, and was overtaken by the idea I could find something in the church I was unable to find outside it. The priests were kind and they sensed my trouble, letting me stay. It was easy to shed my past by adopting their ways."

"By adopting their faith, too?"

Their eyes met and Jerod wondered if this conversation had all been some kind of preamble, and the real question not yet asked.

"Are you asking me if I believe in a higher power?"

"Maybe," Samuel murmured. "God, destiny, fate..."

"Are they not all different?"

"Not to me, not in a way that matters. I have done many wicked things in my life, most without reason. Unlike you, I expect no redemption. Neither do I harbour regret. I would do everything over again, and gladly, if it meant I could win again my freedom."

"You consider yourself free, then? Merely because you have done away with allegiances?"

"No. Because I have chosen not to serve."

"Where would man be, if he did not serve? There would be no king. No father, perhaps. Our cities would fall apart and we would be left to wander the wastelands, alone for fear of falling into another's service."

Samuel laughed quietly. "I will take your words as jest because you are better than them. You know such a thing will never come to pass – what meek and simpering fools they are. But I was speaking of something different, something a person can never understand that has never known freedom."

Jerod contemplated a moment before the answer struck him. "Its loss?"

"Precisely. What if you look up one day and see god, or fate, or whatever you choose to call it looking down at you? Everything becomes meaningless."

Jerod frowned. It was his time to speak, he sensed as much from the quiet, yet no words of advice sprang to his lips, no sentiments trickled down from Scripture to help fill the gap he felt widening between them.

"Last week," he heard himself saying, "a woman came to me with her baby wrapped in rags. She was not old, but poverty had aged her. Her

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husband was killed in the war, she said. There was no one left to care for her so she started selling herself to soldiers from the village. But the men that used her rarely paid, and gradually she was pushed to starvation. She knew the child would die unless she found someone to help. She begged me to take him, on her knees on this very floor.”

“Where is the child now?”

“Dead. It was dead when she brought it.”

Samuel nodded slowly, once, and as the stillness lengthened, Jerod began to feel he had made a mistake. Perhaps he should not have spoken at all, but merely listened, as was the way of the priest. He tried to think of some way to repair the breach but it was too late, he could only watch his friend rise slowly and walk toward the door.

“Samuel!”

Samuel stopped, but did not turn around.

“I cannot offer you forgiveness. You know that. I can only pray for you.”

“Thank you, *Father*,” he answered, and then left. It was the first time he had ever called him by anything but his name.

That morning, the clouds wept. Even as the day first drew breath, the sky grew black with the coming storm. Rain, long held in check by summer drought, poured down until the earth all but disappeared in a writhing grasping lake. The streets were emptied of life, the bravest peering through cracks in closed shutters, cringing at each lightning flash before what must have seemed a judgment from the heavens. A perfect day for men to hunt men.

Lifting his face up to the storm, Samuel felt neither fear nor awe. The water beating down on his closed eyes and exposed skin was almost pleasurable, because after the initial flash of pain his flesh grew numb, then warm; because out here there were no voices loud enough to withstand the storm’s fury: not even his own. Screaming out, he cursed the fates for making him a fool, but the words were swallowed up, his rage broken.

Smiling sadly, he turned from the brackish clouds and scanned the garden run rampant with flowers and weeds. There was almost humour in coming back to where everything began, he thought, though the place was hardly recognisable after so many years. Only fragments of the past remained for the eye: the crumbled ruins of a bench, and under his feet the barely visible stone path...

The story was an oft-spoken one, though it too had changed over time. This was once the queen’s personal garden, her walled-in, counterfeit

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Eden where she spent entire days sitting and reading and trying to forget the life that awaited her inside. It was never a secret that she had planned to follow her faith into the nunnery until her father, unable to resist the dowry promised by then-prince Dorgrimr, gave her away in marriage.

She tried to be a good wife, though it pained her to set aside her religion; and her new husband, alarmed by her mournful aspect, sought the finest landscapers to create a refuge where no one was permitted but her. A child was soon born, and a pleasant complaisance befell them.

One night, a murderer laid in wait. None knew how he entered the garden or how he escaped. It was the king that found his wife, led by her screams. Some say she was still screaming as he held her, blood running from her mouth and from the wounds covering her chest and stomach. It was impossible to tell how many times the knife had fallen because her dress was stained completely red.

She screamed, and screamed, her eyes riveted to the ground beside her where the knife lay buried to its hilt in the earth. In the days following, whenever one of her servants tried to relate the story, they would always struggle with this part, wanting people to understand how perfect the silence was following her death, like the world had died as well.

The air inside reeked of abandonment. Rain dripped from Samuel's hair and clothes only to be swallowed up by dust. None but the dead inhabited this place now, if the stories could be believed, her rooms just as she had left them nearly eighteen years before. An unfinished letter waited on a table beside the bed. A tin of rouge sat open on a small dresser, and next to this a silver-handled brush filled with hairs of a deep black. The bed-sheets were slightly tousled in one place where she might have sat for a moment, her red-bound bible clasped to her breast, her long skirts trailing to the floor.

Samuel walked slowly through the rooms, allowing memories to rise and fall on their own. He tried not to taint them with his thoughts because to think must also allow him to feel. So he concentrated on seeing only the door ahead of him, its painted surface dulled by time, and at last he emerged into a hall radiant with torch-light. Clean air filled his lungs and he swallowed it greedily. Free of death, it seemed all the more oppressive, and he dreaded suddenly the escape that must take him again through its domain.

The hollow scratch of steel on stone roused him. Samuel was a murderer once more, and with a murderer's grace his body flowed into motion.

