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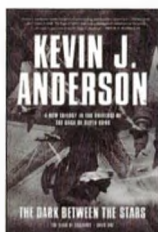
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More than fifty years ago, the Amazing Criswell intoned. "We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives." Leo Vladimirsky offers us a glimpse of a future that may well worry many of us.

Mr. Vladimirsky lives in Manhattan with his wife, with whom he studied philosophy at St. John's College in Annapolis. He now works in advertising, writing "all sorts of things for all sorts of clients." His blog, Das Orbit, chronicles the life of the angryspaceman, a janitor on a low-rent space station.

Collar

By Leo Vladimirsky

TOM WAS NAKED, SKIN sparkling yellow-gray from the thick grease he'd been rubbing, almost seductively, into his short,

meaty legs. He'd seen the young man walk up and down the beach at least four times. The kid was clearly nervous: with every pass he peered, uncomfortably, at the goods for sale in each stall, trying to figure out whom he could trust. The market centered around Beach 69th in Far Rockaway was an intimidating place if you'd never been there before. Tom decided to be nice and made eye contact. Once they locked eyes, the young man nodded, glanced furtively up and down the shoreline, then straightened up. He was just green. There was no need to be suspicious.

Tom went back to greasing himself and putting on his little show. After all, his clients needed to see that their money would be well spent, that the body on sale could handle the six hours safely, could get them where they needed to go.

"You available?" the young man asked. His voice cracked a little bit on the last syllable. This made Tom smile. "That is, you busy tonight?"

"First time?" he asked back, pointing to a pile of plastic crates behind him, deeper under the crumbling concrete and exposed rebar of the overhanging boardwalk.

Tom's stall was cozy, like most of the other stalls in this ersatz grand bazaar. A fire, in a small steel-bucket-cum-brazier, gave each room a friendly, warm aura. All along the beach, underneath the rocky awning, the other merchants were starting their nightlong engagement in capitalism. Food stalls serving fried noodles and grilled meats. Supply stalls selling waterproof bags, goggles, wetsuits, and everything else a swimmer might need to last the long swim. The outlying stalls housed the prostitutes, providing sandy fucks to whoever wanted one. And then there were the bare stalls, dark except for their fires, empty but for their crates. Those belonged to Tom and the other navvies.

"Thanks," the young man said. "What gave it away?"

He walked back into the darkness. Tom saw him wince and crinkle his nose at the condensed vapors of the synthfat he'd been massaging into his skin. It did not have a pleasant odor. One of his fellow guides described it as "dirty sex mixed with rotten meat, and a dash of acetone to cover it up." It smelled rich and corrupt, but in all the wrong ways. Somehow both barnyard and factory, but with none of the wholesomeness of either. And its color was sickly, too: like cheap fluorescent light passing through a yellowed plastic sheet. But that's what it took to stay warm out there. Better to stink and be stained than freeze to death miles offshore.

The kid sucked it up and returned with a purple crate which he shimmied into the sand across the fire from Tom.

"Jake," he said, sticking his hand out.

Tom held up his greasy hand and shook his head. "Tom. Nice to meet you."

Jake nodded. "Laid off a year now. Unemployment benefits just ran out. Can't find work anywhere. Wife said it's the ships or she's leaving me."

"She still working?" asked Tom.

"Yeah. Nurse for old folks," he answered. "Recession-proof, I guess."

"Unless people stop getting old."

The men looked out toward the horizon. The sun was setting and they could see the running lights of the factory ships coming on, dipping into

and out of view, now obscured, now visible, sprinkled along the edge of the ocean.

"You ever do factory work before?" Tom asked. "You ever been on one of the ships?"

"Nah," Jake answered. "I was an office guy. IT, mostly. Worked and lived downtown for about five years. When the bridge started going up, me and the wife couldn't afford Manhattan anymore so we moved to Brooklyn. Had kids, then..." He made a confused half-smile and shrugged.

It was the same "then" as every other person Tom ran into down at the market.

"All work is done in a factory," Tom assured him, "no matter what color your collar is. You'll figure it out."

A little girl of eight or nine came up to the stall opening. "Empanada? Coke? Fries?" she called out. Tom waved her off, but he saw Jake eying the deep blue tubs covered with steamed-up plastic wrap, filled with meat pies.

"Did you eat?" Tom asked him. "Alice, over there three stalls down, she fries up some serious singapore noodles with squid. Blow your mind."

"I'm too nervous to eat," Jake confided.

"It's a long swim, kid. You gotta eat something."

A man and a woman walked by in bathing suits, dry-bags held high, the synthfat covering their heads in a caul which caught and threw the light from the many fires on the beach.

"Gonna drown another one, Tommy?" the woman called out.

"That's the plan," he yelled back. "The gods demand their sacrifice."

The couple went down to the sea. Tom looked back at Jake.

"Friend of yours, I take it," Jake said.

"Friendly competitor, more like it," Tom replied. "So you gonna get some food or what?"

"No offense, but this market doesn't look like the cleanest place to eat," Jake said. "What if I get the runs?"

Tom made a little explosion with his hands. "Then you shit in the water, like the fish."

"Fair point." Jake smiled and got up. "Singapore noodles?"

"With squid. Tell her I sent you over. She'll be sure to wash her hands then."

"I'll be back."

Jake walked out of the stall and headed left. Tom followed him to the entrance and leaned against a pylon, watching the boy go down the shore. The warm air brought many of the other stall-holders to their makeshift doorways, under ragged awnings that gently luffed in the breeze. When Jake reached Alice, Tom could see him trying to explain something complicated to her. She got annoyed. Confused, he pointed back at Tom's stall. Alice nodded excitedly and waved at Tom. He waved back. She then grabbed Jake's hand, lifted the awning to let him through, and they both disappeared from view in the darkness beneath the concrete roofing.

He'd always had a soft spot for Alice. She'd been an institution at the night market long before the navvies worked the boardwalk. He wondered if the story was true, that her family had died, burned when the canals in Queens flooded, and that now she could only sleep during the day. It was a good story. And a good story could keep you safe.

He checked his watch. It was half-past seven. Slack tide would soon be over and the ebb tide would begin. Time was running out. The patrols would be looking for him at ten. He needed to close this deal and get in the water or the next time he went swimming, they'd stun him and not bother fishing him out. So either the kid was a little sacrifice to the gods of the day, or he was.

It was not a kind thing to do, but everyone came up against it. And his luck had run out after five years. He knew the others had done it. Drunken early-morning confessions, after they'd swum back, pounds lighter, slurping their shame through the stink of sea and synthfat, made all the more absurd by their salt-hardened hair, sticking out like a clown's wig.

Jake came back, following three young men who were eyeing each stall, uncertain of where to go. He carried an old plastic yogurt container filled with steaming noodles. An errant green onion clung to the side.

"Eat up," Tom said, "and let's talk business."

"How long you been doing this?" Jake asked.

Tom looked up at the sky and cocked his head thoughtfully. "November, five years ago. I went out to work. It was awful, just after a late-season hurricane. No guides, then, just desperate men, desperate for money."

The legislation had passed through Congress swiftly: all products or services for sale in the U.S.A. cannot be made, or rendered, on foreign soil.

It was political posturing and everyone knew it. The Chinese had built factory ships for years to skirt their own trade wars with the WTO, but now, with high fuel and labor costs at home, they saw a perfect opportunity to export our own jobs back to us. The law, which on paper was meant to protect workers, ended up doing the opposite. Near-shoring, they called it.

No one was surprised.

But to create the illusion that they didn't want to do exactly what they planned to do, they created the Labor Police to patrol the coast up to the international water boundary, which, conveniently, the U.N. had rezoned to six miles from the high-water mark. No exclusive economic zone. No contiguous zone. Just six miles from the sun chairs and umbrellas and you'd find an internationalist free-for-all.

Nobody knew if they were supposed to work or starve, except the companies who realized it was just a matter of dragging those factory ships from the edge of Chinese waters to the edge of ours, then let the free market supply the workers. After all, it had already supplied the law.

"Damn. You're old school, man." Jake was impressed. "That's pretty brave, going out on your own."

"I used to surf and fish around here, so I knew the water pretty well."

"Weren't they rounding people up like crazy back then? You ever get picked up?"

Tom answered, straight into Jake's eyes. "A couple times. Back then the Labor cops were aggressive, but stupid, so you could bullshit your way out of it. Or bribe them."

Jake looked a little concerned. "They're not a big deal anymore?"

"Not as much. They've had in-fighting since their union sold them out. Their managers got a golden parachute and the rest of 'em got a fist in the ass."

"So that's a no?" Jake pushed.

"Now it's mostly privatized. Those guys work on commission: independent contractors like everybody else, so they're pretty aggressive. Though rumor is if you put up a big enough fight, they'll recruit you."

Tom was now vigorously rubbing the synthfat into his face and bald head, the fire in the bucket reflected through tiny flames on his scalp.

"There's another recession-proof job for life," he continued, "keeping other people down."

"So what do I need you for?"

"You don't. There's the ocean," Tom said, gesturing toward the water with his palm up. "Start swimming."

"Hey," Jake said, mistaking Tom's comment for hurt, "I didn't mean anything by that."

"I know," Tom replied. "They're definitely still around, the cops and the private cops. Now they try trickier things: some hero fucker wants to make a career for himself. Comes to the market, finds a guide, makes some arrests. If they get really cocky, they bring the hammer down and close the whole boardwalk. You can smell those guys a mile away."

"Why is that?"

"They act like men who have jobs," he said. "But the law isn't the problem anymore. The real trouble comes from the patriots. Vigilante assholes bankrolled by rich leftists who think taking jobs from the Chinese is destroying the country. They don't arrest. They blow things up."

Jake slurped up some noodles.

"So how do you know I'm not an undercover cop or one of these terrorists?"

"Can't know for sure, of course," Tom said as he started to rub the fat on his upper thighs and groin. The hairs on his body swayed left and right, like seaweed caught in competing tides. "But, like a lot of those fuckers have learned, asking a strange man to take you on a six-hour swim at night in cold water can be a good way to drown. It's a lesson you only need once."

"For the record," Jake said, "I'm not."

"The thought, my friend, never crossed my mind," Tom replied. "Right. Enough morbid shit. Back to practicalities. You said you did IT?"

"Yeah," Jake replied. "I was a coder."

"I can't guarantee you'll find a ship where your particular talents would be useful. Some factory ships are call-centers, some do computer stuff, others need programmers and developers. But most are just factories...making baubles for the natives."

"So I'll be an assembly-line worker?" Jake looked upset.

"What were you before? C-E-effing-O? An innovator?"

"Maybe I should go ask one of the other guides." Jake said, a defensive edge in his voice. "Shop around."

Tom continued to stare out at the sea. "Go right ahead. Three stalls down is Ahmed. He's good. Ask away. Or, like I said, the water is right there. Enjoy the swim."

Jake sat silently. The sound of the surf broke through the susurrus of stall chatter.

Talk like that, Tom thought, will not close this deal.

"Look, I'm not saying it's impossible," Tom said, his tone softer now. "Maybe one of the full-time workers got sick or transferred. You might get lucky and steal their job. It's better for me, right? I work on commission. But this is New York. There's a lot of competition."

"So it's just as bad out there as it is up here?"

"It's different. Not everyone is up for swimming six hours in the cold through one of the busiest waterways in the world. The Chinese respect tenacity. I met one in a bar once who told me that if we'd showed that kind of work ethic in the first place, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Harsh."

"Yup. But true."

"Fuck that," Jake said. "I worked my ass off and got screwed."

Tom stood up and looked himself over, checking to make sure the synthfat was evenly and correctly applied. He was a greasy gray-yellow statuette. Perfect. He reached for his waterproof bag.

"We all did." He dug around inside the bag and pulled out a little gun. "I need to tag you."

"What?"

"It's for my commission. They'll scan the code when you negotiate your contract and I'll get my cut."

Tom checked the magazine of chips. There was white corrosion all over its edges. If he stuck it in the gun, it'd frizz out for sure. The guns were expensive and not easy to come by.

"Fuck. I'll be right back. Gotta get more chips. Eat those noodles before they're cold."

Jake watched Tom rise and leave the stall. Flickering in the warm yellow light, under the grease, he could see alternating bands of rippled and smooth skin on Tom's back, a birds-eye view of marbled scars.

A few stalls down the sand in the opposite direction from Alice sat Ari, an old Lubavitcher from Williamsburg who'd moved to the beach to

retire back in the teens. Why he hadn't moved to Inwood with the rest of the Hasids when the bridge started going up was unclear. Tom doubted his religiosity, as he'd seen him getting stoned with some of the other stall merchants and had definitely shared some of Alice's squid noodles with him. But donning religious garb was a good way to avoid being robbed and must have helped him keep his identity so far from his missing friends and family.

Bearded, bald, and wearing his rekel (which he did regardless of the weather), Ari sat on a little stool atop a vaguely middle-eastern-looking rug he'd spread out over the sand. The plastic containers he used as shelving had their flaps open, presenting lots of trinkets and gadgets and things...sunscreen, cigarettes, amphetamines, water, swimsuits, fins, goggles, snorkels...like a degenerate triathlete's beach shop.

Ari was no triathlete. Degenerate, maybe. His big belly swelled under his white collared shirt, his tzitzit fringing his lap.

"I need a chip magazine. The one I have is fucked. Corroded."

"Second row," he said, with a thick foreign accent despite having been born in Brooklyn, "on the right."

Next to the aluminum squeeze tubes of energy goo, Tom found a cardboard box full of magazines. Used, mostly. He grabbed a new one and examined it. The label read "Proudly made in the U.S.A."

Tom waved the magazine at Ari. "How much?"

"For you, forty-five."

"Five a chip?" He opened his mouth wide, feigning shock. "Outrageous."

"They're not dropping many anymore. Most of the magazines are rotted away. I guess even *their* hiring is slowing down."

It was true. In the last few months there'd been fewer and fewer ships out there. He'd had to turn more and more clients away to keep his track record up, which made tonight's swim a little more depressing. But if he was going to keep his job, he had to do what had to be done.

"Fewer of you boys out there these days," Ari went on. "Lots going up north, to Canada."

"Right. Those libertarian candidates finally broke the labor laws there. Gonna be tough work. Much colder water, that far from the Gulf Stream."

"Even the sea has been outsourced."

"Bad omens, Ari. Put it on my tab."

