



Issue 40 RRP \$8.95

# ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

## Inflight Magazine

FEATURING FICTION BY:

K T McRae

Ian McHugh

Melissa White

Jason Stoddard

Ruskin Drake

Darren Goossens

Dan McCormick

Felicity Dowker

K C Shaw

Douglas A Van Belle



# Editorial

...Simon Petrie

Editing an issue of a magazine is very much like piloting a starcruiser. I don't really know how to do *that*, either.

Which means this could be an interesting flight. Just don't press any buttons, alright? Especially not that one.

Ah, well, too late now. I suppose we'll just see what happens, around about the time we all find out whether 'antimatter containment breach imminent' is anything to worry about.

Where were we? Ah, navigation. Again, not my strong suit. Still, one planet looks very much like another. Especially when we're going this fast.

Uh – we do have collision avoidance systems, don't we?

*Which* button?

[Emergency Metaphor Abort. Activating Now.]

Ouch. Talk about a rough disconnect.

Anyway, as I was saying. Editing an issue is very much like... uh, well. Perhaps best not. Vicious things, metaphors.

The main thing, I think, is to surround yourself with people who know what they're doing, or at least do a better job of looking like they know what they're doing than yourself. With this in mind, I'd like to thank Edwina Harvey, co-editor extraordinaire, Sue Bursztynski, artist herder, Zara Baxter, layout aficionado, and all of the ASIM crew who have pitched in with proofreading, slushreading, and those other gritty little tasks without which an issue like this just doesn't come together. I'm also grateful to the artists, Tom Godfrey, Greg Hughes, Lewis P. Morley, Anna Repp, and Dan Simmons, who have provided startling and uniformly appropriate visualisations of the tales within. And, of course, I'm particularly thrilled to have on board the authors responsible for this issue's lineup. Three of the authors are, in fact, first-timers (which might, incidentally, be an ASIM record): the stories in this issue by Ruskin Drake, K. T. McRae and

Melissa White mark the first fiction acceptance for any of these authors, anywhere, although I'm sure in each case that it won't be their last. Other writers, namely Felicity Dowker, Dan McCormick, K. C. Shaw, and Jason Stoddard, are appearing in ASIM's pages for the first time, but are already well on the way to making a name for themselves (well, alright, pedants, they already *have* names for themselves, but I'm sure you know what I mean...) through their work elsewhere. And Darren Goossens, Ian McHugh and Doug Van Belle fall very solidly into the category of 'ASIM repeat offenders', each having penned at least a couple of outstanding earlier contributions for ASIM. To round it all off, there's a quietly sinister poem from James R Cain.

Is there a unifying theme to this issue's stories? Well, they all feature humans, except the ones that don't. Most of the protagonists are alive. None of the stories has a 100% mortality rate, although some look set to come close.

Oh, and all of them are stories I would have been proud to have written myself, if only I'd had the brilliance to have come up with them.

Anything else you need to know, at this stage? No, I guess not. Please make sure you're familiar with the safety features, such as they are, of this vessel, and rest assured that if we hit anything at this velocity you—

What do you mean, passenger module jettisoned? I thought we'd had that problem *fixed*.

Anyway. Pleasant reading, wherever you might be right now. Assuming you can still hear me. See you on the next voyage, maybe.

**Simon Petrie,  
Editor, Issue 40  
Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine**

# ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

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# Creature Feature

...K T McRae

## **ASIM congratulates K. T. McRae on her first publication.**

*Oops, I got published.*

*After some intense procrastination, I submitted this absurd little story to try and toughen up and bit and get used to rejection. However instead of the expected soul-crushing refusal, I got a series of promising replies which made me wonder if I'd suddenly been transported into a parallel universe.*

*So I will confess that my entire writing experience consists of mandatory school assignments, sporadic involvement in sci-fi RPGs and travel diaries from the occasional overseas jaunt.*

*This little story came about through the deadly combination of watching Pirates of the Caribbean and eating too much pizza. Luckily I survived and the story was later resuscitated after I attended a writer's workshop at Supanova run by Sonny Whitelaw & Jennifer Fallon.*

*Special thanks to ASIM for giving me a go and to my dear friends who encouraged me to take a step towards a dream.*

In this issue we feature a rare and highly rewarding family pet, the Kraken.

Kraken are enormous sea creatures originating from the Norwegian Sea. They are of the Cephalopod family and resemble an octopus, only much larger. They have no internal skeleton so their soft bodies make them ideal playmates for small children.

Kraken can be difficult to keep in captivity due to their size and voracious appetite for sailors and large fishing vessels. We recommend you buy an infant kraken from a reputable pet store. Be sure to check its pedigree. Is it really a kraken or is it just a giant squid? A simple investigation could save your family disappointment later.

For the first few days, you can keep your kraken in a bath tub or wading pool. Bottle feed him a mixture of puréed seaweed and fish stock before moving on to more solid food such as small sharks.

Before long a pool will be needed. We recommend you install an Olympic-size unheated swimming pool with no lane markings.

To alleviate boredom, consider purchasing some toys to amuse your new pet. Common chew toys for young growing krakens are small open aluminium boats. Jet skis are not recommended as they pose a choking hazard. Sailing yachts up to 30 feet are fine as long as the mast is removed first.

Like the common octopus, krakens are highly intelligent creatures and can be easily trained to display a wide range of choreographed movements. Krakens make fine actors and have been in films such as *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, although both appearances were tragically uncredited.

Reports of kraken aggression in the wild are much exaggerated and are often the delusions of drunken sailors. To be fair, these creatures are a little different but you will soon grow to love their fun, playful nature and they're bound to spice up your next pool party. So why not consider a kraken the next time you're shopping for a pet?

# Once a Month, on a Sunday

...Ian McHugh

Once a month, on a Sunday, Mum and me and my little brother Zubby would dress up in our best clothes, Mum would put ribbons in my hair, and we'd all walk into town to go to church.

On Sundays when my Baba was home, Mum would sing while she helped us dress and brushed our hair. She'd tell stories while we walked along the track and Zubby rode in his pram, and she'd let us run ahead when Zubby got bored of riding. She wouldn't care if we strayed from the path, except for the part where the gambelgam was, where we needed to stay close. She wouldn't even mind if we dirtied our hands and clothes before we got to church.

But my Baba had been away now for three months — a lot longer than he was usually out on the road. Mum was in a foul mood. She growled and snapped while she got us ready. My scalp stung as she pulled my hair tight to plait it. I bit my lip and stayed silent, but Zubby cried when Mum brushed his hair, which just made her growl more.

“Zubair! Stay still!”

The only thing to do when Mum was like this was to be quiet and stay out of her way. But her temper made me nervous, and that made me clumsy. Pulling my dress on over my head, I knocked the water basin from the kitchen table. Mum jumped as water splashed over her skirts.

“Olivia! Green Christ above, girl, look what you've done!” Aside from the mess, she hadn't washed herself, yet.

“I'll fetch more,” I said, quickly, and fled before she could send me on my way with a slap.

I dashed out the door and into the lean-to shed out back. Zubby screamed louder all of a sudden. I guessed he'd got the slap instead. I tipped the lid off the big wire cage on the bench near the front of the shed and rummaged around in the wool and straw inside until I caught a mouse. It squirmed, warm and helpless in my fingers. I grabbed the water bucket and ran down the stepping-stone path to the creek.

The tin bucket bumped against the side of my calf. My plaited hair slapped against my shoulder blades. I slowed once the house was lost from sight behind the Banksia shrubs.

The Banksias' flowers had already dried out, losing their bright red colour. They sat along the branches like so many tiny brown owls. A lizard scuttled away from the path. Up in the trees, a magpie cleared its throat, but didn't sing. The bush was stuffy and hot after the cool of the house.

The temperature dropped a little going down the slope to the creek. I walked across the top of my shadow when it baulked, not wanting to lie itself across the water. I stopped on the wide pale stone beside the bank. Baba had chiselled the Arabic word *ma'* into it, which meant "water", and some other words that he wouldn't say aloud. The mouse lay still in my hand. Its heartbeat tickled my palm.

The creek was still full of spring rain, but moving slowly, brown with dirt. I held up my fist, with the mouse's tail hanging out the back and its nose poking between my first finger and thumb.

"*Shukran jazilan,*" I whispered, like Baba told me to. It meant "thank you". I tossed the mouse underarm, out over the water. Its legs spread out stiffly around it, ready to land.

A long tongue of water shot up from the surface of the creek and snapped the mouse out of the air.

The tongue thickened. It swayed in front of me, taller than I was. Odd lumps and tentacles bulged from the bunyip's sides and disappeared again. I watched a dark spot flow down its middle and disappear into the creek. The bunyip looked back at me, even though it didn't have eyes.

I could feel my shadow tugging at my heels, wanting me to come away. I ignored it. I wasn't in any danger.

"Hello, bunyip," I said. Baba had told me there was no point in talking to the land's dreamings, but I always spoke to the bunyip anyway. "I'd like some water, please. May I?"

It didn't answer, of course. I crouched at the front edge of Baba's water stone and lowered the bucket into the creek. The bunyip stayed where it was, watching. A tentacle came out of it when the warded metal touched the water, towards me, but it didn't grow far.

I heaved the full bucket up out of the creek and turned to go. "Goodbye, bunyip."

It had already sunk down into the creek when I looked back over my shoulder.

Back at the house I played clapping games with Zubby, sitting out of the way on Mum and Baba's bed while Mum finished getting herself ready. Then we set out. She put Zubby into the pram, although he wanted to run, and made me walk along beside. The weather was turning cloudy. It didn't look like rain coming, but it was enough to stop the day from getting really hot.

Walking along, just the three of us, I could nearly forget that Baba had been away so long. He never came to church with us, even when he wasn't out on the road. Church wasn't Baba's religion. He didn't follow the Green Christ, or even Christ the Lamb. Baba followed the Last Prophet instead, and did his praying at sunrise, noon and sunset every day, wherever he laid out his mat. Baba made his living going around to the towns and the squatters' homesteads and fixing up all the



old runeworks with his Arabic letters. People didn't mind that he followed the Last Prophet, because he always did right by them.

Really, Zubby and me followed the Last Prophet too, because Baba did. When he was home, he read us stories from the Prophet's book. He didn't mind us going to church, though, because the God of the Green Christ and the God of the Last Prophet were really the same; the Christ and the Prophet just had different ways of teaching His lessons.

We came to the kink in the track around the gambelgam's place. Baba had laid sleepers into the ground around that part and used an iron to burn his letters into the wood. The gambelgam place is hard to pick out, not like a willywilly that twists up all the trees it can reach chasing possums and koalas. You mostly won't know a gambelgam's there until you hear it sing. Your shadow will have heard it first, but won't be able to warn you that there's a dreaming ahead, because it's too busy listening to the song. And once that happens the gambelgam's probably got you unless you've got some good warding under your shoes.

I could hear its song over the rattle of Zubby's pram, bumping on the sleepers. It sounded like wind and fire and grinding rocks. It'd take your shadow and soul away to the red heart of the land if you let it, Baba said.

Mum's knuckles were white, holding my hand against the handle of Zubby's pram. Mum didn't need to be so scared. As long as we stayed on the path that Baba made, the gambelgam's voice had no power. I wasn't going to run away from the path. Our shadows could hear the song but because of Baba's warding, weren't caught by it. They stretched themselves far out to the side, away from the gambelgam.

Baba had taken me off the logs, once, and held me just beyond where the gambelgam could come out and get us, so its voice would fill up my head and I'd know the red heart for myself. My mind had gone to the place where Baba said the dreamings are born and watched the shadows dance on red stone, the Baba had brought me back.

Once we got past the gambelgam, Mum calmed a bit. She let Zubby out of the pram, although she wouldn't let us wander far. The day didn't get any hotter, because of the clouds, but I was still thirsty by the time we crossed over the runestone labyrinth that guarded the road into town.

Mum dug a tin cup out from the bottom of the pram and we took turns to drink from the pump at the horse trough outside the pub. She straightened our clothes and retied my ribbons and felt around the edges of her hair, then we walked the rest of the way to the church in the middle of town.

The yew tree outside the church's western door looked sadder every month. Half its branches were dead and bare of leaves, making it seem hollowed-out around its thick trunk. We walked around the curved wall of the church to the southern door. Father Henryk waited for us in the shade of the oak tree there.

"Good day, Alice, children," he said. Father Henryk had an accent, the way Baba did, but different from Baba's. Both of them mixed up their 'a' and 'e' and 'o' sounds, but Baba made it sound nice, along with the way he growled out his 'h's. Father Henryk just sounded funny. Mum said Father Henryk was Dutch.

Mum bowed her head. I did, too. "Father," said Mum.

"I'm pleased to see you," Father Henryk added. He was very tall and thin, with wet-looking eyes and a big Adam's apple. "You should really come more than once a month."

He always said the same. Mum always answered the same, too: "It's a long walk with the children."

Father Henryk put a hand on Zubby's head. "It is particularly important for the children."

Mum tried a smile, even though she wasn't happy, and said, "Faris will make enough one day to buy me a horse and buggy. Then I'll be able to come more often."

Father Henryk's face got all tight and serious. "May I speak with you a moment?"

Mum's face got tight then, too, and shuttered up, the way it did when she had to talk to the ladies she didn't like in town. "Look after your brother," she said to me.

They walked back over towards the yew tree. Zubby stuck out his bottom lip, thinking about crying. I caught his fingers and held on just tight enough that he could still pull them free. He laughed and I held out my hand to play trap-hands. I watched Mum and Father Henryk talking. He looked like he was asking her something. Mum had her arms folded in front of her. Father Henryk pointed towards me and Zubby, and they both looked. I turned quickly away.

People from the town were going into the church. They looked at me and Zubby, too, and at Mum and Father Henryk.

Mum was still unhappy when we finally went inside the church. She kept starting to sing and stopping part way through the hymns. Father Henryk didn't try to talk to her again. A few people said hello to Mum, but only looked sideways at me and Zubby. Mrs Kewell from the post office looked like she wanted to talk more, but the look Mum gave her killed whatever words she had before they got out of her mouth. We didn't stop at anyone's house for tea, which we sometimes did.

My tummy growled on the walk home. Zubby whined about being hungry.

"When we get home, Zub," said Mum.

"Father Henryk doesn't like that Baba follows the Prophet and not the Green Christ, does he?" I said.

For a moment, Mum looked like she was about to cry. She said, "No, love, he doesn't. You can run along and explore if you want. Come back before we get to the gambelgam."

When we got home, in the middle of the afternoon, it was my job to fetch water again.

"But I'm hungry, Mum," I said.

"You can eat when you get back," she said. She gave me the crust of yesterday's loaf to tide me over and told me to hurry up. She was trying hard but I could tell she was still upset.

Zubby started whining again. I looked over my shoulder as I ran out the door. Mum was standing at the table with Zubby going red in the face by her hip. She held on to the wood like she didn't know what her hands might do to him if she let go.

Inside the lean-to, I reached up to shift the lid of the mouse cage. I stopped. The lid wasn't on straight. I felt like my insides had all fallen down from their proper places. I hadn't closed the cage properly that morning.

I pushed the lid all the way off and pulled out the whole mess of wool and straw and dropped it on the ground. No mice scuttled out. For a minute I couldn't think what to do. I just stood beside the empty cage, hoping Mum wouldn't come out the back door and see.

I rubbed the tears out of my eyes, bent to pick up all the mouse bedding again, and stuffed it back in the cage. I tore up my bread crust and sprinkled it into the cage, then left the lid just a little bit open. Hopefully when I came back, I might've caught some mice again. I grabbed the bucket and ran off down the path. Baba dipped for water without needing a mouse. As long as I stood on his water stone, I'd be fine, just this once.

I felt less and less brave the closer I got to the creek. My shadow dragged at my feet. Baba said dreamings couldn't recognise people. I thought Baba was wrong -- the bunyip knew me, it would forgive me one mouse. But knowing about dreamings was Baba's job. What if it was me that was wrong? I thought then that I should've brought a rope to hang the bucket from, so I wouldn't have to put my hands near the water. But if I went back now, and ran straight off again, Mum would wonder why, and then she'd find out about the mice.

I stepped onto the water stone and waited. My shadow lay very still behind me. The bunyip didn't come up.

"I'm sorry, bunyip," I said, knowing that it must be in the creek, since it was *part* of the creek. "All the mice got away. I haven't any to give you."

The surface of the creek stayed flat.

"May I still dip for water?"

I edged up to the front of the stone and squatted down. Watching for the bunyip, ready to leap backwards out of the way, I reached the bucket over the bank and dipped it in the water.

The creek bulged, only a couple of feet away. A watery tentacle came up and reached towards the bucket. I froze. The tentacle stopped.

Ever so slowly, I pushed the bucket under, and pulled it back up, full. Just as slowly, the bunyip stretched out its tentacle. The tip got wider and flatter. I lifted the bucket clear. The bunyip reached underneath, to catch the drips that rained from its sides.

I stood up straight. The tentacle lowered, and disappeared back into the creek.

"Thank you, bunyip."

I laughed as I ran back up the path. I'd been right. I couldn't wait to tell Baba.

I stopped by the lean-to before I went back in the house. Something rustled under the cotton and straw inside the mouse cage when I poked it, and I quickly put the lid all the way back on.

Zubby was happy, chattering to himself and chewing. His plate was piled with bread, cheese, pickles and salt pork. There was another full plate beside Zubby's, for

me. Mum sat across the table, one of my shirts in her lap, staring off at nothing. A needle was pushed through it, near the collar, where she'd started fixing a tear.

She was quiet all afternoon and through dinner. When it came to bedtime, she tried to tell us a story, but she kept stopping and forgetting where she was up to. She gave up as soon as Zubby fell asleep.

I lay for a while, listening to her get herself ready for bed and thinking about what I'd done with the bunyip.

"Mum? When's Baba coming home?"

She didn't answer. I turned over to look at her.

"Mum?"

Her back was to me, as she snuffed out the wick of the oil lamp. In the dark, I listened to the creak of her bed as she climbed in and the rustle of the sheets as she pulled them up. Then she lay so still and quiet that I could hardly hear her crying at all.



# The Future is Now

...Melissa White

## **ASIM congratulates Melissa White on her first publication.**

*I got into speculative fiction when I was twelve-years-old. I had to read a sci-fi book for an English class and I didn't know what to pick, since I didn't know the genre. My teacher recommended Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker trilogy and that decided it for me: I loved sci-fi, particularly comedic sci-fi, ever since.*

*I was on a bus when I came up with the premise for "The Future is Now." I spent the whole ride writing down dialogue between the Scientist and Phineas. It seemed to write itself. But four years passed until I came up with an ending for it. During that time, I wrote other stories and the bulk of a novel, but I wanted to start submitting my work. I always had a soft spot for "The Future is Now" — or "the brain story" as I called it — and I resolved to finish it off. I came up with a few endings, such as Phineas (inexplicably) becoming a theatrical set designer, but when the current dénouement dawned on me, I knew it was right. I'm thrilled that this is the story to mark my first publication.*

The Future wasn't as exciting as they wanted us to believe. It ended up being fairly similar to the present, but the present didn't have the same marketing zing as expressions like "The Future is Now!" that they trumpeted for as long as they could.

The Future spanned decades. Everyone felt very excited about it, knowing they were living not just any it, but It, and waiting for the promised technological breakthroughs. Especially those robotic maids the scientists kept plugging away at.

Years gave way to decades, decades to centuries. People noticed they were still washing their own dishes and driving the same old gasoline-fueled cars and not a single metallic face made even a cameo appearance. Perhaps the Future was exceeding its stay. It should have at least flashed a few lights and gone beep at the passersby.

*No, the businessmen cried, it's coming... We promise.*

*That was the last century they bothered.*

The Future saw it didn't have much of a follow up act and its booking agent was ready to give it the axe. It stood on the stage watching those millions of faces and

announced to the world ‘never mind’. It slouched off before any tomatoes could hit the stage.

Without the Future, listlessness overcame the population and the world passed into a vacuum of time. Robotic maids were never mentioned anymore and children stopped complaining about having to sweep the kitchen.

A small sect existed, however, as small sects exist throughout all centuries, that would not resign itself to a futureless span. They hated cleaning and prodded at the Future’s carcass with a stick, ignoring those who said ‘don’t bother, it’s dead’.

They tried to be covert about it, too, since being called unkind names by the skeptics began to hurt their feelings.

Phineas sat and thought, since he never had anything else to do these days. He thought terribly clever things, made many plans, and dreamt of executing them one day. But he had a problem so annoying that, for all his thinking, he didn’t have an inch of wriggle room. He would have cried and slammed the door, buried his head in his hands and yanked at his hair at the frustration.

Except that Phineas was a brain in a jar, with no hair to yank, nor hands to slam doors with. Instead he sat there and tried to do a belly flop, which seemed a silly idea to him since a belly flop without a belly is just a flop. Either way, it was an expression of annoyance. He sat there, concentrating on the idea of movement. He thought about the jars next to him on his shelf and wondered whether any of them tried to flop and succeeded. Probably not; those jars held nothing but boring drags. He suspected the jar next to him held a fetal pig but the Scientist always denied it. It’s unlikely a fetal pig would do a flop or anything. They were so boring.

Phineas didn’t like the idea of sitting next to a fetal pig, sharing the same store of formaldehyde kept under the desk. The thought alone made him try to flop. He kept asking the Scientist: “but it’s not the same formaldehyde, from the same vat? I couldn’t bear it.”

The Scientist said no, but chuckled a bit. Phineas hated him even more than before.

“What’s its name?”

“What’s what’s name?”

“The fetal pig’s.”

“Gregg — wait, what fetal pig?”

That decided it and Phineas hated Gregg, the fetal pig, almost as much as he hated the Scientist.

He tried to flop and failed.

Call it a birth defect or the token of some youthful tumble, or just a manifestation of eccentricity, but Phineas misplaced his body long ago. Masterminds were always misplacing their bodies and Phineas suspected he was particularly careless the day he lost his. He assumed he fell from some rafters as back in his time he used to dangle an awful lot, lurching around corridors and climbing scaffolding and sniggering in an obnoxiously sinister way. He would never know for certain, since the Scientist

blotted out the memory, claiming it was too detrimental to their project's aim. The recollection would lead to madness, and dementia, and whatnot.

The Scientist tapped the jar.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Phineas said, "I'm not a goldfish."

"I've got it," the Scientist said. "The body — I've finished it."

He bit his lip.

"Is it good?" Phineas said. "I want a good one, something tall I can move around in — nice command, flick of the wrist, turn of the ankle. None of this shrimp nonsense you see nowadays."

"I built it especially," the Scientist said and gave an enthusiastic little clap.

"And I won't be reduced to cliché, understand? If you've invented a weird tarantula thing or lobster-man," Phineas said, "I won't be part of it. You'll have to find another brain."

The Scientist's left eye flickered for a moment.

"It's not a tarantula."

"Does it have claws?"

The Scientist paused.

"Well, a claw. But a little one, you'd hardly notice it."

Phineas gave the Scientist the cold shoulder. The Scientist crept away mumbling about the scarcity of normal body parts and complaining that normality was so subjective when you thought about it... Why, a claw would be perfectly acceptable in some reaches of space, while a hand would be considered vile, crude, an affront to your hostess had you stumbled in on one of her dinner parties and everyone had a claw but you.

Phineas returned to flopping.

What was it he used to do? They said he was wicked, terrible, a fair-faced monster. If the Scientist had his way, he'd be a monster-faced monster, making him, indeed, a monster. Worse, a cliché. Clichés were well and good, but clichés with claws were too much for any brain of finer feeling to stomach with aplomb.

He'd gone along with the Scientist about ideas — something clever, he was sure, involving world domination.

He paused.

No, definitely not world domination; you don't preserve a disembodied brain for mere world domination. For galactic domination he could understand the bother and fuss... Yes! That was it. It was so very clever... But how was he to do it? Can't just talk into a radio and say hand it over, if you don't mind. He was positive there were robots involved or people turned into robots or robots looking like people. Or automatons. Same thing. Or were those just depressed people? Depressed people could rule the galaxy. Nothing would ever get done and there'd be a lot of griping, but it could work.