At first, the guard only stared at the apparition bearing down on him, a hollow gurgling sound emerging from his throat that might have been

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intended as a scream. It was enough that he must walk these deserted hallways night after night, but then to be confronted with evidence contrary to everything his soldier's practicality had tried so hard to unbelieve... Only through the deepest-buried instinct was he able to draw his own weapon in feeble defence.

Their blades clashed, ringing hollowly through the empty air, and then something happened in the guard. He regarded Samuel without horror as though understanding suddenly the dead neither walked nor breathed, nor had use for such things as steel. However, rather than renewing his attack, he stepped back and lowered his sword until its point touched the ground. Just as quickly the weapon was snatched up and returned to its sheath. Unseeing, the warrior straightened his shoulders and turned his back to the wall. Samuel merely watched, waiting and hoping for some sign that he was moving along a path not dictated by forces outside his own will.

He was given nothing until he neared the furthest end of the hall, and even this came only as a whisper that could easily have been a hundred other sounds, a hundred other words, except he knew them for what they were.

*"Not for him..."*

So be it. He would resist no longer. Let fate drown the roar of crashing wood and quell the death-screams of the king. Let fate ward off the soldiers and attendants who, with their liege slain, would be duty-bound to come running and throw their lives on his blade.

With inhuman strength Samuel lunged at the etched wooden door. It shattered as though held together with dust. Listening for the tramp of armoured feet he waited one second more and then moved into the room.

Eight generations of stolen wealth adorned the walls and floor of the room, and in the very centre was the dread lord Dorgrimr, his lavish robes merging with the paintings and tapestries and furniture so that he became visible only when he rose from the velvet-pillowed couch. Age was stamped heavily onto his face, features striking in youth now creased with thousands of tiny lines into a dried husk. Sickness resided there, too, but vaguely as though long overcome or recently awakened. Holding onto the couch's arm for support, he shook his head as though waking, and, just a little, his body seemed to sink in upon itself.

"You have come," was all he said.

"I came not for myself," Samuel answered, without conviction.

Dorgrimr smiled cruelly, as though sensing Samuel's disappointment over his infirmity. "That does not matter, not between us. What will reasons matter once you feel my blood running onto your hands?"

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“My own reasons are nothing. You have wronged a mere girl, taken what should have been hers to freely give.” Samuel paused. “As for your other crimes, those are yours to beg and squabble over when it comes time to ask redemption, but that will not be tonight.”

Dorgrimr chuckled, a hollow rasp which ended abruptly in a cough so violent he clutched at the sofa with both hands.

“How shall we do this?” Dorgrimr asked, recovering enough to speak. “Will you hold out your sword, and ask me to fall upon it honourably as they did in olden days? Shall we climb my highest tower so you can throw me onto the battlements, and my subjects can look upon my broken body? Tell me, as I am at your mercy.”

“You seem very eager to die.”

“Five years ago, perhaps less, my soldiers would already have cut you down and nailed your limbs to my gates. But as you can see...” He released his grip on the couch, curled one hand into a fist. “Much has changed. Death has come early and made me its slave. At first I waited for my body to heal, but even the surgeons could only slow the decay. They said my sickness ran too deep to see and I should rather consult a priest. I had them killed, of course... but even that brought me no pleasure. Very little brings me pleasure now.”

“Yet you would rape a young girl, and beat her for asking mercy?”

Again Dorgrimr chuckled, and shrugged his shoulders not in denial but as though to say it was most likely the case, he neither knew nor cared. “Why do you waste our time playing at such things? Do you expect me to believe in your righteous crusade when you do not believe it yourself? I know what brought you. I know you have felt it. After all, one way or the other, I made you what you are. So ask me the question you came here to ask, and be done with me. Or are you afraid, even now? Will you simply kill me, never troubling yourself with the truth?”

With these words, the last of Samuel’s will slipped away. It was like another creature spoke through his mouth, and held fast his limbs, a creature still crying out for justice, even a justice that came eighteen years too late.

“Why did you kill her!” he roared. “Why did you not kill me as well!”

“As for the first question, because she was a whore.” Dorgrimr held this last word in his mouth as though cherishing a fine vintage. “As for the second... I tried. But once she started screaming, every blasted servant within hearing poured into the garden to watch her die. By the time I was able to leave off playing the grief-stricken husband, you were gone, I knew not how. I contemplated sending men after you but then

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realised there was no need, for I knew you would come back to me on your own. Though I confess it has taken longer than I imagined.”

When Samuel said nothing in reply, Dorgrimr continued. The truth, he understood, was the most enticing of balms, even when it came from one such as he.

“You were young, so you might not remember her beloved *Prince*. For years he visited my court on every imaginable pretext, bowing and simpering and begging favours from me even as he made eyes at my wife. Men might kill from anger, or jealousy, but I was patient. I let her carry on playing the devout wife, believing her husband the fool. Then, at her happiest moment, long after she had grown complaisant with our pretended roles, I killed her: but not before presenting her with the evidence of her lover’s rather brutal demise.”

“Enough!”

“Enough? Would you not like to hear about her final moments? She begged for your life of course, like a good mother, and like a good father I promised...”

Whether Dorgrimr finished this thought Samuel had no recollection. He listened instead to the muted footfalls of the approaching warriors, gauging their footsteps as they flooded behind him into the room. Murder loomed near but still he did not turn, his eyes riveted on Dorgrimr who with impossible swiftness reached for a sword hidden in the cushions, and slashed at his son’s chest. The weakness so attached to the king’s limbs was gone and Samuel realised Dorgrimr was a much better actor than he supposed. Only at the last conceivable second did Samuel raise his weapon to strike the other’s down, driving its tip into the stone. With a deft kick he broke his attacker’s sword in two.