"Of course." The old man smiled at him. "By the way, perhaps you could do me a little favor. My nephew, David, needs to find work."

Ari had thousands of nephews. Tom'd placed a lot of them.

"What does he do?"

"He was a lawyer. Tax stuff. He just lost his job last week, but he has a baby on the way. Can you help him?"

"Can he swim?"

"He's not exactly what you'd call 'in shape,' my David," Ari said. "I thought maybe you might be able to ask around when you go out tonight and see if anyone needs someone of his abilities. Perhaps they could arrange a pickup."

Nobody did pickups anymore. At least not the kind you'd want. Today's pickup was very different.

"If he's on Manhattan, I can't get him out. It's on him."

"No. His mother was a goy. He wasn't allowed to go with the family."

One diaspora replaces another. Tom nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

He got back to his own stall as Jake finished his noodles. The container was empty, scraped clean. Even the overboard onion was gone.

"Hungry after all?"

"You weren't kidding. These are amazing."

He had left his gun on his stool. It looked a lot like a label maker: featureless grey plastic with a heavy handle to hold the magazine. He jammed the clip into the gun's butt and pulled back the charging handle.

"Ready for your shot?"

"Does it hurt?"

"Only your pride."

Tom pressed the gun against Jake's shoulder and pulled the trigger. It emitted a little puff of air. Jake grunted.

"Welcome to the workforce," he announced and tossed the can of synthfat over to Jake. "Get those clothes off. Time to grease up."

Jake smiled. "Yessir." He pulled his pants off, rolled them tightly, and stuffed them into his waterproof bag.

"Underwear, too," Tom told him. "You don't want your dick to freeze off."

Jake started to turn around to strip, hesitated, then turned back and took off his briefs.

"Okay. Take a handful and slap it on. Work it in like sunblock. When you think you've finished, blow on it. If you feel anything other than just a light pressure, put some more Crisco on," Tom said.

"Wait," Jake said. "Like the stuff for cookies?"

"Nah. It's some kind of synthetic fat," Tom answered. "We just have a sense of humor. Haha. For all I know, it's partially hydrogenated polar bear blubber, but the stuff works. Get greasy, kid."

Jake opened the tin. "Jesus, it stinks. I thought that reek was just you."

"You wish."

While Jake starting greasing up, Tom stretched, working the kinks out of his back. His last job had been a week ago, and he was still sore. The client was a nightmare: a forty-five-year-old dumpy advertising executive who'd put his life savings up his nose. The man was desperate and offered him half his contract pay, five times the usual commission. It was clear weather but very windy, with big swells. From the moment they entered the water, the man complained. Eventually, he gave up completely and Tom had to drag him. That's when the Labor Police caught up, darted them, and landed them on the boat.

His client was delirious, babbling about how he didn't want to be here, and how did it come to this. After the anesthetic wore off, Tom made a deal with the patrol. He'd get them their trophy, just not today. He had too much money riding on this whale. Give him a week, and he'd give them their prize.

Patrols were easy to bribe that way.

It was too bad, though, because Tom'd taken a real dislike to the asshole. Jake, on the other hand, seemed like a pretty decent guy.

He opened up his bright yellow dry-bag, pulled out a pair of Speedos and a well-worn orange-covered book. He put on the swimsuit, rolled his clothes, and put them into the bag. Out on the sea, the lights from the ships were getting brighter and closer together. Closing in...edging...right up to the territorial waters.

He looked over at Jake rubbing the synthfat on his chest; great rolling globs of grease trapped in frozen waves.

"You gotta work it in. Smooth it out," Tom instructed. "That shit ain't cheap."

Jake looked at him, squinting. "I thought the chinks dropped cases of it in the water for us to find."

"Easy with that language," Tom warned him. "Those chinks of yours are about to pay your fucking bills."

Jake looked down and continued greasing himself, taking smaller scoops of synthfat and slapping them on his naked body, wattle and daub.

"That's right. Nice and even. It's a second skin." He went over to Jake and stuck his pinky against the man's chest. It made a squishy sound. He lifted it to Jake's face. "See how it's about halfway up the nail? That's the right amount."

Jake looked at it, then proceeded to smooth out the rest of his body.

Tom opened the book with a little flip of his wrist. Its pages were stained with grease.

"What's that?" Jake asked.

"Eldridge." He checked his watch. Seven forty-five. Shit.

Jake shook his head. "What's Eldridge?"

"Tide book. If we leave as the tide begins to ebb, we can ride it out and double our speed. Hit a current right and we're barely doing any work at all."

"You still use books for that? Why?"

"Same reason you can't take anything but a rowboat out: without that passport from Homeland Security to bypass the EMP generators at the bottom of the bay, any electronics will stop working the minute you hit the high-water mark."

"Right. Sorry. Stupid question," Jake said, sheepishly. "I guess I'm a bit nervous."

"Relax. Worry about staying warm and staying as low in the water as you can. It's pretty calm today, so we won't have much chop — that makes us easier to spot. And the warm water attracts wildlife."

"What...like sharks?" Jake asked.

"Patriots. They're too lazy to go out when the weather is shit, but if it's a calm, warm night, who doesn't like a little cruise around New York Harbor: see the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street, the new pylons being driven into the bay for the Manhattan Bypass Bridge."

"So if the weather is lousy, we have to worry about the cops and if the weather is nice we have to worry about vigilantes?"

"Career office didn't tell you about this, eh?"

"Can't say that they did." Jake stood up, admiring the job he'd done putting on the grease. "This look okay?"

"You're an Adonis. Put on your fucking swimsuit."

He did.

The two men stared out into the ocean for a while. The ship lights came closer and closer together, now a pale necklace dotting dark skin. A few broke ranks and started moving, independently and quickly, toward the shore. He could see Jake craning his head to figure out what they were.

"Just trawlers," Tom said, "coming in for the night."

"They ever take people out?"

"No. Those passports are hard to come by and are passed down, like heirlooms. If they got caught, they'd screw their entire family, kids, grandkids, out of a livelihood. Not worth the risk."

Jake relaxed and sat back down.

Tom added, "You won't see the trouble until it's on top of you."

"Right" Jake said, incredulous. "Their boats are invisible."

"Not exactly. But they don't use running lights. It's all infrared."

"So how do you know if they're on to you?"

"Look for emptiness. Blankness on the horizon. Stars and other lights blotted out by some kind of wandering darkness. When the lights go out, that's when you worry."

"What do they do to you?"

"They'll either arrest you or kill you. Either way, they'll start by throwing a halogen cannon on you, then dart you with a paralytic. The light is hot enough to blister your skin if you let it sit on you long enough. That's the drawback of the Crisco: acts like a lens. Saw one guy, his back burned right off. Third-degree, blisters and shit. They just cooked him up with those bright lights, then dumped him on the beach, a few blocks down the shore. They aren't legally allowed to kill you, but...you're paralyzed, floating in the sea...easy enough to have an accident."

"Fuck me," Jake said, quietly.

"Funny thing is that when you get hit with the light and the dart, it's an incredible feeling. You're four miles out. Cold. Delirious. Suddenly

that warm blush hits your spine and shoulders, like the sun rising, and you think, 'Maybe now is a good time to take a little break, just lie here for a bit, warm the old bones and muscles.' You're warm and numb and exhausted. It's paradise. Until you smell your flesh burning."

"What'd you do with the guy's body?" Jake asked.

"Dunno. Ask Alice," he said, as seriously as he could manage. "We told her to take care of it."

"It's funny what passes for squid these days," Ari shouted from his stall.

Laughter came roaring in from the guys drinking at the meat stall next door. Jake blushed.

"More crap from you," Jake said, smiling. "Do you even know how to swim?"

"You'll find out soon. Still hungry?" Tom asked. "Need something else?"

"I don't think so." He stood and looked up and down his own body. "I guess I'm ready."

Tom nodded. He grabbed two bungee harnesses from under his stool and threw one to Jake.

"Over the shoulders and around the waist, then attach your dry-bag. You'll want about six feet behind you."

He put his own on and clamped a carabiner to the metal ring of his yellow bag, which he lifted above his head.

"Hold it up like this, until we get into the water."

Jake fumbled a little with his straps, and Tom had to help him out. He saw the young man's hand shaking, palsied, from fear.

"Too early to get cold, kid," he said, with a short laugh. "Wait a couple hours. Here."

Tom unfouled the lines and adjusted the belt.

"Good?"

"I guess so."

"Follow me."

In silhouette, they looked like a pair of oversized fetuses, looking to reenter the womb.

Tom stared at the break as he waded out. The sea was surprisingly warm. That didn't matter. In two hours he'd be shivering so hard his ribs

would bruise and he'd be turning back to shore after delivering the kid to the patrol boat. Or maybe they'd forget about the deal. That could happen. Maybe they were just playing a mind game with him. Maybe they wanted to recruit him for full-time work.

The answer was just a few miles offshore.

Something pinched at his foot. He looked down. A tiny crab, scuttling sideways, snipped at him angrily and scuttled off. He smiled and looked back at Jake.

"Time to pick your lucky star," he said.

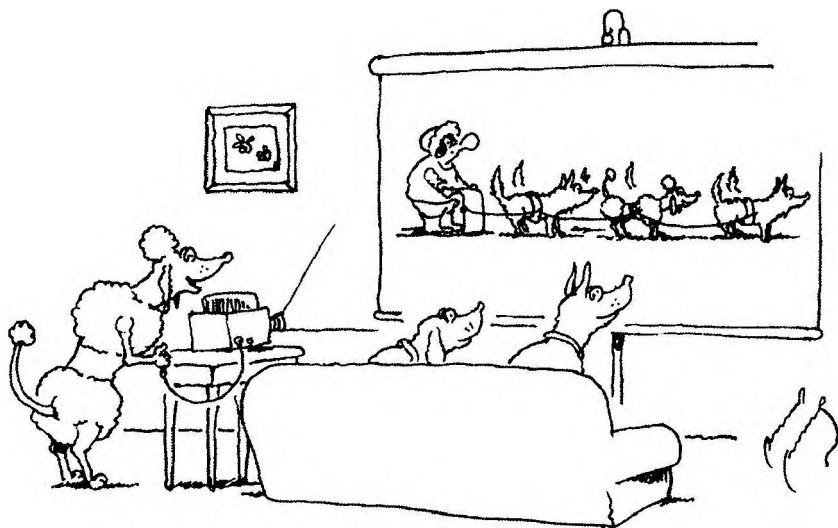
"How can I choose?" Jake said. "It's just one big streak of light out there."

Tom looked back toward the sea. Jake was right. The factory ships had come in even closer and the lights were now a continuous band straight across the water. A bobbing, burning, solid white fence. A noose. A cage.

A collar.

He walked farther into the surf.

"It doesn't matter. We'll go for that one," he said, not bothering to point anywhere. ¶



"There I am at fantasy camp."

Since the first story in this issue probably set a downbeat tone for many readers, we thought we'd lighten the mood with a new tale by Oliver Buckram, whose recent stories have quickly made him popular around these parts.

A Struggle Between Rivals Ends Surprisingly

By Oliver Buckram



WHILE THE HARBORMASTER fidgeted at his desk, Treya checked her pipes. They were, of course, in perfect condition: the leather supple and the drones polished. She'd brought her double-chantered smallpipes today, in case the negotiations grew complex.

The harbormaster snapped shut his pocket watch. "That damned beetle is already ten minutes late."

Treya walked to the window. On the street below, a fishmonger pushed his wheelbarrow through a group of green-skinned Cantharan peddlers while a Glanite hoverjar floated by. But there was no sign of the beetle. If he didn't show up, Treya wouldn't get paid.

She scrutinized the hoverjar as it wafted through an intersection. Inside its murky interior, there must be a Glanite. The squid-like creatures seldom visited Port Raskol. What was it doing here? Might it want to hire a translator?

At last Treya spotted the beetle's top hat bobbing above the heads of

other pedestrians. His fringed leather vest marked him as a servant of the beetle Baroness.

After a few moments, the beetle was ushered into the office. Treya and the harbormaster bowed and the beetle spread his stubby hindwings in greeting. After Treya piped a welcome, he responded with a cacophony of wails, whines, and groans from his spiracles.

She translated in a low voice. "He's doing the *Lamentation on Congestion*...apologies for being late...greetings from the Baroness. He's going off on a tangent. Could be an extended monologue. No... He's back on track. We're definitely doing the first scene of *A Routine Mercantile Transaction*. It's a one-act, so this shouldn't take long."

When the beetle finished his lines, Treya glanced at the harbormaster.

"Ask him why the Baroness is behind on her docking fees," he said. The Baroness owned a fleet of fishing vessels currently in the harbor.

Treya shook her head. "That will serve no purpose. At best, he'll give us a discourse on unavoidable delays, and at worst, he'll push us into a convoluted subplot. No, at this point in *A Routine Mercantile Transaction*, you need to state your demands."

"I want those fees paid. Right now."

Treya put her lips to her mouthpiece and trilled the harbormaster's demand in a circuitous oration on the changeability of fortune and the virtues of punctual payments.

The beetle patted his vest pockets with his midhands. His moans and screeches grew louder.

She raised an eyebrow. "He claims he was bringing payment from the Baroness, but now he can't find it. Pickpockets, he says. Of course he's lying. He's attempting the *Clever Servant Outwits Rich Foreigners* subplot."

"No one cheats me!" The harbormaster got to his feet.

"Relax. I'll tell him that he must've dropped it when he came in. Just pretend to look around on the floor."

Treya played a brief dirge of sympathy, weaving in a sarcastic countertone. The beetle spent another minute checking his pockets before dramatically producing the crumpled banknotes from inside his top hat. He declaimed the *Panegyric on the Recovery of Lost Items* and handed the money to the harbormaster.

The beetle departed in a flurry of squealing farewells and the harbormaster counted out Treya's fee in silver. She left the office feeling prosperous, coins jingling in her coat pocket.

She stopped at the first bakery she saw. The ostrich potpie smelled delicious, but she couldn't afford it — she was weeks behind on her rent. She settled for a handful of day-old rutabaga crumpets, which she devoured on the spot. That would hold her until tonight.

As Treya left the bakery, she spotted the Glanite hoverjar on the other side of the street. This time it wasn't alone. After a yak cart rattled by with a pungent load of night soil, she saw that Neb was walking beside the hoverjar. She could tell from his smirk and the way he stroked his beard that he'd just been hired by the Glanite.