He squelched in the jar.

It had been so much more important then. Now he'd just like to see that girl again, the one with the eyes. He assumed she had eyes, as girls often will, blue or something colorful like that.



She complained about them not working right, then the Scientist came in making a row about her being there, and *bang* went his elbow and off Phineas went onto the floor. It was very embarrassing for all involved. The girl screamed and waved her arms around on account of having malfunctioning eyes, and the Scientist muscled her off somewhere. Phineas dribbled out of his shattered jar, losing consciousness.

The Scientist said a shard of glass got stuck in the parietal lobe. Phineas didn't believe it and told him to shut up. The Scientist said that was the shard talking, he knew Phineas would never tell him to shut up in earnest. Phineas told him to shut up again and added that he would always tell him to shut up whether in sound mind or not.

"But—"

"Shut up."

Besides, there was a body waiting, and then things would take a turn. Maybe he'd even revive that robot domination idea; unless the girl didn't want him to. He hated being contrary.

The Scientist told him not to be stupid, the girl was dead.

"You can't have a girl, even a blind one, stumbling around during an operation like this. Think of the consequences!"

"You wouldn't say that, if I had a body. I'd like to see you try."

Phineas asked him to perform the operation that very afternoon, so he could give the Scientist a kick with his new leg for being a jerk.

But the Scientist only said that that was the shard talking.

She wasn't dead, she couldn't be dead. He would have known somehow. It's strange when you don't have a body, you take on new senses. Not the passé sight and smell nonsense, but a cerebral sense of affairs. If someone had died, been murdered, especially a girl with eyes, he'd know.

"You and that girl! It's pathetic the way you go on. If she ever met you, she'd scream and run away."

"Not if I had a body."

"You and your body, it's becoming a bore."

"You could fix her eyes, give her different ones. I know there's a pair in that jar on the other side of Gregg."

The Scientist stopped.

"How do you know that?"

Phineas expressed a wish to tap his nose for dramatic effect. After the operation he would, just to bring the point home that still waters run even deeper if made from formaldehyde. Then he'd keep his promise and kick the Scientist.

"If you don't stop about her, I'll blot the memory. She's dead anyway, the shard won't let you accept that."

If Phineas got his body, looking for the girl would be one of those upsetting scenarios where you tumble around and flail your arms, getting used to being corporeal again, only to open a closet and have the girl's insensate body come tumbling out, dead upon the floor.

For everyone's sake, it was best not to bother.

And then there was the postal blunder.

The Scientist came into the laboratory with a pile of mail and plopped it onto the table. He put on the headphones connected to Phineas's jar and began his daily drill for information. Phineas saw through these attempts, the poorly veiled questions like 'what were the plans?' and 'how could we move the robots?' and never bothered to answer. If he had a hand, he'd pluck the headphone jack out of his side, canceling communication between them until the Scientist realized it just needed to be plugged in again.

"The Committee's getting concerned, they insist we do the operation soon. You're just going to have to deal with the claw, there's no other body ready."

Phineas focused his thoughts toward the pile of mail.

"What's that one?"

"What?"

"The brochure next to the electric bill."

"How did you know — never mind, it'll give me the creeps if you explain. It's just a brochure sent to the wrong address."

He held it up.

"Correspondence courses?"

"Bunch of rubbish. Mail-away degrees."

"What do they offer?"

The Scientist sighed and figured a humored brain would be a willing brain, so he lowered his morale and suffered reading aloud the correspondence courses available in all manner of attempted elucidation for those of busy schedules or lack of funds.

"Botany, Funeral Direction, Telepathy — what a miserable bunch." He bristled and went on a tirade about his own schooling days when you had to study, pay a hell of a lot of money, and spend intolerable amounts of time in the campus library wishing you were dead. "Why, the whole point of education is the suffering!" he cried. "These people are just fooling themselves."

"What was that last one?"

"What? Telepathy? A bunch of crazy women in turbans humming 'oom' at each other."

He made a noise somewhere between 'feh' and 'baugh!'

"I could do that — let's try it."

"You can't be serious."

"Just think what an advancement it would be if we didn't have to bother with these headphones. I hate this plug jammed in my side... And I could talk with you halfway across the room — the cord is awfully short."

"Yes," the Scientist said, musing and thumbing through the catalogue. "I can't even reach for a spare pen when I'm chained to this cord..."

He stopped.

"But that's ridiculous! A brain in a jar can't take a correspondence course. How would you do your assignments?"

"You can type, can't you?"

"I'm not going to be your secretary."

"No doubt the girl with the eyes knows stenography—"

"She can't see! And, for God's sake, she's dead!"

The Scientist chucked the catalogue into the trash and stalked away, mumbling that humoring a brain was all very well and good and helpful for the Cause, but this was the freezing limit frozen over. He'd drag out the girl's body to show the brain, but the blasted brain couldn't see despite its claims of cerebral awareness. It'd insist the body wasn't dead, that the girl was given a sleeping drug, and it would moon about her for the next five years. God, he hated that brain.

The next day arrived.

"You haven't taken the garbage out yet, the catalogue is still in there..."

The Scientist left the laboratory.

The next week came.

"You still haven't taken out the garbage. That's disgusting."

The Scientist began to spend less time in the laboratory than usual.

A ring in the night woke him.

"Hello?" he said. The voice on the other line yelled in a tinny voice that they hadn't received any progress reports. The tinny voice also yelled that if the lack of progress reports betrayed a lack of progress, the Scientist would be killed and replaced with another.

The Scientist said he'd get right on it.

He inched open the door to the laboratory, tiptoed to his desk and began to write under the light of a candle.

"If you didn't want this argument, you should have thrown out the garbage," Phineas said.

That afternoon Phineas was enrolled as the first ever disembodied brain in Mental Telepathy 101. No one ever found out what he really was and Madam Gretchen was quite impressed by the assignments handed in by her star pupil. She sent much mental encouragement Phineas's way, but by that point Phineas had developed a paranoia about his thoughts and assumed everyone was listening in. He blocked his mind from unfamiliar signals and never received the praise, while Madam Gretchen chalked him up to a lost cause.

A scuffle sounded outside followed by the clank of a wrench hitting a human head.

The laboratory door smashed open. Phineas deduced that this was not the Scientist since the Scientist had the laboratory door key and therefore saw no use in smashing it open. Also, there was a lot of unnecessary movement, shuffling around, opening cupboards, and someone dragging a body. The Scientist hated unnecessary movement, having let himself go flabby some years before.

Phineas did what he always did and sat in his jar.

He heard a rustling, a piece of paper coming out of a breast pocket.

"The brain," the stranger said. "Fetch the brain."

Phineas appreciated the stranger's need to explain his motives for no reason.

"Not just any brain," Phineas said.

The stranger whirled around. He regretted whirling as men of import should never whirl — a lackadaisical turn on the heel or a sidelong crook of the head were laudable and expected in his profession, but never an all-out whirl. It was too late,

however, the whirl had been whirled; and he found he whirled right in the direction of Phineas.

“Who said that?”

“Careful, it talks,” Phineas said.

“Shut up!” the stranger said, whirling again in another direction. He didn’t consider himself the panicking type, but events were proving otherwise. He began to shake. “Come out of hiding,” he said. “I have a wrench in my hand.” He lifted the wrench as if to reassure himself that, yes, it was in his hand and, yes, it was heavy enough to hurt someone very badly.

“I’d never dream of hiding,” Phineas said. “It’s beneath me.

The stranger thrust the wrench in front of him, wagging it in useless defense.

“I told you, I have a wrench!”

“I see it. Are you going to tighten the door hinges? They squeak dreadfully.”

The stranger’s eyes widened in terror. His face trembled and then transferred to full-throttle shaking.

“It’s impossible!” he cried, looking at Phineas. “You’re just in a jar!”

“Temporarily. I hope you haven’t hurt that fellow too badly, he was my only chance.”

The stranger whirled toward the doorway, seeing the inert Scientist crumpled into a heap — a heap no human would ever want to be jumbled into, what with the bones going in directions against the standard wont.

The stranger tried not to become hysterical.

“But you’re in my head!” he cried and clasped his hands over his ears.

“I’ve gotten quite good at it — got an A in the class, you know.”

The stranger yelled “arugh!” and lolled his head around.

And then there came the cloth. A well-thought criminal always comes prepared and this one did his thinking in advance, so he wouldn’t have to think during a panic. He whipped a black cloth from his pocket and threw it over the jar. Everything went dark, and cerebral deduction could no longer help Phineas.

He got the impression of being handled; moved, even.

“I think you should know, I’m not a nice brain. I’ve had many unkind thoughts and a lot of them concern you.”

The stranger muscled Phineas through the laboratory, up the stairs, past the Scientist’s parlor and into a car.

They drove, Phineas sitting in front with a seatbelt securing him in place.

“This can’t be right,” the stranger said. “They said I was retrieving the remnants of the most powerful man in the universe—”

“Did he use robots?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have the right brain. Say, did you see a girl when we left? I wanted to have a look, but the cloth made it difficult.”

“What about the robots — did you ever use them?”

“I don’t go in for that anymore. Meanwhile, the girl, where was she? I’d rather like to know.”

“Don’t go in for it? Then why do they want you?”

“To give me a body?”

“They didn’t say.”

“Is the scientist dead?”

“Probably. I hit him pretty hard.”

“Ah. I’d feel sad if I could. Instead I’d like to shrug.”

The stranger looked at him.

“I can’t actually do movement, so I have to explain what I would do if I could, you see.”

The stranger considered this and then spoke.

“You seem awful affable for someone so dangerous.”

“Well, you know. Being mean didn’t get me anywhere except in a jar. Say, do your people know what happened to me? Flimsy scaffolding, wasn’t it?”

There was a series of taps and dings. The taps went for long stretches and just when you thought they were due for a ding, the ding didn’t disappoint. Sometimes a sigh would come from a corner and then a long pause, a fiddling pause with correction fluid, until the taps resumed.

The taps typed and Phineas sat on a company-issued coffee table. He didn’t know how to feel about sitting on a coffee table, being an alternative decorative piece to the standard vase of flowers. Surely, the company’s interior decorator would give a disapproving cluck of the tongue when she noticed the cables coming out of his jar and the green preserving liquid that didn’t look like something a bouquet of daffodils would fare well in.

Another ding and a loud rip.

The secretary tore the page in half. “I’m never going to spell ‘cybergenetics’ right,” she complained.

“Is that because your eyes don’t work?” Phineas said.

“No, I’m just a lousy speller.”

A door opened and a loud collection of businessmen flooded the room, behaving as businessmen do when a keen bit of business has gone well. Lots of back slapping and Old Boy humor and recollections of the halcyon days when business didn’t require so much business. A tear forms in the eye, a reminiscent gaze into the distance and another slap on the back that gathers the wits for another bout of business.

They circled around the coffee table.

“Is that a brain?”

“Not just a brain, *the* brain.”

“Him? The very he?”

“Yes.”

“I say.”

And more back slapping and pin-striped suit wearing and general Old Boy ruckus making. One of the pin-striped businessmen gave the secretary a wink. She didn’t wink back, pretending to be engrossed with her left shoe. She didn’t ask him how to spell ‘cybergenetics’ either.

“Ask him a question, he likes questions,” the CEO said.

The secondary businessman seemed wary.

“Go on, it’s a little creepy at first, his voice in your head, but it’s very interesting.”

“Well...”

The secondary businessman’s wavering warranted a round of backslapping to buck him up, nearly pitching him into Phineas.

“Are you really the very he?” he said.

Phineas ignored him.

“Come on, are you? The robots, they’re yours? The whole enterprise was brilliant!”

Phineas rustled.

“I mean, wow, robotics commanded telepathically! No one can trace the orders... How did you think of it?!”

Despite appearances, Phineas was human and possessed the one object all humans fall prey to: ego. He lit up as best as a brain could and said, “There was a correspondence course brochure misplaced in my mailbox. It was addressed for next door, but I kept it.”

The secondary businessman beamed in frozen awe.

“Was it scaffolding that did me in? I expect it was. Stupid robots led me up there.”

The secondary businessman remained in frozen awe.

The secretary typed and complained of a broken nail. No one felt much compassion. Phineas was shoved under the arm of the CEO and hustled out of the room.

They walked through several hallways, all tile bestrewn and pale, until they reached a door marked ‘Conference Room’.

They entered and met many lawyers seated around a table. A bundle seated in the middle of the table revealed itself as the Scientist tied up.

“You didn’t have to hit me with a wrench, I would have brought Phineas had you asked... Blast, it’s starting again—”

A lawyer mopped at the Scientist’s bleeding head with a handkerchief.

“Sorry,” he explained, “you weren’t supposed to live. Jim’s a brute and can never do a job right. If he had, it would have saved you a lot of fuss and me a stained handkerchief.”

Phineas was thumped onto the table, calling the group to order.

“I’ve been away a long time,” he said, “but since you’re keen to recommence, I’ll oblige. I take it you finally got the funding for this despotic scheme; it’s neither here nor there for me nowadays. I’d just as soon control or be controlled—”

“But we need you!” the secondary businessman said, still awed.

“It’s difficult to be needed. I’d gotten used to languishing in a jar... Which reminds me, do we have a body?”

The lawyers hummed and jotted notes, the businessmen fingered their collars and the Scientist took to being smug.

“No,” he said, “we haven’t unless you want the insectoid shell I’d been working on. We still have your old body, but it’s mangled beyond serviceability. Would you like to see it? It’s quite terrible.”

He leaned back in his seat as most obnoxious people like to do. The smugness broke when the Scientist's head began to bleed again. He cursed and motioned for the lawyer to mop at it.

"If you could just untie me," he complained.

"Listen," the CEO said, ignoring the Scientist. "Electronics are at the lowest ever. Why, sales of the common broom are exceeding vacuums by seventy percent — stores can't keep them in stock! We're going to fold at this rate."

"But 'The Future is Now', remember?"

"That's true," said the CEO, "but what if we delivered the myth..."

"Myth, what myth?"

"You know..."

Everyone gasped. Phineas would have gasped, too, but ended up sitting quite still, stiller than usual.

"And this fellow," said the CEO, tapping at Phineas's jar, "had the answer."

Curious the way a bit of well-timed import can shift the atmosphere. The entire conference room turned to the center of the table to look at Phineas.

A moment returned to Phineas, a gentle reminder of how things used to be.

"I was important at one time, wasn't I?" he said and paused. "It's very familiar."

The entire room continued to stare, awed by the brain they'd never have.

"These robots—"

"Robotic maids," the CEO interjected.

"They're a ruse, yes?"

"Ruse?"

"The idea being we tinker with the circuitry, fit every home with one. When the time comes, we press an important red button or other. Instantaneous domination."

A horrible silence followed.

"Well, that was the plan as I recall it," Phineas said. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

The horrible silence stretched. It was one of those silences when you realize everyone's on a different wavelength and you'll never tune your radio to their frequency.

"We just want to sell vacuum cleaners, Mr. Phineas," said the CEO, softly.

"That's all?"

"To remind people that the Future is Now and we'll prove it with a robotic person cleaning the house. We never did lose heart, like everyone thought."

Phineas paused to consider this.

"If that's all you wanted, what do you need him for?"

The mind sometimes can take an undirected comment and figure out exactly to whom it is intended. Phineas didn't point a finger at the Scientist due to his not having one, yet everyone was able to glean that his question was geared that way.

"Well," the CEO stammered, "we need him because even though the Future will be, indeed, Now, we don't know a thing about science."

Phineas directed himself toward the Scientist.

"They've kept me alive all these years just to sell vacuums? And you went along with it? What happened to your longing for grandeur?"

“It died after the first few months. Wonderful to know your life has such meaning, isn’t it?” the Scientist said. “At least they’ll keep you alive. Once they find out you’re too uppity for the claw, they’ll hit me with the wrench to more permanent effect. They invested a lot of money into this project.”

The gravity of this conversation, particularly the gravity of the Scientist’s future that would no longer be Now, but Then, was not discussed injudiciously in front of the crowd of frowning businessmen and lawyers. Rather, just as Phineas was feeling his ego deflate, nearly on the brink of total annihilation, for his net worth consisted solely of his value as an over-glorified vacuum salesman, a scuffle broke up the tension in the conference room. During this scuffle, Phineas belittled the Scientist.

The scuffle became more and more intense.

It went like this:

The businessmen frowned at each other and at Phineas. One asked whether Phineas knew how to make a vacuum cleaner, and Phineas replied, “no, I always had a cleaning lady.”

The businessmen frowned further.

“Then what on earth were you doing on that scaffolding before the accident? Weren’t you testing the vacuum’s suction capacity? To see if someone could vacuum when dangling from an alarming height should they feel so inclined?”

Someone came running into the conference room, nettled and out of breath. His shoes skidded as he came to a halt.

“Terrible news!” he cried, panting. “My wife just told me...” and he stopped, unable to breathe.

“Wife, what wife? Who cares about your troubled domestics?”

“No, no,” he said, gathering his breath once more. “She went to the neighbors’ and came back in such a huff, I thought she’d kill me.”

“Oh for goodness’ sake, who cares.”

And the rest of the businessmen puffed in disdain. One of the lawyers offered a reasonable rate for divorce litigation.

“You don’t understand!” the messenger yelled. “My neighbor is CEO of NEMESIS GENETICS.”

The businessmen withdrew an inch and gasped.

“She was *furious* because the CEO’s house was spotless, just spotless. My wife asked the CEO’s wife how she kept it so pristine — a maid, yes? ‘No,’ she said, not a maid. Just this thing on the wall that camouflages with the paint. See it? That little thing?”

“Why, yes I do,’ my wife said.

“This is just a prototype George gave me, but it works like a dream and should be out on the market in a month—”

“Works like a dream?!” a businessman interrupted.

“Quiet,” the messenger said, and continued: “ ‘An absolute *dream*,’ she said and then gave the thing a pat. And wouldn’t you know? All the dirt in the room got sucked off the floor and into the mechanism. Right on the wall!”

“But surely, surely” the CEO said to prevent the others from panicking, “it left a filthy residue that would affect asthma in young children and imperil small pets. It couldn’t possibly have cleaned it right.”



“But it did! It was perfect! My wife asked whether robots had anything to do with it, for ‘Don *will* go on about robots’ and she said no, robots were silly and a waste of time.”

The messenger fell over.

The CEO cradled his head in his hands. “We’re doomed, doomed. No one will want a robot now. Waste of time! Waste of time! Thing on the wall, inconspicuous and perfect. No metallic humanoids to feel awkward around. We’re ruined. I can hear our stock devaluing as I speak.”

He pulled a tiny vial out of his pocket.

“Well,” he said, “the captain must go down with the ship.”

And he tipped the contents of the vial into his mouth and dropped dead.

Everyone regarded this calmly.

“All that money...” a lawyer said, wistfully.

At the mention of money, pandemonium erupted. The draperies unaccountably caught fire. Businessmen ran around the room stealing paintings hanging on the walls. The secretary grabbed a mini *escritoire* that would look darling, just darling, in her apartment. And the lawyers calmly went through the window, in single file, onto the fire escape because lawyers can always find work and have nothing to be upset about. They marched across the street — still in single file — and entered the headquarters of NEMESIS GENETICS, where they were hired on the spot.

Phineas, meanwhile, was forgotten. The Scientist momentarily regarded him as he planned his own escape, debating whether to take him since they were friends of a sort, after all. But Jim, the thug, was coming at him with the wrench and he had to make a hasty departure. Thus, Phineas was left behind.

Phineas couldn’t see the pandemonium, but he could hear an awful lot of it and it didn’t seem like a good situation for an immobile and disembodied brain. He wouldn’t have minded the claw right now, for though aesthetically displeasing, a claw could get him out of there before the burning drapes set off the sprinkler system.

He knew his jar was open on the top and water would dilute his formaldehyde, if the flames didn’t ignite it first. With water and, particularly, the parasites living in water, he would begin to decay very quickly. He also imagined that water parasites — all manner of protozoa and other things — would be terrible conversationalists. He couldn’t bear to hear them chattering over how tasty he was.

The fire alarm went off, a piercing shriek. The businessmen took it as the final signal to get out of the building whether they’d looted to their satisfaction or not. Accordingly, they fled.

Except for one.

Everything was gone from the board room; the one businessman left behind was looking for that darling *escritoire* that his wife always liked, when he saw Phineas sitting on the conference table.

“Brain is an expensive delicacy in some cultures,” he said, scooping Phineas up. “I might get a good price for you — aged to perfection like a fine cheese.”

He started to run out the door when a thump, the unmistakable sound of two elbows brought together, slammed into the back of his head.

Phineas realized he was being handled by someone else.

“Are you going to sell me too?” he asked mournfully, knowing there was no need to preserve him any longer. “Or are you just going to eat me yourself?”

“I’m getting you out of here!”

“I know you are — to eat me. Do you have a gas range or electric? It’s silly to even think you’ll cook me first. You’ll eat me alive and screaming.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Who are you?” Phineas said.

The person didn’t have time to answer and made a dash for the door.

“Ow!” she cried.

Phineas had the suspicion he was on the floor.

“What happened?”

“I ran into the wall.”

“Why?”

“I can’t see very well. Come on!”

# TFT

...Jason Stoddard

I'll tell you a story. It probably won't mean much. It'll slide off the corners of your psyche like a message-board thread about alien abductions, or a creepy ghost video posted on MyTube — shivery for that moment when you're home alone and the wind is howling, then quickly forgotten in the whirl of the office the next day. Which is okay. Who knows how many stories came before, or how true they are?

Let's start with this:

## **T.REX THIGH REVEALS TIES TO CHICKEN**

*By Julie Steenhuysen, Reuters*

CHICAGO (April 12) — Tiny bits of protein extracted from a 68-million-year-old dinosaur bone have given scientists the first genetic proof that the mighty *Tyrannosaurus rex* is a distant cousin to the modern chicken.

"It's the first molecular evidence of this link between birds and dinosaurs," said John Asara, a Harvard Medical School researcher, whose results were published in Friday's edition of the journal *Science*.

Scientists have long suspected that birds evolved from dinosaurs based on a study of dinosaur bones, but until recently, no soft tissue had survived to confirm the link.

That all changed in 2005 when Mary Higby Schweitzer of North Carolina State University reported finding soft tissue, including blood vessels and cells, in a *T. rex* bone dug out of sandstone from the fossil-rich Hell Creek Formation in Montana.

Schweitzer, in another study appearing in this week's issue of *Science*, found that extracts of *T. rex* bone reacted with antibodies to chicken collagen, further suggesting the presence of birdlike protein in dinosaur bones.

Yeah, I know. What does a 10-year-old press clipping have to do with anything, other than a few stale jokes about how *Tyrannosaurus* tastes like chicken? Well, let's continue this with a couple of internal documents from Americonglomerate International Holdings Corp, a division of IBM Research, in association with the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, dredged from the nanocam nets with a little bit of chaos-to-order magic from me and my friends at Caltech.

And yeah, I know, posting my own data, using my own algorithms, blah blah, woof woof, hey whatever. It reliably pulls real, recognizable data from strong encryption, so unless Our Boys in Blue are diddling the network with another chaos-ordering algorithm...but, that's a whole lot of tinfoil hat stuff right there.

Anyway, Americonglomerate. Apologies for the corporatese:

### **03012009-EITS-R045.1 ANALYSIS OF EXPERIMENTALLY INDUCED TEMPORAL SHIFT**

*Observations:* Physical specimens removed from temporal contact point verify reality, countering speculation by R. Chandakar that the phenomenon is due to mass hallucinations. Study of samples, including an unknown egg which appears to be linked to an unknown species of pterosaur, or perhaps a transitional ground-based form, indicates a contact point in the Triassic era. Flora analyzed also support this contact point. There have been no additional deaths since the last report.

*Range:* We are working towards the capability of inducing contact points at more current timeframes to increase the usefulness of the Temporal Shift Device (TSD) for historical study. T. Chang's theory of self-repairing quantum fluctuations, however, indicates that contact points nearer than 50-60 million years in the past may not be able to be achieved.

*Applications:* There are no known commercial applications of the TSD or of the current temporal contact point. We strongly suggest this device be used for serious research only. Although we have been prohibited contact with the university, we feel this can dramatically increase our knowledge of previous eras, and help delineate evolutionary mechanisms previously not understood.