Screaming with rage, Dorgrimr dropped his useless weapon and threw himself forward. The cry was cut short by the steel that entered his stomach. Samuel looked down at the sword he still clutched with both hands, and at the blood starting to gush onto its blade.

“Why did you do this to me!” he shouted, unable to let go or look away. “I never wanted this!”

Dorgrimr regarded him with a profound calm. An almost beatific smile flecked his lips as he wrapped his fingers in his son’s cloak and began pulling himself further onto the sword. He laughed horribly, briefly, and then his struggles ended.

And Samuel, cursed by fate, was denied even the opportunity to relish the death, for it was at this moment the soldiers fell upon him.

Near dusk, the rains finally ended, and the sky cleared, so there were

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only a few precious minutes where the sun raised its head before giving way again to the dark. Fires kept blazing through the day were left untended, slowly burning to ash, and candles were snuffed one by one as the countryside sought peace in sleep.

In one home, the fire was left to burn a little longer than in others. Aria sat by the hearth in a rocking chair, knitting held in her hands though a long while had passed since her fingers last moved. Rocking softly back and forth, she stared into the fire and wished again for the sound of rain. She alone noticed the shadow enter the room, raising her eyes lethargically from the flames to trace its path. Her mouth opened as though to call out a warning but instead she merely sighed, and her face regained its look of calm expectancy. She watched her father glance up from his gambling and take notice of the intruder. She watched the other nobles spring from their chairs as though each one believed himself the target of a vengeful plot.

Then the eyes found Aria's again just like she remembered from the tavern and she waited, feeling once more the warmth brewing in her chest. When the man crouched before her, she reached out compulsively to brush his cheek.

"It is finished," he told her.

The girl smiled then, though her look was so filled with sadness that Samuel had to fight not to take her in his arms.

"Thank you," Aria whispered, and touched his face once more.

He nodded, and rose to leave, tearing his gaze reluctantly away. Once again he addressed Voskh, who only then managed to blurt a few incomprehensible words.

"It is finished," Samuel said again, pulling from his shirt the same purse once given to him. He threw it onto the table where it exploded in a shower of coins and then turned his back on the outraged looks awakening all around.

Safe in the cover of darkness, he paused, allowing himself one last look before he committed everything to forgetfulness. The noble, unmindful of his guests, crossed the room to his daughter, where he fell to his knees and buried his head in her lap.

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## REVIEWS

# The Quarterly Review

## BOOKS

## The Babylonian Trilogy

Sebastien Doubinsky

PS Publishing, hb, 286pp

The first part of this trilogy of novellas is *The Birth of Television According to Buddha*. Though not overtly science-fictional, it reminded me a bit of Warren Ellis's *Transmetropolitan* in tone and subject matter, and in its attempts to make sense of – or at least catalogue – a world that's utterly confusing. I loved the short chapters, which broke what could have been quite a difficult book up into nicely manageable pieces.

It was interesting to read this on the Sony Reader (the publishers sent a review pdf), because it did show up one flaw of the device: if I wasn't paying attention when new characters were introduced (there are lots in this first part), I couldn't just flick my eyes back up the page to get my bearings. On the other hand, that means the Sony Reader will encourage me to read more carefully.

I took a bit of a break before reading the second part, *Yellow Bull*. The problem for me with this novella, about a detective assigned unenthusiastically to a serial killer case, despite how well written and engaging it was, was that I kept forgetting which book I was reading: was it *Yellow Bull*, or the Chabon book (I'm getting sick of hearing myself mention it) or *The City in These Pages*? But maybe that's a problem with me, not the book: I've only read a very few crime novels before. Someone new to science fiction might see little difference between Robert Heinlein and E.E. "Doc" Smith. The similarities stick out more than the differences.

Next: the third part, *The Gardens of Babylon*. This was the first part with a noticeable fantastical slant, in that among other things it's about the misadventures of a government-licensed assassin and an author guilty of illegal publication (though I suppose both have real world equivalents). After the straightforward, linear narrative of the second part, this is back to a fractured narrative from multiple viewpoints, but again it's in easy-to-digest bite-sized chunks.

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Overall, a well-written, exciting and thought-provoking book. It's a book I suspect I won't really understand until I read what other people have to say about it, but that wasn't a barrier to enjoying it, and the sense that it will repay further consideration is a good thing: a book that you know you've probably misunderstood is much better than one that leaves you thinking, glad I'm done with that! **8**

## Gunpowder

Joe Hill

PS Publishing, hb, 88pp

I read a lot of horror in my early teens, when I was still dependent for reading material on the adults around me and the library. So that meant lots of James Herbert and Stephen King, and unfortunately some Shaun Hutson. Once I got to the point that I could buy more books for myself than I could possibly read, horror fell to the wayside – I'd enjoyed Herbert and King, but my favourites were Vance, Moorcock, Asimov, Farmer, Dick. More recently I do most of my reading at bedtime: not the best time to read horror.

Which is all by way of explanation for why this was the first book I'd read by Joe Hill. I'd taken *Heart-Shaped Box* and *20th Century Ghosts* out from the library, but never got around to reading them.

But now science fiction fans can find out what all the fuss is about. This superb novella took hold of my attention from the very first page and never released it. If I didn't read it in a single sitting, I've no memory of what else I was doing that day! It's a familiar scenario – gifted kids and the military that wants to exploit them – but the writing is so wonderful, the character touches so exquisite, the narrative so brilliantly focused.

The story starts out small – the relationships between the boys and their handler/mother – but opens out to so much more. I won't say what, because it should all come as a surprise – but it's all cool stuff. It's tragic, moving, epic and glorious, and all in a mere eighty pages.