Damn. Since Neb's arrival a year ago, he'd stolen half her clients. And now the bastard had scooped up a new one. As a translator, he lacked finesse. But as a negotiator, he was ruthlessly effective, using high-pressure tactics and inside information when haggling on behalf of his clients.

While Treya was deciding whether to confront him, a mastodon lumbered down the street, blocking her view. Under the red velvet canopy of the howdah, an Owl Sister preened her feathers and puffed on a cigar. By the time the mastodon had passed, Neb and the Glanite were gone.

Ah, well. Neb's small victory wasn't important, because tonight her fortunes were going to change. Her best client, Renfrew Oxton, had hired her to negotiate the purchase of herring from the Baroness. Once the deal was made, Treya would earn a huge commission.

She arrived at her rooming house to find the landlord sweeping the stoop. The remainder of her coins disappeared into his outstretched hand. She climbed up the stairs to her room and set to work preparing. First, she unpacked her triple-chantered greatpipes and wiped their bores with almond oil. Next, she arranged her hair in a close approximation of the current fashion. Last, she examined her best gown. It had a dark stain, perhaps red wine, on the powder-blue velvet of the bodice. That would need to be covered up somehow. She rummaged in her trunk, weighing the merits of wrinkled sashes and grubby ribbons before finding the perfect solution: a silk flower.

Years ago, Treya had almost thrown it out. Now she was glad she

hadn't. She'd worn the flower in her hair on the night she and Neb had broken up, in her final semester at the university. After passing their midterm exams — his in Invertebrate Managerial Accounting, hers in Interspecies Performing Arts — they'd gone to dinner to celebrate. What a fool she'd been back then, hopelessly in love with Neb, blind to his narcissism. Had he proposed to her that night, she would've accepted instantly.

Instead, he'd announced that his post-graduation plans didn't include her, and her evening had ended in tears. In retrospect, it was a lucky break. She'd spent several gloriously Neb-free years making a good living in a new city with new faces. But her earnings had fallen sharply when he'd arrived in Port Raskol, hungry to establish himself, with no hesitation about competing for clients.

By dusk, when the lamplighter was making his rounds, she was dressed and ready. Oxton arrived in a style befitting his status as Port Raskol's leading human merchant, in a carriage with a liveried coachman and four snow-white yaks. Although Beetle Palace was not far away, it wouldn't do to arrive on foot.

As Treya climbed into the carriage, Oxton moved over to make room. He was a big man, smiling and smelling of cologne.

"Fine gloaming to you," he said. "Tonight, you'll make us both rich, what?"

"I'll do my best, Mr. Oxton." Treya had to raise her voice to be heard over the clatter of wheels on cobblestones.

"How I despise those beetles and their tiresome dramas. Still, they do a damn fine job catching herring, what?"

Once a season, the Baroness's herring fleet sailed to rich fishing grounds in the Howling Seas. Tonight, Treya would negotiate a price so that Oxton could purchase the entire season's catch in advance and control the supply of herring.

The carriage slowed to a halt. They'd arrived at Beetle Palace.

The majordomo led them to a waiting room. This particular room was meant for humans, with appropriate furniture and refreshments.

Treya set her greatpipes on a chair and helped herself to a plate of llama compote. She ate while admiring the slime painting on the wall. The different colored lines — red, green, blue — were interwoven in a

shimmering, hypnotic pattern. Peering closely, she saw an individual snail, no larger than a pea, crawling across the surface. It must have been fed a diet of red algae, since it left a red slime trail.

The first time Treya had seen a slime painting, she'd been a student at the university. It was the night she'd met Neb, at a Theatre Department reception. He'd not yet grown his beard, but he was handsome nonetheless.

"What do you expect from the Baroness tonight?" asked Oxton. He reached for a pickled emu egg and accidentally knocked over the silver saltcellar.

"Oh, probably *An Honorable Agreement Arrived at, Following a Frank Exchange of Views*. In Act I, we make our bid, and she rejects it. As we walk out the door, she begs us to stay. In Act II, she bewails her poverty. In Act III, we magnanimously raise our bid, and the deal is struck amid great rejoicing. The whole thing should take about two hours."

"Poor predictable insects." Oxton threw a pinch of salt over his left shoulder.

The door opened and the majordomo appeared, beckoning with a foreleg. It was time to see the Baroness. Treya glanced regretfully at the untouched eel custard before shouldering her pipes.

The receiving hall blazed with the light of several chandeliers. In the center stood the Baroness, wings folded and black eyes glittering, orating to three smaller beetles.

Treya and Oxton bowed, but no one acknowledged them.

"What the devil is happening?" asked Oxton.

"Let me figure this out." Treya drummed her fingers on her thigh. "This certainly isn't *An Honorable Agreement*. I don't recognize it."

"She's improvising?"

"Beetles don't improvise structure," said Treya. "There are exactly three thousand, six hundred, and two plots. No more, no less. She's just doing an obscure one."

"Clever. She's trying to throw us off, what? She knows that I've been getting the better of her, ever since I hired you."

Treya smiled. "That's because before me, you used translators with no training in theatre."

The Baroness delivered a soliloquy. The chorus of three smaller

beetles apparently had no lines in this scene, as they merely clicked their mandibles in agreement.

Treya tried to remember the lesser works she'd studied in the university. Since she'd majored in Commercial Xenodrama, she hadn't memorized all the theological pieces. Could this be *A Son Slayed Unknowingly, by Command of Divinity*?

"Got it," she said. "*A Struggle Between Rivals Ends Surprisingly*. And she's already in Act II."

Oxton frowned. "Rivals? You mean me against the Baroness?"

"No, I think — "

"Sorry we're late," said a familiar voice behind them. She spun around to see Neb, resplendent in a tailcoat with brass buttons. His greatpipes were garish as always with red beading and mother-of-pearl ferrules. Beside him, the Glanite undulated in the brine of its jar.

"Treya, you're looking lovelier than ever." Neb smirked. "Fine gloaming to you, Mr. Oxton. Allow me to present my client."

The Glanite pressed a single tentacle against the glass of its hoverjar and regarded them with enormous pale eyes.

Treya fingered her silk flower and gave an icy smile before leading Oxton to the other side of the room.

"The Baroness is trying to spark a bidding war," she whispered. "*A Struggle Between Rivals Ends Surprisingly*. The rivals are you and the Glanite. The surprise might be the high price that results."

"Damnation," muttered Oxton. "She's getting smarter. Still, I — "

Treya elbowed him as the Baroness at last turned to face her guests and stretched out her hindwings in welcome.

Before Treya could blow into her mouthpiece, the whine of Neb's pipes filled the hall. He blundered through the preliminary courtesies with clumsy phrasings that made Treya wince. The Baroness stood motionless, eyes gleaming in the candlelight like polished obsidian.

Treya waited until Neb was done — she didn't want anyone to think they were playing a duet — and skirled a sprightly greeting, concentrating more than usual on difficult trills and graceful overblows.

The Baroness responded with an ornate monologue on commerce, transitioning to specific contract terms for the sale of the herring fleet's catch.

"The fleet departs tomorrow on the morning tide," said Treya. "She wants half her payment now, and half when her ships arrive with the catch." It would be six months before the fleet returned to Port Raskol from the Howling Seas, loaded with herring.

"Well, at least that's what we expected," said Oxtan.

"She's definitely trying to stoke a bidding war. She's doing the *Encomium on Untrammelled Competition*."

Oxtan scowled. "What happens next?"

"We make a bid. They make a bid. We both raise our bids several times. Then the Baroness does something surprising. Like awarding the contract to the lowest bidder. Or canceling the sale entirely."

"Perhaps we could make a deal with the Glanite, what? Form a temporary consortium, with each buying half the herring. That reduces the risk."

"I advise against it," said Treya, keeping her voice level.

"I know you and Neb have a past, but — "

"He's not trustworthy."

"I'll speak to him man-to-man," said Oxtan.

Treya clenched her fists as Oxtan sidled over to Neb and engaged in whispered conversation. Meanwhile, the Baroness continued her encomium.

After a few minutes, Oxtan returned. "He won't do it. Cocky sort of fellow."

When the time came to bid, Treya went first. She'd chosen an initial bid that was well below Oxtan's willingness to pay, so she could raise it later in dramatic fashion. She started with a profession of undying love for the Baroness, moved on to an enumeration of the reasons why Oxtan had little interest in buying herring, and then gave a threnody on ruinous market conditions. At the end, she apologetically piped the offer.

Then it was Neb's turn. He started with a traditional denial of interest in money, segued into a bland observation on the magnificence of the Baroness's thorax, and concluded with an offhand statement of his bid.

It was three times the size of Treya's offer. Even the Baroness did a double take before starting her response.

"That's outrageous," said Oxtan. "No one could make a profit buying herring at that price."

Treya visualized her commission receding into the distance, like a schooner heading out to sea. "We haven't lost yet. They want a surprise ending? We'll give them one. Tell me, have you ever considered marriage?"

Oxton stared at her.

"You need to propose to me. Right now. It won't be a legal marriage, of course. And it doesn't need to be, er, consummated." As far as she knew, Oxton had never shown any interest in women. "It's a shame we don't have any dung. It's the traditional engagement gift from a beetle groom."

"What's this got to do with herring?" asked Oxton.

"The Baroness will be obliged to give us a wedding gift. Something related to the plot threads already laid down. She could give us a fishing schooner, for example. She could give us a single herring as a symbolic gift. Most likely, she'll sell us the catch at our original bid. That's harmonious with the existing plot elements."

"I don't have to give you half of my wealth, do I?"

"Well, as my husband you must refrain from eating any larvae I produce. That's about it."

Oxton nodded, and she instructed him on the procedure. Fortunately, the groom had no lines during the scene.

When it was her turn to speak, Treya gave a lengthy account of her inability to attract a mate. She bewailed her undersized thorax and declared that since she'd never known love, her life was a failure. At this, she collapsed onto the tiled floor, being careful to fall without damaging her greatpipes.

Oxton began walking around her prone body. He needed to circle her three times clockwise and three times counterclockwise, the beetle betrothal ritual. He managed to complete only one circle before Neb put a hand on his shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing," hissed Treya from the floor.

"*A Loveless Marriage Prevented*," said Neb calmly. "Stand aside, Mr. Oxton. If the beetles think we're fighting, we'll end up in *A Romantic Triangle Ends Tragically*."

Neb circled Treya, three times clockwise, three times counterclockwise, as the beetles looked on silently. When he was done, Treya stood up and glared at him. The Baroness began the *Paeon to Matrimony* while the chorus clapped their various pairs of hands in simulated joy.

The bastard had derailed Treya's plan. As the groom, Neb would get half of any gift from the Baroness.

Neb smiled and turned to face Oxton. "You mentioned something earlier about a consortium. I believe my client will now agree to combine forces."

Treya explained to Oxton that the play was effectively over, and there were no more lines for them to speak. The rivals had struggled, and had indeed come to a surprising conclusion. The gift from the Baroness, whatever it was, would arrive in the morning.

"But what about the blasted herring?" asked Oxton.

"We'll have to wait until morning. If her wedding gift doesn't involve selling us the herring, we'll come back tomorrow and bid again. We'll find a way to win."

After a brief discussion, Oxton and the Glanite agreed to evenly split the market value of any gift from the Baroness.

The wedding ceremony took about an hour, after which Oxton and the Glanite departed. The feast dragged on much longer, with numerous speeches. Treya and Neb were obliged to sit together, with nothing to do but drink claret while the beetles droned on. They finished their first bottle during the Baroness's opening *Soliloquy on Procreation*.

Toward the end of their second bottle, Neb raised his glass. "I propose a toast. To the beetles. I earn my living exploiting them. And so do you."

"I don't exploit them." Treya looked over at the Baroness, who was reciting the *Catalog of Copulatory Postures*. "I just help people understand their complex culture."

"We're the same, you and I." Neb's speech was slurred. "No difference."

"I'm nothing like you. I'm not a greedy egotist."

"Please. That's no way to talk on our wedding night." And with that, he fell asleep, sitting straight up in his chair.

Same old Neb. He never could hold his liquor.

Treya drank her way through an ensemble performance of the *Ovipositor Oration* before losing consciousness.

The next morning, Treya woke to the din of Neb's snores. Woozy and still half-drunk, she vomited over the side of the bed before taking stock of her surroundings.

She didn't recognize the bedroom's wooden walls and small round windows, but she'd never spent the night at Beetle Palace before. She was relieved to find both she and Neb were fully dressed. Her greatpipes hung from a peg on the wall, next to his.

When she got out of bed, the cramped room seemed to sway. How much had she drunk last night? Only when she noticed the greatpipes swinging gently back and forth on their pegs did she realize that she wasn't in the Palace.

She flung open the door and squinted at the bright sunlight.

"Shut off that light," shouted Neb.

She walked out and found herself on the deck of a three-masted schooner. Above, white sails billowed. At the far end of the deck, a beetle stood at the wheel.

Neb staggered out, leaned over the railing, and threw up. "What the hell have you done?"

"Me? I thought it was you." There was no land in sight. She glanced up at the sun. "Looks like we're heading north."

"This is outrageous. The Baroness can't just dump me onto a random ship."

"It's a herring schooner," said Treya. "On its way to the Howling Seas."

Neb wiped the corner of his mouth with his sleeve. "She did this to get me out of the way. Because I'm such a good negotiator."

Treya started to laugh. It was a harsh, high-pitched sound, not unlike the cries of the wheeling seagulls above.

"Our wedding gift from the Baroness," she said. "A six-month honeymoon cruise. To the Howling Seas and back. Just you and me."





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

I WONDER how many of you reading this are like me when it comes to non-fiction and anthologies/collections. I read the introduction first off, but after that I rarely go to the beginning and read straight through to the end (for which I offer my apologies to the authors who, even in a non-fiction book, have carefully worked out a flow from start to end, and the editors who have agonized over the placement of stories in the anthologies they curate).

I've no idea why I do this. I do know I usually have up to a dozen or so of such books on the go at any one time — not to mention various magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc. — and flit from one to the next like a bee gathering pollen. I can tell you that one of the few autobiographies I've read from start to finish is Bob Dylan's *Chronicles: Volume 1*, but that's probably because he wrote it the way I would normally read it, jumping from one part of his life to

another, rather than telling his story in a linear fashion.