*Caution:* All samples brought through to present day should be sterilized, as per previous procedure. T. Chang's theory appears to mitigate any possible paradoxical or ripple effects from changes made in the temporally shifted region.

You chuckle. You know where this is going. Hunters are gonna go back and bag T-rex, discover it tastes like chicken, and there you go.

But. Diversified companies. Corporate logic. You get right down to it, it isn't surprising they came to the decision they did. What they did probably made sense to the army-sized division of the company obsessed with beating numbers into submission, those people who tweak and twist the terms of the mortgage division to pry \$45,432.11 more out of each mortgage, on average, for every 30-year term, or those other guys who try to optimize the kill-to-cost ratio for the bombs they are shipping to The Current Crisis, or trying to shave 0.02 cents off the cost of a 6-wing meal. And there you go.

Need more proof, courtesy of our order-from-chaos algorithms?

**To:** k.k.clark@tfclabs.com

**From:** j.pemberon@tfclabs.com

**Re:** New Meat Processing Procedures

The large size of the samples makes this new product extremely easy to incorporate into all boneless and skinless products. Recipe has been altered slightly to accommodate new samples. Please refer to attachment for details. Subjectively, the new meat samples are much more delicately textured and robustly flavored. We anticipate the focus groups will go well. Is it anticipated that we will roll this out for all non-whole-chicken products, or is further research into the pseudo-bone support system necessary?

Or this snip of audio that someone posted on a forgotten podcasting site:

*"We're going into the meat lockers now. Big secrets, you know, maybe like the old thing about the chicken with 6 legs. We bet there is GM going on here. Transparent News, from...wait, that's not chicken, that's...gigantic!"*

Or more, how about from the news?

### **TFC's Explosive Growth Surprises Analysts, Delights Investors**

*By Gene Riverside, Reuters*

SHANGHAI (August 3) — Tennessee Fried Chicken, or TFC, has always been popular in China, but now it's a craze that is sweeping the world. Some pundits believe this is a rebellion against both ends of the fast food spectrum: greasy burgers on one side and healthy sandwiches and fresh Mexican on the other. Fried chicken is a throwback, a comfort food, a reminder of simpler times.

But no matter what the reason, franchisees are dazzled. "Since the new recipe was introduced, sales are up three hundred percent. I've opened seven new franchises."

And customers are pleased. "This is the best stuff! I can eat this all day, breakfast lunch and dinner," said one U.S. patron.

Most of all, Americonglomerate International's shareholders are pleased. Its fast food division profits have sustained company performance, even during downturns in their technology divisions.

And what about all those photos of the chicken farms, empty and neglected? Remember those? They flashed across the tubes overnight, everyone had a nervous laugh, and then Britney's kid shoved that asshole out the window, and bang! Nobody cares.

You may be saying this crap doesn't matter. Who cares if I've been enjoying a cheerful bite of Tyrannosaur, if my TFC is TFT or whatever these past few years? If poaching the past can't change the present, if it gets a few smelly chicken farms off the countryside and saves a few pounds of carbon, then what's it hurt?

Well.

**03012017-MPF7111 OPERATIONAL REPORT,  
MEAT PRODUCTION FACILITY #7111**

*SUBMITTED BY DR. J. FERNANDEZ*

SUBJECT: Inability to continue meat production.

*OVERVIEW:* Scarcity of T. Rex for meat production has been noted over the course of the last year's reports, as has the proliferation of herbivorous species. We have provided JurasSat photos of widespread defoliation caused by herbivore proliferation. Moving meat production to another species has proven largely unsuccessful, with the exception of the new "Dark Meat" products derived from Velociraptor. Widespread harvesting of another key predator has accelerated all trends noted in previous reports. We believe the ecosystem may be beyond recovery.

*DETAILS:* Please see attachments for photography and video of deforested areas, starving herbivores, analysis of current ecosystem, and additional data.

*CONTINGENCIES:* We suggest Americonglomerate strongly consider a program to dramatically reduce herbivores by diverting hunting resources to this goal; collection and breeding of any T. Rex and Velociraptor samples; as well as recision to prior means of meat production.

*RAMIFICATIONS:* Although T. Chang's theory regarding the self-repairing nature of the time-space continuum appears to be largely accurate, we cannot predict the future ramifications of effects on this scale. Although we appear to be operating near the known edge of dinosaur extinction, we do not know if this is a true history or a temporal artifact.

*NOTE FROM A. ALLEN, MARKETING:* It has also been noted that other corporations may be at or near the point at which they have temporal crossing capability, if they were to intersect with our operations, or analyze a profoundly altered world shortly thereafter, Americonglomerate could be adversely affected in the popular and horizontal media.

And, more news:

**Americonglomerate Defense Deflects Asteroid in Near-Earth Encounter**

*By I. Edwards, Reuters*

Ft. Lauderdale (April 2) — Arguments about the cost of ongoing defense spending went out the window today as Americonglomerate deflected—or, more accurately, destroyed—an asteroid that many scientists thought could have threatened life on earth.

"It was simply too close for comfort," said Dr. Samantha Brooks, a Americonglomerate scientist. "Anything that comes within one million miles of earth should be considered a threat."

Deflecting the asteroid is a major win for Americonglomerate's defense divisions, hit hard by losses over the last quarter. Americonglomerate hopes increased defense investment will also help offset losses in its food products division.

So. Now you're getting the big picture. And now you know why TFC tastes like, well, like it always did, and why they're closing all those new stores.

And I hope, like me, you're just a little bit upset. I mean, I grew up believing this. I grew up thinking this was the way things were. Dinosaurs romping happily around, eating people dumb enough to sit on a toilet in front of them, then, bang! A big-old asteroid comes and takes 'em out. I mean, that's what all the history books say.

But maybe that isn't the way it was. Once.

I mean, this isn't the way things are supposed to be. We're all happy and transparent and social-media-y now. Everyone knows what the big corporations are doing. And they listen to us. And they show us how they listen. And it's a big happy good better world because of it, in so many ways.

But I can't help thinking. Like, how many other things have been screwed into my head by companies like Americonglomerate, companies that ain't so open and happy as we think? And just how open is, well, anything?

What were we before?

So.

If you look closely in the blogs and papers over the next couple of days, you'll probably see a small entry, maybe from my Mom, maybe from Wendell's girlfriend, asking where we are. There might be a missing persons report at a Pasadena police station. Or there might be nothing at all. Because we never really were. Much of anything, anyway.

Or, who knows, we might be right back.

You see, that's how you know our neat little chaos-puller works. We were able to pull the plans for the time machine off Americonglomerate's nets, and it's a simple thing to make. The professors at Caltech think it's just another molecular beam epitaxy machine.

Still confused? Consider this: the neat little trick that allows us to pull order out of chaos also works the other way. Or so says Navid. He knows Terrence Chang's theories a lot better than me. He thinks the self-repairing nature of the continuum does have limits. And he thinks he can, well, bias them. Put a spin on them. Weave a thread that falls down through the millions of years to make some pinpoint changes in the current day.

We've got it all calculated. It should start with Chang and his theories, and in the Americonglomerate labs. It should result in them never developing time travel.

Of course, there's a small chance it will do a lot more. Maybe you'll get MyTube and YourSpace and stuff 10 years earlier, or maybe we'll all be descended from dogs.

No. I'm making the last one up. Anyway, that's the story. Hope it sticks with you a bit.

But, right now, I have a quick little trip to make.

# Lopsided Love

...Ruskin Drake

## **ASIM congratulates Ruskin Drake on his first publication.**

*Luckily for me, “Lopsided Love” is the story that would not die. Nine drafts, ranging from minor tweaks to serious overhauls. Five titles. The submission process seemed like a gauntlet, pounding the story into a bloody mess, forcing me to rebuild it into something stronger. I am proud of its ultimate destination. I wanted to write an unconventional love story. A young protagonist like Katie kept the story innocent, hinting at magical morality while not dwelling on it, but not shying away from the consequences of her actions. The story also allowed me to work with one of my favorite motifs, which I call “magic in the open.” Magic remains a powerful and selective talent, but it is otherwise treated as plausible. In this story, Katie doesn’t waste time and energy on too many questions — she just accepts the fantastic. I appreciate this implicit belief, because it lets me focus on what is happening and doesn’t make me stop to explain how a character struggles to accept or deny the intrusion of the supernatural upon her life. Call it the price of my impatience. “Let me get to the fun stuff,” I demanded of my story. “I have no time to waste on mortal disbelief. There’s enough of that in the real world!”*

Katie’s footsteps aroused the unexpected creak of rotten floorboards when she stepped into Cyprus Shores Relationship Consultation. The walls too were wood, crooked like teeth in need of braces and traced with liquid shadows cast by the fire in the center of the room. Little else occupied the room: a table with two chairs; some cupboards; an old woman dozing in a rocking chair.

Katie looked back over her shoulder. She saw the mall through the doorway, with its wall of shops and traffic jam of customers. She looked around the room once more: it didn’t change. Even outside the mall, she’d never seen a shop like this. It was almost a hut.

She ignored the odd feeling at the back of her neck, urging her to leave. Her problems went far beyond her experience. Katie was a very mature ten-year-old — she wore make-up and carried a purse, after all.



A tea kettle over the fire screeched with steam. Snorting, the old woman awoke. Her rocking chair wobbled as she struggled to stand. “Just when I got comfortable,” she muttered. Once on her feet, she shuffled towards the fire.

Katie took a step deeper into the out-of-place shop. The old woman didn’t seem to notice her, despite standing all of a dozen feet away, so Katie cleared her throat.

The old woman turned, squinting until she found Katie. Her eyes stretched open, blinking rapidly. “Are you a customer?” the old woman asked, her voice like the whisper of an old book’s pages.

“Is — is this Cyprus Shores Relationship Consultation?” Katie asked.

“Gracious, you are a customer,” said the old woman. “Don’t get one of those every day. Sit, sit, get off your feet.” The old woman waved towards the table with one hand as she removed the tea kettle from the fire.

Still unsure, Katie slipped into the bigger chair. It resembled a cushy throne.

“Not there!” the old woman snapped, and Katie leapt up before her bottom had a chance to dent the cushion. “The other one. That chair is mine.”

The other chair was a hardwood seat with a back shaped like a heart. Katie sat and squirmed as she fought for comfort.

“I hope you like green tea, because that’s what we’re having.” The old woman came to the table bearing a tea set decorated with smiling cherubs in chipped paint. As she sat, it seemed she got her first good look at Katie. “Why, you’re just a child,” she said.

“Yes,” Katie said, “I’m a little young, I guess.” Her lungs clutched in a painful moment, but she tried not to let panic show. “That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Well — no, I suppose it isn’t,” said the old woman. “Young money is no less valuable than old money, eh?” Despite trembling hands, she poured two cups of tea without spilling. Katie took her cup and drank without hesitation, as any adult would surely do. The bitter brew struck her so hard, however, that she sucked on her lips furiously.

“Perhaps a lump or two of sugar, dear?” the old woman said, nudging a sugar bowl across the table.

Katie took a handful of cubes and dropped them into her cup, a little more reluctant to drink this time. The old woman stared at her, eyes like foggy marbles, as she drank her own tea. With lips puckered, Katie tried a sip. The sugar helped her force it down her throat. “Best tea I’ve ever had,” she croaked.

“You flatter an old woman with honeyed words. I like that. Now, let’s get the formalities out of the way, yes? My name is Minerva, and I will be your relationship consultant today. You may call me Ms. Minerva. That’s *Mizz*, mind you, with a *zuh* or two.”

“Oh,” Katie said, and she held out her hand as she was always told to do with introductions. “I’m Katie Sanders.”

Ms. Minerva leaned over the table to shake Katie’s hand. Something creaked; Katie couldn’t tell whether it was the furniture or the old woman’s bones. “A pleasure, I’m sure,” Ms. Minerva said. She leaned back and folded her hands. “So, what can I do for you, dear?”

“Well, there’s this boy—” Katie said.

“Another person is involved?” Ms. Minerva said. “That’s always a good way to start.”

“Um, yeah. Anyway, I like him, a lot.” For a moment, Katie lost her nerve. She chewed her lip until she thought she might bite it off completely. “I think I might love him,” she finally blurted. “I don’t know if he feels the same way, though.”

“Ah,” Ms. Minerva said. “It’s like that, is it? Sounds like Aphrodite has been napping on the job again.”

“Aphrodite?” Katie asked. “Who’s that?”

“The Greek goddess of love, my dear. Shakespeare said, ‘The course of true love never did run smooth.’ That would be Aphrodite’s fault.” The old woman clucked her tongue, a dry sound without saliva. “Still, this business is devoted to her, and we do our best to help her out. It’s a full time job with no overtime and a lousy dental plan.” She smiled. Her teeth reminded Katie of the walls, only with less nails and more holes.

“Can you help me?” Katie asked.

“Possibly. But why aren’t you sure of this boy’s feelings?”

“Well, he calls me names, like brat or pest. And he tugs on my pigtails. But sometimes, he trades his apple for my pudding at lunch. He’ll even talk to me nicely, when his friends aren’t around.”

“He’s giving you mixed signals, then.”

Katie nodded. “I wish he’d stop being a jerk and just be nice.” She looked around, as if someone might overhear, then leaned over and whispered, “I want him to be my boyfriend.” Immediately after she said it, she squeezed her lips shut with her fingertips.

“Goodness,” Ms. Minerva said. “I have to see what has you so worked up.” She stood, her back straightening as best it could, and limped to the fire. Smoke twisted around her, and she waved it away, shoulders trembling with a weak cough. She passed a hand through the flame, muttering, “Show me.”

The fire slowed, its dance reduced to a subtle sway. The oranges and yellows seeped away until it looked like an ice sculpture. In the fire, a picture materialized, and Katie saw him — Justin Parker, the object of her stomach-squirming affections. She couldn’t help but sigh; those eyes, that messy hair, the smile — it melted her like ice cream in the sun.

Ms. Minerva grunted. “Looks like a satyr. They don’t groom, either.”

“How did you do that?” Katie asked. “With the fire?”

“Magic, obviously. What did you expect?” Ms. Minerva hunched over, staring deep into the fire once more. “I can’t understand what you see in this unkempt little boy, but I might have a spell for the situation.”

“A spell?” Katie asked. “Is it okay to cast *spells* on people?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s quick and painless,” Ms. Minerva said. She reached into the fire as if it wasn’t even there, stirring the flames and mumbling. The image of Justin smoldered, a core of color revitalizing the lifeless fire.

Suddenly, the fire burst like a solar flare. Katie wasn’t sure whether she fell, or jumped, out of her chair. The old woman cried out, stumbling back from the fire. She tore off her shawl and threw it to the floor, attempting to snuff out the flames by stepping on it with battered slippers. The rest of her remained unharmed, if a little red. “I hate it when that happens,” she hissed.

“Did it work?” Katie asked.

“Thank you for your concern. Just some third degree burns, but a trifle.”

“Sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’ve had worse.” Ms. Minerva peeled the shawl from the floor, her face sour. “I just wove this two decades ago. What a waste.”

“So,” Katie said, after she thought an acceptable amount of time for concern passed, “did it work?”

“It better have. Give it a day, though, to make sure.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!” Katie hopped a bit in her excitement. “You’re the best! How can I ever repay you?”

“Well, I accept all major credit cards, cash, and checks with at least two forms of ID.”

“Oh. Right. I have money.” Katie unzipped her purse. She dropped a handful of bills on the table, then upended her purse and shook out the coins within. “I hope it’s enough. It’s all I have.”

Ms. Minerva picked at the crumpled bills, trying to tug out the wrinkles. She slid the coins into different piles. Then she shrugged and said, “It will do. We’ll call it a child’s discount.”

Katie hefted her purse. “Thank you, Ms. Minerva!” she said, trying not to giggle. She walked to the door.

“Oh, Katie?”

“What?”

“Have you considered cutting your hair? You’d look good with a pixie cut, I think.” Katie, confused, said, “No, I never really thought about it. Why?”

“I just thought you should consider the possibility, that’s all.” The old woman smiled. “Goodbye for now, dear.”

It felt like a bucket of crickets hopped inside Katie’s stomach. She skipped lunch, afraid she might throw up in class if she ate. As eager as she was to have Justin share her feelings, she couldn’t bring herself to face him until much later.

Katie packed all her things early. As soon as the school bell freed her from torment, she leapt from her desk and hurried for the door. She tried not to run down the hall, but her feet left the ground every other step.

The crickets in Katie’s stomach hosted a tap-dance competition as she stood outside Justin’s classroom. As she checked her teeth for lipstick in her compact mirror, Justin entered the hallway. A few of his friends accompanied him, but Katie didn’t care. She couldn’t last another day without him. She didn’t care if the whole school knew it! With a deep breath, Katie approached Justin. She looked up into his eyes and smiled. “Hi, Justin,” she said.

Justin glanced at his friends before he looked down at her. He did not smile. “What?” he said.

Katie lost some of her smile. That was a rather rude tone to use with someone you like, she thought. However, she gave it another try. “Um, your hair — it looks really good today.”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling. It didn’t seem like a nice smile. “Wish I could say the same about yours. Pigtails for a pig, huh?”

Justin's friends laughed, and one of them snorted. The others joined in, squashing their noses into snouts with their fingers.

Katie backed away. She didn't know why he was acting like this. Hadn't Ms. Minerva fixed him? She turned, ready to run, but someone grabbed her arm and pulled. She stumbled back into Justin, and he pushed her into one of the other boys.

"Hold her, Chris," Justin said. "I need to fix her hair. Pigs are only supposed to have one tail."

Chris nodded and grabbed hold of Katie's arms. She tried to pull free. Chris twisted his hands a little, burning her skin.

Justin went back into the classroom. When he returned, he had scissors.

Speed and tears blurred Katie's surroundings as she ran through the mall. She collided with only a few people. In her distress, she neglected to apologize.

At last, Katie reached Cyprus Shores Relationship Consultation. She took a moment to wipe her eyes and nose on her arm. When she felt ready, she stomped in, shoulders hunched, fists clenched. Once again, the old woman dozed in her rocking chair. To wake her, Katie cried, "Your spell sucked!"

Ms. Minerva snorted. She struggled awake. Finally roused, she said, "Someone there?"

"I said that your spell sucked!"

When the old woman's eyes managed to focus, they looked at Katie, then drifted up to look at her head. "Isn't that hat somewhat unseasonable?" Ms. Minerva asked.

Katie had taken a winter cap from the school lost-and-found. It itched, and she felt sweat in her hair. But it was better than showing the world what she now showed the old woman as she yanked the cap off her head. One pigtail fluttered free. The other one didn't; it was now nothing but a stump of hair held by a scrunchie. "He did this to me," Katie said. Anger dammed up her tears for now, though it began to crack like her voice. "Do you call this love? Do you think this is what I wanted?"

"Katie, calm down," Ms. Minerva said, rising from her chair.

"Calm down?" Katie said. "Are you completely blind? Look what he did!"

"You have to calm down, child," Ms. Minerva said. Her voice hardened like clay in a kiln. "Let's just talk about this like adults, shall we?"

"What is there to talk about?" Katie said. She clutched at her former pigtail. "He might as well have cut out a piece of my heart! Why did you do this to me?"

"Katie Sanders!" Ms. Minerva shouted. Her fury towered over Katie's diminutive anger and stuffed it in a locker after taking its lunch money. "I told you to calm down, and you *will* calm down."

But Katie could not calm down. The sweet, strange old woman was gone, replaced by something large, scary, and more. Katie could only whimper, her lip trembling and tears dripping. Once she started to cry, she couldn't stop. Her eyes pumped pain. She couldn't believe Justin would do this to her.

Ms. Minerva crouched down beside Katie, one hand on Katie's shoulder while the other stroked her face and hair. "Hush, child," Ms. Minerva said. "Love isn't easy, you know. Besides, we're not done yet."

Katie's face felt cool as the tears dried. A few sniffles escaped her nose, but the worst had passed.

"There," Ms. Minerva said. "That's better. Now, let's deal with this, shall we?"

Katie nodded, wiping an arm across her nose.

"First, what are you going to do about your hair?" Ms. Minerva asked.

"Dad gave me some money to get my hair styled at the salon," Katie said.

"What, the one by the Orange Julius?" The old woman shook her head, her face sour. "They'll charge twenty dollars just to cut off the other pigtail, maybe snip a few more hairs to look busy. Waste of money. I'll cut it for you. Come sit."

Katie let Ms. Minerva lead her to the chair. As the old woman went to the cupboards, Katie freed her lopsided hair from the scrunchies.

Ms. Minerva returned, holding a pair of scissors with teeth. "Pinking shears," she said. "I usually use them for my weaving, but I think they'll cut hair well enough."

Katie closed her eyes, not wanting to witness her long hair's final moments. She felt the scissors chew through her hair, and cringed.

"This look will suit you," Ms. Minerva said. "Shorter hairstyles are elegant. They add an air of wisdom to a woman, even a young one." Katie's head felt lighter. "Besides," the old woman said, "you won't need to spend so much time brushing it, and your head will be cooler in the summer. There. Take a look."

Katie opened her eyes and looked into the mirror that Ms. Minerva held. She didn't recognize herself. "I guess I have to get used to it," she said.

Ms. Minerva placed scissors, mirror, and hair on the table. She sat down. "Now that that's settled," she said, "let's figure out what to do next."

"What *can* we do?" Katie asked.

"I could check the employee manual," Ms. Minerva said. She reached under the table and withdrew a scroll, yellow and brittle — much like Ms. Minerva. She unrolled it and started to read.

Katie, meanwhile, combed her fingers through her hair, twisted a lock around a finger, just sort of trying it out. It wasn't so bad, she supposed.

"Ah," Ms. Minerva said. "I see the problem now. 'Spell not recommended for mortals under sixteen years of age. Use at own risk for mortals *over* sixteen years of age.'" Ms. Minerva scratched her head. "Don't remember reading that before."

"What was the spell supposed to do, anyway?" Katie asked.

"It is a spell to inflame passions," Ms. Minerva said. "From the behavior you described, I guessed that he already felt for you, as boys your age express their tender feelings in a mix of sadism and denial."

"What?" Katie said.

"It's like the saying about how you hurt the ones you love. Anyway, I assumed the spell would help him work past the usual boy issues, get to the love buried within him. It seems it just made him worse at expressing himself."

"Oh," Katie said. "So what now?"

"Just a moment," Ms. Minerva said. She unrolled more of the manual. "Let's see. Troubleshooting. Backfired spells, here we go. 'In the event that a spell does not function as desired, a spell of opposing intent should be cast, to restore balance.' All right then." The old woman rolled up the scroll. "Since the first spell created intense interest in you, we should aim for disinterest. That should balance."

“Are you sure about that?” Katie said. She had started to question the wisdom of using magic to get what she wanted.

“The manual said so. It’s never steered me wrong before.” Ms. Minerva frowned. “Not that I’ve used the manual before, of course.”

“Well, anything’s better than what he’s doing to me now. Cast the spell, please.”

“I have just the thing,” Ms. Minerva said. She reached for the hair on the table, pulled a few strands free, and then from somewhere within her sleeve she produced a small doll with ‘JUSTIN’ carved on its chest. “I made this doll yesterday, just in case.” Ms. Minerva held the end of the hair atop the doll’s head and twined it around its face. When she finished, it looked like the Wolfman from the old movies. “You must carry this with you,” she said, handing the doll to Katie, “until you see him again. Your hair over his face will blind him, you see, and he will no longer see you, metaphorically speaking.”

“Are you really sure this will work?” Katie asked.

“No.” The old woman grinned. “But it can’t hurt, can it?”

The bell rang, signaling the end of school. Katie gathered her things and left the classroom, in no particular hurry. She had managed to avoid Justin all day, reluctant to chance another bad outcome. She would just wait.

The inevitable moment arrived when Justin stood at the bus stop with his friends. Katie rode the bus, too, so she could not avoid contact now. She stood apart from them and stared at the sidewalk. One of the boys snorted, and the others laughed. Katie’s cheeks burned. When she risked a glance, she saw the boys grinning and nudging each other. Justin, however, just stared ahead silently.