It may still take me a while to read Joe Hill's horror works, but if he continues to write science fiction he'll very quickly become one of my favourite authors. If Stephen King had been an out-and-out science fiction writer, would he have been writing sf as wonderful as this for the last twenty years? It doesn't bear thinking about... Let's just hope Joe Hill produces more in this line over the next twenty years. **9**

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## The Kill Crew

Joseph D'Lacey

StoneGarden, hb, 80pp

After the apocalypse, a couple of hundred survivors hole up in a ring of barricaded buildings and fight off the zombieified commuters that attack every night. But is the greatest threat from without, or within?

The setup of *The Kill Crew* is far from original – we've seen much the same thing before in *Day of the Triffids*, *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and so on. In the early pages, especially, this book felt like a grab-bag of random elements from films – a mysterious mist, zombies, cars not working, etc – and they didn't seem to fit together all that well. The zombies, in particular, seemed rather underwhelming, and zombies isn't really the right word: they're people in office clothes who wander around crying. They aren't undead, and they don't eat people.

With an author I'd read before, I'd probably have been more trusting, but in those early pages I felt very much as if D'Lacey had put the cart before the horses: he'd come up with the (rather worrying) image of people blasting commuters with shotguns, but struggled to come up with an actual reason for it happening. It felt a bit too contrived. But as it turns out, the book saves its originality for its second half. By the end the commuters have become extremely alarming antagonists, and the book's various elements come together very well.

Still, it was never quite clear why *The Kill Crew* – a team of monster slayers sent out to battle the commuters every night – (a) went out at night when the commuters were active, instead of hunting for them while they slept, and (b) went out at all, since the commuters were hardly bothering their community any more. It seemed like a really bad way to go about things – but then the book makes the point that these aren't soldiers, they're just everyday people struggling to cope. Perhaps it's just the human desire to “do something” asserting itself at a very bad time. Or maybe it's survivor's guilt, a deathwish. And the book would have been much duller if they hadn't left the compound: the sequences where *The Kill Crew* has to high-tail it back to the Station were exceptionally thrilling.

There are a couple of editing glitches. For example, there's a passage where a guy called Lee stops talking, because someone's given him something difficult to think about. Sheri then explains to the reader that she's happy when everyone's quiet, because it means they are concentrating on the job – which makes little sense when we know Lee is quiet

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because he's thinking about something else. Commuters is capitalised or not fairly randomly. Apostrophes are up to their usual high-jinks: "Stopper's with this problem." "Load you're gun, babe."

But those minor things (some of which may well have been fixed by the time of final publication) weren't enough to spoil a very exciting and at times very frightening book – and in the end the publisher takes responsibility for such errors, rather than the author.

What's most interesting and impressive about *The Kill Crew* is the way it skips the actual apocalypse to focus on what it's like to be cooped up in an enclave fighting for survival. The book conveys brilliantly a sense of how thoroughly depressing that would be, of how such a life would wear a person down. Many post-apocalyptic books are about rebuilding, about beginning a new cycle, but this one is about attrition, about an apocalypse that won't give up until it has utterly destroyed us. And if it doesn't destroy us physically, it'll erode our humanity until we have no reason left to live.

It may not be the most original book ever written, but it's very well done, psychologically very rich, and extremely efficient in its eighty pages. Anyone who enjoys survival horror will find this very satisfying. 7

## The Best of D.F. Lewis

D.F. Lewis

TAL Publications, chapbook, 54pp

When the writer of thousands of stories issues a fifty-four page Best Of you know there won't be much messing about, and there certainly isn't here.

This is a very challenging read. Unsurprising, perhaps, since the content matter is often deliberately repulsive. For example, in "The Weirdmonger" the narrator visits Wagger Market:

"Then, to my consternation, I saw clearly what the man was selling from his stall, for he had begun to hang out long (very long) male members ... My companion was by now running her fingers down some of the wares, testing the thickness, pliancy and consistency (no knots meant no disease)."

And there's plenty more where that came from! But in fact it's not the gore and grossness that makes this a tough read; on the contrary, it's the subtlety.

These stories are so short, intense and condensed that you cannot drift

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for a second: each word must be read individually, as if proofreading. You have to be alert to subtle shifts of mood, location, time and consciousness, because everything can change from one word to the next.

Incidentally, this is one of my very few signed books, bought from the author himself. It is number three of the limited edition and even has a few of his corrections marked up in pencil...

Recommended for readers with strong stomachs and alert minds. **8**

## Curious Men

Frank Buckland

McSweeney's, pb, 128pp

A diverting little book, but it's the point of view that's interesting, the what-they-don't-know, more than the actual subject matter, much of which is fairly pedestrian. If, like me, you didn't find the people here quite curious enough, I'd recommend the excellent *Eccentric Lives and Peculiar Notions*.

Buckland writes very well, though; you could often think yourself reading the opening of a story by Lovecraft, Poe or Conan Doyle. In fact, it's easy to imagine his "nondescript" as having inspired the very similar strange statue in "The Call of Cthulhu". **6**

## Doctor Who: The Writer's Tale

Russell T. Davies, Benjamin Cook

Random House, hb, 512pp

An absolutely brilliant book. Doctor Who's been blessed with a wonderful range of non-fiction works over the years, not least among them Benjamin Cook's book on the audio adventures, but this tops them all.

You get to see what goes through the mind of the man presiding over what's arguably the greatest triumph of modern British television. There are dozens of surprises in here. Sometimes it's how early some things happened (Steven Moffat had written the first pages of episode 5.1 – to be broadcast in 2010 – by 13 January 2008), and sometimes how late they were left (Russell Davies is still writing 4.13 on 18 February 2008 – only a few months before broadcast).

You learn about scenes that weren't filmed, scenes that were but went unused, companions who missed their chance, and all sorts of other things. Don't show your face on the Outpost Gallifrey forums without

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having read this from cover to cover: you'll seem hopelessly uninformed.