But the point of all this is that I don't cover as many anthologies and works of non-fiction in this column as I read on a regular basis because it actually takes me so long to finish the books. I'm sure if you add up the word count I read more of them than I do novels.

And let's face it: Most readers prefer novels, so it makes sense to review more of them here. Still, one of my personal mandates for this column has always been to present you with a certain percentage of material that you might not otherwise run across, or see reviewed, so this time out I'm going to focus on a number of non-novel titles that I've been reading these past months.

The Classic Horror Stories by H. P. Lovecraft, Oxford University Press, 2013, \$24.95.

If you've been reading in the field as long as I have, you might wonder to yourself as you pick up

The Classic Horror Stories, do we really need another Lovecraft collection? Especially considering that the nine stories featured here are relatively easy to track down on their own for much less than the price tag on this new Oxford Press edition.

The answer is, we don't.

Except...

It's a beautiful edition, from its understated cover art through to the forty-plus pages of explanatory notes collected in the appendices. These are the classic Cthulhu Mythos stories — the backbone of Lovecraft's posthumous fame in the field. Now, granted the prose can sometimes be a bit overwrought. And the slow pace might put off the urban/vampire/werewolf crowd. But regardless of Lovecraft's apparent shortcomings as a stylist (especially for a contemporary audience), there is still undeniable power to his work. He is, after all, the master of the cosmic horror story, which has trickled down to everything from the work of Stephen King and James Herbert to movies like *Alien* — not to mention all those wonderful B-horror movies that I remember seeing at all-night marathons when theaters did that sort of thing.

For me, the most appealing element of this collection is Roger Luckhurst's introduction. In just a

couple dozen pages he presents what's basically the perfect *Introduction to Lovecraft 101*, setting Lovecraft and his work into the context of the times in which he lived and the state of fiction at the time, exploring the writers who influenced him (such as Lord Dunsany and Arthur Machen) and those he influenced (pretty much anybody working in horror once his work appeared in paperback in the tail end of the sixties).

Over the years I've read a lot of books and essays about Lovecraft and his work. So far as I'm concerned, Luckhurst's succinct overview and analysis is one of the best. If you're at all curious about Lovecraft, it's worth checking out.

As an amusing aside, Luckhurst mentions that as far back as the 1880s there was already a term for fiction that "seems exactly concerned with what defies fixity or boundary." In those days these sorts of slippery-to-define stories were simply called "weird." So no need for us to go looking for new terms such as interstitial.

Spectrum 20: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art, edited by Cathy Fenner & Arnie Fenner, Underwood Books, 2013, \$35.

Art lovers will no doubt be

happy to know that 2013 brought us another volume in the Spectrum series. I have the complete set to date and they're a joy to revisit. They cover every form in the field — book covers, interior art, comics, advertising, statues, toys, you name it — as well as every medium, from the traditional arts to digital.

Unlike many best-of-the-year books, Spectrum has a jury to choose what appears in its pages, with the art taken from submissions made by artists or their representatives. Every year there's a different jury, but every year the quality of art presented remains high. Printed on heavy, slick stock, these are gorgeous books.

This is the twentieth anniversary of the Spectrum series and I was struck by one particular thing as I was reading it: in twenty years, fantasy art hasn't really changed that much. I don't say this as a negative. The artists in the field — and especially those who appear here — are doing fabulous work and I've thoroughly enjoyed this book.

But you'd think it would have changed more.

One only has to compare the art of the fifties to that of the seventies, the sixties to that of the eighties, to see big differences in terms of style and theme. But the past few decades — even given the rise of anime/manga and digital art — fan-

tasy/sf/horror art seems to have settled into something that works, so I suppose artists and art directors would say, why change it?

Spectrum 20 is also the last volume edited by the Fenners and published by Underwood Books. John Fleskes will edit the next volume and it will be interesting to see what changes, if any, it will offer. Maybe it will include cosplay, since costuming has really evolved from the early days of its birth at sf conventions. These days many cosplayers are creating original characters, and I'm anticipating a crossover where instead of the costuming being based on books or films or comics, the costumes/characters will be the origin of the creative endeavor.

For all I know it's already happening.

Past Masters and Other Bookish Natterings, by Bud Webster, The Merry Blacksmith Press, 2013, \$19.95.

Want to know more about the history of the sf/fantasy field and the writers working in it, back in the day? Bud Webster is your go-to guy, and this collection of essays will lighten your pocketbook, or start you on the first of many trips to the library, because once you've

read Webster's take on these authors, you'll want to read their fiction. I know it got me wanting to reread many of these classics, a project made easier by the handy bibliography of stories and novels included at the end of each essay.

Webster has a conversational tone to his writing, but it's backed by a seriously extensive knowledge of the field. And no matter how well I thought I knew some of these writers, he still found something new to tell me.

C. L. Moore. William Tenn. R. A. Lafferty. Judith Merril.

If these names, and those of the others written about here, don't mean much to you, I highly recommend you check out Webster's chapters on them and find out why you should be reading them.

I love the idea of a younger reader dipping into this book and then going on to try, say, Clifford D. Simak, and falling in love with his work the same way that so many of us did when his books first came out.

And just in case you think this is all nostalgia and living in the past, the collection ends with a handful of recent dialogues Webster had with Jerry Pournelle in the pages of *The SFWA Bulletin*. Back when I was a member of SFWA, my favorite part of *The Bulletin* was similar

ones that Mike Resnick did with Barry Malzberg.

The dialogues reprinted here are like listening in on a frank conversation between a couple of writers. They cover the importance of research, the differences between sf and fantasy, and the pros and cons of digital vs. paper as a delivery system for story. The latter has a copyright date of 2013, but it's got to be older than that. The points being made are still valid on both sides of the argument, but the tech described will make you smile. At any rate, I did. But at least Pournelle could look ahead and see how smart phones would change everything.

But then he would. He's an old-school sf writer who learned his chops back when sf took current sciences and projected how they would grow and change in the future.

War over Lemuria, by Richard Toronto, McFarland & Company, 2013, \$45.

While I had certainly heard of Ray Palmer and Richard Shaver prior to my starting this book, I had no knowledge of the "Shaver Mystery" controversy from the last half of the 1940s.

It involved a secret language

that Shaver said he'd discovered, as well as the history of extremely advanced prehistoric races that had built cavern cities inside the Earth before abandoning Earth for another planet due to damaging radiation from our Sun. But they left behind some of their offspring who could speak to certain humans (such as Shaver) and projected tormenting thoughts and voices into their minds.

And — reminiscent of Whitley Streiber, who claims to have been abducted by aliens — Shaver claimed to have been the captive of these beings.

Information about the mysterious beings appeared in *Amazing Stories*, then under editorship of Ray Palmer, and became so popular it's estimated that between 1945 and 1948, Shaver Mystery content was featured in almost seventy-five percent of the magazine's content.

Readers wrote in, telling of their own experiences with the ancient beings, infuriating other fans who claimed it was all a hoax to drive up sales of the magazine. Shaver Mystery clubs sprang up around the country, and even the mainstream press reported on it as the controversy raged on.

Richard Toronto lays out the whole story here — or at least as much of it as he can, never having

lived inside Richard Shaver's head — and it makes for fascinating reading, not only for the mystery itself, but also for the insight it gives us into the times when it all took place.

I gather that Mr. Toronto has self-published a follow-up book called *Shaverology*, but I haven't seen a copy of it myself, just its listing on www.shavertron.com.

Jeffrey Jones: The Definitive Reference, by Patrick Hill, Chad J. Kolean, Emanuel C. Maris & J. David Spurlock, Vanguard Publishing, 2013, \$39.95.

Heroic fantasy was everywhere in the 1970s and Frank Frazetta was the king of the book covers. I can admire the power of his lines, the drama of his design, but my own favorite at the time was Jeffrey Jones. So while I passed on Vanguard's early title *Frazetta: The Definitive Reference*, I wasn't able to do so when this Jones title was released.

His art was my door into the work of some of the writers I treasure most from that time: Fritz Leiber. Thomas Burnett Swann. The Bran Mak Born and Cormac Mac Art books by Robert E. Howard.

Now unlike most art books, this is more a catalog of everything Jones has done, including book

covers, art prints, portfolios, sequential work, convention programs, etc. There are a few full-page pieces but most of the art is the size of large thumbnails, with descriptions as to where it appeared. There are a few short essays sprinkled throughout as well, but for deeper biographical information and larger depictions of the art, you'll have to look elsewhere.

I especially enjoyed the foreword by Bernie Wrightson and the afterword by Michael Wm. Kaluta, in which they each take a turn at describing their first meeting with Jones. The three of them (along with Barry Windsor-Smith) went on to have a studio together for a number of years, and the over-sized art book *The Studio*, which came out of that association, is well worth tracking down.

The Treasury of the Fantastic, edited by David Sandner & Jacob Weisman, Tachyon, 2013, \$19.95.

I always cringe a little when I see an anthology like this. With the fantasy boom still going strong (albeit in slightly different costumes: the barbarians, elves, wizards, and such have, for the most part, given way to vampires, werewolves, and witches), publishers will still grab a bunch of early stories (usually in

public domain), slap some kind of "history of" or "the best of" title on it, and send it out into the world, where it will be met with indifference, or what can be worse, by someone eager to discover the real roots of the field, only to be disappointed by the large preponderance of dull material suffocating a few good stories.

Except on a closer look, I realized that *The Treasury of the Fantastic* truly is a treasury of wonderful stories. Granted there are some of the usual suspects such as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," an M. R. James ghost story, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," an Oscar Wilde fairy tale — all fine stories, without a doubt. But further investigation proved to me that the editors know their material, and know what they're doing.

Lovely, inventive choices abound: "The Golden Key" by George MacDonald. The whole of Rosetti's "Goblin Market." Yeats's gorgeous "The Stolen Child," which has inspired any number of musical collaborations, from The Waterboys to Loreena McKennitt, but needs no music to sing from the page as it's presented here. Robert Louis Stevenson's creepy "The Bottle Imp." Kenneth Grahame's "The Reluctant Dragon." Robert W. Chambers's "Cassilda's Song," in which one can hear the poetic

cadence that Lovecraft would come to borrow years later.

And then come the surprises. Fantasy/horror from Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Edith Nesbit. Rudyard Kipling's "They," which I haven't read in forever. "The Mysterious Stranger" by Mark Twain, which I didn't even know existed.

Turns out there's not a dud to be found. I hope this ends up in many libraries—particularly school libraries where, one might wish, that at least a few times a year it will prove to be the catalyst to an appreciation of the fantastic for some young reader who is of just the right age to be swallowed whole by its sense of wonder in the same way so many of us were in our own teenage years. And after that, one can also hope that they'll use the stories and authors found in this treasury as a roadmap to the other marvels to be found in the early history of our field.

A few converts along those lines would make this book's existence all that more essential.

The Year's Best Science Fiction: Thirtieth Annual Collection, edited by Gardner Dozois, St. Martin's Griffin, 2013, \$22.99.

Every year *The Year's Best Science Fiction* provides pretty much

the best bang for your short story buck. I've been reading these anthologies for years and I'm lucky in that it appears that the editor's taste and my own overlap a great deal since I rarely find a clunker, and invariably discover a handful of stories that become real favorites, such as Megan Lindholm's "Old Paint" or "Close Encounters" by Andy Duncan in this particular volume.

I also enjoy the twenty-plus pages of "Summation: 2012" section, which brings me up to date on the past year's goings-on in the field.

There are other best-of-the-year anthologies, but this is one of the longest running and easily my favorite.

Writers Workshop of Science-Fiction & Fantasy, edited by Michael Knost, Seventh Star Press, 2013, \$17.95.

I'm not going to say that I don't have anything more to learn as a writer. I don't care where you are in your career, there's *always* something more you can learn. But that's a by-product of why I'll read a book such as this. Mostly I read them because I'm interested in the creative process and fascinated in how others go about pulling their own something out of nothing.

It doesn't matter the medium. I'll read interviews with visual artists, musicians, choreographers, whomever. And there are lots of great pieces collected here, some essays, but also many interviews.

But I can also recommend it as an excellent how-to book because, with all the various voices presented, it ends up following my own philosophy in terms of how one writes a story: there is no single correct method. It really does boil down to what works for you. However, it's very useful to have in your mental toolbox a great number of options about how you can go about creating compelling characters and stories.

No matter what kind of story you want to write, there's a good chance you'll find an approach you'll want to try here, especially with the advice coming from such a diverse group. You'll hear from Neil Gaiman to Joe Haldeman. Tim Powers to Ursula K. Le Guin by way of Pamela Sargent, Harry Turtledove and so many others.

Will it make you a better writer?

Not without your putting in a lot of work, because there's no quick and easy method to any creative endeavor.

But it's entertaining as well as informative, and it won't hurt your chances.

And now back to our regularly scheduled column for at least a couple of titles....

Butterfly Gate, by Benjamin Read & Chris Wildgoose, Improper Books, 2013, \$12.99.

Knight & Dragon, by Matt Gibbs & Bevis Musson, Improper Books, 2013, \$14.99.

Once upon a time readers of both books and comics chose much of what they would read by who published it. Collectors tried to get all the Ace doubles, or every DAW book. They would search out majors like Bantam Spectra or Ballantine; small presses such as Donald M. Grant Books or Arkham House.

And for all the indie comic publishers available now, these days it's still pretty much DC versus Marvel, just as it was back then.

We trusted the editors at our favorite houses. If we fell in love with a fantasy series published by Doubleday or Tor, we'd be more likely to try an author we didn't know published by the same house.

I suppose, in some regards, it's still true today, though not so much for me. I think it's mostly because rather than presenting creators with a similar flair of talent, today's

houses publish books and comics that are fairly interchangeable, and that's not what I'm looking for.

But I can feel a draw to *Improper Books* that reminds me of the old days. Not so much in the style of what they're publishing as in the high quality of the work and the fact that, so far, each project has been entirely different from the one before.

A few columns ago I wrote about *Porcelain: A Gothic Fairy Tale* by Benjamin Read and Chris Wildgoose. The pair are back with *Butterfly Gate*, which is about a pair of truly amoral kids who find a gate into another world. The art's different from *Porcelain* but just as wonderful, while the writing — well, I'll get to that in a moment.