The bus pulled up and opened its doors with a hiss. The boys walked past her to get on. Justin’s eyes passed over her as if she was as invisible as the wind. Katie didn’t expect that to feel worse than when he had acted mean to her. Somehow, it did.

Justin continued to ignore Katie throughout the week. No, not ignore — that implied conscious effort. She just fell under his notice whenever she encountered him. Each time it happened, it felt like she swallowed a little piece of glass.

Katie could only hold so much glass in her gut before it cut up her insides, so she returned to the hut in the mall. This time, the old woman was awake.

“Welcome back, Katie,” Ms. Minerva said.

Katie smiled as best she could. “It worked,” she said. “He doesn’t even know I exist now.”

“And that isn’t any better, is it?” Ms. Minerva sighed, shaking her head. “This is exactly why I wasn’t born a love goddess. I think you need to speak with the manager.”

“You have a manager?” Katie asked.

“Well, I would call us partners,” Ms. Minerva sniffed. “However, this is more her specialty than mine. Credit where credit is due, after all. We’ve faced worse than this before, so I’m certain she’ll have an answer for you.”

Ms. Minerva went to the far wall of the hut and knocked three times, paused a moment, and knocked once more. The wood groaned, reluctant. Ms. Minerva knocked again, her bony knuckles sharp and persuasive. The wall relented, the boards peeling back like a banana and forming a doorway. Katie caught the smell of flowers and the song of birds. She couldn't see where the doorway led, for only brightness came through.

Ms. Minerva snapped her fingers and said, "Come along, girl, come along." Katie followed her through the doorway. She couldn't see at first, but her eyes grew accustomed to the light.

They stood in a forest of tall trees. Pine needles stuck between Katie's feet and her sandals, and she shook them out. As she looked back, she could not see the doorway, nor any sign of the mall. And she knew of no forests anywhere near her town. She was lost.

"Oh, blast," Ms. Minerva said. "I forgot my walking stick. Be a dear and help an old woman, won't you?" She extended an arm, and Katie held it. As they made their own path through the woods, the sounds seemed to hush. Animals appeared between the trees and stared at them. An owl swooped down to perch on the old woman's shoulder.

"Wow," Katie said.

"What?" Ms. Minerva said. "Oh. Owls like me, for some reason."

They reached a lake where swans glided. A woman in a green bikini and sunglasses lay on an open clam shell, floating in the centre of the lake. Ms. Minerva cupped her hands around her mouth, and shouted as loud as her papery voice allowed, "Venus!"

The woman in the seashell sat up. Katie heard her faint cry as she said, "What?"

"Get over here. A customer needs to talk to you."

"Why can't you handle it, oh Wise One?" Venus called.

"Screwed-up love is your area of expertise, not mine."

"All right, all right, I'm coming."

The swans on the lake converged on the seashell, pushing it. Venus stepped off when it reached the shore, lifting her sunglasses to perch atop the nest of her hair. "You're interrupting my tanning time," she told Ms. Minerva.

"It looks terrible with your red hair, anyway," Ms. Minerva said.

"I don't care. It's in right now. Get with the times." Venus reached for a robe hanging on a tree branch and slipped it on.

"Fads come and go," Ms. Minerva said. "A classic look is eternal. Anyway, enough of that. Twice have I cast spells for this girl, and they're just not working out."

"Long story?" Venus asked.

"It is."

"Shorten it."

Ms. Minerva told the story, illustrating each point on her fingers. "Girl loves boy who may or may not love her in return, we inflame his passions, boy goes nuts, we attempt balance, he loses interest completely, and now girl is sad."

"Oh, one of those," Venus said dismissively. "Didn't you read the manual?"

"Of course I did. How do you think we ended up at this juncture?"

Venus regarded Katie. "I apologize for all the trouble," she said. "I assure you that we are doing the best we can to fix the situation."

Katie nodded. "I know. I just wanted Justin to feel about me the same way I feel about him, that's all."

“Yes, love does work best when it goes both ways, doesn’t it?”

“To be fair,” Ms. Minerva said, “the boy already had the feelings we sought. His expression just left much to be desired.”

“I see,” Venus said. “Tell me, girl, have you ever heard of Helen of Troy? Now *that* woman had some love problems.”

“We didn’t really help, did we?” the old woman reminded her.

“No, I suppose we didn’t. Anyway, Helen of Troy had some bad luck with men. She loved two of them at one time, you see. Neither man liked this very much, so they had a fight. A big fight. One might call it epic.”

“The point?” said Ms. Minerva.

“I was getting to it,” Venus said. “Anyway, love doesn’t obey our plans. Not even mine. It hurts a lot of the time, and sometimes we make bad choices.” She placed her hand on Katie’s shoulder and looked into her eyes. Her face held a serious expression that Katie would have thought beyond Venus’s capabilities. “Is this boy a good choice?” Venus asked.

For the first time, Katie thought about her feelings rather than felt them. She wanted to be Justin’s girlfriend. Unfortunately, trying to make him feel like she did hadn’t worked out so well. “I don’t know,” Katie said. “I don’t want him like he is now. But if you could make him like he was before, maybe we could have another chance. No magic this time.”

Venus smiled. “That might be best.” She gestured to the lake. A swan broke off from the rest and made its way to the shore. “Full refund,” Venus told it.

Rearing back, the swan beat its wings. Katie felt the wind they created. A feather dislodged from the swan’s wing and fluttered into the air like a butterfly in search of a flower. It circled Ms. Minerva’s head. She tried to blow it away, but it persisted. With obvious reluctance, the old woman extended her hand, and the feather dropped into her palm. She stared at it unhappily. “I was going to buy yarn for a new shawl with that commission,” she said.

“Come now,” Venus said. “Surely everyone deserves a freebie, especially at this age?”

Ms. Minerva split her disappointment into a noise and a hand gesture. “It’s your business, not mine.”

Venus pulled her sunglasses back over her eyes and took off her robe. “Well, my skin still needs some of the sun’s attention. Goodbye, Katie. Remember that love isn’t always easy, but it’s worth it.”

Ms. Minerva extended her arm, which Katie took, and they left Venus to her sunbathing. They walked through the forest until the old woman stopped. “Sit on that rock, won’t you?” she said. Katie did so. “Now, open your eyes,” said the old woman.

“They are open,” Katie said.

“You are mistaken. Now, open them.”

“I’m telling you, they *are* open. See?” She opened her eyes even wider. Suddenly, there was no forest. They were in Ms. Minerva’s hut, and Katie sat in the heart-backed chair. She blinked in the sudden half-light.

“I told you so,” Ms. Minerva said. She got a jar and a feather duster from her cupboard. “Here is your money,” Ms. Minerva drew a fistful of bills and coins from the jar. “I’ll do without a new shawl for awhile. Stand up.” Katie stood. After jamming the pristine swan



feather amongst the ragged brown feathers, the old woman fluttered the duster over Katie's skin and clothing. Katie expected magical dust motes to swirl about, but nothing remarkable seemed to happen. "That should break any magical connections between you and your boy," Ms. Minerva said. "Oh, do you still have the doll I gave you?"

Katie searched her backpack until she found it. She handed it to the old woman.

"Ah, good," Ms. Minerva said. "I can recycle this."

"You're not really normal, are you?" Katie asked before she thought about it. "You or Venus."

"That depends on how you define normal. The answer, in any case, is no." Ms. Minerva settled into her rocking chair, and it creaked in welcome. "Now, go on, get. We fixed you, so stay fixed."

"Um, okay," Katie said. "Thank you, Ms. Minerva."

"You're welcome." Ms. Minerva's eyes closed, and soon she snored.

Katie left. She made it all the way to the mall's exit before she turned around. For some reason, she expected Cyprus Shores Relationship Consultation to be gone. It wasn't. The old woman was still there: asleep, and snoring, but still there.

During lunch the next day, Katie stared at her pudding and wished for an apple. As if reading her mind, Justin tossed his crumpled paper bag on the table and sat across from her. "Pudding again?" he asked.

"Yes," Katie said, staring at her food.

"Trade for my apple?"

"Sure."

As they switched snacks, Katie dared to look at him. He seemed normal enough. No scissors, at least.

"Did you do something with your hair?" Justin asked.

"A friend of mine fixed it," Katie said, her tone nonchalant. "I think it suits me. Thanks."

Justin's face reddened and he concentrated on his pudding. Plastic scraped as he swirled the spoon in the cup. "I'm sorry I cut your hair," he said at last. "I really don't know why I did. I was a real jerk."

Katie smiled. "It's okay. Hair grows back."

"Well, it looks good. Really." Justin took his lunch and stood up. "I'll see you around, Katie."

"See you," Katie said. When Justin left, giggles overcame her, and she had to cover her mouth to contain them. He said her hair looked good! Maybe his attitude towards her had changed already. Maybe this was the beginning Katie wanted.

If not, she could wait.

# Play Time

James R Cain

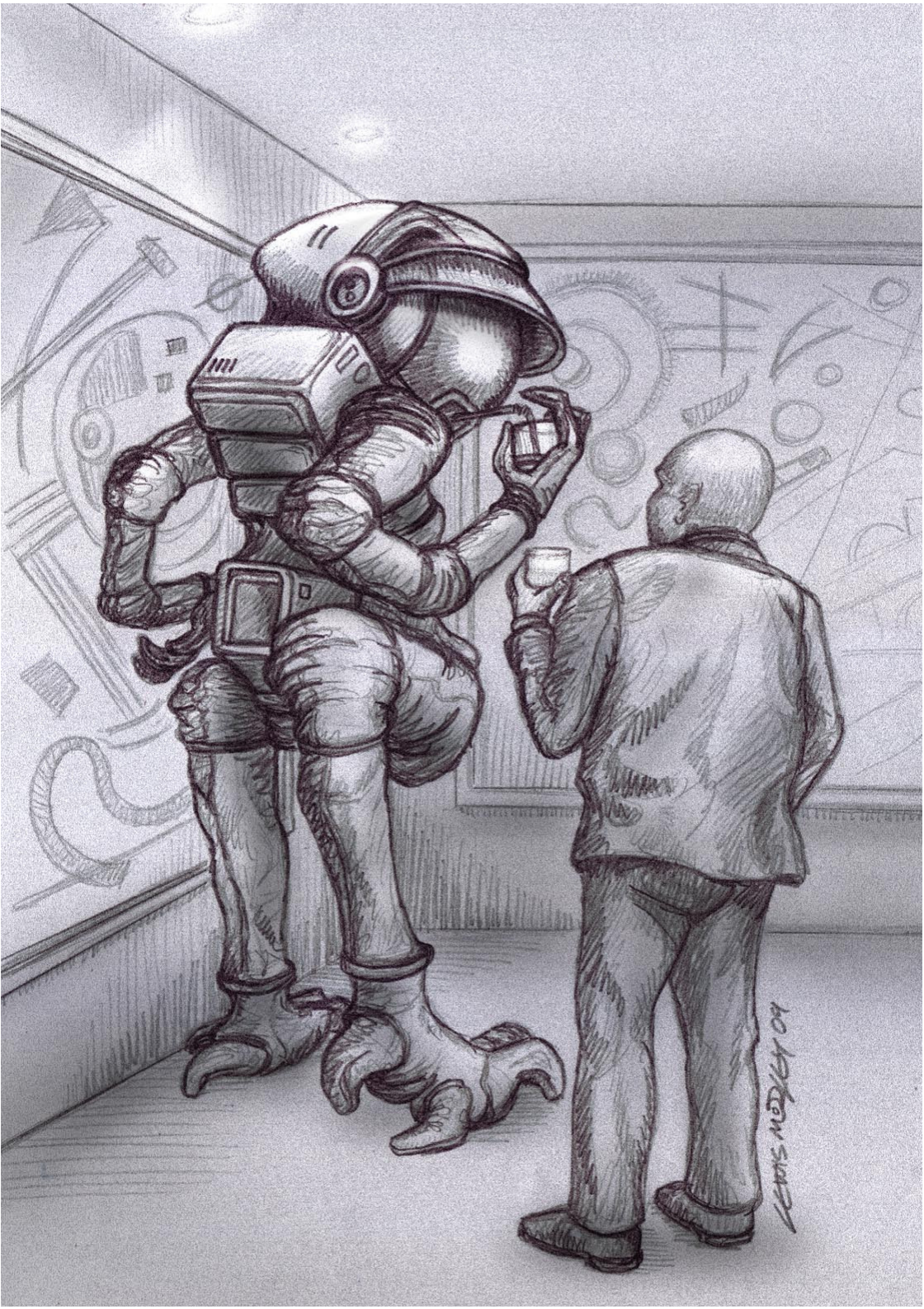
Clowny picked open stitching with a  
rusted pin,  
tore out stuffing,  
ripped cloth,  
all while Teddy watched,  
with his glass eyes glistening  
unable to move,  
or lift a claw  
to prevent his demise.

"No more love for you," Clowny snickered.  
"All the hugs for me!"  
He flopped back on a cushion  
his red cheeks blazing,  
and skewered the pin inside his shoe.

Sipping coffee, Mrs Evans  
found Teddy,  
disemboweled,  
his cotton entrails trailed about the floor..  
Tommy was slapped and sent to his room.

Clownie laughed to see this  
with a never-changing grin.

That Christmas,  
Clownie espied  
Tommy opening  
his presents on the bed.  
He giggled from the toy bin,  
and fingered that secret prick,  
and muttered,  
"Oh! What fine games,  
the New Year would bring."



CHRIS MORTON '09



# Kandinsky's Mistakes

...Darren Goossens

Of course Simon was thrilled when the aliens landed in our parking lot and asked for his advice. If he had not been so thrilled, if he had thought a little bit harder about his actions, maybe the end of the world would not be quite so nigh. I always thought a politician or a rogue general would bring about the end of the world. Now it seems a second-rate art dealer and critic might have beaten them to it.

It was the end of a long day; the first and possibly last day of an exhibition by a new, young, 'hot' painter. Or not so hot now that people had actually *seen* her work. Simon saw the artist out — a distraught young lady who had anticipated triumph but met with indifference, the worst reaction of all — and slumped into an art-deco armchair beside a lamp shaped like the 1920s version of Felix the Cat.

"Ian," he said. "Have I lost my touch?" He mopped his brow with a red handkerchief and put it back in the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

"No." I continued crating up the champagne flutes, most of which remained unused. "Everything's going according to plan. Another dud artist, another pasting in the trade papers. You'll knock out a new book called *The Utter Fool's Guide to Light and Shade* or something and we'll keep trying to discover the next Picasso."

"I think that's a bit flippant. My reputation is not quite that shot. Something will turn up."

"I—"

A thunderous boom, followed by a loud metallic clang, reverberated in our ears. It sounded like it came from behind the gallery. We hurried into the loading bay and out into the car park through the small door set into the big roller door.

The alien ship settled onto the remains of our cluster of rubbish bins. Clouds of shredded plastic bags and dust puffed into the air each time the shiny steel ship, shaped like a house brick, nestled deeper into the ruins. I tasted ozone. We waited. I hoped to see a ramp extrude itself from the spaceship like it always does on TV. Disappointingly, a small door opened in the side and a couple of oddly proportioned figures in space suits backed down a ladder. They walked towards us across the debris. The shorter of the two must have been two metres tall. The complicated articulation of their suits showed their arms and legs to be multijointed. Their faces remained invisible behind blue visors.

"Simon Merriwether?" said a harsh but muffled voice.

"Yes."

"We have come many millions of kilometres — almost six light years — to ask your advice."

Simon beamed. “Of course you have,” he said. “Follow me to my office.”

There you have it: First Contact, more or less.

I trailed in last and closed the door. We sat at Simon’s conference table, a smallish rectangular table surrounded by four wooden chairs. The aliens barely fitted both for height and width, but their inhuman articulation did make it possible. Each time one of them moved a subtle aroma reminiscent of cloves teased my nose.

“Can Ian get you a drink, gentlemen...uh...gentle...er, my good visitors?”

“Scotch,” both said at once. “Single malt. No water. At room temperature. A double.”

Simon looked to me. “The good stuff, my boy.”

I gritted my teeth. “And for you, Simon?”

“Oh, the same, the same; our guests show excellent taste.”

I went into the tearoom, scrounged up some highball glasses and poured three drinks and brought them back to the table.

Indicating each in turn, Simon said: “Glaugnabb, Paul, this is Ian Pritchard. Ian, meet Glaugnabb and Paul. From a planet orbiting the — ahh — Barnard’s Star.” Glaugnabb was the taller one.

I waved at them across the table. They remained behind their masks, for all I knew breathing chlorine or krypton or something.

Simon’s eyes shone. “How can I help you?”

“We seek an understanding of Art,” said Paul.

I could hear the capital ‘A’.

“Visual Art,” added Glaugnabb. “We find most Earth-broadcast signals pointless, faulty or obvious, but *Sunday Arts* and the like we find fascinating.”

“Have you no Art yourselves?” Simon leaned over the table.

“We are practical people on Kenebrecht. And very mentally stable,” said Paul, as if that explained it.

“Have you the concept of beauty?” Simon did not look at me but said: “Ian, peanuts. You folks aren’t allergic to peanuts, are you?”

“Paul gets bilious.”

“I do not.” Paul half-turned to Glaugnabb. “We see things as right and wrong, Mr Merriwether.”

“Can a tree be right or wrong?”

“Such a thing is right if its presence is desirable, wrong if not.” Paul paused. “Explain ‘beauty’.”

Simon thought for a moment. “What might make a tree’s presence desirable?”

Paul said: “It may provide useful shade, act as part of the ecosystem, perform a structural function or be a wind-break.”

“Can it be simply decorative?”

“If its presence is useful then its presence is desirable.” Paul brought his drink up to near his face-mask; a thin pipe extruded downwards. He (if the use of the name Paul meant he was male) took an inaudible sip and nodded appreciatively.

“Then you would look upon it with pleasure?” Simon stuffed a handful of peanuts into his mouth. He must have been more nervous than he looked.

“I would not remove it.”

Simon screwed up his face in thought. He tapped his fingers on the shiny black tabletop and swallowed. "Many trees could perform these functions, trees of many species and varied appearance. Surely one type may be more desirable to look upon than another, even if they perform the same function?"

"A sound tree is better than a failing one, this is true." Glaugnabb selected a peanut and brought it near its face mask. A small door flipped open and (I'm going to pretend it was male) he placed the morsel inside.

"Surely some proportions are preferable to others."

"That would depend on the function of the tree," said Paul. "Windbreak, shade... really, Mr Merriwether, we would like to talk about Art, not forestry. We do not want to blot out your memory of us and find yet another expert to talk to." Glaugnabb made an open-handed gesture. "It's a messy and painful process and not altogether reliable. Paul does not like the sight of blood, not even Earthman's blood."

I gulped. The lunacy of the whole situation held me transfixed.

Simon seemed oblivious to the words 'painful' and 'blood'. He said:

"You mean you did not come to me first?"

Glaugnabb turned to Paul. "Is he twenty-third? Twenty-third?"

"I think so."

Simon looked glum for a moment then shot to his feet. "Let's have a look around the gallery."

If Paul and Glaugnabb wanted to see beauty, I would have advised against a tour. Truth be told we stocked work by a mixture of wannabees, hacks and *poseurs*. Some of the wannabees would make it — but they would have cut free from us by then. Some of the hacks *had* made it (once, long ago). The poseurs were better at talking about their work than doing it.

Simon led Paul and Glaugnabb around the gallery. He pontificated about each painting in turn. I tried to ignore him, having heard enough of words like 'juxtaposition' and 'insightful'. He stood in front of an enormous canvas, at least ten feet high and twenty wide, although skewed rather than rectangular. To it the artist had attached various parts of dismantled dolls — an arm here, a leg there, a hairless, wide-eyed head somewhere else.

He said: "This work is a controversial example of the juxtaposition of childhood images, grimly transfigured through the disassociation of their constituent components, as an indication of the—"

As if oblivious to Simon's every word, Paul pointed at the calendar visible through the tearoom door and said: "What is that?"

"It's just a calendar," said Simon. "As you can see, today is a Friday in July."

"It's a Mondriaan," I said. "The picture on the calendar is a Mondriaan. June was a Pollock, July gets a Mondriaan. *Composition in red, yellow and blue*, 1921."

"It is..." he seemed to hunt through his English vocabulary. "...good. I do not know why."

"That's Art!" jumped in Simon.

"If I think it good and do not know why, that is art?"

"It'll do for now," I muttered.

Simon stepped up to the calendar as if it were a prize exhibit. "Composition, visual harmony, is the *raison d'être* of this piece. It represents nothing but the universal — I

see now how universal they are! — universal rules of balance and harmony. Through formality it achieves universality!”

Simon could talk under liquid nitrogen, I’m sure.

Paul and Glaugnabb exchanged tones, some with a fuzzy burr, some pure. At times the sounds ascended into the ultrasonic, at times they swooped into the infra.

Glaugnabb said: “We will have six. Or seven.”

“You can have this one, right now.” Simon pulled the calendar off the wall.

“Not in reproduction,” stated Paul firmly. “We are serious.”

For a moment even Simon had nothing to say. “Mondriaans... Of *that* quality, of any quality, they rarely come on the market.”

“Other works must share in the qualities of that. Logically, it cannot be so unique.”

“Yes, but...”

“We can pay.”

“Gold?” Simon’s eyes shone. “Diamonds?”

“If you like. I believe rhodium is currently one of the more expensive elements on this planet.” Glaugnabb handed Simon a large transparent box containing a metal cylinder about the size of a jam jar. It shone like white gold would, under an arc lamp. The alien had handled it easily, but the unexpected weight nearly pulled Simon over.

We found ourselves at Simon’s office again. “I have many reproductions!” he said, “Many books. Would you like to—”

Paul made a gesture at least as universal as the laws of composition. He said: “I have engaged your services, Mr Merriwether. I do not wish to be troubled further until the goods arrive.” From a pocket in his suit he extracted a small silver box with a red button. “When you have the requisite six works, press this switch. It is a communicator. I will hear it. Please choose well: I do not want to have to remove your memories.”

Excited but plainly also worried, Simon led them back to the loading bay. They climbed the ladder into the spacecraft and it somehow zoomed away into the moonlit sky, but grew too small too quickly for perspective alone to be responsible.

We returned to the meeting table in Simon’s office, but did not sit. Two empty highball glasses, the silvery cylinder, and the silver box with the red button confirmed the memory of the visit.

Simon picked up his glass and looked at the viscid scotch sliding around in the bottom. He looked at me. “Mondriaans,” he said.

I shrugged. “Rothkos?”

“Kandinsky.”

“And hen’s teeth.”

He looked at the transparent box and its contents. “So this is rhodium.”

“Probably. Something rare and valuable. And shiny.”

He emptied the glass. “I’ll have to discover somebody.”

I thought about the stuff hanging on our walls. “They’re not in here.”

“Not yet.”

It was rhodium. About six kilograms. Ultra-high purity. Worth about two million dollars in total. With the money from that and from occasional deliveries of iridium, osmium

and the like that arrived by conventional mail we started a program of purchasing works we thought Glaugnabb and Paul would like. Simon took on the 'onerous' task of joining the world's wealthy art collector jetset, circling the globe following the best auctions, poring over catalogues, and staying in the best hotels because 'one must act like a serious player to become a serious player'.

To Simon's credit, Paul and Glaugnabb generally approved of his deliveries.

Usually the works arrived at the gallery in wooden packing cases. When the first few cases came I pulled the paintings out to admire them before repacking them for Paul or Glaugnabb to collect; but the novelty wore off surprisingly quickly and soon I merely passed the unopened crates along. And always to Paul or Glaugnabb. Only those two, sometimes together, sometimes separately, came to collect the works. They never sent an underling or a professional delivery firm — unless I suppose they worked for one themselves. Some months passed before the orbits of Simon and Glaugnabb again intersected.

Leaning on the bench in the gallery kitchen, Simon and I ruminated over a scotch each. He looked more tanned, more fit, and even more self-satisfied than ever previously. Apparently he had become an enigmatic figure in the art world, a buyer with deep pockets and quite specific taste. He loved that, he revelled and wallowed in it. Deepening the enigma, although perhaps bringing a little approbation upon him, the paintings he bought simply vanished; they never got loaned out for retrospective exhibitions. They just...disappeared.