And once you've read it, hopefully you won't post on there without considering the effect that a needlessly cruel comment can have on the people putting in sixteen-hour days to make this programme... 9

## First and Last

Truman Capote

Penguin, pb, 90pp

The first piece here, "Master Misery", is a dark little fantasy story about a man who buys dreams. It wouldn't be out of place today in McSweeney's or PostScripts, but it didn't really have any surprises or anything particularly profound to say.

The second piece, "La Cote Basque" is an extract from an unfinished novel, published years after Capote's death. It's a series of scandalous tales about real people (Joe Kennedy, Princess Margaret, Jackie Kennedy and so on) from the 1960s told by ladies sitting in a restaurant. It's interesting gossip, but a dull story.

In the week that Prince Harry was reported as saying to a black comedian, "You don't sound like a black chap", it was interesting to read Capote's words on the British royal family: "basically, royals think that there are just three categories: colored folk, white folk, and royals". Everything changes in the end, but some things change very slowly! 6

## The Forbidden Tower

Marion Zimmer Bradley

Legend, pb, 416pp

Andrew Carr of Earth and Damon Ridenow of Darkover fall in love with two twins of noble birth, Ellemir and Callista, but the world's against them!

I started this about twelve years ago and got a couple of hundred pages in. This month I've been trying to read one book at a time and to finish ones I've already started, so I picked up from where I'd left off. I was determined to finish this book, if only to rescue the bookmark that it had held captive all those years.

My initial impression was that it was awful. In some ways it seemed

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very much like a feminine counterpart to the Gor series. Gor is a world where Earthwomen learn to love sexual subjugation; Darkover is a world where Earthmen learn to love intimacy, talking about their feelings and – ugh! – cuddling. Not quite as reprehensible as Gor, but still not really my cup of tea. I like my heroes to be Ian Chestertons, guys who don't even think about romance until the adventure is over!

Much of the book (or at least the second half – I don't remember anything of the first half) is taken up with the bromance between Andrew and Damon. I've no issue with stories about the love between two men, of course. I've watched all the Lethal Weapon movies, and every episode of Hercules: the Legendary Journeys!

In general, though, I'd rather see such bonds form in battle. The budding relationship between Andrew and Damon comes into full flower when the latter starts crying in a bedchamber after someone is a bit testy with him in a meeting. At times it felt very much like reading the script of a female-friendly porn film...

More seriously (and quite Gor-ishly), the scenes where Andrew objected to being fondled by Damon during group sex irked me a bit, in that he's portrayed as a prude who has committed a huge faux pas. Afterwards he feels "awkward, still scared at the immensity of what he had done to Damon". One wonders if the author's take would have been the same if Damon had groped a girl instead of a boy...

But as the book wore on I did enjoy it more, and the cloying romantic scenes between all parties proved crucial to the plot's development. The council intrigues were interesting, and the book's overall message of love and tolerance is one that's always relevant. But thank goodness it's over. Now fly free, little bookmark, fly free! **4**

## The Airlords of Han

Philip Francis Nowlan

Feedbooks

I read this as a palate-cleanser, so it's ironic that the very first page left a sour taste in the mouth – the airlords are "fierce Mongolians, who, as scientists now contend, had in their blood a taint not of the earth".

Apart from two extremely dull chapters – essentially essays describing the technology of each side – most of the book is the usual meticulously-described Antony Rogers derring-do.

By the end, though, you realise that Rogers is leading a war of genocide – his purpose is to eradicate every man, woman and child of the Han

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from the face of the Earth, destroying their cities, burying them beneath rock, murdering them mercilessly.

The narrator acknowledges this awful bloodthirstiness, but explains it to be warranted by the evil, alien, subhuman nature of the Hans. Norman Spinrad wrote a book, called *The Iron Dream*, as if by a Hitler who found his way to America and science fiction. I haven't read it, but it's hard to imagine it sticks more closely to Hitler's ethos of annihilation than this book does.

I'm not one for praising science fiction for predicting the future – when it happens it's nice, but when it doesn't people take it to be a failing of the genre, and either way writers are often just popularising scientists' ideas – but Nowlan's description of the Hans at work at home, before their computer screens, ordering their new trousers with a button press, seems remarkably prescient of the internet age. 4

## The Oz Suite

Gerard Houarner

Eibonvale Press, pb, 152pp

Three separate novellas linked by their references to The Wizard of Oz (the film). Broadly speaking they can be taken as science fiction, fantasy and horror.

The first, "No We Love No One", tells of pod people who fall to Earth, one child for every adult. "Bring Me the Head of That Little Girl Dorothy" wonders if Oz was the invention of the Wicked Witch, rather than Dorothy. "The Wizard Will See You Now" is about a child who survives a knife attack by his father.

I was a little disappointed that the Oz references are only to the films, rather than the books. It's only in the films, for example, that Oz is implied to be something Dorothy cooks up in her own head. I think the books make it clear that she really does go there.

The author says in an afterword that he only got through a couple of the books. They can be pretty silly at times, but taken as a whole they present a much richer world than that of the films. It makes sense that the characters in these stories would be more aware of the films than the books, but I felt a bit cheated. It felt slightly disrespectful. Imagine how a sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* would be received if the author admitted to having watched only the movie...

Like the other Eibonvale books mentioned below, *The Oz Suite* suffers

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from a couple of odd typesetting quirks – two spaces after full stops and gigantic indents of each first line.

The stories themselves are pretty good, and held my interest well. Their main strength was in characterisation rather than plot – none of the stories really went anywhere, but all three painted careful portraits of their damaged protagonists. 6

## Thanks and Have Fun Running the Country: Kids' Letters to President Obama

Jory John

McSweeney's, pb, 144pp

Lots of very funny letters in here, though they are so on-message you imagine Alastair Campbell standing behind the kids with a rolled-up newspaper!