Knight & Dragon is a delightful all-ages take on an encounter between the titular characters, wonderfully rendered in Musson's cartoony style. Dragon attacks village, maiden in peril, villagers request help from the noble knight. But the conclusion isn't as straightforward as the set-up — mostly be-

cause this is like a choose-your-own-adventure book. The reader picks one of six characters and follows their story. You can't begin at the opening pages and read your way through.

It's fun and quite fascinating how your perspective of the story changes depending on which character you're following — even though each storyline borrows pages from the others.

This technique might seem a little gimmicky, just as the fact that *Butterfly Gate* is told entirely in art: there are no captions, no word balloons. Read and Wildgoose manage all sorts of complexity and subtlety using just the art.

But although both stories use a gimmick, that doesn't change the fact that the actual narratives are good and the art is terrific.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.





MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Shadows, by Robin McKinley,
Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013, \$18.99.

S, by J.J. Abrams & Doug Dorst,
Mulholland Books, 2013, \$21.

The Kindred of Darkness, by
Barbara Hambly, Severn House,
2014, \$28.95.

Fables: 1, by Hal Duncan,
New Sodom Press, 2013, £6.

I FIRST encountered Robin McKinley's work as a teen, when I picked up the paperback of *Beauty and the Beast*. *Beauty and the Beast* is my favorite fairytale ever, and I adored that book, and the minute I finished it I got back on the subway and headed down to the bookstore and fervently demanded everything else she had ever written.

"You're holding it."

Because I was an avid, teenage reader, my disappointment was

probably palpable. I am not that same reader now; many years have passed between the first time I opened the covers of *Beauty* and the first time I opened the covers of *Shadows*, her latest.

But when I started reading *Shadows*, I felt like I'd come home.

It's not often I can connect with a novel the way I could as a teenager; too much water under that bridge. (When people demand that readers develop taste and discernment, I'm fine with that — but I want, also, to say that books aren't medicine or vitamins or physical fitness regimens, and if we can read with the same open vulnerability we could when we first started reading, why destroy that? Expand, certainly; read more, read other, yes. But if you can retain the joy and connection to works you loved as a young reader, why lose it? You are just cutting yourself off from something that you loved, which seems to mean less joy. But I digress.)

Maggie's father was killed by a

drunk driver when Maggie was young, and this shattered her family. Her mother worked three jobs trying to make ends meet; Maggie became responsible for her younger brother. But the three jobs became, eventually, one job, and the family picked up the pieces of life and tried to knit them together again. And they've succeeded.

Then, Maggie's mother started dating. This was kind of awkward, but it didn't really go anywhere. Maggie's met a few of her mother's prospective boyfriends — but on neutral ground (a restaurant, for instance). For some reason, Maggie's mother has invited the new boyfriend to dinner at the family house for the first introduction, and Maggie's not thrilled with this.

She is even less thrilled when she meets Val, an immigrant from Oldworld. Maggie frets at how ditzzy her mother seems to be while making dinner and cleaning the house, and it's Maggie who answers the door when Val shows up. Val appears to have brought a veritable army of disgusting and inhuman shadows with him. The fact that he's short, hairy, and has the worst clothing taste in the history of ever is almost a secondary concern: the shadows are creepy, and they disturb Maggie.

Since he's creepy and unacceptable to Maggie, it's no surprise to her when her mother marries him. She loves her mother and she wants her mother to be happy — almost as much as she wants to avoid any contact with Val, the new occupant of the house. Maggie has friends — Julie and Takahiro. She has school (they're all in high school), and she has her job at the animal shelter. She also has a dog that needs walking. She has a ton of decent excuses to avoid her mother's new husband.

But Val's shadows don't go away; they get worse.

Although this book is contemporary in tone, *Shadows* doesn't take place in our world. Maggie and her family live in Newworld. In Newworld, magic is illegal. A few generations back, the scientists figured out how to splice out the genes responsible for magic. The only place where magic is discussed is the university — and most of the Newworld students avoid any subjects that have anything to do with it.

But magic is not gone entirely. The reason Newworld exists at all is because every world in existence suffers from unpredictable, magical rifts that open in the fabric of reality itself. In Oldworld, the rifts are frequent and dangerous; people die, disappear, and go insane.

People believed it was the existence of magic that created these rifts, and they wanted a world in which they, and their children, could be safe. Which is why Newworld exists.

Maggie is the granddaughter of a very famous witch. She has no magic herself — or so she believes — because she believes no one does. But that belief is about to be tested in fairly major ways.

I know this book wasn't written with me in mind — but it might as well have been. First: it deals with the repercussions of death, loss, and grief; with Maggie's ambivalence to change and her desire to protect what her family has managed, with time, to rebuild. Second: It has Mongo, Maggie's dog. Maggie actually knows how to deal with dogs, and very realistically. Third: Maggie's best friend Julie is an actual friend, not a kind of plot coupon. They don't always agree on everything, but they always manage to be there for each other. Fourth: when the love interest is introduced and the list of his incredibly attractive attributes appears, there is actually one that appeals to me, which happens almost never. And fifth: the love interest part of the plot takes a left turn for reasons that also work for me across the board. There is also origami.

Yes, this is a book in which magic is prominent and the world isn't ours and therefore isn't real — but while reading it, it felt real to me. Everything about the characters made sense.

If I had to live in a fantasy universe — and while I like to read about them, living in them generally has no appeal — I would want to live in one that McKinley created.

S. was, according to the back of the box containing the novel, "conceived by filmmaker J. J. Abrams and written by award-winning novelist Doug Dorst."

The book inside the box — the box itself is the only thing that bears the title "S." — is *Ship of Theseus*, authored by V. M. Straka. There's also an old-fashioned library sticker on the spine. The copyright page — the only one in the book — is by V. M. Straka & F. X. Caldeira, in 1949.

Before we reach the copyright page, we hit the title page. "*Ship of Theseus*" is surrounded by paragraphs of handwritten text — two lines in block cap pencil, blue ballpoint cursive ink and black block caps. The blue cursive writer signs her name as Jen; the black block caps writer doesn't sign his

name at all (I don't consider it a spoiler to say his name is Eric, because the back of the box makes this clear).

The book belongs to Eric. He left it in the library where Jen works; she picked it up and noticed all of the writing in the margins. Since she considers the book already defaced (one assumes), she leaves him a note. Or several. He replies. Frequently.

Their notes pull the reader to the introduction written by Caldeira, the translator, who writes of the mystery of Straka's real-life identity, the various people who've been assumed to have been Straka, and Caldeira's own sense of the importance of Straka's work. In this section, the first of the extra-novel pieces appears: a photocopy of a letter, written by Straka to a filmmaker, both in the original German and the translated English, which Eric leaves for Jen.

There are numerous bits and pieces that have been placed between the pages of *Ship of Theseus* — letters, postcards, newspaper clippings, photos. I both loved them and found them difficult, because it's hard to read the actual novel without bits and pieces falling out. Their placement isn't accidental.

I was drawn into reading via

the margin notes and the interaction between Jen and Eric; Jen is new to Straka, having never read him; Eric intended to base his life on the study of Straka's works, and the question of his identity. Who was V. M. Straka? There are suppositions and theories and papers and presentations — all mentioned in Eric's various notes — but no proof. As when reading Nick Bantock's *Griffin @ Sabine*, there's something slightly voyeuristic about reading these private messages and notes.

Unlike Bantock's work, the foundation for the correspondence is an actual novel. Jen and Eric aren't artists; they're readers who meet over the mystery and promise of a book they both love.

Ship of Theseus was Straka's final novel; it was published posthumously. It could be considered horror, fantasy, or very heavy-handed allegory. Eric refers Jen to various other novels by Straka as they continue to communicate in the margins, and Jen comes back with comments about Straka's oeuvre.

Both come to believe that the book was published in part because Caldeira wished to reach out to Straka. But they don't know what Caldeira was trying to say.

And so, on to the book itself.

The presentation of the book, the typeface chosen, the layout and placement of headers and page numbers, implies age. The text does, as well. The writing is not contemporary in tone. If the only thing offered were the novel itself, pages unadorned with either marginalia or inserts, I don't think it would stand well on its own; it's a bit top-heavy in philosophical/metaphorical imagery, which feels overdone in places; the end is abrupt and unsatisfactory in and of itself — although I suspect that effect is intentional.

The titular character of the project, S, drags himself out of the water in the harbor of an unnamed city. He has no memory of how he ended up in the water. He has, in fact, no memory. He doesn't know his own name, has no idea where he's been, and has no idea where he's supposed to go. There is a piece of paper in his pocket with a single letter written on it: S.

He wanders until he sees an S outside of a bar, and he enters. There he sees a woman who catches his attention; she is reading a thick book, and appears to be waiting for someone. He approaches her; he can't tell if she recognizes him or not. They don't get much of a chance to converse, because he's grabbed

from behind, drugged, and carried away.

He wakes in a small cabin on a ship. He knows about ships, and he knows this is a good one. But it's crewed by exhausted wretches; none speak. The captain of the ship does. Neither the captain nor the ship have a name, which is fitting, as S doesn't either.

But this ship is destined to be his home. He escapes it once, returning to the world in search of the woman he met in the bar, and becomes embroiled in a strike at the factory of Vevoda; he falls in with the people who organized the strike, and sees them vilified and hunted. And he sees most of them die, before the ship returns to rescue him and carry him away.

These deaths will define everything he does in the future. The cause of the fallen will become his cause. But every time he returns to land, he searches for the woman he calls Sola, because he believes she holds the key to his identity.

Identity is the mystery of *Ship of Theseus*, the title an allusion to Theseus's paradox: "The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for

they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, in so much that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same."

Identity is the question Jen and Eric ask — of each other, and of Straka himself. They look at the footnotes, the introduction, and the material added by the translator, and they attempt to discern what message the translator was trying to send, and as they do, they grow closer.

But they're not the only people interested in solving this mystery. And they discover, the hard way, that there are forces who discourage any investigation into the history of V. M. Straka himself.

Jen is pitch-perfect for a college student of her age. Eric is more reserved, and his interest in Straka so personal, it takes longer to get a clear read on who he is. But their interaction, their slowly growing interest in each other, their attempts to meet (well, Jen's attempts to meet with him) and the shift in the tone of their interaction after they have is striking. I believed in them. I



ON AMAZON.COM

Overpopulation, wars, violence, and religious conflicts plague this planet called Earth. The only one that can reverse this is a Troo from Trooton whose name is Oris. He takes over a homeless man who doesn't realize his body planted a seed for a new colony of species that will now roam this Earth.

believed in their growing attachment to each other.

Ship of Theseus itself seems to be written to, or for, Caldeira. Caldeira's footnotes are definitely written to Straka — but there's no certain sense, as there is with Eric and Jen, that what's written will reach its audience, or even be understood. Caldeira says in the introduction that Straka didn't finish the book; he wanted to speak with Caldeira in person before he penned the last few lines.

And it's clear by the end of the entire project what he intended to say, and it ties in neatly with the present day.

I don't recommend this book for people who are looking for a strong narrative; it's almost impossible to read the novel that lies beneath the marginalia without reading the marginalia, because the eye is drawn by underlines and

markers to the notes that adorn them. But there's something about the chaotic jumble of novel, letters, footnotes, and personal marginalia that I found compelling, and if you like codes and puzzles, there are a few that Jen and Eric don't solve on their own.

I didn't know that Barbara Hambly had continued her vampire novels; *Those Who Hunt the Night* and *Traveling with the Dead* are the only two I've previously read, and I adored them. I found her vampires exactly the right blend of inhuman predators, with echoes of memories and attachments to elements of the lives they once lived.

Kindred of Darkness is apparently the fifth of the James Asher/Lydia novels. I haven't read *Blood Maidens* or *Magistrates from Hell*, because, sadly, I've only just learned of them. I will, of course, be reading them soon.

But *Kindred of Darkness* can be read without reading the two books that precede it. I was happy to return to James Asher, now retired from His Majesty's Service, and his wife, Lydia, who has been dragooned into escorting her unmarried younger cousin to gatherings in which she might meet a suitable husband.

The events take place entirely in and around London, in 1913. Hambly's writing and her ability to evoke a sense of place are, for me, as strong as they were when the first James Asher book appeared in 1988. Lydia's position in society has not notably improved since she has taken up the medical profession, but she's made peace with that. James is out of town at an academic conference — or so he's said; she's concerned that he might be doing the more risky work from which he retired, but she has no control over what he does when he's not at home.

Nor does she have any control of what the vampires of London will do, regardless.

Grippen, the Master Vampire of London, needs Lydia's aid. There's a new Vampire in London, and unlike Grippen and his nest, he's been eating a handful of people every week. That kind of deathcount is going to attract notice, and it's not the notice that Grippen — or any Vampire — wants. But Grippen's been looking, and the vampire is nowhere to be found. And he knows Lydia can find him.

He also knows Lydia's not likely to volunteer, and in order to persuade her, he kidnaps her daughter, Miranda. He promises to

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release Miranda if — and when — Lydia does as he asks.

Lydia summons James home. And she summons Don Simon Ysidro.

I found this book harder to read than the first two — which has nothing at all to do with the writing, and everything to do with the viewpoints: James and Lydia are both parents, and their daughter is in the hands of vampires. They know what her chances of survival are. Because they're the viewpoints, it's easy for the reader to slide behind the visceral fear of losing a

child; I know this one intimately. It almost kills James, at one point.

But Hambly's vampire books have never been cheerful comfort books. They are absorbing, atmospheric, compelling books, and I really look forward to seeing where she takes the characters in future.

Hal Duncan is one of a handful of authors whose writing always engages me. I saw mention of a chapbook he's publishing through New Sodom Press, with the elevator pitch "if David Cronenberg remade *Oliver!* on a script from Clive

Barker ... and *kept the songs*," and I immediately raised my hand and did the "Me! Me! Me!" dance of pure reader avarice.

Fabbles: 1 is a collection of three stories set in the universe of the Scruffians. In this Steampunk/Dickens pastiche (the pitch really does give a feel for the tone of this world), it's cheap child labor with a twist: the downtrodden can be "fixed." A process in the Institute turns them into immortals. They can't be killed. They *can* be hurt, but even lopped off limbs grow back in time. Everything they were when they were stamped remains exactly as it was: even hunger.

Fabbles are fibs, babbles — the stories the Scruffians tell to each other, and to the newcomers. As such, they're oral stories, in print; you can hear the cadence of the teller. They're meant to be read out loud (which is how I read them the second time).