It bugged me, too. I said: "Doesn't it concern you that these paintings are lost to Earth once they're taken by Paul or Glaugnabb?"

He looked into his Scotch and spring water, sniffed it appreciatively, then smiled at me condescendingly. I winced in anticipation.

"Ian Ian Ian. These paintings are Earth's ambassadors to the stars. They represent us, they show that we can bring things to these other peoples that, despite their stardrives and so forth, they cannot produce themselves." He saw the dubious look on my face and as a result went on with even more vigour: "And they speak across species and worlds. Do you think the artists would disapprove of their works showing such an amazing ability to bridge divides, to—"

"All right, all right," I gave in.

"More of a problem is that now my tastes are known, prices are beginning to skyrocket. But I have a plan."

"Hence your being here when a pick-up is due."

He smiled broadly and took a swig of the superb golden spirit (we only drank the best these days, at least when Simon was in town). "Indeed."

As if on cue, the sound of a spaceship clattering into our row of rubbish bins came to our ears.

I said: "Sounds like Glaugnabb is here."

"How do you know it's not Paul?"

"Paul knows how to park. No matter where I put those bins Glaugnabb always manages to hit them."

Simon smiled knowingly. "And you think Glaugnabb hits them by *accident*?"

I frowned.



We met him in the loading bay, amidst the stench of upturned garbage bins and ozone. The half-light of dusk made his shape more indistinct, but no more human.

Simon showed Glaugnabb through to our little meeting room. “Drink?”

“Eighteen year old single malt, with rain water at room temperature,” said the alien, making himself comfortable at the meeting table.

“Just what we were drinking ourselves. I take it you have a contact in Scotland,” chortled Simon happily.

I started preparing the drink.

“We have agents here and there.” The voice remained flat and colourless as always. He took the glass from me and sniffed it blandly, though did not yet drink.

Simon sat at the end of the table, at 90 degrees to Glaugnabb so as to appear less confrontational. “I have a suggestion,” he said.

“As have I. But after you.”

“Well. People are wondering what is happening to the works I buy. To put it another way, your technology is very advanced.”

“To put it another way, get to the point.”

“Can you copy these works? Exactly?”

“We do not have machines to examine every atom and assemble a copy exact to the atomic level, but we could make a copy of the same mass, colour and texture with chemically identical fibres, pigments and so forth, yes. We could match the statistical distributions of particles in the original, but not match it on a particle-by-particle basis. We can probe the work using various forms of radiation and make it appear identical to the original no matter how it was viewed or measured, unless for example someone did a direct comparison at the atomic scale using, as you would call them, atomic force microscopy or scanning electron microscopy.”

“Err... yes. Then need you keep the originals?”

“We have paid for them. Will you buy them back off us?”

Simon’s face fell. He *did* like art, he *did* like to treat artworks properly, he *did* believe in the value of mankind’s history of attempts at self expression. But he was *extraordinarily* fond of money.

He said: “What would you charge for such a copy, then?”

“Simon,” I muttered, “you wouldn’t try to pass off—”

He shushed me quite rudely. “Not during negotiations, please, Ian.”

“We would reduce your fee per painting by approximately 10%.”

I could see the wheels revolving in Simon’s brain. He could sell perfect reproductions as originals. If they were as perfect as Glaugnabb said, did that matter? I tried to frame an argument that Simon would not deconstruct on sight.

Simon said: “That sounds acceptable. Now, what can I do for you?”

“There is much interest in our collection back on Kenebrecht. People are drawn to the works but lack an understanding of why. Will you come to Kenebrecht and speak to us?”

“A lecture tour. To the stars!” Simon’s smile widened. “Are there many universities on the planet?”

“Many continents, many scholars. Many interested parties, yes.”

With the lightest of clicks Glaugnabb placed his empty glass on the table. Simon’s came down rather less precisely, as befitted a man who’d drained a whisky quickly.

"I shall be pleased to. Ian can do the purchasing and—"

I had to speak. "No, I'll come."

Glaugnabb said: "We want only Simon."

I looked at Simon. I said: "Simon will not go without me. Will he, Simon?"

Simon opened his mouth, closed it and opened it again. He tried to take a mouthful from his empty glass then put it down on the table with a disappointed clunk.

"I would never dream of taking such a fabulous opportunity without my colleague having his chance to come."

I suspect Glaugnabb sighed at that point, but his face mask hid any such exhalation or its Kenebrechtian equivalent. He nodded stiffly. "So be it."

He stood to leave. Simon and I showed him to the loading bay, although of course he knew the way. Simon swayed a little as he walked. We all stood on the platform, same height as a lorry flat-bed, and looked at the pile of rubbish bins, crumpled under Glaugnabb's rectangular flying saucer. A weak bulb lit the scene. Above us shone a lovely night sky, gibbous moon, Venus bright. Not a cloud to obscure a single glittering pinpoint.

"Ahh, the night sky!" enthused Simon tipsily. "Ian, the light!"

I cut the single bulb.

Simon babbled on: "Man's first and greatest inspiration in his exploration of the fundamental questions. See the diagonal splash of the Milky Way," his arm swept out a wobbly arc, "see how the eye traces out patterns, connecting star to star unbidden. See Venus, a focal point in the sky." He laughed. "Were it not for the weighty mass of the moon the scene would be balanced, perfectly trapped between stillness and infinity!"

I groaned. Even Simon rarely reached such exalted levels of pomposity. I wished him a thundering hangover.

"So removal of the moon would improve the appearance?" said Glaugnabb.

"Tonight, yes."

"New moon in a couple of weeks," I said. "Come back then."

I turned the light back on to aid Glaugnabb in getting down the stairs, although for all I knew his suit contained some sort of night vision apparatus or his eyes worked better than ours in the dark. I watched the alien climb the ladder into the side of the spaceship. A tailgate folded down and clanged onto the loading dock. I stepped inside the roller door and pulled on the endless chain that hauled it up. Glaugnabb stayed in his vehicle while I wheeled the latest acquisitions into the hold. Last thing I did was pick up two tool boxes sitting just inside the door of the spaceship; they contained today's precious metal. After a frightening episode early in the buying process had helped sort out some of the previously ill-defined aspects of our deal, I could be sure they were *not* radioactive.

I stepped out of the hold. The tailgate started to grind shut. Simon had long ago vanished into the building, probably to snore his way though the night in his little suite upstairs.

I went home.

The appointed time for our visit to Kenebrecht drew closer. I was not sure what to pack. Simon suffered no such doubt; he used up his luggage allowance (a generous 100 kg) with copies of various of his art histories and critical guides.

Astounded, I said: “Simon, you must have fifty copies of each of five books here. Are you crazy?”

“I know,” he said, stacking the last few volumes into a cardboard box. “But I just can’t fit any more copies in... Would you mind if I used some of your mass allowance?”

“I would mind. They only gave me twenty kilos as it is.”

“True, you’ll need that for the visual aids and other lecture materials.”

Glaugnabb arrived at the appointed time (10 pm) and place (loading bay, on top of rubbish bins). Again the tailgate of his spaceship clunked down, but this time I lugged luggage as well as wooden cases of paintings into the dark hold. Before I could step out Glaugnabb shepherded Simon in. Glaugnabb flicked a switch and a hard white light filled every cranny of the hold. I squinted and shielded my eyes but somehow could not block out the brightness.

“You travel in here,” said the alien.

Simon looked indignant.

“Our air is not good for you. Through that door is a compartment with everything you’ll need.”

“And a window, I trust.” Simon frowned.

“Yes. Please do not open it.” His voice remained utterly flat.

I laughed and looked out through the slowly closing tailgate. I could see our loading dock — tightly locked — and a black patch of grim, clouded sky, nothing more. The view narrowed until I saw nothing but the packing cases and grey, stippled steel walls. I felt like I was in a giant toolbox. I realised I should have asked how long the journey would take.

The lecture tour was a massive success. I could not tell whether Simon’s presentations were being appreciated as documentary or comedy but I knew a full auditorium when I saw one. Simon, with some technical assistance from me and a couple of local boffins, performed from behind a glass wall. Our side contained Earth-normal air, if heavily conditioned; on the other side apparently lay the usual oxygen and nitrogen plus a few other gases inimical to Earthlings. We could not really see our audience — with bright lights on our side and dim lights on theirs, we had trouble seeing past our own reflections. We knew they were there, but that was all.

Each night Simon presented a range of works, with images projected in 3-d into the space above the audience, and proceeded to discuss their genesis and interpretation. His endeavours to slip in some works more representational than the kind Glaugnabb and Paul had been buying did not find approval; at best they fell into a polite silence. He soon found that the more abstract his subject matter the more appreciative the audience. They cared little that some arrangement of human bodies drew on an episode from the Old Testament — that was our mythology and they were our bodies, not theirs. A handful of xenoanthropologists showed interest, as did some biologists with theories on the evolution of intelligence (of which they were gracious enough to consider us an

example) but generally proportion, balance, contrast, use of colour and, overarching all things, composition received the most appreciation.

Glaugnabb or Paul, as our patrons, met with us regularly. They seemed well pleased — far more so than I. I had had almost no chance to see anything of Kenebrecht itself. Always we scurried from venue to venue, always in a custom-made capsule to protect us from the Kenebrechtian environment. I had come six light years to spend my days locked in a caravan. Simon did not mind — he held a whole planet fascinated and so every night realised his life's dream.

At one meeting, inside our caravan, with Paul and Glaugnabb in their suits just as if on Earth (even down to the blue visors and the vague smell of cloves), I said: "Can we somehow explore the planet?"

"The air—"

"I know about the air. You guys can come in here. How can we go out there?"

The two aliens (although I suppose here Simon and I were the aliens) had a discussion in their own odd tongue, buzzing and whirring at each other.

"It can be done," said Paul. "We will send a...tailor."

"Thank you," I said.

"Now," Simon said quickly. "I was thinking about making use of a spotlight, in fact two, one on me and one on the projected image to..."

A few days later, after our accommodation had been bodily shifted to yet another city on another big island in another hemisphere, Paul asked us to step through a freestanding doorframe. This turned out to be the tailor, a machine that made measurements on us in three dimensions and squirted them off into a computer somewhere. While we listened to this explanation, said Paul, our excursion suits were taking shape, and as he finished speaking they were ready. A knock at the door came and Glaugnabb entered unbidden with the suits.

We slithered into our newly-minted garments. They smelled like shiny, out-gassing upholstery and felt like old anoraks against the skin. Glaugnabb seemed to be in a hurry to get this over with. He led us through the door and then through a sort of airlock. He and Paul changed into the baggy ensemble that the locals wore — I guess it suited their highly flexible frames — while we carefully checked the seals on our suits, not that we had enough expertise to do more than the most rudimentary tests.

I had the opportunity, for the first time, to examine our hosts' faces up close. I fought to hold my expression level; they were like nothing I had imagined. In keeping with the jointed limbs, I had expected something vaguely insectoidal. Instead when I looked at Paul I saw a hairless, egg-like ovoid with regular but moving regions of vivid, startling colour printed across it. The mouth, the sole identifiable feature, was a perfectly horizontal razorblade slit halfway up the face. Perhaps the skin was a translucent membrane with eyes beneath, or perhaps they did not have eyes so much as sensors in the skin. Perhaps the shifting colours (Paul at the moment looked rather like a crossword puzzle in which each square had been carefully coloured in) aided communication. I could not ask. The vision made me feel further than ever from Earth.

Incongruously, I thought, we slipped through a side door and out of the hallway that led away from the airlock. We walked past what looked and, even through the suit's filters, smelled like Kenebrechtian janitor's equipment and pushed through what I suspect was a Kenebrechtian fire escape. We found ourselves on the roof of a large building, one of many. Despite the rows of buildings like office blocks, the scene showed little of the grubbiness of its Earthbound equivalent. No blanket of smog sprawled above us; in a dark sky remarkably free of light pollution the stars burned sharp and plentiful. Our building stood exactly as tall as every other, and no building looked to be brightly lit. No neon advertising signs demanded attention. I suspect no lights lined the streets below — if such streets existed. I reflected that nowhere, except in our quarters, had I seen really bright lights. Perhaps Kenebrecht's star burned dim and orangy. (I had had no chance, really, to tell, and I am no astronomer. I wouldn't know Barnard's Star from a Saint Bernard.) Or perhaps the people had evolved from nocturnal creatures. Either way they did not seem fond of bright lights.

The night sky looked oddly familiar. This place apparently was not a long way from Earth as these things went ("Half a dozen of your light years," Paul said, "Which is not all that far.") and some configurations of stars, presumably the more distant ones, looked the same. The Milky Way and the Magellanic clouds remained unchanged. Here and there a pattern looked distorted or just plain unknown to me — but as I said, I'm no astronomer.

I looked about, disappointed. This was not Kenebrecht, I thought, any more than Paris is just the view from the Eiffel Tower. Less so. At least you can see people from the viewing decks on the Eiffel tower. Where bustled the life? Where crowded the people, the noisy markets and exotic foodstuffs with their foreign odours, the strange music and complex, hypnotic sculptures that the word 'alien' implied to me? Where hid the incredible technology? I wanted to see space freighters taking off to go to Betelgeuse, or landing with wondrous spices from, I don't know, Sirius or something.

Instead I saw a dead, charcoal grey, night-time cityscape. I suspect that was no accident.

I spun around to see Simon in full flow. Like he had done on Earth he pointed out the balance of the sky, the key to which apparently was the loose diagonal of the Milky Way, offset by some rain cloud. Some constellation had 'dynamic fluency', whatever that meant, while another spoke of 'frozen action'. Apparently yet another constellation appeared unbalanced and lacked 'imminent causation', since an otherwise smooth curve of six stars...

Paul's face showed a chessboard pattern of greys, which I took to indicate polite interest.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to my own thoughts. Simon could talk underwater with his throat cut. I had to satisfy myself with a walk around the rooftop. The view did not change, but at least I saw it all. Boxy buildings designed to be seen from the inside, blocks and blocks of them stretching away on all sides with crystallographic regularity. It looked like a crude, oversimplified computer-generated image of a city. No wonder they liked composition, balance and the abstract; all their works lacked detail or humanness (Kenebrechtianness, I suppose). Function function function. But no soul, whatever *that* is supposed to mean.

After some time, we went back inside. I remained dissatisfied. The talk that evening went well. Some interesting questions came up after the formal session.

One audience member, unusually tall even for these people, asked (*via* Paul as a translator): "There are plainly ideals in art. How rigorously should one pursue them?"

I winced inwardly as I saw Simon take a good deep breath in preparation for his answer. The question begged the sort of pontification Simon had made his own. I could see it on his face as he prepared to (1) say words that would sound Right, True and Meaningful and (2) make himself believe those words *were* Right, True and Meaningful, at least while he was saying them. Of course he succeeded superbly.

"Ideals are goals, to be aimed for but rarely attained. The ideal composition in terms of balance may lack dynamism, for example. The great artist finds a solution in which these factors build on each other rather than compromise each other. In a smaller sense, if one knows what must be done to a work to bring it closer to the ideal, then one must do it! Many an author will tell you that a paragraph, no matter how beautiful, *must* be cut out if it has no place in the story. It *must* play its part *as well* as being beautiful of itself..."

Watching from stage right, I rolled my eyes. As the applause came (a custom explained to them in detail in the lecture program handed out at the start) I rolled them again. Simon of course almost floated off the stage on a cloud of approbation. I reached a decision. Soon after the show, I told him.

"It's time to go home," I said.

We sat around our little table, drinking. We did a lot of drinking. I felt lacking in alternatives.

"We have three more universities to cover." The tail of his adrenalin rush shone in Simon's eyes. "And I think they'll want to extend the run, maybe we'll be based in one of the larger cities with people coming to us."

"Like some sort of Broadway show?"

He completely missed my cynical tone of voice. "Exactly, like a stage show. With a fixed venue we can review the performance, add in bigger props, maybe—"

I heard a knock at the door and Glaugnabb and Paul came in. They did not sit, but stood before us in their multijointed excursion suits.

"The collecting is over," said Paul.

"We have enough," said Glaugnabb. "It is official. We believe we have isolated the elements of value in Earth's 'art world'."

Simon looked at him in disbelief. "So the tour's over?"

Paul seemed to look at Glaugnabb for a moment. "Oh no, the opposite. It will be extended indefinitely."

"No!" I blurted out. "Sorry. I would like to return to Earth soon, though."

"That will not be possible," said Glaugnabb.

Ice thrummed in my veins. "But—"

"We have taken your words to hearts," said Paul, seemingly sadly. "We know what must be done."

"Why can't I go home?" I said, not caring how rude I sounded.

Simon said: "I can do the lectures without Ian, especially if we have a fixed venue..."

Typical Simon.

"Why can't I go home?" I repeated. "What's happening?"

“Why,” said Glaugnabb with, I fancied, a smug edge in his voice, “we are remodelling our night sky, after your own principles. And, sadly, your Sun, how does it go? It ‘unbalances that constellation, since without it those six stars would form a smooth curve, reminiscent of a curl of phosphorescent foam on a beach at night’. Yes, I think that was the phrase.”

At last Simon took a few words in. “The *Sun*?”

“We have to do what is within our power to make this difference,” said Glaugnabb. “And we are very powerful.”

“How long...” I muttered weakly.

“Oh, it will take many weeks to destabilise your sun. Something to do with gravitons, they tell me. I wouldn’t really know.”

“Paul, are you happy about this?” I said, pleading in my voice.

He sagged for a moment. I wondered what colour his face had turned. “The... the conclusion is inescapable.”

I took that as a ‘no’.

I turned to Simon. “Simon, did you hear that?”

He looked at me with his eyes wide. He had heard, and even understood. The tip of his tongue rested on his bottom lip, as though stuck there or, more probably, paralysed. Eventually, thickly, he said:

“No, that can’t be right.”

But apparently it was.

Simon cancelled the remainder of the tour. In truth it got cancelled on his behalf, since his showmanship was in abeyance for the time being. He would not look at me. We sat in our little accommodation capsule, him slowly crawling into a bottle of excellent Cognac (or a statistically perfect copy, at least), me trying not to throttle him with the cord of the kettle (though when I looked the kettle had no cord, and when I thought about it I realised I had no idea how it worked).

I thought back over our ‘adventure’. I recalled my part in it, the fateful, insistent, bad-mannered demand that we get to see the sights. Neither Simon nor I had predicted such a grave outcome. Who would have thought art really *mattered*? Simon seemed to think so, but mostly he thought art really *paid*, if done right. The talk of fakes, the visits to the gallery on Earth, the tailor-measuring machine—

The talk of fakes. The ability to analyse an original down to a molecular level.

The ability to strip away the surface?

The ability to see what lay underneath?

I leapt to my feet. I punched a small green button and said: “I want to speak to Paul. Or Glaugnabb. Preferably both.”

An unfamiliar voice said: “Whom shall I say is calling?”

“Who else speaks English? Ian, Ian Pritchard.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Assistant,” I ground out, “to Simon Merriwether. The Art Man.”

The Art Man took a slug directly from his bottle of Rémy-Martin Louis XIII. Or imitation Rémy, whatever.

"Oh, yes. What about?"

"The destruction of Earth."

"You must be referring to the Balance Adjustment Program. I shall see who is available. I'm sure we could arrange good seats for you gentlemen..."

"I need to talk to Paul, or Glaugnabb. Please find one of them."

About ten minutes later Paul arrived, alone. As always his face lay behind its mask; but everything about his carriage, the curve of his shoulders, the slowness of his walk indicated his discomfort and regret. I had no time for that.

I stood in the middle of our little living space and faced him as soon as I could. I gave him no time to sit or take in Simon's state. I said: "You can analyse an original down to its deep structure, yes?"

He nodded. "We can image it as if peeling off the paint layer by layer."

"Then do it!"

He looked at me, his motion paused in disbelief. "At this time you are interested in making perfect copies?"

"No, no!" I almost screamed at him. "Look at your favourites — better, find Glaugnabb's favourites and look at them — and you'll see mistakes, corrections, cover-ups and slip-ups. Even the greatest geniuses made mistakes. And," the words tripped and tumbled out of me in a rush, "I bet you'll find works where things were erased and put back later, where the artist *changed their mind* and then changed it back again. And again. Don't blow up our sun. Tomorrow, you might want it back!"

He said: "Glaugnabb prefers Kandinsky. I will begin the analyses immediately. It will take some time for the solar destabiliser to be assembled, and some days more to ship it into the vicinity of your star. Your idea will be heard."

"Tell them..." I looked at Simon. He snored drunkenly, his face wet with tears. "Tell them it was his idea. He carries more weight than I do."

Paul nodded. I felt drained. I still feel drained as I sit here in our hermetically sealed caravan, some number of light years from Earth, listening to Simon snore, and waiting to find out whether a painter's change of mind can save a whole planet.

I hope Kandinsky made some mistakes.



# The Easy Way

...Dan McCormick

Floyd Ricketts woke to a roaring blaze of light, wondering if the Lord had come to save him. *Dear Jesus*, he thought, *smite mine enemies and forgive my doubting you*. Then his ears focused and he realised that the roar was coming from a diesel motor; six point two litre, if he recalled rightly. Squinting, he made out a pair of headlights behind the glare. When he rolled over and looked up he could see the stars, right where he had left them.

He got to his feet, swaying. Seemed the little devils had put him back right where they had found him, on the roadside near Halliday's chicken farm; put his truck back and started it up for him, too. Well, okay then, but it wasn't like he was feeling inclined to thank them. He looked up at the sky and shook his fist. Then he staggered over to the truck, climbed in, put it in gear and headed for home.

"Is that you, Floyd?" Martha called from the kitchen as he stepped onto the verandah.

"It's me, all right," said Floyd, opening the screen door. "And I ain't no ghost, neither. Come and cuddle me, honey, I missed you something terrible."

Martha, standing by the stove, put her hands on her hips. "You've got a hide, mister, coming home drunk again."

"Honey?"

"I told you I wouldn't be tolerating no more inebriation. Now you step right back outside and don't come back in until you slept it all off."

"Damn it, Martha, I ain't drunk. I been taken by aliens. Where you think I been gone all this time?"

"You take me for a fool, Floyd?"

"God's honest truth, Martha. They took me up in a spaceship, just like in the movies."

"Floyd, I just finished talking on the telephone to Annie May, and she said you and her no good husband were still drinking at the bar not half an hour ago. Now you expect me to believe you had time to be flying through space?" She shook her head. "I married me a bad one, just like Momma said I would."

"Honey, you know that can't be true. Why, I been gone three, four days or more."

“Well, Mister Spaceman, why don’t you just phone up Annie May yourself and ask why she lying to me?”

“Damn it, Martha, I will.”

“Don’t you cuss at me. Well, go on then.”

“Well, I will.”

“Well, go on then.”

Floyd looked at the telephone, then back at Martha. “Honey,” he said, “You seeming so sure of yourself, I have to admit to feeling a mite confused.”

“Ain’t no confusion about it, Floyd. You been drinking again, and either you is lying or the liquor’s turned your brain to mush.”

“Baby, I know what it’s like to feel drunk, and I ain’t drunk.”

Martha’s eyes narrowed. She stepped towards him and sniffed. “You ain’t drunk?”

“I swear I ain’t. But I’m mighty perplexed, that’s the truth.” He went over to the kitchen table and sat down.

Martha sat beside him. “I got to admit you don’t smell drunk, Floyd. And you ain’t behaving drunk, neither. At least, not in the manner you accustomed to.”

“That’d make sense, now, honey, wouldn’t it? If I was telling you the truth and all?”

“I’ll hear what you have to say first, Floyd Ricketts, before I go making up my mind on that.”

So Floyd told her everything he remembered. He began by telling her how he had stopped the truck for a quick break after leaving the bar—

“How much you had to drink, Floyd?”

“Now, Martha, you know I got a weak bladder.”

—then he told her about the strange yellow star he had been watching in the sky that had grown bigger and bigger, until he thought it was a comet falling straight at him—

“Meteor, Floyd, that’s what they call them things. Wasn’t no comet, was a meteor.”