At first I felt uplifted by the letters, by all the hope and happiness and desire for change, but by the end I was just depressed. The things these kids are crying out for – restrictions on guns, a national health service, an end to war – are never going to happen in present-day America.

And a British person watching Obama's rise to power can't help but be reminded of Blair in 1997 – you can't count the similarities without using your toes... And that tempers your excitement. Like Blair, I'm sure Obama will do a lot of good. But he's also bound to end up breaking hearts, making mistakes and shattering dreams.

But this is a wonderful and inspired book, despite my cynicism.

I've just realised I've read 100% of my McSweeney's Book Club books (and this one only arrived last week). I don't know if that's the variety, the fancy packaging, the excitement of having books delivered from the US, or just because they're short – but I do know that they are enriching my life. 7

## The Time Traders

Andre Norton

Baen, pb, 448pp

There are two novels in this volume. In the first, *The Time Traders*, time travellers go back to ancient Britain and find aliens there – or are they future humans? Exciting at times, but a little uninspired.

In the second, *Galactic Derelict*, the time travellers recover a space-

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ship from ten thousand years in the past, only for its pre-programmed flight to be launched once they return to the present day. It's a fascinating idea – the worlds the ship takes them to are now long-abandoned, the buildings in ruins, the people reduced to living like animals.

It's odd, though, that the time travellers say things like "We may never know the reason or answer to any questions about them", clearly forgetting that they possess time travel technology that could be brought out to these abandoned worlds one day. But there are more books in the series – maybe that thought occurs to them later.

Like the first novel, *Galactic Derelict* has exciting moments, but suffers at times from a slight dullness.

Note that this entire book is available to download from the Baen Books free library. 6

## The Witnesses Are Gone

Joel Lane

PS Publishing, hb, 80pp

Charles Swann finds a videotape of an old French film in his new house. He doesn't really enjoy it – it's depressing, miserable and repetitive – but he can't stop thinking about it. When he tries to discover more about the director, Jean Rien, he finds only dead ends. He makes the mistake of persisting.

Before saying how wonderful this book was, it's worth saying first that instead of spending hours searching for old magazines, Charles might have had more luck in his quest if he'd begun by looking Jean Rien up on the IMDB...

We can guess what would have happened if he had, of course: he'd have got a page loading error, or at best a page of tantalising titles whose links did not work. But it would have been worth mentioning it: you can't help feeling that Charles is ignoring the obvious way to find the answers he needs.

Anyway, now that's off my chest: this is a brilliant book. It combines perfectly certain English, American and Japanese traditions of horror, as exemplified by M.R. James, Lovecraft and Hideo Nakata. But this isn't a Frankenstein monster of influences sewn together; somehow Lane makes it seem as if they were all part of the same tradition in the first place.

It shares with Lovecraft a moral outrage at the horror: these events are not just horrible or frightening, they are wrong; they should not happen;

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the world should not allow it. With Nakata it shares an interest in the paradox of film; that it seems more real and substantial than reality. With James (I think, at least – I confess I've only seen the BBC adaptations) it shares the idea that there are things in the world best ignored for the sake of your own happiness.

It's grounded in everyday detail (Charles watches DVDs of *Angel* with his girlfriend), which makes the strange things that happen even more anomalous. Most of the time Charles's life is normal, mundane. When the supernatural (if that's what it is) intrudes, the reader is knocked off the rails all over again. While the tone is unsettling throughout, two or three sequences are utterly terrifying.

Perhaps the book's biggest achievement is that you're left wanting to see the films described, despite the inevitable consequences for your sanity...

This was a superb book, one that I read in a single sitting; I refused to let myself sleep until I'd reached the end. And once I'd reached the end, I found it very difficult to sleep... 9

## COMICS

### **Aliens Vs. Predator Omnibus, Vol. 1**

Various

Dark Horse, pb, 456pp

Entertaining, scary enough to give me a few nightmares, but not earth-shattering. The Predators seed worlds with the Aliens, but it blows up in their unlovely faces so often that you start to wonder how they've survived this long. 6

### **Powers: Definitive Collection, Vol. 1**

Brian Michael Bendis, Michael Avon Oeming

Marvel Comics, hb, 456pp

Two detectives investigate the murder of Retro Girl, then take Warren Ellis on a ridealong, and finally look into the violent death of a student who liked to dress up as a superhero.

This was all well done, but very wordy. There were rather more spelling mistakes than you'd expect in a definitive edition, and it was a

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pain in the neck trying to work out which panel or speech balloon was supposed to come next. I generally ended up picking one at random and hoping it would be right.

Also, after reading *Top Ten*, *Jack Staff*, *Kane*, *Astro City* and *The Boys* (some of which it predates, of course) it all seemed a bit overfamiliar. Maybe future volumes will see it develop a more distinct identity. **6**

## Showcase Presents: Legion of Super-Heroes, Vol. 2

Jerry Siegel

DC Comics, tpb, 528pp

The last time I checked in with the Legion it seemed to be in a complete mess. Towards the end of the original Legion saga things went wrong with the introduction of the Legionnaires (teenage versions of the adult heroes, who were either clones or the original heroes rescued from suspended animation), and things went pretty badly for Earth. Following *Zero Hour* the whole story was rebooted, and since then I get the impression that it's been rebooted one or two times more, though I haven't kept up to date. Reading these stories makes you wonder how DC got into such a mess.