The first of these stories is a Christmas story, set in a workhouse. It's short, and sweet, if by sweet you mean dark and demented.

The second, "Beast of Busker-ville," introduces the Waiftaker General, who's pretty much what his name implies: He's responsible for the Institute that turns out the Fixed for sale to those who want the

cheapest of labor — after all, you don't even have to *feed* them, they don't take sick, and they can't die. Unless they're Scrubbed — and that, only the Institute can do. He hunts the Scruffians in his spare time, because they're escapees; they've tweaked the stamp, and they're free. And that's just bad business.

But he's got a pressing problem. There's a dog. It's been killed dozens of times — but it won't *stay* dead, and he knows what that means: the dog's Fixed. He's been stamped. Waiftaker's got a squad of men, and knows how to find the beast. But when the Scruffians are about, things don't always go the way they're planned.

The last of the three stories — and the longest — is about the "Taking of the Stamp." I think this has appeared in ebook before, but not in print. The title pretty much says it all. This is easily the most violent of the three, and the most complicated.

There is a manic energy to these stories, with their over-the-top violence and down-in-the-gutter language; they have energy and verve and I want to call them almost perky dark horror. Which, as I said, matches the elevator pitch almost to a T. ₹

Pat MacEwen is the author of Rough Magic and The Dragon's Kiss. Her third novel, True-Born (a sequel to Rough Magic), is due to be published in a few months. Ms. MacEwen is a self-described science geek with a degree in marine biology and a lot of professional experience as a physical anthropologist. We hope this story doesn't reflect her own days as a grad student.

The Lightness of the Movement

By Pat MacEwen

I REMEMBER THE LAST thing Niera said to me, face to face. Now, in the dark, it keeps beating its way through my brain,

like a comic refrain from the wrong kind of poem.

"Shannon, don't ever forget," Niera told me. "They're not human. Nothing about them is human, no matter how like us they look. Don't assume you understand anything simply because, on the surface, it appears to be normal, familiar behavior."

I'd rolled my eyes at that, already tired of all the obsessive reminders, but didn't say what I was thinking — that I'm not a child and she isn't my mother. I held my tongue because I knew how badly she wanted to take my place down here. The whole project, funding and all, was her baby, right? But her artificial legs wouldn't allow her to waltz, let alone attempt the intricate steps of the Neons' incredible courtship dances. So Niera had stayed aboard ship in the comfortable half-grav that let her feel limber in spite of titanium hip joints, and through the link she recorded all my efforts and notes and discoveries.

I wonder what she's recording now.

Ever since I led the tads into the caves, I've heard nothing but static across the link. I'm not sure whether my locator beacon is working or not. I don't know what Niera would do, what she *could* do, even if she decided to try. After all, there are only the two of us in the whole system, and the probes on the ground are designed to detect and record events as they happen, not to *do* anything. They're mostly disguised as rocks, and about as useful in a situation like this one.

Kneeling, I touch the small boy sleeping next to me. I feel more than hear the soft shudder of breath rasping in and out. Here in the cave it's too dark to make out the electric green, the glowing pink and iridescent blue of the millions of minute scales that still cover parts of the boy's face, but I can feel them as I stroke his cheek. It's like touching a butterfly's wing, and now that I have touched him, I know my fingers are dusted green, pink, and blue, too.

It's a natural process to shed those scales, I tell myself, but my heart still cries out for the beauty he's losing. Only nine weeks ago, when I saw him first, oh my God, Dharm stole my breath away.

He was the size of a three-year-old human then. I'd spied him scampering back and forth in his father's garden. The sun glowed wherever it touched him, a soft halo forming around that incredible face, yet I thought for a moment that he was a boy of my own race. His features were utterly humanoid, with a high forehead and small bones. He had a pert little nose turning up just a bit at the tip, and chubby cheeks, and a kitten's fuzzy ears.

It was the coloring of those familiar small features that caught me. The shape of his face was entirely outlined in brilliant teal-green, but the green feathered into beige, then black around his mouth, eyes, and nose. Across each tiny cheekbone, a splash of soft apricot-pink matched smaller, brighter spots on his chin. A larger row of spots ran back over the top of his head, and his eyes were enclosed in broad almond-shaped splashes of fluorescent blue. Even that doesn't really describe the totality, though, doesn't capture the fey spirit shining inside him, the feeling that this child had stepped out of Faerie five minutes ago.

When he saw me, I froze, certain he'd run away.

Only he didn't. He cooed, then took a step nearer and chirped at me.

"Dharm!" he sang, naming himself as though he were already cadet-size.
"Dharm! Dharm!"

I smiled and wanted to laugh when he stretched himself upward, as tall as could be when you're only three. As he spread his small arms, the thin membrane connecting each arm to his sides was pulled taut, and the sunlight behind him shone right through the green, pink, and blue of the webbing. The child glowed, like living stained glass.

At first, I stared, enchanted. Then, through the link, I sent a sharp query. <Did you record that?>

<Ha! Got it!> said Nicra. The link conveyed more than words. I heard the glee in her voice as well, the intensity that had brought both of us here despite every restriction on research, on contact with primitive peoples.

The boy held his pose for another five seconds, then trilled softly. It was a sound in between that produced by a bird and a happy house cat, not really musical yet as expressive as song.

<The display signal> Nicra said, needlessly.

I nodded, using the one gesture we had in common with Neons, and suddenly there were a dozen more children, all smaller. Then two dozen. Then more. They tumbled and skipped and ran out of the shadows and linked hands, a star pattern forming. The star rotated, the children joining hands and skipping around like the spokes on a wheel as the webbing outstretched beneath each tiny arm caught the sun in its turn.

As they danced, even more children popped into view and a new outer ring formed about the original. Here, too, the webbings were spread and the tiny bright heads were thrown back at each step and the dazzle of color was that of a living kaleidoscope.

<Oh my God> I murmured through the link.

Nicra's reply cut me, knife-sharp. <Don't anthropomorphize! Not on the record. And keep your eyes open! Their father won't be far away>

No, he wasn't.

The male stood beneath a tree, most of his outline concealed by the dappled light filtering through the leaves. Seven feet tall, broad at shoulder and hip, he was easily twice my mass, and I'm not small for a human. He had enormous golden eyes with slit-pupils and was staring straight ahead at the children's dance, unblinking. Then the head turned toward me.

I held my breath.

I was wearing a latex and celluloid "skin" that was much more than a costume. The sensor arrays hidden under the scales served as Niera's eyes, ears, and nose. Other arrays kept me cool in subtropical heat, and the link tight and focused regardless of weather. It balanced my nutrients and my electrolytes. It maintained a weather eye and a predator alert. In an emergency, parts of it could even serve as light armor.

Till now, though, we hadn't been able to test its primary function. Would my "skin" convince a male Neon that I was the genuine article? A breeding femme of his own species?

Obviously, it was good enough to fool the children. On sighting me, they had begun their display without any detectable doubt. A mature male, however, had years of experience. He would be looking for much more than visual cues.

I was sweating in spite of the thermal control system in the suit.

<Easy> said Niera. <You're doing fine>

I didn't think so, but no dress rehearsal could really prepare either me or the suit for the ultimate test. If it failed, we'd be forced to postpone the whole project until we could build one that worked because no open contact is ever allowed with a non-technological species. The Neons could not be allowed to guess our people even existed. They had to perceive us as part of their world, and react to us by their own standards.

Which meant there would be no half-measures.

He'd either accept me or he would attack me. If I wasn't Neon, I must be some kind of intruder and therefore a danger to him and his garden and his brilliant children. If I was a Neon, but not a femme, I could only be one of his rivals.

At last, having eyeballed me for a full four minutes, the male took a step forward, into the sunlight.

<That's right> Niera whispered, unconsciously coaxing him although no one could hear her but me.

<Quiet!> I said, then added, <Please...don't distract me> I had to be ready to jump if he rushed me.

Instead, the male took one more step, slowly canting his head as he studied me.

I studied him in turn, letting the suit record everything. Less humanoid in appearance than most of the children, he had a much larger face,

with the mouth projecting forward until it was almost a muzzle. I could make out the sharp yellowish-white tips of six large canines against the milk-chocolate of his lower lip.

Like the children's, his scales caught the light, but could hardly be called iridescent. Where they were electric green, blue, and pink, he was brown, rust-red, and drab salmon. Where they glowed, he merely warmed the light.

Even so, he was impressive. His neck was thick and muscular, his body square in shape. He had the bulk of a weightlifter. I was sure he had the strength to snap me in two, suit or no suit. So I couldn't help fidgeting as he approached me, as he stared at my false femur's body.

<Hold still!> Niera whispered.

<I'm trying> I answered.

He crouched a bit, leaped the wall, landed a meter away and then paused again, bringing his head down to my level while the paired nostrils atop that short muzzle flared open. I clearly heard the sharp sniff as he inhaled. The suit, keyed by Niera, was already oozing a mixture of my excess moisture and false pheromones, a synthetic sweat designed on the basis of chemical samples collected the year before.

Niera had been here alone, then, dependent upon the machines for the sampling scut-work, her first in-system research grant far too small to support any grad students.

I only hoped she'd been careful enough, that she'd done it right. While all the children were herbivores, feeding on fruit within Papa-san's carefully tended lek garden, the grown-ups were omnivores. Some of the males, Niera'd told me, were capable hunters outside of the rut cycle, clearly the equals of any Cro-Magnon with similar tools.

At least this fellow came at me bare-handed. He had his spurs tucked away as well, in those long, bony sheaths at his ankles.

He took a step nearer, sniffed once again, and apparently made his decision. He bowed to the empty space on my left, then my right, chirping a tenor-key, "Ghlem!" at me.

<Attaboy!> Niera said.

I didn't voice my own heartfelt, "Thank God!" *Don't anthropomorphize*, I told myself, silently repeating Niera's dictum. Instead, I did my best curtsy, taking his lead as I bowed my own head to the left, then the right, and I offered him my name in Neon. "Cha-none," I replied.

When I came back up, Ghlem raised his long arms. The sleek webbing inside them stretched out — a bat's wing with false finger-ribs that were actually nothing but thickened ridges of brown and black scales. The sun shone through the membranes, although not as well as it did through the children's, and I was reminded of home and the difference between moths and butterflies.

Suddenly, he spun about like a dervish and kicked up a spray of dust. Dipping one arm, he spun halfway around before switching arms. Ghlem finished facing me once more, hands cocked on his hips in a Cossack pose.

As he began the dance, I spread and spun, too, but couldn't begin to match Papa-san's speed. I was bound by the suit, by the layers of latex, of circuits and coolant lines. Even with all the practice I'd put in aboard ship, I felt awkward, pitifully ignorant, anything, dear God, but graceful. I copied his moves and fought hardest to stay upright.

I followed him through a curving *chainé* of small, quick turns into a *demi-plie* and then into a tight *rond de jambe*, but I didn't even realize I'd spun the wrong way until, through the link, Niera cried, <No! Turn right! Clockwise!>

By then, of course, it was too late.

The Neon male had stopped. He stared at me, straightened, and whuffed a great breath at me. Slowly, he let his arms fall. As his webbings collapsed, I wanted to crawl right down into the earth at my feet because even without a common language I could see his disappointment. Perhaps more than that. From the dark shadows forming around his eyes, I felt sure he was embarrassed for me.

But I didn't have time to indulge that particular notion.

<Heads up!> Niera told me. The suit joined in, adding its own little tinny alarm chime. When I pulled my head up, I found they were right. We were not alone, not on this side of the garden wall.

Nearly ten meters away stood another femme.

Well, not another. A real one.

She glared at me, cyeing my body from head to toe, making me blush underneath the suit. Silly reaction, I know, but the purpose of all this play-acting and dancing was getting inside of the primitive Neon mind, inside the lek. That meant doing what they do and feeling what they feel in order

to understand. How could I not react, human-style, then, to a challenge that must be the same for most races?

I even adopted a fight-or-flight posture, but only wound up feeling silly again for I knew Neon females did not compete, not with each other.

Indeed, once I *had* been examined, she turned her gaze into the tek garden. Papa-san stood and watched both of us. Seeing they'd caught her attention, Ghlem trilled to the children, and they giggled as they resumed their elaborate dance.

The unknown femme responded as I had, by watching intently, then nodding. Papa-san gave her the once-over sniff, too, but after that — well the whole thing was totally different.

When he began spinning, she didn't hesitate. She spun in unison with him and matched every move with her own, mirror-perfect. The dance didn't stop with the first pirouette, either. When they'd completed the first turn-about, they went into the dip-dance. An awkward term, I know, but how else can I quickly describe the elaborate sequence, the dipping of heads, hands, and webs that most closely resembles the courtship rite of a sandhill crane?

Here, too, the femme was near perfect, her timing so close, it was hard to be sure who was leading the dance. But we'd used the computers to prove the essentials — that every dance *was* different, and that the Neon male was the controller, the one who made every important decision.

Niera's own theory is that this is something akin to the courtship effect among humans and other terrestrial species. Courtship isn't just about wooing your partner. It also brings the hormonal cycles of two individuals into synch, so that their physical union will be more successful.

Whatever the reason, the outcome was no surprise.

Dipping low, Ghlem led the femme to a gap in the garden wall, too high for children to use, but the femme had no trouble at all getting over it. Once she was inside the garden, he led her through spiral loops around the still-spinning children, the little processional somehow a part of the dance for a minute or so. Finally, he led her toward the rock wall at the back of the garden, a piece of the limestone karst that made up the bulk of the northern peninsula.

Trilling together, they disappeared into the shadows, and I couldn't help it. I sat on the nearest rock and heaved a sigh of despair.

Through the link, Niera snapped at me, <Get up! I can't see a thing while you're sitting down!>

Angry, I sucked in a sharp breath that hurt my lungs, only to bite back the words that came with it. Whatever my own disappointment might be, Niera's frustration must be even worse. Either way, she was still the boss. So I climbed to my fake feet and prowled the full length of the garden wall, doing my best to take close-ups of children, of bushes and berries and landscaping laid out in circles and spirals that might be derived from the dance itself. Was it a conscious design or not? Was it important to femmes? Or were females more interested in productivity? In the small fruit that would nourish their children and transfer their father's memories to them, supposing they did choose to mate with the gardener?