“Wasn’t no meteor neither, honey.”

—and then he described how everything had gone dark just before it reached him.

“Ain’t the first time you blacked out from whiskey.”

“I know that, baby, but this was different.”

“Uh huh.”

“Trust me, honey. Anyways, a while later I woke up inside the spaceship, and I was strapped down to a table, and these alien critters were...”

“Go on,” urged Martha.

“I don’t rightly know if I remember everything just right. It was kind of strange, you understand?”

“Go on.”

“Well, they was doing peculiar things to me. Sort of like... like medical things, honey.”

“You mean they was operating on you?”

Floyd fidgeted in his chair. “Maybe. Some of them operations was kind of indecent, though, if you know what I’m saying.”

Martha frowned. “You be mindful how you tell this to other folks, won’t you Floyd?”

“I ain’t intending to tell other folks nothing, Martha. Truth is, I don’t remember too much anyways.” He shook his head. “Sure felt like I was gone a long time.”

“What did they look like, Floyd? Was they scary? Was they ugly as they look on TV?”

“They didn’t look like nothing I seen on TV. Except for the tentacle things.”

Martha shuddered. “Floyd, you know what happened to you? You been abducted.”

“Well, hell, Martha, I know that.”

Martha ignored him. “When aliens abduct folks they mess with the time, so’s folks’ll get confused and think they’re dreaming. I read it in a magazine. That’s why you feel you been gone so long, it’s cause you been in another time zone.”

She stood up and walked over to the telephone.

“I’m calling the police, then I’m gonna call the Reverend.”

“No, baby, please don’t. I don’t want to be talking to no police just now.”

“But you have to, honey. What if those aliens still flying around out there? It wouldn’t be right not to give folks some warning.”

“There’s no point in warning folks, ‘cause they ain’t gonna believe me.”

“Sure they will, Floyd.”

“No they won’t, honey. They gonna say I was drunk, just like you did.”

“They’ll believe you when I tell them my man’s no liar.”

“No they *won’t*, honey. They gonna say me and you is telling stories to try and get on TV. I know what folks are like. And maybe we shouldn’t be telling the Reverend, neither.”

“But he’s the *Reverend*, Floyd.”

“I know who he is. But that don’t mean he always capable of keeping a secret.”

“I don’t like hearing you talk about the Reverend that way.”

Floyd crossed his arms and said nothing.

After a moment Martha got up from the table, filled the kettle and put it on the stove. “You thought about how this might mean a ways of making us some money? It ain’t like the mill’s paying you in gold. I heard a woman in Arkansas got four hundred dollars for telling how she had a baby to an alien. They had pictures of it in the magazine.”

“I ain’t got no baby to show them, Martha. Anyways, be best not to say nothing. Weren’t no harm done, after all.” He yawned. “Getting kind of tired, though. Think maybe I better get me some sleep.”

He stood up, walked over and kissed her on the cheek. “Good night, Martha.”

“You sure you okay?”

“I think so, sugar pie.”

“Okay, then. Good night, Floyd.”

“Floyd?”

“Hmmm?”

“Floyd?”

“Hmmm?... what’s up, Martha?”

“You awake, Floyd?”

“I guess I am.”

“What’s the time?”

Floyd leaned over and looked at the clock on the bedside table. “It’s just past four in the morning.”

“You feeling something?”

“I feeling tired, baby.”

“I’m feeling something too, Floyd. Feeling it bad.” She reached over and touched him.

A surge of pleasure coursed through Floyd’s body, flooding him, electrifying him.

“Floyd?”

“Sweet baby Jesus!” he gasped. “I don’t know what you did then, honey, but now that you mention it, I’m...”

He stopped talking then, because Martha was already astride him.

“Maybe we should talk to the Reverend, after all,” said Floyd. He sat at the kitchen table, sipping his coffee. Martha cooked eggs on the frypan, humming to herself.

“I mean,” he continued, “it seems awful strange, the way we... you know...”

“Okay, baby. Whatever you think right.”

“I mean to say, we never gone all through the night and day and night again like that before. And, I don’t mean to be impolite, by the ways, but you was wilder than a bitch in season.”

“You disappointed in me, baby?”

“Hell, no. It’s just, well, I’ve got to thinking, that’s all. I never... you know... that many times before. Didn’t know I had it in me. Truth to tell, it’s kinda scary, coming so soon after me being on a spaceship and all.”

“I’m pregnant, Floyd.”

“You *what*?”

“I’m gonna have me a little baby. I can feel it inside.”

“God almighty, honey. You couldn’t feel nothing yet.”

“I know how I feel, Floyd. I’m happy as I ever been.”

“Let’s go talk to the Reverend, Martha.”

"It's mighty good of you to be seeing us like this," said Floyd, as the Reverend ushered them into his living room.

"There's always room at the inn, Floyd." The Reverend seated them together on the sofa, then called upstairs. "Peggy, we got two of the Lord's own right here in our house seeking comfort and guidance."

"I'll be down in just a minute," Peggy called back. "You just tell them from me how glad we are to see them, Everett."

"Peggy's been cooking us a supper fit for fat Herod himself, so I hope you don't mind she's running a little late."

"It's mighty kind of her, Reverend," said Floyd. "She didn't need go to so much trouble."

"When a lamb returns to the flock it's cause for celebration, Floyd. When a sinner sees the error of his ways Heaven throws itself a party. And I can tell it's good news you've brought because Martha never looked so happy as I'm seeing her now."

"It's true, Reverend. Floyd's made a happy woman of me."

The Reverend beamed. "Your time of tribulation is over, Martha, like I always told you would happen if you kept your faith in the Lord. Floyd here has seen the dark abyss at the bottom of the bottle, and Jesus is waiting to lift him up." He looked at Floyd. "That's right, isn't it Floyd? You've given up the drink?"

"I ain't never felt less like drinking, Reverend, and that's the truth."

"Praise Jesus."

"Praise Jesus, that's right. But that ain't why I called you, Reverend. Martha and me has something to tell you, something wondrous strange and... well... kind of delicate, like."

"Floyd, there's nothing you can tell me I haven't heard before. We're all sinners here: you, me, everyone on God's green earth. The only thing separating us from the beasts is the freedom to choose Jesus as our personal saviour. That's our prerogative, Floyd. The prerogative of every man, woman and child."

"I know you be right, Reverend. There's just one thing troubling me, is all."

"Don't keep those troubles to yourself, Floyd."

"Well, what if it ain't just the beasts and us, Reverend? I'm kinda curious, you see, what Jesus might think of aliens and the like. They got that prerogative thing too?"

"You mean illegal aliens? Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and the like?"

"No, sir, I'm thinking more the other kind."

The Reverend shook his head. "There is no other kind, Floyd, else Genesis would have told us so. And if there *were* another kind they'd be like the animals, lacking souls, no matter what they looked like. That's because God only made one single species in His Own image and that single species is standing here in this room. Wouldn't make any sense now otherwise, would it?"

"I'm thinking you're right, Reverend, and I'm grateful to hear you say it."

"Gratitude is good, but penitence is better. Are you a penitent man, Floyd Ricketts?"

"I reckon I am, Reverend. I seen them things without souls you mentioned and I never want to see them again, so help me." He glanced at Martha then leaned

forward in his chair. "Problem is, Reverend..." He looked up as Peggy made her way down the stairs.

"Good evening, Martha," said Peggy. "And good evening to you, Floyd." She stopped suddenly, a step above the landing, staring at Floyd wide-eyed. She put one hand to her chest and grasped at the banister. "Oh, my. Oh, my."

As he watched her, the strange electricity flowed through Floyd again. He stared back, dumbstruck, his heart pounding in his chest. Beside him, Martha smiled.

"Ma'am," said Floyd at last, "you looking mighty pretty, if you don't mind me saying so." His chest felt so tight he had to force the words out.

Peggy's cheeks flushed. Her hand trembled on the banister.

"Why, Mister Ricketts, that's very kind of you."

With an obvious effort she began moving again, walking across the room in small, delicate steps until she stood beside her husband. Martha and Floyd stood up. The Reverend looked from his wife to Floyd and back again, smiling uncertainly. The two women kissed each other lightly on the cheek. Floyd held out his hand. Slowly, almost fearfully, Peggy held out hers.

Their fingers touched.

On a spaceship somewhere beyond Jupiter, a hundred tentacles reached towards each other, intertwined, and began writhing together in unison.

The sun was clearing the horizon the next morning as they drove home. Floyd glanced over at Martha. "You sure you ain't mad at me, sweetie pie?"

"I ain't mad at you, baby."

"I don't know what happened. Peggy wanting me to do that with her, and me not being able to help myself, and you and the Reverend being so nice about it all."

"Honey, why don't you stop your worrying. Everybody's happy, so why you want to go and trouble yourself?"

"But what if I made her pregnant, honey? Seems I might be in a highly fertilising stage at present."

"Well, what if you did, Floyd? Is it such a bad thing to bring another little bubba into the world?"

Floyd drove the rest of the way home thinking about that.

The next day he slept with his boss's secretary, a waitress at the diner, a woman from out of town who had been standing in line with him at the post office, and a police officer who pulled him over on the way home because she thought he was falling asleep at the wheel.

"You have a good day, baby?" Martha asked him, as he walked in the door.

"I guess I did," said Floyd, slumping into a chair. "But I'm awful tired."

"You been working hard, Floyd, that's why. Least that's what Mary Lou tells me."

"Mary Lou?"

“She’s the girl from the diner. She called me up to thank me for what you did, said you didn’t stay around long enough for her to thank you personally. Said she was going straight to her man to share the good news.”

“The hell you say! What’s she intending to tell him?”

“Why, she’s pregnant Floyd. Just like me and Peggy. Ain’t it grand?”

“No baby, it ain’t grand. Her man gonna be around here any minute cranky as a cut snake, you hear me? Did you say Peggy’s pregnant too?”

“That’s what I said. And it seems you done something to the Reverend as well. He been running all about town all day, seeing to the ladies from the church.”

“Seeing to? You mean in the biblical sense?”

“Well, giving them babies is what I mean. The way Patty Tucker tells it, he almost energetic as you. Seems Peggy must have taught him something, after we left.”

“What is going on here, honey? This ain’t right.”

“Who are you to be saying what’s right and what’s wrong, Floyd? You thinking of becoming Reverend now?”

“No, I ain’t thinking of becoming nothing. But things have gone all crazy, baby, can’t you see that?”

“Only thing I see is people doing good deeds for each other, just like the Lord intended.”

“This ain’t got nothing to do with the Lord, Martha. Hell, I never had nothing against a good time, you know that, but I always been able to say no, even if I didn’t. And you ain’t never been so good natured about it, that’s for sure.”

“I ain’t never been so happy, is what you mean. I don’t blame no woman for longing for you, Floyd. You a handsome man.”

Floyd considered for a moment. “You still longing for me, Martha?”

“Well, why would I be, honey? I’m pregnant. But once I had my baby I’m thinking maybe I will be again.”

“And I’m thinking I’d best be the nearest man to you when that happens.”

“You probably right about that, honey. Now, what would you like for supper?”

Congressman William J. Lee stood up from behind his desk, reached out a hand and smiled. “Hope you’ll forgive me for keeping this short, Floyd, but I’m flying to Washington tonight and I’m running a little behind.”

Floyd shook his hand. “Thank you, sir. Good of you to make time for me, you being such a busy man and all. I’m much obliged.”

“You’re more than welcome, son. Take a seat. So, what brings you up all the way from Tuscaloosa, Floyd? Mind if I call you Floyd? That’s a beautiful part of the world you got yourself down there.”

“Why, yes sir, it is, and no I don’t mind at all.” He cleared his throat. “The reason I come all this way, your honour, is we got us a predicament I hold myself responsible for. Seems the whole town’s gone crazy, and I was kind of hoping you could help us get things sorted out.”

“You been to the police about this, Floyd?”

“Yes I have, sir, but the police ain’t feeling inclined to do much about it at present.” He hesitated, then started telling the congressman the whole story, from his abduction by aliens to his encounter with a blonde on the train that morning.

The congressman stared at him intently. “Let me get this straight, son. You’re saying these ladies can’t help feeling lustful thoughts around you? And proceeding to act accordingly on those thoughts?”

“That is what I’m saying, sir. And I can’t help myself from reciprocating, try as I might.”

“And you claim that their men folk don’t mind?”

“Well, no sir, they don’t, and that surprised me mightily at first, let me tell you. Seems there’s something in the air around me that turns the women all dirty and the men real peaceable. Martha says it’s pheromones, but I can’t smell nothing different about me.”

“Uh huh, uh huh. But tell me, son, after you have...intimate relations...with these women, do they always end up pregnant?”

“It seems so, sir.”

“And then their...ah...heightened desires...subside?”

“Far as I can tell they do, after a day or so. But if they get to conjugating with some other man first, well then he tends to gets afflicted like myself. Personally, I’m believing it to be some kind of virus, your honour.”

“And you’re saying that the men in your town are now all afflicted in a similar way to yourself, Floyd?”

“Each and every one of them, sir. Over the last two weeks the whole town been fornicating like Gomorrahs at a Roman orgy. Even the sodomites been getting ladies in the family way. And I ain’t saying any one of them ladies is sinful at heart, for none of them can help themselves any more can I.”

“You got yourself a terrible situation there, son.”

“That’s why I come to you, your honour, ‘cause we running out of childless women real fast, and only the Lord knows what’s going to happen then. Some of us already begun looking into adjacent counties.”

The congressman stood up, turned around and gazed out the window, hands clasped behind his back.

“How does your wife feel about your affliction, Floyd, now that she’s pregnant? Is she jealous?”

“No sir, she be highly encouraging. Seems everyone just intent on making more babies, doesn’t matter whose they are.”

“Hmmm. Tell me, Floyd, and I need the honest truth, how many women would you say you have been intimate with these past two weeks?”

Floyd shifted in his chair. “Well, it’s kind of embarrassing, like, having to tell this to a man who works in Washington and all. Makes it sound like us country folk don’t know how to keep our pants on.”

The congressman turned around and looked down at him sternly.



"I'm not one to look down on any folks, Floyd, no matter where they come from."

"I didn't mean to say you were, sir, absolutely not." Floyd began ticking off his fingers, counting out loud.

After a minute the congressman interrupted him.

"That's enough, son, I get the picture." He shook his head. "Floyd, that's one hell of a story. Can't say I've heard anything like it before. If what you're saying is true we've got a genuine crisis on our hands."

"I swear on the Holy Bible I telling the whole truth and nothing but."

"I believe you, son." The congressman rubbed his chin. "Floyd, I need to talk to some of my people. You just stay right here, I'll be back momentarily."

"Yes, sir."

The congressman left the room, closing the door behind him. Floyd waited.

Over an hour later the door opened again. Floyd rose to his feet.

"Floyd, I'd like you to meet my wife," the congressman called out from behind the door. "Go on in, Tammy, and say hello to Floyd."

Twelve weeks and one day after his abduction, Floyd sat in the delivery room of Tuscaloosa Hospital, holding his wife's hand. He tried to ignore the television cameras in the room and the commotion coming from the street outside.

"I don't understand why they can't all just stay home and watch it on TV," he complained to Martha. "Why they have to clog up the streets and make such a fuss?"

Martha smiled up at him from the bed. "Why, they just excited, Floyd. You should be proud, everybody wanting to see your number one son."

"Of course I be proud, baby. I just would have liked a touch of privacy, if you know what I mean."

"Mister Ricketts?"

Floyd turned around in his chair. A nurse stood there, holding one hand to her round belly and the other out towards him.

"Mister Ricketts, sir, I just want to shake the hand of the man who started all this. My boyfriend, he says you're the most important man in the whole wide world. He says if you ever want your truck fixed real cheap, all you gotta do is ask. He says —"

"Thank you, honey, you're more than welcome. But why don't you just leave us be for a few minutes now, hear?" He turned back to Martha. "Sweetheart, whatever happens I'll be right here for you, understand?"

"I know that, Floyd. You're a good man. My Momma was wrong about you, and I just wish she was alive to see this day."

"Maybe that ain't such a terrible thing, all things being considered."

"What do you mean by that, Floyd?"

"Never mind, sugar pie. Now, would they be your waters breaking?"

"Why, I think you're right, Floyd. Ain't they pretty colours?"

The doctors and the midwives went to work. Floyd closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. When he opened them again a minute later the delivery room had broken into cheers and Martha was holding their baby in her arms.

Martha beamed up at him. "Oh, Floyd, ain't he just adorable?"

"You sure it's a he, honey?"

"The doctors been saying it didn't matter which I choose, and I choose me a boy. You gonna love him, now, ain't you Floyd?"

"I guess I will, Martha."

"Floyd, look at me."

With an effort Floyd tore his gaze away from the tentacle suckling at his wife's breast.

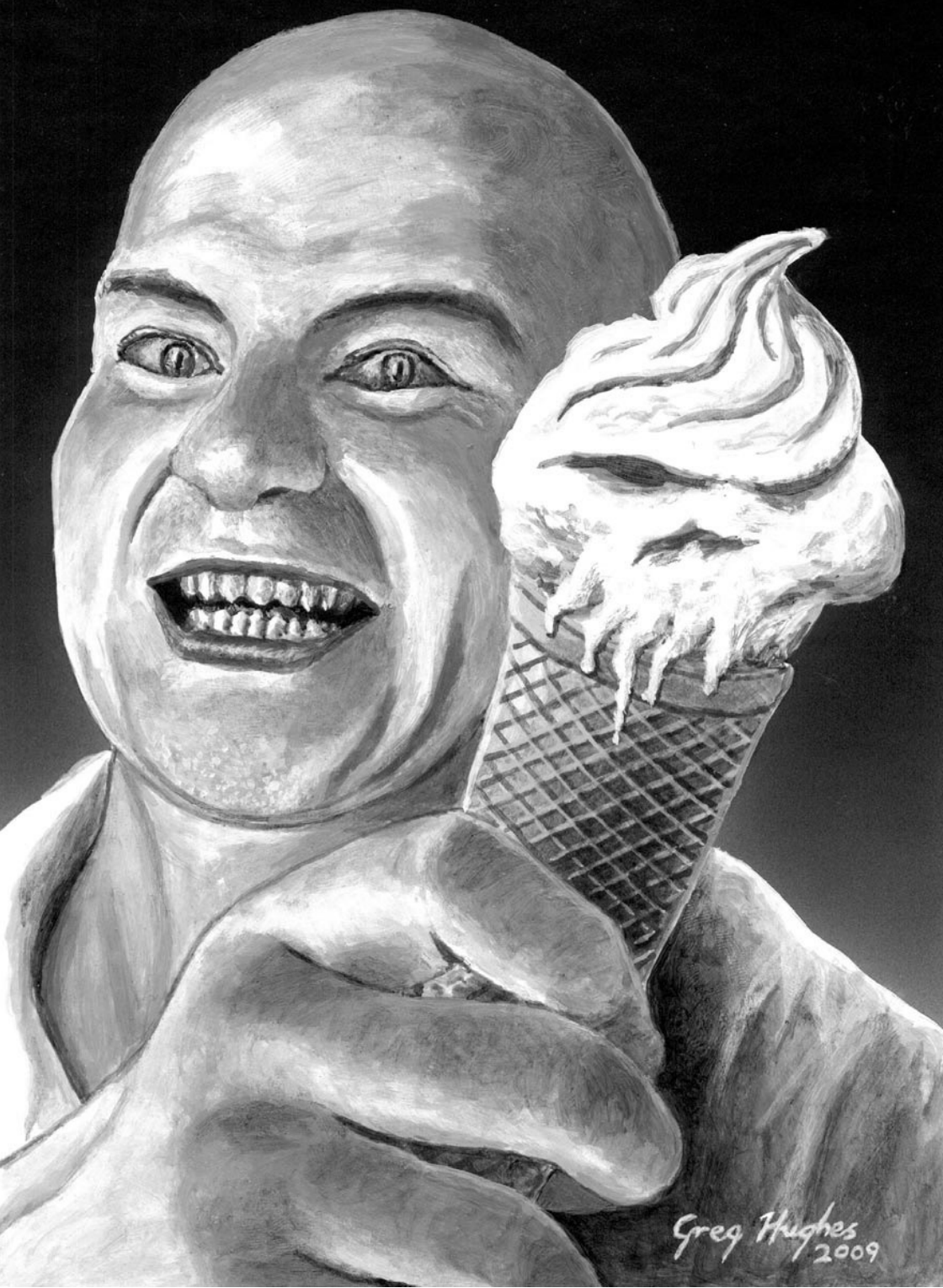
"You gotta promise me to stop thinking about the past now, baby," said Martha. "We got ourselves a whole new future right here. You, me and little Bobby Dean."

"I guess you're right, honey." Floyd sat there for a while, holding his wife's hand, coming to terms with the situation. A thought came to mind, and he frowned.

"You gotta promise me something, too, Martha."

"What's that, Floyd?"

"The next one we get, we gonna name it Floyd Junior."



# Jesse's Gift

...Felicity Dowker

Being a child is perilous. Predators lurk around every corner, and we have so few tools with which to defend ourselves. So many of my friends didn't make it — and those who did didn't always make it intact. Their scars aren't always visible, but they're there.

I made it, barely (though I can't claim to be unscathed), and now, at 36, I've forgotten most of my close shaves. Forgotten them, was ignorant of them in the first place, or have just blocked them out.

Except for one.

The Ice Cream Man took my best friend when I was eight, and he almost took me too. Jesse gave his life to protect mine that night, and I won't forget that. I promised Jesse I would remember him. Him and the Ice Cream Man.

And I have kept my promise. Decades later, I still keep it. Even on the nights where sleep won't come, and I convulse with grief and fear in my cold bed, and a strange song seems to dance in the air around me, and I think I truly might be insane... even then, I cling to my memories, and I keep my promise.

I love you, Jesse. I love you still, and I will always remember.

The apple was enormous, a hard red boulder. It hurt like hell when it thumped into the back of my head, and my eyes began to tear immediately. I spun around, holding my throbbing scalp, feeling the sharp sting of rage in my chest.

A tall boy grinned at me, white teeth dazzling in his grimy face. He had olive skin, hazel eyes, a snub nose dotted with freckles. His brown hair was clotted with mud, his scabby knees winked at me from below his shorts. He already had that coltish look boys get just before they hit puberty; all long limbs and awkwardness. But he wasn't at all awkward; he could move those gangly limbs as quick as lightning. I knew it just by looking at his whippet-thin form.

He was graceful and beautiful and bold, and I adored him at once.

"My name is Ann, and I'm not scared of you," I said, standing with my legs parted, hands on hips. I glared into his eyes, daring him. If I had unclamped my

hands from my hips, he would have seen they were trembling. But I wasn't that stupid.

He stared at me a moment longer, taking my measure, and then laughed. A generous sound. I wanted to be the cause of him making that sound again. Often.

"Kid, you're ok," he said, closing the gap between us with a few lanky strides. He stuck his dirty hand out, and I took it. We shook in the solemn manner of children who understand that everything in life is serious, especially the things that don't seem so. "My name's Jesse, and if you ever need a hand with anything or anyone, just say the word."

I smiled up at him (he was a full head taller), and hoped he couldn't tell that I was blushing.

"Thanks," I said, "I will."

"You're new," he stated. This was a kid who had no questions about the goings-on in his neighbourhood; he knew it all. "I live at number 36 too, with my mum, in the flat at the top of the drive; you're at the bottom. We're neighbours."

We were standing on the street, just past the steep driveway leading down to the four little freestanding flats where we both lived. Fitzgerald Court was a cul de sac atop a formidable hill; mum said our little two bedroom flat was cheap because nobody wanted to scale that mountain every time they needed something. Few people in the area had cars, and many of the flats were housing commission. The street was full of single parents (like my mum) with their kids (like me).

I had been walking back from the shop at the bottom of the hill, where my mother had sent me for cigarettes (they didn't care so much about selling them to minors back then — in fact, in that area, I'm sure they still don't care). I didn't know where *he* was returning from, but I wished I had been there. With him.

"Yeah, we moved in yesterday," I told him. "I start school on Monday."