Of all super-hero stories, the Legion is the easiest to keep perpetually new – rotate the older heroes out, and bring in new members to replace them. It's been part of the premise from the very beginning. Why on Earth anyone thought introducing a bunch of clones or rebooting the entire saga was a better idea is beyond me. So while the ongoing saga of the JSA grows ever weightier, the Legion has become nothing more than a series of fuzzier and fuzzier photocopies of itself. Would Doctor Who have been better off if both the TV movie and the new series had kicked off with Ian and Barbara wondering why one of their pupils is so preternaturally clever? Clearly not.

Never mind: at some point I'm sure someone who cares enough will reveal the years since *Zero Hour* to have been a plot of the Time Trapper, the Legion will find a way to put the broken pieces of Earth back together, and a bunch of brand new teenagers will be invited to join the team. Don't get me wrong: I'm certainly not one of the people who always want the originals reinstated. What I want is for stories to continue and develop.

In this book, though, you see everything going right, everything that was so good about the Legion. The stories follow on from one issue to the next. Towards the end there is a series of multi-part sagas, but even

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before that decisions in one issue will have ramifications explored in future stories. Characters die, lose limbs, leave and join the team, and, best of all, start to develop personalities. When reading "Computo the Conqueror" I gave a little cheer to see Brainiac 5 getting grumpy for the first time. "What is this—" he shouted via the tele-monitor, "a private lab or Grand Central Spaceport? Can't you read, Chameleon Boy? Shove off!"

Lots of notable issues here, but for now the most memorable is "The Legionnaire Who Killed", mainly for the panel where Invisible Kid yells to Star Boy, "Come on and join us, Star Boy... We're having the big computer decide who'd have the most fun kissing whom! It's a riot!" Chameleon Boy can be seen snogging away with Light Lass. Star Boy declines, leading Invisible Kid to note, "Funny... Star Boy never seems to have time for romance!" Seems like Invisible Kid is carrying a torch!

There's lots of similarly enjoyable daffiness in these pages, and if the actual enemies tend too often to lameness, that's forgivable when the heroes are so interesting and varied. **8**

## Showcase Presents: Supergirl, Vol. 1

Jerry Siegel, Curt Swan

DC Comics, tpb, 528pp

An enjoyable book but not really a remarkable one. Some elements quickly became very repetitive (the robot who fills in as Linda Lee while Supergirl is on adventures, the would-be adoptive parents who must be put off, and so on), but the stories improved as they went on.

A few things struck me as interesting...

For one, it seems strange that Supergirl wears a black wig all day long, then takes it off when in costume, even though no one ever sees her (during this period Superman insists on her acting secretly, so that he can keep her in reserve as a secret weapon). For that matter, why does she even wear a bright costume if she doesn't want to be seen?

The silliest wig-wearing is in the imaginary story "Ma and Pa Kent Adopt Supergirl", in which the Kents make the poor girl wear a black wig from the age of five (or so), just to lay the groundwork for an adult secret identity!

Maybe wigs don't bother Supergirl: her head is invulnerable, so perhaps it doesn't get all hot and itchy. But then that would imply that she can't feel any sensations of hot or cold at all, and I'm pretty sure that she can.

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Another story of interest was “Supergirl’s Busiest Day”, in which, just to protect her secret identity, she sucks all the air out of a room to render her fellow orphans unconscious. She exits at super-speed, thinking to herself, “I opened and shut the door so quickly, more oxygen didn’t have time to enter the room! I’ll be back in a flash!” Good job she didn’t get delayed... It’s just another example of the way that rules are above all the most important things in Super-stories of this period.

“Supergirl in Smallville” raised some interesting questions. She travels back to the Smallville of Superman’s youth, in a bid to show him that she could successfully conceal her secret identity while living with a family. So she stays with the Kents, introducing herself to the teenage Clark as an out-of-town cousin. But she is still wearing her Supergirl costume under her clothes...

So the whole plot depends upon Clark not using his x-ray vision to look under girls’ clothes. Now I’m not casting aspersions upon Clark’s morality; if there’s one teenage boy in the world who wouldn’t, it’s him (though he did check out Lois’s underwear in the first movie). But it’s sort of funny for the whole story to rely on it.

But how many of the writers of these stories would have expected anyone to still be reading them and picking them apart forty years later? They were designed to be read once by an eager child... 6

## TELEVISION

### Who Wants to Be a Superhero?

BBC2

I cry pretty easily at films and TV programmes, but you’re probably made of sterner stuff. You probably didn’t cry when Buffy said goodbye to Angel, or even when the little robot boy was left alone in the forest by his mum. But even the toughest of you would crumble after seeing a dozen child superheroes bursting into tears because one of their number is to be stripped of her powers...

Originally a US reality show starring adults, but now a CBBC show hosted by two guys from Pop Idol, Who Wants to Be a Superhero? is distinctly less embarrassing with children involved, and is pretty inspirational at times. Like Mark Hamill in Star Wars, these kids really believe in what they’re doing: they completely inhabit those costumes. It’s good Saturday morning fun.

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But one thing angered me during the first episode I caught. During a challenge, Dolphin Girl got in trouble for dancing across a beam straddling two rooftops. She was put up for eviction and told her behaviour was too irresponsible for a superhero.

I was apoplectic! This is Stan Lee's programme! Have they never read an issue of Spider-Man? Would Spidey have walked slowly and carefully across that beam? No, he'd have stood on one finger and bounced across!

But the poor girl, taken to task, had her flawless defence prepared: it was in character, she said, dolphins like to show off, and so does Dolphin Girl. Well done to Dolphin Girl, my new favourite hero!

## Being Human

BBC3

A devilishly handsome vampire, a socially awkward werewolf and a heartbroken ghost share a house, but despite the set-up this isn't a sitcom, it's a very unusual drama.