I shook my head. There were so many questions to answer, yet so little time. There were seven more weeks till the Equinox. After that, lek would give way to the migration season, and then to the onrush of winter.

When I finally gave it all up and went back to the lander, I spent the whole evening reviewing the record of my first attempt, and my utter rejection. I swore a solemn private oath. I'd do better tomorrow.

HAVING STRUCK OUT with Ghlem, I decided to try a different garden the next day, one with a male who might be a little less particular. A male with a smaller garden, perhaps?

A lot smaller.

I wound up a good ten kilometers from my first site, where I found myself peeking over a rock wall almost half a meter lower than Ghlem's. A real mess, too, as if it had been built on a dare by rival clades of alcoholic stonemasons after an epic drinking match. Inside the wall, things weren't much better. There were weeds everywhere, and the khia trees had been planted in clumps so that none of them got enough light on all sides, and the shusoorel bushes were unkempt and overgrown. No one was trimming away the excess buds, so the branches had all just gone leggy as hell, producing only a smattering of pallid blooms about half the size of those I'd seen at Ghlem's.

Small, pale flowers equal small, pale fruit, short on sugars as well as essential pigments, minerals, vitamins, and memories. To a Neon femme,

this could hardly look promising. Maybe that's why I spied only four children inside, all quite young, and none of them looking too healthy.

I gazed at them, letting the suit catch details of the awkward humpety chase game they were playing, which appeared to be a cross between tag and leapfrog. It took them a good ten minutes to notice me, there being no one on lookout here, but when they did, their response was normal. They trilled to me. Then they formed a small square and began to dance. It wasn't the wheel-within-a-wheel pattern produced by Ghlem's kids, mainly for sheer lack of numbers, but they were still graceful as hell, and the sunlight set them aglow in a lesser yet still enchanting fashion.

Their father turned up before they'd completed their second circuit. I might not have noticed, if not for Niera. <Heads up!> she whispered. <Four o'clock>

He was lurking among the shusoorel bushes, all but invisible. Their chaotic disorder allowed him to blend right in, even his eyes, as if his face were a cluster of flowers. He stared at me, motionless. Was he asleep? Intent? Or simply trying to maintain his cover?

Impatience struck, and overwhelmed me. Rather than wait for him to act, I leaned over the wall and pointed at him.

<Shannon!> Niera protested.

<What? Did I say anything?>

<That's not what I meant, and you know it!>

Yes, I did, but the crux of the thing was interaction. If he didn't care to dance, okay, I'd deal with that. Thing is, we had tons of video showing male-female encounters, and nearly a third of them showed the femmes initiating things. Why not me?

As if she'd heard that thought, Niera snapped, <You're a virgin! In their terms. You can't just leap into this head-first!>

Why not? I thought. A leap of faith had served me well in human terms, that first time at least. Then again, Niera had spent three years on this study before bringing me aboard. She'd been the one who compiled the statistics. A worm of doubt began to niggle, but it was already too late. He'd reacted. In fact, he charged my way.

<Oh, shit!> I flung myself backward, but he'd crossed the open space in three long leaps. He was over the wall itself with a fourth, and then he was on top of me.

I whirled desperately to the left and was startled almost beyond words when he did the same. He was matching my step, letting *me* lead.

<Niera! What do I *do*?>

<DANCE, damn you!>

There was no other choice. I whirled again, did a small *jeté*, and when he copied that as well, I lost my cool and fell back on my training. Not Niera's. My early training. Ballet. Folk dance. Human dance. I should have stuck with the Neon steps I'd been observing and practicing, but in my panic, I found myself spinning in place, doing a series of *fouettés en tournant*. When I finally came to a stop and tried to dart backward, away from the male, he came with me. He matched every change of direction, quick as a hummingbird although, like Ghlem, he was easily twice my size. He followed me onto the wall itself, and then into the garden, every step speeding up as we moved toward the cliff that bounded the garden instead of a wall along the southern side. Before I knew it we were doing a mad tarantella, pure adrenaline driving me onward. Sheer madness, of course, but that's the nature of the thing, is it not? A tarantella spins you about. You whirl faster and faster until you fall into a kind of insanity.

Centuries back, people thought it would cure the insane. Well, it didn't do any such thing for me. It wore me out, that's what it did, but that only helped to keep Niera from getting through. Somewhere light-years away, she was screaming at me across the link, but her words made no sense to me. Nothing did. Nothing but the dance itself.

Finally, breathless and damn nearly boneless, I slid to the ground. Half-fainting, I could do nothing to stop him when the male came back to me, then picked me up. When he embraced me, I did try to push him away, to voice some kind of protest, but it was already too late. His organs everted, he thrust himself into me, into the fake receptacles we'd built into the suit. Armored, just like the rest of the suit, thank God, otherwise I'm not sure I'd have survived it. The spiny points at the tip of each organ (he had two primary organs, and two to spare) would have punched their way through *me* like so many spear points. As it was, those powerful surges, five in number, drove my whole body up into the air, so that I had to spread my fake membranes and flap with both arms and both legs just to keep myself upright. If I fell beneath him, I couldn't be sure the suit's armor would save me from his crushing weight.

<Shannon!> I heard. Niera, screaming.

Then came the convulsion. My overgrown partner achieved his climax and pumped me full of his sperm packets. He bugled, too, sending the four children into a mad frenzy of their own. I was so dizzy, I couldn't make out much of that, but the suit must have caught it. From my height, above the male, I would later see how their new pattern unfolded: each tiny dancer, arms spread wide and membranes lit up from behind by the sun, became one part of a green, pink, and blue four-leaf clover.

When it was all over, the male set me down again. Carefully. I let him, none too sure I would be able to stand up again if I tried. When I sat there, not moving, he nudged me, but I was in shock.

It was Niera who keyed my suit's biotelemetry, who told my suit to infuse me with glucose, to balance my fluids, my temperature, and my electrolytes. Then, as she kept talking to me, I found my way back to full consciousness.

<What?> I said, no longer dazed, but not totally with it.

<He's waiting> said Niera.

<For what?> Far as I could see, we'd gone the distance, so what more could he want from me?

<You've still got to lay your eggs!>

Oh, no! I shook my head, repulsed by the notion. I knew, of course, where courtship leads, but up to that point, I'd been totally focused on the courtship itself, on the dance, not the purpose of all this. I never expected to get this far, certainly not *this* flaming fast.

Yet I had. Using the wrong steps, in synch with the wrong male, and here I was, trapped in his garden, receptacles overflowing, him standing there, waiting....

<All right, all right!> I said, mostly to him though I'm quite sure only Niera heard me, her and her recording equipment.

I rolled over onto all fours. Laboring mightily, I used the nearby wall to get up again. I staggered toward the cliffside nest he'd constructed, an open bowl that collected the warmth of the sun as well as the white light reflected by the limestone face rising up at his back. Heat to help the eggs develop, light to show how lovely they were. Moving slowly, I fumbled a bit with the suit's controls.

<Easy, now. Open your storage pouch> Niera commanded. <Then start sequence eighteen-one-A>

Oh, yeah. That part was programmed as well. With Niera's guidance, I did that, and squatted, and let the suit complete its program, inflating and then depositing a golden skein of false eggs engineered to look just like the real ones.

Not that many, though. No more than an octad, all softball-sized. I was supposed to be virginal, after all, too small and too inexperienced at this to make major inroads on his optimistically sized conflation of a nest. But this male had only four kids on display, thus far, and no other eggs at all. This late in the season, that number was pitiful. Too few to draw femmes who had any real sense. Meaning: anybody but me.

When I stepped back, the fake eggs began to glow, golden, pink, and green, just like the real thing. The male, satisfied, began trilling at me, and at them, with what I could only consider contentment. At long last, his garden was growing.

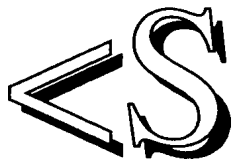
A nursery rhyme ran through my mind. *Oh, Mary, Mary, quite contrary....*

<Shannon!>

What? Oh. Had I sung that aloud?

<Return to the lander. Now>

<You hetcha, boss> I replied, and clambered back over the wall again. I had to let Niera guide me the rest of the way, though. I was too wiped out to know where the heck I was going.



HANNON, what were you thinking?> Niera demanded.

Morning had come, much earlier than I would have preferred. I rose, groaning, and got a full dose of her "lecture" voice before I could even duck into the fresher. She didn't ease up, either, no sir. Not even to let me evacuate and medicate.

I was sore, all over, and worst of all up through the middle. I'd taken a pounding to match anything you'd encounter in, say, the average bar fight back home. Or rape.

<You could have been hurt. Badly hurt. And you've totally ruined this encounter> Niera went on. <Perhaps the whole study! If that Neon

shows even one of those steps to another femme, and the meme is transferred — >

I shook my head, and regretted it. <You saw that moke. He's a total loser. He'll never get that far with a real femme — >

<You think so?>

The frantic tone got through more than the words, and I paused to consider. That's when she keyed my monitors to the small, badly built garden I'd visited the day before. I had to blink my way through a layer of blurriness, but when I did, I got an eyeful. It showed the male, and his nest, and his meager display. But it also showed a Neon femme, and she was taking careful note of my fake eggs. She then turned to the children's dance.

Oh, surely not, I thought. Compared to Dharm and his siblings, these four little tykes couldn't even aspire to mediocrity. Yet there she stood, observing, considering.

Horrificed, I watched her enter the lek garden, hesitate, then bow to the male and take the first tentative steps of the courtship dance with him. What was wrong with her, I wondered, that she would settle for this fourth-rate schmo? Normally, guys like that only pull in the substandard femmes who fall short in some way. Then, as they began the elaborate *pas de deux*, I could see that she had a limp. She had to work hard to maintain her own speed. And on his part, he appeared to be giving her extra time and space.

Okay, then. I could tell myself it was all right. No harm, no foul. He was following all the usual steps, and maybe they'd manage, and maybe they wouldn't. But as the male became aroused, his urgency grew, and finally his impatience overwhelmed his good sense and he really cut loose.

Oh, good Lord. That mad whirling transition was a passage I'd taken from Kai Li Chen's variations on Liszt. It was wholly, and damningly, human. <But — >

<Now do you see? Your eggs attracted her> Niera said, <and *she* doesn't know they're all phonies. So now she's dancing with him. She'd never have given a garden like *that* so much as a second look. But now she's going to — >

<Shush!>

<What?>

<Quiet!> I practically shouted that. Had to, to get past her panic. Instead of explaining myself, I pointed. <Look!>

On the very same monitor screens, the happy couple we'd been watching a moment before were no longer in synch. In fact, they were flying apart. The male had thrown in another fast passage, and she'd tried to follow, but couldn't. She ended up spinning out of his axis altogether and came to a dead halt, staring at him in consternation.

Well, that's what I'd call it. In Neon terms, it was noncomprehension, I suppose. In spite of my own belief system, or lack of same, I started to pray. "God, give it up," I whispered, mindful enough (just) to say no such thing on the link. "Please!"

I was answered with miracles. There, on the monitor, I saw the femme back away from the plaintive male. I saw the four-petal children's dance grind to a halt as well. I saw the male try to touch her, and then the mad flurry of scales flying off one or both as the femme flew at him in a sudden rage.

It all happened in split seconds. I had to study it later in slow-mo, to see what really did take place, but my first impression turned out to be right. She was interested, yes, but not desperate. Not like him. And so, when he tried something totally off the map, she didn't have enough impetus or flexibility. She either couldn't or wouldn't do what he'd done in dancing with me. Instead, she gave it only a half-hearted try and when she failed again, she quit. In that final moment, what she presented to him was not the focused pose of a receptive if impatient femme but sheer pique. Perhaps he failed to see that. He let his frustration win out by trying to make direct physical contact, even though she wasn't ready. It was far too soon and too aggressive, and so she'd lashed out at him, just as a human female will sometimes lash out at a man who gets too cocky.

The dust her abrupt rejection kicked up served to veil her retreat, but the last I saw of the outraged femme, she was hightailing it over the wall in what I could only describe as a state of high dudgcon.

"Oh, thank God," I whispered, and meant it, although I had no idea who I was praying to. Hralsted's World wasn't a foxhole, after all, but neither was I a true atheist. Not then. Not now, either, I suppose.

I spent the next few weeks visiting more and more lek gardens. I found an array of enclosures whose walls and fruit trees and dance displays

ranged from the pitiful to the exquisite. It was my task to sample the full spectrum, right? And to listen to Niera's unending complaints. After that one unexpected success, you see, I kept on failing. I made dozens of approaches but no other male let me finish the dance. Not one, although I did my best to adhere to the study's protocols. Neon steps and sequences only, no matter what. I did everything right, but it just didn't work.

Eventually, I began to concentrate on other wanderers. Most of them, as I'd expected, were femmes. Intent on locating the very best gardens and thus the best mating prospects, they just didn't pay much attention to me, or each other. So I figured I'd play Tag-Along.

That's why, three weeks after my sole and sorry success, I was following a pretty femme, a small newly mature type like I was supposed to be. I was hoping to catch a clue somewhere along the way. She'd taken notice, though. Kept looking back at me over her shoulder, so I stayed about fifty meters to the rear. An older femme might have done more in the face of my odd unfemmelike behavior, might have thrown a rock at me or simply confronted me. This girl did not appear to know what to do, and I guess I was making her nervous. That might be why she didn't notice the male Neon lurking behind a big shahsul tree growing beside the path.

The suit alerted me and Niera. The next thing I knew, he was on her. He knocked her down and pinned her beneath him. Then the male clamped his six fangs around her throat. Every time she tried to struggle, he'd bite down and strangle her until she quit fighting. His organs, bright red and fully everted, made his intent all too obvious.

What can I tell you? It shocked me. I'd never seen anything like that, not in Niera's recordings or in my own life. On a civilized world, it's the kind of thing you only see in a virtual.

<Good God!> I cried over the link while I stood there, frozen. <What's he even *doing* here? There's no gardens close by>

Even if there were, why would a gardener leave his kids? The femmes were supposed to come to *him*.

But what if they didn't?

A fleeting half-memory fled through my mind — orangutans, I thought. Our cousins, and also an ape who rapes. If he can't get a date any other way, a male orang without control of a territory will sometimes go

after the ladies and take them by force while the male who does run the place isn't looking. Was this Neon doing the same?

I began inching closer.

<Stay clear> Niera told me.