"Rose Gardens Primary?" He knelt down for a moment, and resurfaced holding the apple he had lobbed at me. He bit into it, crunching with relish. He held it out to me, offering a bite. I leant forward and took one while he kept hold of the apple. The fruit was sweet and crisp, but not as delicious as the intimacy of the shared moment. "It's a posh name, but not a posh school. But I reckon you guessed that."

"Yeah. I'm in grade three. You go there too?"

"Yep. Grade five. I'll walk with you on Monday." Another not-question. I nodded. He returned my nod, and we walked side by side back to our driveway. A grin, a wave, and he was gone, consumed by his flat's bright yellow door.

I'd been in the neighbourhood for five minutes, and already a kid that oozed coolness and capability was going to hang out with me. Well, for the walk to school (and maybe on the way home, too, if I was lucky), anyway.

"What are you smiling about?" Mum took the cigarette packet from my hands and began to unwrap it as I walked into our lounge room. She was still in her dressing gown, curled into a ball on the couch watching Oprah.

"Nothing," I said. "Just happy."

"I think we'll both be happy here, Ann." She was already sucking on one of the cigarettes, her eyes flitting to me in quick hope. "I really think maybe we will."

"I think so too."

As long as Jesse was nearby, I had a feeling everything would be alright. Better than alright, even.

I still feel that way now, if I sense Jesse near me. I don't feel him often, but sometimes, I think he's there.

I choose to believe that, anyway. I've got to.

Jesse walked me to school on Monday, and home again. He did the same on Tuesday, and by Friday, I was pretty sure I could safely call it a regular thing.

We didn't see each other much during the school day; he was a big ten year old, and I was a much smaller (and less well known and important) eight year old. We passed on the oval or in the corridor from time to time, and he always gave me that radiant grin, and sometimes reached out a hand to ruffle my hair as he walked by.

God, I loved it when he did that. Especially when everyone *saw* him do it.

True to his word, he was suddenly *there* if I needed him. When the biggest girl in my grade took a dislike to me, shoving me around behind the bike shed, Jesse materialised and whispered something in her ear. I don't know what he said (he refused to tell me), but it made her swarthy face blanch, and her lower lip shudder. I even thought I spotted moisture in her piggy eyes.

"Sorry Ann," she blurted, running away before I could reply.

He was my self-nominated protector, and soon enough, everyone knew it. I was off limits for bullying and all the other mundane violence and torture that make up a large portion of school life. I was safe, and the name of my safety was Jesse Willis.

Don't get me wrong, he gave me a rough time himself on occasion. He liked to challenge and provoke me, and he enjoyed a good battle — physical or mental, it was all the same to Jesse, though I think he preferred non-physical sparring with me. I was so much smaller than him that there was no fun in beating me as we wrestled on the concrete of our shared driveway; it was a foregone conclusion that he would be the victor. Jesse liked to be genuinely tested, and he played some of the most vicious mind games I have ever encountered. No one could push my buttons like Jesse could.

But I knew he would never *really* hurt me. Jesse just had an angry core, burning away deep down inside where few people could see it. It flamed in measured bursts, but he was always in control. Because he was *good*, in every way that mattered.

Our backgrounds were so similar we barely bothered talking about them. We had a brief exchange of words and were done with it.

"My dad put my mum in hospital a couple times, so we left him, and then we moved here," Jesse said, dropping a stone into the puddle below us. We were sitting on scaffolding up on the building site at the end of our street. Jesse told me it had

been “under construction” for about five years. The house was an empty shell with no roof; the owner builder had gone bankrupt and had simply stopped work. We called it The Mansion, and it was one of my, and Jesse’s, favourite places.

*Dad tried to kill mum on my seventh birthday, I thought, willing him to hear me. From my bedroom, I could hear every punch, and her screams. Then there was a crash and the screaming stopped. I thought she was dead, and I knew he’d come for me next. I jumped out the window and ran to a neighbour’s house, and they called the police. Mum was in a coma for a week, and I was in foster care for a while. Then we were in a women’s shelter, and now we’re here. Sometimes mum locks herself in the bathroom with a bottle of wine and her cigarettes, and I can hear her crying and moaning in there, and I’m scared she’s going to kill herself.*

But all I said was: “Same here.”

He knew. I knew that he knew, and he understood.

We had sleepovers every now and then; I loved curling up with him in his little red metal bed, him under his boyish racing car doona, me on top of it — and I could just walk the few steps back to my own house the next day. We spooned with the innocence of kids who don’t yet know what spooning is, and we told ghost stories until the wee hours. We talked about school; I loved to hear his tales of life as a grade fiver (he had less interest in my retellings of grade three life).

It was a small and modest Utopia we created, Jesse and I. We were poor kids in many ways, but we weren’t bothered by that.

Jesse’s mother yelled at him a lot, and I’d seen her slap him in the face once; he’d stormed past me into his bedroom, and when I followed, his tight lips and blazing eyes told me not to discuss it. But she loved him, and he loved her — fiercely, like everything he did and felt. I loved my mother too, with all her neuroses and flaws.

Our mothers couldn’t afford to buy us stuff the other kids had, but we had The Mansion as our personal plaything, more than any other kids could claim. And we had each other.

For the briefest moment in time, we were happy.

Then the Ice Cream Man came, and saw our frailty. Maybe he sensed it, *smelt* it on us.

And all was lost.

Of the simple pleasures afforded to your average kid in those days, the pinnacle was an ice cream from the van that made its musical way around the neighbourhood streets.

On hearing that tinkling in the distance, every child shared a Pavlovian response. We sat bolt upright, stopped whatever we were doing as the saliva flooded our mouths. We descended upon our parents in a flurry of demand, clamouring for the right amount of change. We hopped from foot to foot, hearts beating furiously, as our parents took their sweet time gathering the money. Then we tore out the door and

onto the street, coins in hand, standing in hopeful bunches, peering down the road, each vying to be first to spot the van as it came around the corner toward us.

That was exactly where Jesse and I found ourselves the day the Ice Cream Man came.

"I'm getting a soft serve with a Flake," I said, craning my neck, determined to see the van before Jesse did. The hot pavement was scorching the soles of our bare feet, a pleasant association with the treat to follow.

"I'm getting choc dip on mine," he said, blocking my line of sight with his frame, as I scuffled for position with him.

*Greensleeves* played on a loop; the tinny melody echoed, ricocheting off neighbourhood nooks and crannies.

"There it is!" I yelled, and danced in the gutter as Jesse hissed in disappointment.

*Greensleeves* was suddenly a cacophony, blasting down our street. I always think of that van's tune, reverberating through my every fibre. Jangly. Evil is a jangly thing, and its wares are sweet and cold.

The ice cream van was a battered beast, once white, but now a chipped grey. Its side was covered from top to bottom in photos and descriptions of wondrous confections. '**SHAKES TOO!**', brightly painted letters informed us. The window in the middle of the van's side was open, like an eager mouth.

The van shuddered to a halt in front of us, and was immediately swarmed with children. I rushed forward, but Jesse pulled me back.

"Better to hang back until those vultures are done."

We watched the wriggling backs of the other neighbourhood children. They looked like mewling newborn kittens, clamouring at their mother's teats.

When the last kid had scampered off, licking the melting sweetness from their hand, Jesse and I approached the window.

The Ice Cream Man had his back to us, re-stacking the cones. He was huge; *broad*, a hulk of a man. The top of his bald head brushed the van's ceiling, the back of his white shirt stretched almost to breaking over the expanse of his shoulders. A sheen of sweat coated the back of his head, and I felt oddly repulsed; for a moment I thought I might vomit.

We should have run away then. I wish we had.

He was humming *Greensleeves* as he turned around. His eyes, a shocking venom green, widened when he saw us. His cheeks were round and red, like a painted doll. His tongue darted out from behind his small pointy teeth, moistening his plump lips as he smiled. His translucent skin stretched tautly over him like a full body mask. Which is what it really was, after all.

"Why, *there* you are! I thought all my customers had gone for the day." His delighted voice was shrill and nasal. "You two certainly hid yourselves well!"

His choice of words and the recognition in his voice started the slow flip-flop of unease in my belly.



“Yeah, it’s better to just wait until everyone else is done,” Jesse said, and I had the sudden urge to wrench him away from the gaping maw of the van’s window; run back into my flat with him and hide until the van was gone.

“A very wise approach,” the Ice Cream Man said, his eyes fixed on Jesse’s. “Very wise indeed, young man.”

We stood there for a moment, and when it became apparent that the man wasn’t going to speak again, I cleared my throat.

“Um, can I please have a single cone, soft serve, with a Flake in it?”

He kept staring at Jesse, and then his eyes *shifted* somehow, and he was looking at me — *and Jesse*.

“Of course you can, little lady. And you, young man? What can I do *you* for?”

“The same, but with choc dip.”

“Oh, mmmn, yummy!” the man giggled, and it sounded like a pig screaming. I looked sidelong at Jesse, and found him already looking at me. He shook his head slightly. *Don’t freak out*, he seemed to be saying.

By now I knew I wouldn’t eat my ice cream. And I didn’t want a single melted drop of it to touch my skin. I sensed danger, and I wanted to run, and run, and run.

But Jesse was never a runner; he would stand there until the danger backed down or consumed him. And I wouldn’t leave his side.

My knees began to shake as the man turned his back on us once again.

“What names do you two kids go by?”

“Jesse and Ann,” Jesse said automatically, and I yelped.

*He shouldn’t have done that. He shouldn’t have given it our names.*

“Well, Jesse and Ann, I go by the name of Vincent when I’m here. These two treats are on the house, ok? When I see smart kids, I want to reward them. And you two are smart kids; any fool can tell that, even an old fool like me.” He squealed his hideous laugh again, and stretched his arms towards us, offering the two dripping confections.

*I can’t take it from his hand. I WON’T.*

Jesse gave me a quick glance, and then reached for both of the ice creams. Always my saviour. Always my protector.

The man who was Vincent *when he was here* lifted his long fingers and caressed Jesse’s hands as he passed the ice creams over. Jesse shuddered, and his head snapped back on his neck, lolling. For a moment he looked like he was about to fall over, and I reached my arm around his back, ready to try and hold him up; but he seemed to regain his equilibrium quickly, and flashed me a smile.

“I’m ok. Just felt a little bit...faint.”

“You should go sit down and eat those,” the man said, beaming at us, showing off his sharp teeth. “They’ll cure what ails ya!”

He flipped a switch to his left, and *Greensleeves* resumed its canned noise. I hadn’t even noticed it had been silenced until then.

“Be seeing you, Jesse and Ann,” the man called over his shoulder, heading for the driver’s seat. “Be seeing you real soon, I hope!”

Another murderous shrieking giggle, and he was driving off; turning a circle in the cul de sac and disappearing around the corner.

Jesse and I both looked down at the ice creams he held. As they gleamed in the sunlight, melting white liquid trails snaked towards Jesse's skin.

"Don't let it touch you," I said, but Jesse had already flung the ice creams on the asphalt, stepping back from them with a grimace.

"Were they poisoned?" I huddled close to Jesse's side, and we stared at the gooey carnage on the road.

"I think maybe they were, but not in the way you might think," he said.

I nodded. I knew just what he meant.

"There was something wrong with him, Ann. When he touched my hands, something happened. He's bad. I don't think he's even human."

I heard a moist sniff, and realised to my horror that Jesse was crying.

"He's gone now," I said. But it was a question, not a statement.

"I hope so. I really hope so," Jesse said, squeezing me.

We gave the fallen ice creams a wide berth as we made our way down the driveway.

"Stay at my place," I said to Jesse, and he nodded.

He shivered all night. I knew, because I stayed awake, holding him, keeping watch. A few times, he whispered: "No... leave her alone... you stay away from her!"

My protector, even in the murky depths of his own worst nightmares. Always my hero.

I scream, you scream, we all scream for ICE CREAM!

I want to forget, and if I choose to, I can. The blissful fog of adulthood can descend over those sharp-toothed childhood memories and erase them as if they never were.

But it would mean forgetting Jesse, and I won't do it.

Mum was going through another black mood. She hadn't dressed in days; her dressing gown was badly food-stained. Her hair hung lank on her pasty face and she stared into the middle distance, eyes glassy and vacant. She still made our meals, and she kept our little flat in decent shape, but she simply wasn't there while she did it. I didn't know where she was, but I knew it was somewhere I couldn't go to bring her back.

"I'm going to have a bath," she said tonelessly, moving around the lounge and kitchen area, collecting her cigarettes and a half-full bottle of cheap wine.

*Oh no.*

She shut herself in the bathroom, and, as usual, turned her cassette player up loud. She seemed to think the noise blocked out the sound of her weeping, but it

never did. I think that sound can be heard through anything; detected by some deep, primal sadness sensor in our brains.

The music I heard blaring from the bathroom, while my mother cried, was *Greensleeves*.

And in the moment between my eyelids falling and rising in a blink, Vincent the Ice Cream Man appeared next to me on the lounge-room couch.

“She’s going to kill herself in there this time, Ann,” he said in his high-pitched twang, and he chortled his slaughtered-pig laugh.

I leapt off the couch, terrified keening rising from my throat, and backed up against the lounge room wall, keeping my eyes on him. The seat of the couch bowed under his bulk, almost touching the floor. His arms were spread across the backrest like pterodactyl wings, and his ankles were crossed. He looked casual; comfortable; vicious. Even through his smile.

“You’re not real,” I hissed at him through clenched teeth. “You’re not here, you can’t be here, you’re *not real!*”

His tongue flickered out from his bulging lips, and I saw that it was forked. Not just forked, but forked over and over again, with at least ten tips. And *long*.

“Why, of course I’m real, Ann. I’m sitting right here talkin’ to you, aren’t I? I’m one of the realest things in this world right now; the oldest, too.” He winked at me, and I realised with horror that his eyelids closed in from the sides, not top-to-bottom.

“What are you?”

“I’ve come to drink your mother’s blood, not to chat with you, on this particular occasion.” He pronounced it *per-tickle-uh*, like a demonic Colonel Sanders. “She’s slicing herself up good in the bathroom, and I’m going to help you clean up afterwards.” He waggled thin brows at me, grinning.

“She’s not. You just want to scare me.” But I threw a glance toward the bathroom anyway. *Greensleeves* was still blasting through the door...but beneath it, I could hear her sobbing. She was so very sad, but she was well and truly alive.

“Oh, but I *do* scare you, don’t I, Ann?”

And suddenly he was in front of me, towering over me, leering down. And he was *cold*. I felt a bone-numbing chill gnawing at my bones.

I knew he wanted me to scream, but I wouldn’t give him that. Whatever else he wanted from me, he could just *take*, and I probably couldn’t stop him; but I wouldn’t give him my screams.

Not today.

“Your mother is dead, Ann. There’s nothing left here for you. Why not come with me now? It’s better where I come from; you’ll like it there. All the ice cream you can eat, and there’s music, and it’s never too hot. In fact, it’s deliciously *cold*. Your mother’s there now. Don’t you want to come, Ann?”

“My mother is not dead,” I said, hating the tremor in my voice, “and even if she was I wouldn’t go with you. I have Jesse.”

*Why, oh why, did I say THAT?!*

“Yes, your little friend. He’s there too, Ann, boogeying on down to *Greensleeves*. Or he soon will be, so who’s counting, eh?”

I shook my head at him, over and over. He reached around behind his back, and produced three ice cream cones jammed into his huge fist.

“One for each of you. Your favourite ice creams, and why don’t you have a **SHAKE, TOO!**”

And he threw them into my face, and they *burnt*, with an icy cold fire that ate into my skin, blazed into my eyes, probed my brain, consumed me...

I screamed then, as he squealed with delight. I slipped down the wall and hit the floor, cold fire scorching me as the world tilted, spun... and fell away completely.

When I woke from my faint on the floor, there was nobody in sight, and my face had not been melted off by the caustic coldness of Vincent’s ice creams. For the briefest moment, I wondered if I had imagined the whole thing.

But I knew better than that.

I never told Jesse about the Ice Cream Man paying me a special visit. Maybe I should have. I can’t see how, but maybe things would have been different. I never told my mother, either. Vincent had lied about her hurting herself in the bathroom. And it hadn’t even been *Greensleeves* she was listening to — she’d had her Joe Cocker cassette playing.

We sat on The Mansion’s scaffolding, dropping leaves into the dirty puddles below and watching them settle lightly on the surface.

“You’re my best friend, Ann,” Jesse said suddenly, and I looked at him, startled.

“You’re my best friend too, Jesse.”

He put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed me, and I let my head drop onto his bony shoulder. We stayed like that for a long time.

“I’ll be going away soon,” Jesse said after a while. I jolted upright, instantly terrified.

*Vincent paid him a visit too*, I thought, but I didn’t ask, didn’t want to make it real.

“Are you moving?”

“No, nothing like that. Forget I said it. I just want you to know that you’re the best person I’ve ever met. I just... wanted to tell you.”

*I love you, I love you, I love you, please don’t let him take you away.*

“You, too,” I said.

We watched while the sinking sun dappled The Mansion and us in amber, then crimson, then dusky purple. That is how I like to remember us; in that perfect last moment together, for all time, just Jesse and me, in our safe place.

When the air’s chill began to bite and we heard Jesse’s mother calling out his name, we clambered down from our lofty perch and ambled, arm in arm, to our steep shared driveway.

“I love you,” Jesse said, and then he was gone, running into his house without a backward glance. I had seen the embarrassed flush rising in his cheeks, even in the dim glow from his flat’s outside light.

I stayed standing there, looking at Jesse’s bedroom window, until my own mother called me home.

Something called to Jesse that night (probably with ice cream that burnt, and **SHAKES, TOO!**), and it must have called *loudly*, because Jesse was gone in the morning.

And I know why. Jesse had slipped a note under my front door.

But I think I would have known, even without that note. Even if my dreams that night hadn’t been set to the tinkling of *Greensleeves*.

It’s the only tangible thing I have left of him; left of *us*, and I’ve treasured it all these years. Treasured it, kept it safe, but never read it again. I only ever read it that one time, the morning after Jesse was gone.

If my mum had found that note, she would have told Jesse’s mother, and that would only have hurt everyone more. Better for them to think he was kidnapped by his father.

Better anything than the truth.

ANN,

I HAV 2 GO WITH HIM.

HE SAYS THAT IF I GO WITH HIM, HE’LL LEVE U ALONE. I DON’T THINK THAT HE WANTS 2 KILL ME, I THINK I WILL STILL BE ALIVE OVER *THERE*. I THINK THEY NEED KIDS THERE, AND IT’S HIS JOB 2 GET THEM.

LOOK AFTER YOUR MUM, AND MINE. SHE WILL MISS ME. I WILL MISS HER. BUT I WILL MISS U THE MOST.

U R WORTH IT.

JESSE XO

I wonder if he still lives in that Other place, where Vincent took him in the dead of night. I wonder if he regrets

(*U R WORTH IT*)

not putting up a fight. But I’m not sure fighting would have helped him anyway. I suspect it had mostly been Jesse who the Ice Cream Man wanted, not me. If Vincent had tried to take us both, we could not have prevented it. I can’t imagine the negotiations Jesse must have had with the Ice Cream Man. But I *believe* that note. Somehow, Jesse managed to take the horror from something horrific, even to give it some beauty. For me, for us. How Vincent must have hated that.

I was safe, and the name of my safety was Jesse Willis.

This was Jesse's gift to me, and it will stay with me.

I wonder if he is still ten years old. I think, maybe, he is.

Most of all, I wonder how anyone can hear the eerie jangle of ice cream van music without going insane. Even before Jesse was taken, even before we saw Vincent grinning out at us from his van, I knew that music for a Wrong Thing.

There aren't so many ice cream vans cruising our streets now, when we're too paranoid to send our children onto the streets to receive sticky gifts from strangers.

No, not so many travelling ice cream vendors...but I think that somewhere out there, there is still a battered grey-white van rattling down the streets, the window in its side panel gaping open, *Greensleeves* blaring on a loop from the loudspeaker mounted on the roof. Inside is a man who is not a man at all, and *his* ice cream is something really special.

# NZ Spec Fic Anthology

## Call for Submissions

Random Static Ltd is publishing an anthology of original speculative fiction by New Zealand writers, to be launched at Au Contraire, the National Science Fiction & Fantasy Convention, in August 2010. The theme for the anthology is "the future is a foreign country". We're looking for short stories of up to 7000 words (and we might consider poetry too). The deadline for submissions is 31 Jan 2010; full guidelines available at [www.aucontraire.org.nz/competitions-writing.php](http://www.aucontraire.org.nz/competitions-writing.php) or from PO Box 10104, Wellington, New Zealand.



[www.randomstatic.net](http://www.randomstatic.net)



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# Meet Mary Sue

...K C Shaw

On the roof of an abandoned cathedral, a tall figure stood watching the sunset. She had long black hair that waved in the breeze, and wore a black trench coat. One hand rested on the hilt of a sword.

The sunset had ebbed from pink to deep crimson when an angel soared above the building. She noticed the woman in black and coasted down, landing with a rustle of feathers.

"I haven't seen you before," the angel said. Golden hair curled in ringlets over her shoulders; her wing feathers were a darker gold. "I'm Diamond."

The woman gave a curt nod. "Dark Raven."

The two regarded each other for a moment, like cats meeting for the first time. Then Diamond said abruptly, "My mother was an angel, but my father's a demon."

Dark Raven said, "My father was a vampire prince. He fell in love with a mortal woman, which led to his destruction at the hands of his own clan."

"Oh? Well, the archangel Michael and Lucifer himself both desire me, and my very presence is likely to cause a war between heaven and hell and bring about Armageddon."

Dark Raven crooked an eyebrow. "I'm an assassin, hired by vampires to destroy vampires. My father's murderer is obsessed with me; he'll stop at nothing to make me his blood slave. But my heart belongs to the werewolf chieftain, although I have to keep my feelings secret so the vampires won't turn on me."

Diamond said, "I have a singing voice of such beauty that I make demons weep."

"I play bass in a vampire band."

They were silent again. The sunset melted into a purple smear in the west. Finally Diamond said, "Do you have trouble with everyone hating you?"

"I have a lot of enemies," Dark Raven said, narrowing her eyes, "but I can handle them."

"No — I mean, it's like everyone hates me and I don't know why. I'm always really nice to people and I try and help them, but everyone still hates me." Diamond paused, looking thoughtful. "Do you think they might be jealous? I'm not very pretty--" she gave a modest little laugh — "and I have this totally ugly scar on my hand, but everyone seems to fall in love with me anyway."

“So everyone hates you because they’re jealous because everyone loves you?”

“I think so, yes.”

“That must be really rough,” Dark Raven said. She gazed out over the cityscape of light and shadow. “I just wish I had a friend I could trust. I’m always being betrayed. I just want someone to confide in.”

Diamond brightened. “I’ll be your friend! You can stick up for me when people hate me, and I’d even die for you if I had to!”

“Really? Thanks.” Dark Raven looked surprised. “I promise I’d be angry about your death forever.”

“Then it’s settled.” Diamond stuck out her hand and Dark Raven shook it.

They both said solemnly, “Best friends forever.”

The two stood side by side for several minutes, while the sky grew dark. Dark Raven stared down at the street below, where headlights and taillights traced paths between shadowed buildings. Diamond fidgeted.

Finally the angel said, “So what do we do now?”

“We wait for full night.”

“So the vampires won’t see us coming?”

Dark Raven gave Diamond a doubtful glance. “Something like that. I’m waiting for Volfe Hunter, my liaison. He’ll have a new mission for me tonight. He’s also my lover.”

“Ooh. What’s he look like?”

“Tall, long black hair, fabulous physique, fangs.”

“Do you think he’d, you know, like me?” Diamond said.

Dark Raven’s stance shifted meaningfully and her hand went back to her sword’s hilt. “I said he was *my* lover. Mine.”

“I thought you were in love with the werewolf guy. Or is Volfe Hunter the werewolf?”

“No, he’s a vampire, and prince of this city.”

Diamond gave her wings a restless shake. “Well, he sounds really cute. If you don’t want any competition, fine, but I thought we were friends.”

“Being friends means you don’t horn in on my men.”