The tone is similar to that of *Torchwood*, but the mixture of humour, action, sex and blood-drenched drama is much more effective here. There's a definite Stuart and Vince vibe to the vampire/werewolf relationship; a slightly uneasy, co-dependent friendship between a lion and a lamb. The house-sharing brings *This Life* into the mix, and the ongoing plot (the vampires are up to something shady) gives it the widescreen scope of *Ultraviolet* or *True Blood*.

In the *Radio Times* Jack Seale said of this show that "the metaphor of werewolves, ghosts and vampires as outcasts works well", and to that extent this reviewer would agree with him wholeheartedly. He then added that "Toby Whithouse is surely good enough to cast away that crutch and write about real people".

Readers will probably come to their own conclusions about that statement (if only Stephen King would stick to social realism...), but it's notable that Whithouse doesn't force us to see this world through the eyes of "real people". He doesn't patronise or bore us with a Myers: he chucks us straight into the thick of the action, right into the middle of this strange, dark world. Our only friends are the monsters from whom we should really be running away.

One thing that has let *Being Human* down ever so slightly is the finished werewolf costume, but those are notoriously difficult to get right (it's no worse than the one in *Ginger Snaps*). On the other hand, the transformation effects are excellent, and the way the change is described

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is brilliantly appalling: every organ in his body fails, all at once, before ripping themselves apart and into new shapes...

A highly promising start to the series. Shame we didn't get to see any more of Phoo Action, though.

## The Quest of Dick & Dom

CBBC

Plague ravages the kingdom. Two accident-prone princes drop the antidote and are sent on a quest to find more. A wizard and a saucy lady thief complete the party. This is a thirteen-episode series, shot entirely on location with lots of clever special and visual effects, full of jokes both original and ancient.

Adults will see that *The Quest of Dick & Dom* wears its influences on its sleeve – *Carry On*, *Monty Python* (Terry Jones narrates), *Reeves and Mortimer*, *the Mighty Boosh*, *Asterix and Groo the Wanderer* – but a seven year old would probably think it the most hilarious, original, astonishing thing ever made.

Even for adults, it's pretty darn astonishing – and very funny. When the giant teats of a giant cow dangled into shot I thought I'd wandered into another television dimension. When the princes began to milk that cow, in order to shrink it down to normal size, the parents in the room exchanged raised eyebrows, but decided to go along for the ride...

At a time when children's drama on other channels is dead and buried, the BBC should be applauded for putting so much effort and money into ambitious and exciting children's fantasy like this; plus *Sarah Jane Adventures*, *M.I. High* and *Young Dracula*.

If cancelling *Grange Hill* made room in the budget for this, then I wish they'd cancelled it thirty years ago... How marvellous to have childhood memories of silly men milking giant cows rather than bullies beating up fat kids for their dinner money.

## Demons

ITV1

*Demons* – the adventures of a teenage, present day *Van Helsing* – has taken a pretty savage beating in some quarters, and it's easy to see why. The plotting is fairly weak, the characters aren't terribly interesting, and the level of outright theft from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is astonishing,

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to the extent that Van Helsing has a watcher called Rupert – a nod in Buffy's direction, or the accidental remnant of a cut-and-paste operation?

But there's room for flawed programmes on my TV, and even ones that aren't completely to my taste. My wife won't watch *Primeval*, but for an hour of Saturday morning scares with my daughter it's unbeatable. I'd never watch *Merlin* on my own, but rather *Merlin* than *Bratz*. The police procedural and historical stuff in *Life on Mars* bored me rigid, but the season openers and finales were unmissable fantasy television.

The problem with *Demons* is that it's a bit too scary for parents to watch with their children, and not really good enough for them to watch on their own. There are things I enjoyed about it: Glenister's American accent is a thing of beauty, the lead actor has a remarkably deep voice, the monsters are pretty decent, and parts of the first episode had a nicely Gaiman-esque feel. Unfortunately, though, the *most* positive thing I can find to say about it so far is that it was probably better than whatever else ITV would have shown in that slot.

## ALSO RECEIVED

### But Not Yet Reviewed

There are always a few things in for review that we don't get around to reading on time, or sometimes that we don't manage to finish. Here's a quick round-up (with excuses and apologies). As I think they say at *Interzone*, a mention here doesn't preclude a full review later on.

We've had loads in this time around:

From Eibonvale Press we've had several books. In this issue we've reviewed *The Oz Suite*, but there's also *A Thread of Truth* by Nina Allan, *What the Giants Were Saying* by David Rix, *Experiments at 3 Billion A.M.* by Alexander Zelenyj, and *The Smell of Telescopes* by Rhys Hughes. They all look very interesting, though they all suffer from slightly unusual typesetting – two spaces after full stops and gigantic indents on the first lines of each paragraph.

As well as those books reviewed in this issue, P.S. Publishing have sent: *Val/Orson* by Marly Youmans, *Starfall* by Stephen Baxter, *The Painting and the City* by Robert Freeman Wexler, *Mystery Hill* by Alex Irvine, *Camp Desolation* by Uncle River and *Everland and Other Stories* by Paul Witcover. They spoil us, they really do.

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*Light Boxes*, by Shane Jones, has some fancy typographical stuff going on, which is always fun, but unfortunately it makes it very hard to read on the Sony Reader. We hope to get around to it soon, though.

Right now I'm reading *One* by Conrad Williams, sent to us by Virgin Books, one of the best designed mass market books I've ever seen. It would have been reviewed in this issue if I hadn't somehow lost it half a dozen times in the last two weeks.

We've started to get the odd DVD coming through, mainly for *Dark Horizons/Prism*, but the reviews will appear here too in the end. One of them is *Shuttle*, starring Tony Curran, but the one I'm looking forward to is *Dark Floors*, a horror movie starring, of all people, Eurovision Song Contest winners Lordi.

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