“You can have Lucifer.”

Dark Raven hesitated, then frowned. “Did I mention I was trained in swordplay by the world’s foremost expert?”

“I know every form of martial arts ever invented.”

The two women glared at each other. Dark Raven said bitterly, “I knew you’d betray me. Everyone always does.”

“And I knew you’d hate me.” Diamond turned away and sniffled.

Both of them added at the same time, “You’re just jealous.”





# Zombies From Mars

...Douglas A Van Belle

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Z-word

Dear Mr. Gussard Escarpment  
Assistant Co-Pilot, 3rd class,

I am afraid the regrettable outburst that you broadcast over the V-wave has been referred to this committee. While we all share some degree of frustration with the bureaucratic necessities of life, it is unquestionably inappropriate to refer to anyone as a "Brain-eating Zombie."

Further, your hyperdramatic tone has only served to amplify the disharmony you have imposed upon administrative staff company-wide.

To save bandwidth, the Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics has categorized the complaints we have received thus far and I have only sent you the paperwork for a representative sample from each of the 162 resulting classifications. I believe classifications 32, 87 and 121 can be handled with a formal apology and I would urge you to lodge the **Formal Apology-Contrite** form immediately.

Officiously Yours

Regolith X. Scramjet

Castigator of Disharmonic Holistics

Andromeda Spaceways UnLtd.

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Inappropriate Orifice Reference, level 3

Dear Mr. Escarpment,

Your suggestion regarding lodgement of the **Formal Apology-Contrite** form is only making your predicament worse. The committee has now been forced to add six new dimensions to the

complaint categorization matrix, including sexual harassment, and I should not have to remind you that our overtime budget is limited.

Sincerely  
Regolith

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Policy on Appropriate Use of Communication Infrastructures

Gus (if I may),  
Please stop.

I have tried to handle this informally, but if you insist on broadcasting inappropriate and inflammatory comments over the V-wave I will have to initiate official disciplinary procedures that could result in a certified chastisement being entered into your permanent record. Clearly you are suffering from stress-related issues. This will be considered a mitigating factor, but I can only help you as much as you are willing to help yourself.

In addition to your continued use of the derogatory term "Zombie," shouting, screaming and bleeding on the V-wave are not appropriate.

I am sending the **Policy on Appropriate Utilization of Communication Infrastructures** for your reference. Due to bandwidth limitations, it will be forwarded in five 600 terabyte sections.

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Unharmonic Workplace Complaint

Gus,

As a Zone Ranger (Retired), four-time recipient of the Stallone Medal for Unprovoked Heroics, and former Treasurer-elect of the Royal Order of Chicken and Sloth, I can appreciate the strategic motives inherent in your last broadcast. However, your intent will not insulate you from the consequences of your continued misuse of the ship's V-wave transmitter. If you had bothered to review the **Policy on Appropriate Utilization of Communication Infrastructures** you would know that broadcasting or otherwise disseminating images, audio recordings, pantomimes, or other depictions of the disharmonic behavior of others is

itself a disharmonic activity and, as such, contravenes the aforementioned policy.

Clearly, your concerns are justified. Extracting and consuming the brains of others in the workplace almost certainly constitutes a "philosophical disposition that contributes to the possibility that others might perceive disharmony with their occupational environment." However, the appropriate action would have been for you to file an ***Intent to File an Unharmonic Workplace Grievance or Complaint-Justified by Fact, Logic or Evidence (non-paranormal)***.

Even though your earlier use of the phrase "Brain-eating zombies" might now reasonably be considered as a literal statement of fact, this does not absolve you of the mental distress caused by the metaphorical interpretations that offended, insulted, demeaned or disincentivized.

Assuming the graphic content of your most recent broadcast indicates intent to seek administrative relief from the depicted disharmonic activities, I have attached the necessary forms and guidelines. To ensure a timely response, please ensure that all 14 items on the checklist are addressed properly.

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Language

Gus,

The expletives are not helping.

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE: RE:** Help! Help! Help! For the love of all that is holy, HELP!

Gus,

As you should be aware, this committee is specifically tasked with reducing or eliminating conflicts or other disharmonics. Neither I, nor this committee, has authority to take action that might potentially escalate the severity of an interpersonnel conflict. Thus, while I can confirm that there are a variety of weapons on board ship, no matter how qualified your military training and your weapons certificate might imply you are, as this committee's representative I cannot in good conscience act to enable your access to them.

The committee considers commendable your current conflict reduction strategy of fleeing and locking doors, though it might be more effective if you did not scream or engage in other expressions of terror.

Sincerely

Regolith X. Scramjet

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Referral Request

Gus,

Again, the expletives are not helping, and reference to the testicles, or lack thereof, of any Andromeda Spaceways employee over the V-wave is yet another violation of the **Policy on Appropriate Utilization of Communication Infrastructures**. You really need to review this document.

In spite of your intransigence in regards to the above issue, I have decided to refer your request to the appropriate department.

As a friend, if I may, I suggest you choose your words very carefully in following up this reference.

Regg

**From:** Department of Ship Security Departments

**RE: RE:** Referral-Zombies

Dear Mr. Escarpment,

Sorry for the delay in responding. Most of the staff is on a team-building retreat.

As is clear in the attached organizational chart, The Department of Ship Security Departments is part of the corporate relations division, tasked with interactions between Andromeda Spaceways and other entities (excluding gods and demigods - see Division of Supranormal Relations). As a result, the DSSD is responsible for policy and practice regarding threats to the safety of a ship arising from these external entities. This excludes threats, dangers or hazards originating from within a ship or resulting from the actions of a ship's crew or passengers. Since, by your own admission, these zombies are infected crew members, your situation clearly does not concern us.

I suggest you refer this request to the Departments of Internal Policy: Security, Hazards, Internal Threats and Safety.

Sincerely  
Adam Stone Fusion  
Assistant to the Acting Associate Director

**From:** Departments of Internal Policy: Security, Hazards,  
Internal Threats and Safety  
**RE: RE: RE:** Referral-Zombies

My Dearest Mr. Escarpment,  
Clearly there has been a mistake here. DIPSHITS don't actually  
do anything, we just make company policies.  
Might I suggest referring your request to customer relations  
or perhaps the Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics?  
Affectionately  
Bambi Love Moondust  
Co-equal of the Policy Collective

**From:** Customer Relations  
**RE: RE: RE: RE:** Referral- Zombies

Dear Valued Customer,  
All our customer service representatives are enthusiastically  
assisting others, but we are eager to help you and will respond  
enthusiastically to your request just as soon as possible.  
Sincerely  
Automated Response-Do Not Reply

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics  
**RE: RE: RE: RE: RE:** Referral-Zombies

Dear Mr. Escarpment,  
After thoroughly reviewing your request, I can find no relevant  
Interpersonnel Harmonics policy or established practice for  
addressing your concerns about Zombies, or indeed for engaging  
any category of the undead, post-living or reanimated.  
Since there seem to be some security issues here, I have  
referred your request to the Department of Ship Security  
Departments.  
Regolith X. Scramjet

On Behalf of the Committee for Interpersonal Harmonics

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE: RE:** Pull Your Damn Head Out

Gus,

In light of the stresses imposed on you by the disharmonies of your current occupational environment, I will overlook both the expletives and the anatomically-impossible-but-still-offensive postures you have described in such explicit detail. Do be aware, however, my patience with your abuse of the V-wave is all but exhausted.

It occurs to me that the lack of any relevant Interpersonnel Harmonics policy or established practice for dealing with Zombies, or other category of the undead, post-living or reanimated, might actually help here. The absence of policy indicates that this situation is outside the committee's mandate, meaning, at the very least, that there is no policy specifically precluding action that might be construed as fostering the escalation of disharmony. This means I just might be able to do something.

Let me ask around.

Regg

**From:** MegaHotboy 35

**RE:** Success!

Gus,

It took some doing, but I had a Zone Ranger to Zone Ranger talk with the division supervisor's administrative assistant. Once I convinced her that "Shooting a Zombie" wasn't a crass colloquial reference to the missionary position, she then persuaded the division supervisor's legal advisor's assistant that your situation is generating sufficient liability exposure to warrant concerned consideration. The company won't authorize anything construable as an action, but they did agree to allow me to convene a voluntary ad-hoc committee. We won't get a budget line until next fiscal year, so until then we have to call it an employee social club, we can't use any company resources, we can only meet during our lunch hour, and they made me sign a waiver, but still, we have a committee! I'm currently the only volunteer, but as sole committee member

this should make it easy to get elected to the chair. and that looks pretty good on a resume.

I'll call a meeting as soon as I can find a time that fits everyone's schedule and get back to you as soon as I can. Until then, keep locking the doors, hang in there, and watch that language.

Regolith X. Scramjet, Chair

Ad-Hoc Committee for Zombie Policy and Action

**From:** MegaHotboy 35

**RE:** Minutes of the Emergency Meeting of the Ad-Hoc Committee for Zombie Policy and Action

Gus,

The committee has carefully reviewed and investigated all aspects of your emergency weapons access request. We agree, in principle, that the disparity between a reanimated person's desire to eat brains and a pre-deceased person's interest in keeping his or her brains inside his or her head justifies some degree of conflictual behavior by the latter. Since some committee members expressed concerns regarding the potentially dangerous manner in which you might employ the weapons, this authorization is conditional. Please review the attached document, signaling your acceptance of all 36 conditions, guarantees and restrictions *before* retrieving the weapon.

Of course, as an unofficial social club, this committee has no authority and no means of enacting this authorization or enabling weapons access.

Fortunately, the committee has also discovered that all of Andromeda Spaceways' security lockers are already programmed to open in response to the entry of a valid weapons proficiency certificate number, which is something I believe you possess. The nearest security locker is up one deck, in the women's toilet.

Good Hunting

Regolith X. Scramjet, Chair

Ad-Hoc Committee for Zombie Policy and Action

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE: RE:** Certificate Number

Gus,



Your certificate number is indeed included in your personnel file and I do have access to it, but for security reasons I need the attached authorization form signed and notarized before I can transmit it.

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Security Policy is for Your Own Protection

Gus,

I'm sorry, but I can think of at least 588392003411843 reasons why our security policy requires that notarized form.

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Suspension of Weapons Certificate

Gus,

Officially, I must chastise you for yet another inappropriate V-wave broadcast, but personally, I have got to say that I have never in my life witnessed such an impressive command of the complexities and nuances of profanity.

Your problems in accessing the security cabinet are because your weapons certificate has been temporarily suspended. The sheer volume of your pending complaints has triggered an official reevaluation of your social harmonics, and this has led to the suspension of your certificate. Although I'm not exactly sure how a cabinet in the women's toilet found out about that.

The good news is that it's not difficult to get your weapons certificate reinstated. I've already called the staff psychodramatist at the orbital transfer station. He agrees that such extreme circumstances justify jumping the queue and he will perform the required re-assessment as soon as you arrive.

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE: RE:** Totally Zombified by Then

Oh, Right.

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Remote assessment

Gus,

It appears that even though a remote assessment is not exactly legal, it's also not clearly illegal, so arrangements have been made. See the attached appointment reminder form and remember to send your first V-wave transmission 2 minutes early to compensate for the time lag.

I don't want to put any more stress on you than you are already dealing with, but I have to tell you that in your current state of agitation, not even a half-pissed quack will certify you as sufficiently socially harmonic to be trusted with a weapon. You need to find a way to calm the hell down before you start the assessment.

Good Luck

Regg

**From:** Committee for Interpersonnel Harmonics

**RE:** Recertification

Gus,

I am impressed. Dr. Suzie expressed some concerns. He said that you looked pale, stiff and you seemed to be moving and reacting very slowly. He was also concerned about the mumbling and what appeared to be a fixation on brains, brains, brains, but he said that even without considering the incredibly stressful circumstances, you are the most perfectly-adjusted, socially-harmonized Andromeda Spaceways employee he has ever assessed.

The reinstatement of your weapons certificate is being uploaded to all of the security cabinets right now.

Blast Away

Regg

# Melbourne's Full of Vampires: comparing Keri Arthur's *The Darkest Kiss* with Narelle M Harris' *The Opposite of Life*

...Edwina Harvey

I never realised Melbourne was crowded with vampires until I read "The Darkest Kiss" and "The Opposite of Life" about a month apart. Both are murder-mysteries, where rampaging vamps are causing havoc in their own way, both are set in Melbourne, both have lovelorn female protagonists who are trying to solve murders while angsting over their love-lives, both are told in the first person.

*The Darkest Kiss* was my introduction to Riley Jenson, an officer for the Directorate of Other Races, but it looks to be at least her sixth outing, with five other books in the Riley Jenson series preceding *The Darkest Kiss*, so it must have a large and loyal readership.

According to the book's cover, Jenson's a half-vampire, half-werewolf, so I was a bit confused when the story opened with the heroine getting chucked out of a tree in order to fly like a bird. Seems she had discovered in her recent past that she has the ability to shape-shift into a seagull as well. Okay, so like real life, some of us are just over-endowed with talent. But I don't hate Riley Jenson for her various super-powers as much as her superfast werewolf metabolism that allows her a staple diet of coffee, chocolate and ice-cream while not gaining any weight. I think I also hate her for having Kade - a horse shape-shifter - as a work colleague. Damn, why can't we have *those* in real life??? He sounded very dishy, and Arthur knows how to write sizzling sexual tension very well.

She also tends to throw everything into her stories except the kitchen sink. Riley Jenson is a no-nonsense, tough, kick-butt crime-fighter in a world populated with blood-sucking vamps, emotion-sucking vamps, horse-shifters, bird-shifters, werewolves, psychics & telepaths; yet she's also a sensitive woman, distracted by lust on occasions, but looking for love, a soul partner, and yearning to be a mother. It's an odd combination, but it works.

The story to *The Darkest Kiss* is that there seems to be a renegade vampire on the loose in Melbourne, killing off members of the upper-class, and Riley has to solve the mystery and unmask the killer.

Though the book is written to an American audience — Riley uses her cell-phone rather than a mobile, for instance — I thought it was a buzz to read about Toorak Trollops, Brunswick cafes, and mentions Collingwood beating Carlton in the football on the weekend. Not much speculative fiction is set in Australia.

There were times while reading *The Darkest Kiss* where I felt I was an outsider looking in. What is 'the blood ceremony' she alludes to, that people go through in order to become a vampire for instance? And what was the back story between her and Dia, or her and Quinn? They've probably already been explored in the earlier Riley Jenson novels, but I felt left out as a reader. And while Keri Arthur excels at writing sexual tension, I felt she failed to build a similar tension when writing the crime element of this book. But it was a nice piece of escapism, and I enjoyed reading it.

Then I picked up *The Opposite of Life* by Narelle M. Harris. Narelle's central character, Lissa Wilson, doesn't have any super-powers; but she works in a library, that instantly labels her a super-hero to me. She also has a penchant for large bags that hold everything — another plus for her as far as I'm concerned! Well-meaning friend, Evie, takes Lissa for a night out clubbing, but when she comes across two bodies in the ladies loos with the throats ripped out, that puts a dampener on the night, and the rest of Lissa's life when murders keep happening around her.

Lissa gains the reader's sympathy by describing herself as a geek-girl with bargain bin fashion sense who prefers her books and technology to human company. Though she goes a little crazy she quickly shows she's got the courage and determination to find out what's going on.

Some Goth friends hint that a nightclub, The Gold Bug, could be the place to find out what is happening to the people Lissa knows, so she sets off to solve the mystery as a one-woman detective agency. She uncovers far more than she ever expected, and joins forces with the mysterious 'Guy In the Hawaiian Shirt' - another anti-hero. Through him, she explores the dark Melbourne vampiric underworld that she (and we) never knew existed.

The pieces of the plot come together as the suspense builds to a dramatic climax. Though there are a couple of hints at romance, this book concentrates on telling the murder story, and solving the crime while Lissa goes on living her own complicated life involving her supportive sister and the unwelcome arrival of her mother.

Harris writes very eloquently — her loving description of Melbourne's State Library at the start of Chapter 6 is a memorable example. More so than Keri Arthur, she lets her head go and paints a beautiful word-picture of Melbourne. While Arthur's descriptive writing seems to be "Here, look at this", with Harris, it's more a case of "Here, let me show you." And seeing things through her protagonist's eyes often evokes long hidden memories. I've visited Melbourne often enough to identify with many of the places and experiences Harris describes: tram rides, Bourke St Mall, the labyrinth of laneways around Chinatown and the gelato at Carlton. While Arthur's descriptions are written as a backdrop to the story she wants to tell, Harris writes it like she owns it.

There's plenty of blood and gore in Harris' book, plenty of violence as well, but you don't get dragged into the depths of despair for long, there's lots of humour in the mix as well for counterbalance. Lissa's humour is very dry and dead-pan (pardon the pun), while The Guy in the Hawaiian shirt is her perfect foil.

While reading *The Opposite of Life*, I felt I'd surrendered myself up to a good, old-fashioned story teller who was really enjoying her writing. It was a spooky, scary story she was unfolding, but it would all work our right in the end.

It did, though some of the twists in the tale pushed my disbelief a little too far, and Harris repeatedly returned to elements in her protagonist's sad past. While the facts bore relevance on the story's ending, I felt she'd overstated them throughout the book.

Coming from a small local press with an eye to quality production and caring editorial guidance, I felt *The Opposite of Life* was every bit as good as Keri Arthur's *The Darkest Kiss*, and I think I'll be wearng a scarf next time I visit Melbourne - just in case.

*The Darkest Kiss* by Keri Arthur. 2008. Piaktus Press. ISBN 9780749939250.

*The Opposite of Life* by Narelle M Harris, 2007. Pulp Fiction Press. ISBN 9780975112922

## About the contributors...

**James R Cain** is an Aurealis Award shortlisted author, and editor of *Dark Animus*, Australia's premier dark pulp fiction magazine. His debut novel, *Ek Chuah*, was published by Active Bladder in 2006.

**Felicity Dowker** lives in Victoria, Australia, with her partner, their two young children, and a nagging sense of self doubt. Her limited edition chapbook *Phantasy Moste Grotesk* was released by Corpulent Insanity Press in April 2009, and she has had short stories published in a number of magazines and anthologies including *Borderlands*, *Midnight Echo*, *Antipodean SF* and others. Felicity is a member of the ASIM Publishing Co Op and the Specusphere. She's also the winner of the 2009 Ditmar Award for Best New Talent. She can be found online at [www.holeinthepage.blogspot.com](http://www.holeinthepage.blogspot.com) – but enter, stranger, at your risk: here there be Tygers.

**Ruskin Drake** exists in Florida, USA, but lives in his own mind since it is less humid and has more monkeys to talk to. His wife keeps him company in both locations. On the timeline of his published career, you'll find him at the dot on the far left, this being his first appearance in print. He is proud to contribute to Australian speculative fiction and hopes to do so again in the future. Visit him at <http://ruskindrake.livejournal.com>.

**Tom Godfrey** has fun producing art using a variety of media, from the traditional to the wacky and weird. Tom's pastel and acrylic wildlife paintings show off his almost photo realistic rendering skills. His cartoon themes have varied according to client needs, and he has always had great fun conceptualising and producing them. Tom recently discovered the joys of 'digital painting' in the SF and Fantasy genre. Visit [www.tomgodfrey.com](http://www.tomgodfrey.com) or [www.redbubble.com/people/lefrog](http://www.redbubble.com/people/lefrog) to see examples of his work.

**Darren Goossens** has published work in journals as diverse as *Acta Crystallographica Section A*, *Acta Crystallographica Section B*, *Zeitschrift für Kristallographie* and the *Journal of Applied Crystallography*. With such wide-ranging interests, it is little wonder he turned to writing science fiction in his spare time. 'Kandinsky's Mistakes' is one of the results. There are others.

**Greg Hughes** originally had training in graphic design before drifting into fine art. From about the age of five, Greg developed an interest in science fiction. Although he had no idea what was going on, the imagery he saw on television made a lasting impression. Greg became interested in illustration after seeing the work of Mark Salwowski, Chris Moore and Fred Gambino. Samples of Greg's work can be seen at <http://arrowfire.deviantart.com/gallery>

**Dan McCormick** lives in the Blue Mountains near Sydney with his wife and two daughters. An English teacher by trade, he is currently on an extended sabbatical, hoping to produce a few more short stories and maybe even a novel. He enjoys reading SF, fantasy, history and the occasional literary classic.

**Ian McHugh** is a graduate of Clarion West 2006. In 2008, he won the annual grand prize in the Writers of the Future contest. His winning story was also a finalist at the 2008 Aurealis Awards. It and other past publications can be read in full at [ianmchugh.wordpress.com](http://ianmchugh.wordpress.com). In 2009, he has stories forthcoming in *Asimov's*, *Greatest Uncommon Denominator*, *Pseudopod* and the anthology *Clockwork Phoenix 2*. "Once a month, on a Sunday..." was inspired by the picture book *Lizzie Nonsense* by Jan Ormerod, and borrowings from that story are with Ms Ormerod's blessing.

**K T McRae** resides at a top secret location, somewhere at the bottom right hand corner of the big pointy state. On weekdays she is an office-dweller of modest geek powers, taming both server and noob with the help of some very strong tea. When offline, she consumes a steady diet of britcoms and sci-fi, works on her flying side kick and occasionally dances Lambada. She continually ponders the absurd and the impossible, but rarely do these thoughts make it out of her head and onto paper. This may change after the inclusion of her first published story in this issue.

**Lewis P Morley** has been in SF fandom for a very long time. He used to be famous for his intricate rubber masquerade costumes, but hasn't been inside a costume since he appeared on stage with the late Jonathan Harris as the *Lost in Space* robot some ten years ago. He's moderately well known as an artist, garnering the 1989 Ditmar award for Best Artist. He created, wrote and illustrated (with various other artists) his own Komic book title *Peregrine Besset* about a time-travelling ancient Egyptian dwarf. He has contributed illustrations to a few ASIM issues (no cover yet) and examples of his work, including his Komic, can be seen on his website [www.redworldstories.com](http://www.redworldstories.com). He also works on fantasy films like *Justice League*, but that's another story...

**Anna Repp** is a fantasy and children's stories illustrator from Chicago. She illustrates for many fantasy and children's magazines in the US and Australia. Born in Russia, Anna moved to the United States in 1993. She graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, with a BFA degree in illustration. You may see her latest work online at [annarepp.com](http://annarepp.com). Anna lives in a Chicago suburb with her three-year-old daughter Dasha Sonora.

**K C Shaw's** stories have appeared in numerous magazines, including *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *MindFlights*, and *Every Day Fiction*. Visit her website at <http://kcshaw.net>.

**Dan Skinner** lives in Saint Louis, Mo. USA. He got into art as a side profession, having done model photography for years. His business partner, Nick Fitcher, was a model who wanted to get on book covers as a romance model so he dabbled in photodigital art and ended up being hired by over forty companies to do covers. Nick has been on over 500 covers as a result. Dan uses digital photography, Photoshop, vue 5 and Painter. His artistic hero is Boris Vallejo.

**Jason Stoddard**'s evil marketing background hasn't prevented him from becoming a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award or Sidewise Award, or getting his short fiction into publications that include *Interzone*, *Sci Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*, as well as anthologies such as *Dangerous Games* and the *Del Rey Book of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. He has two novels upcoming from Prime Books in 2010: *Winning Mars* and *Eternal Franchise*.

**Douglas A Van Belle** doesn't exist. Recent investigations of the absurd claims made in the various biographical statements attributed to his existence have only been able to verify two facts. One, Canadian authorities have eagerly and insistently confirmed that he is indeed not Canadian. Two, a really spiffy pseudo-scientific analysis of the writing attributed to him confirms that it could have only been produced by a certified jackass. Since it is impossible to simultaneously be a jackass and not Canadian, he must not exist. As for the source of the stories that continue to appear, paranormal mechanisms are being investigated.

'The Future is Now' is **Melissa White**'s first publication. She is in her last semester toward getting a BA in English; after graduation, she plans on going to law school. She lives in New York City and is working on a full-length novel. Her blog address is <http://melissawhitemw.blogspot.com>.



## Acknowledgements

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p. 66, Jesse's Gift, by Greg Hughes

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