<But — this is all wrong!>

<Doesn't matter> she shot back. <It's happening. Therefore it has to be natural. One more behavior we need to record>

What? The very idea caught me crossways. Did she really think I'd just stand here and watch the little femme get raped? For the sake of *Science*?

Oh, no. No friggin' way.

All of a sudden, a kind of rage exploded inside me. I ran forward, shrieking, "Get off her, you bastard!" As I ran past a fallen tree, I grabbed a branch, and wrenched it free. Made even more noise in doing that, but the male Neon only took notice at the very last moment, perhaps because he was already wrapped up in doing the deed and more than a little distracted. As I swung the branch at his head, though, he flung himself sideways, away from my makeshift club. I didn't connect, but I'd hit him all right, with simple surprise instead of an actual impact. He rolled over one more time, fast as a striking snake. Then he was back on his feet again and snarling at me.

Smooth move, a small, rather panicky part of me noted.

The rest of me swung again.

This time, I aimed at his shoulder. He ducked that one easily, too, but the very attempt set him back on his heels a bit. I would have gone for a third whack, a two-handed golf swing at his tender bits, but I heard Niera screaming at me on the link, and the male was beginning to back off. Then, all of a sudden, he spun about and ran away from me at top speed, in thigh-slapping disarray, all of his organs still being everted.

Why? I wondered. He had to know he could have taken me. Why cut and run?

I don't know, but I think he was spooked. A Neon femme just doesn't fight. Ever. I must have come off like a psycho-bitch from hell, something so far off the Neon social map, I might as well have been a werewolf. *Thank God for that*, I told myself, ignoring Niera's continuing tirade while I fought the tremors and breathlessness of excess adrenaline, no longer needed but still coursing through my veins.

It took a few minutes. Meanwhile, Niera kept quoting me chapter and verse from the Conservation of Sentient Species Act, which seemed a little excessive, considering. <Hey! I never laid a finger on him> I finally told her.

<Like *that* matters!>

It did to me.

<Are you out of your mind? You could have been killed!> Niera shouted. <D'you know how lucky you are?>

I sure didn't feel lucky. Then I remembered just why she was up there, why she'd needed me in the first place. When she was a grad student, Niera had been the one doing the scut work, on Brasse 1438d, I believe. It was something to do with the Hallamah, an insectoid race that uses small luminescent chromatophores in their skin to communicate, and especially to advertise their readiness to mate. Niera's team wore mimicry suits rather like mine in principle. Hers, though, malfunctioned, offering up by mistake the display of a local prey species. By the time anyone else even realized that, she was already being dissected and large parts of her predigested by powerful enzymes found in the Hallamah's venom.

They'd saved her. They'd tried to rebuild her, too, I'd heard, but her body's reaction to all that venom, which also included a full array of neural toxins and harshly antigenic compounds, made regeneration much too risky. They'd had to use prosthetics instead.

Oh, crap, I thought. Niera was right. An unsettling thought, not least because I didn't think I could manage without *my* legs. I'd certainly never be able to do what she had, finishing up her degree in the hospital, landing a post-doc, and finally winning her own fully tenured faculty appointment in spite of her problems.

Somehow I managed not to apologize, knowing it wouldn't help. Casting about for some other focus, I finally remembered the femme I'd been trying to help in the first place. To my surprise, she was still there, completely immobile on the ground and staring up at me.

Was she hurt? I couldn't tell.

For lack of a better idea, I stepped forward and offered my hand to her, thinking to give her a bit of a lift, that's all, help her get to her feet again.

She gaped at me, then spat a word I had never yet heard, and she clawed me. Her talons flashed once, and the glove built into my suit was in ribbons.

I yanked the hand back, of course, swearing in two or three languages.

Meanwhile, she hauled herself upright without my help and took off like a bat with a tail on fire.

<Thunderation!> I spat at her backside, finding she'd drawn blood in spite of the suit. Not much, but still. <What was *that* for?>

<What do you *think*?>

< But I saved her ass!>

Niera snorted. <Which no real Neon femme would ever do! You revealed yourself, in that at least, as an alien!>

Which, being true, put me that much more on the defensive. <He could have killed her> I argued.

<I doubt it> she answered. <There's no percentage in that for him. If he kills her, she's certainly not going to lay any eggs for him>

<So what? There's no nest for the eggs, so the odds are they won't even hatch. And no garden, either, so how can he hope to feed the tads if they do hatch?>

Her only answer? <The sex drive's a powerful thing>

No kidding, I thought. It can drive you crazy.

So can a myopic thesis advisor who thinks she's my mother.



HEREAFTER, I kept an eye peeled for those wandering males. They were rogues of a sort, edgy, frustrated, unfriendly. There's simply not enough room for all the mature males to set up a viable garden, especially on the

Akalaian Peninsula. So much of the ground is too steep, or too rocky, or too far from water, so even males who do have a garden are forced to defend them against interlopers and challengers. The later it got in the season, the worse the problem.

I saw several donnybrooks erupt when a wandering male jumped into a garden and confronted the resident male. Without exception, the invaders were ejected again, but those encounters were always noisy, and the violence was growing ever more extreme. At other times, though, the trespassers simply snatched fruit from the garden. Some focused on chasing the children around.

<So what is *that* all about?> I finally had to ask my advisor.

<Who knows?> Niera shot back. <Maybe they're trying to steal the RNA analogues meant for the kids>

<Stealing memories? I thought the Neons could only absorb them as tads and cadets, before metamorphosis>

<We're not totally sure about that>

We? Who else was studying Neons?

Niera coughed up another hypothesis. <Maybe they're trying to sabotage the dance displays, so the gardeners won't succeed either>

A "doggy in a manger"-type strategy? That didn't sound right, either. But the moment I ventured to say so, Niera jumped down my throat with both prosthetic feet.

<Do you think, *just this once*, you could stick to the protocol? *That* is a side issue!>

Something up there made an ugly thud, as if a fist had hit a console. Or maybe a metal foot. Whatever it was, it didn't improve her mood.

<Damn it all> Niera groaned, not quite sobbing. <The whole field season is nearly gone. It's all — it's just — evaporating!>

I tried to argue. <We've got lots of data — >

<But nothing that *means* anything! How am I going to get funding for next year, if *this* is all I have to show for a whole season's work?>

No idea. Nor did I know what I'd do with this mess. Some sliver of the study was supposed to become my graduate thesis, without which I would not win my degree. I hated to think about that onrushing dilemma. Yet another failure loomed, and I couldn't help picturing my parental group, all of them gazing at me with the same expression of doleful disappointment. The one thing they wouldn't be, I told myself, was surprised.

I sank to the ground. I shook my head. I let loose a gusty sigh of dejection. After a while, I heard Niera's gentle query. <Shannon?>

Why bother to answer? I shook my head again, wondering what kind of job I could get if I sidled back into the world of ballet. Stagehand? Usher? All-around kiss-ass and dogsbody?

<Honey, are you all right?>

A shrug momentarily lifted my shoulders.

<Shannon!>

<I'm sorry> I said, though I wasn't, really. Well, sorry for myself, I suppose. I was in a place I'd seen before, and it felt worse than ever.

<Shannon, do I have to come down there and get you?>

Ridiculous question. We only had the one lander.

I shook myself a bit, only then noticing that I was being observed by another, a Neon. A femme, but nobody I'd seen before. So at least it wasn't the ingrate I'd tried to rescue from her rapist. As I watched this femme, she clearly decided to discount me and made her own approach to the wall of the garden at my back. I heard a tad's trill, alerting the children within as well as their father, and I couldn't muster enough energy to get up and record the encounter.

<Shannon — we'll try something different>

I shook my head. <It's not that>

<Then what?>

<I — I — they don't like me>

<What?>

I tried to explain, but I doubt there was any coherence to what I said. Somehow, Niera worked it out anyway and began to make consoling noises. Soon enough, I asked her to stop. It didn't help.

<Drink more water> Niera said, flailing a bit. <You're getting dehydrated>

<No, I'm not> I threw up my hands. <I just — I guess I just never expected to care that much about being rejected by these guys. Nonhumans, I mean. By my own kind, yeah, sure — > I fell silent, choking on bitterness.

<Oh, Shannon> she said softly. <Why do you think any of us ever even get into xenology? Because we don't fit into our own cultures terribly well. We end up marginalized, outsiders at the great human banquet, and so we decide that we like being different, and we like the "other" and seek it out>

Was that it? For her, I thought, what she'd said was probably true, but I hadn't come to this sorry business out of my attraction to anything.

Niera released her own soft sigh. <But how can we ever fit into another culture that isn't even human, let alone our own?> she asked me. <We can't. We can only strive to build a bridge of understanding, knowing that although we long to belong, we never can. And yes, it most certainly does hurt>

What was that? Poetry?

Almost. But hers, not mine. The only world I yearned for wanted no part of me. My only hope of reentry had been the off chance that my doing the job here would show them, would prove that I could do it. I could learn

not just to dance, but to dance like no one else ever had. No human, anyway.

By late afternoon of the next day, my wandering took me back by Ghlem's garden. I cast a yearning look over his wall, and who did I spot but the same tiny dancer I'd seen on that first day? I couldn't be sure on my own, of course, but the link's analytical eye made the ID, and then the kid noticed me, too.

In an instant, he ran toward me, trilling in sheer delight. Like a puppy will, spotting a playmate.

Well, who can resist that?

I don't think I tried.

Instead, as he plowed to a stop and bowed to me, and trilled his name again, "Dharm! Dharm!" I nodded and trilled back.

The rest of the children began to take notice, but then Ghlem appeared. He remembered me too, it would seem. His response was a hard snort of utter disgust mixed in with a blatant warning.

The other children faded back into the bushes again.

Not Dharm.

He was larger, I noticed, and darker, too. His face had begun to lengthen. He must be one of the oldest of this year's brood, perhaps the most senior surviving tad of the lot. He was entering the penultimate growth stage, the cadet phase, the last one before metamorphosis. That would end his starring role in his father's displays. As a cadet, he'd lose his looks. He'd concentrate on acquiring stores of body fat and on helping his father lay up the food he and his siblings needed for the coming winter. The adults always migrate to warmer climes shortly before the first snows fall, but the adolescents hole up down deep in the caves below this garden. There they'd huddle together, eat up their father's larder, and in the process, acquire their father's memories. Then they'd dream away most of the cold season while their minds and bodies transformed bit by bit. Come spring, the survivors will all emerge into the sunlight again, in small but adult form.

Dharm would become competition for Ghlem, and for next year's kids. He'd be forced to leave and make his own way in the world, until he was finally big enough to start or take over a lek garden.

"Dharm," the young Neon repeated, still watching me, still bowing.

"It's no use," I told him, turning my link off to avoid any more of Niera's nagging. "I'm not getting anywhere."

He couldn't have understood a word, but he did seem to pick up the feeling behind it all. Dharm canted his head and whined a bit, and came nearer yet.

I sighed. "Forget it, chum. You'd better go chow down and fatten up. Christmas is coming."

I turned away.

"Dharm!" he said once more. Then I heard a mad flutter behind me, a scraping sound, and the almost-cadet was on my side of the friggin' wall.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "Get back in there!"

Instinctively, I swooped at him, and he leaped back onto the top of the wall. But he stopped there, still watching me.

"Look, I'm hopeless," I tried to explain, my outthrust hands necessarily spreading my membranes as well as my arms.

In response, Dharm cheeped at me, canting his cute little head to one side, then the other. Had I accidentally copied a gesture? Said something in Neon without even knowing it? I'm still not sure. My despair might have been so obvious, even a Neon child could see it. Or maybe it's Dharm. Maybe he's different, too.

All I do know for sure is the kid wasn't scared of me. He seemed to like me, but that might have been simple pity. Or maybe just boredom. Whatever. Within seconds, he leaped back down off the wall and landed right in front of me. He raised both arms, but then lowered one to plant that fist on his hip. Then, ever so slowly, he began to rotate in place.

I stared at him, astonished.

It was the Cossack pose I'd seen Ghlem take up on our very first meeting. The tad, however, was working his way through it step by glacial step. Was he practicing? Or just aping his father? Or was he trying to show me something?

I had no idea what to do, but it felt entirely natural to copy his moves, and his pace. It was actually harder to keep my balance at that speed. A spin has its own built-in logic, and dancers are trained to make use of it. A physicist would describe it in terms of angular momentum and probably think about gyroscopes, but a dancer thinks in terms of speed. The faster

you turn, the more stable the spin is. The slower you spin, the more you wobble.

As Ghlem had done, Dharm only turned halfway around before switching arms, and on reaching the end of that turn, he reversed course. Then, just like his father had, the tad finished up the move facing me once more, both hands cocked on his hips.

He looked pretty pleased with me, or maybe himself. Moving just a bit faster, he went through the whole thing again, and I followed. Almost, I could hear Madame Periot carping at me from behind as I stood at the barre, and wondered for a moment why my toes weren't aching from wearing ballet shoes. I'd never had money to spare for the body mods a professional dancer needs, and so I'd done it old school. But here, the suit appeared to perform much the same function. Its built-in bracing lent me the reinforcement I needed without doing unpleasant things to my bones.

By the tenth repetition, I'd got it down pat and was matching Dharm's dance to a tee. So, of course, he speeded up, and I did likewise.

Was Niera recording *this*?

I would have asked, but I hated to risk anything that would break the spell Dharm had cast over me. He might stop at any moment, and finally, I had the sensation of progress, of movement beyond the steps I was attempting to learn. I had made a connection, without knowing how, or why this lad would care enough to try teaching me anything. I only knew I'd made some sort of breakthrough. So, no, I did not restore the uplink. I kept on dancing.

My efforts soon winded me, though, and I finally had to sit down for a bit.

Dharm did not seem to mind. There were no other femmes about, so he could pretty well do as he pleased, I suppose. When I offered him one of the khias I'd picked that morning, he accepted the gift and gravely ate it while I rested.

When I got up again, Dharm had decided to work on another, longer passage. This time, he began drilling me on the *chainé* of small, quick turns that came after the Cossack's spin. These, I had trouble with. Not because I couldn't follow the steps, but because I was wrong, somehow, in my performance of each one. We kept at it for more than an hour, with short breaks, but I still could not satisfy my tiny tutor.

He gave up, at last, and went on, taking me through the same *demiplié* I'd done with his father. That led straight into an even more closely bound *rond de jambe*, and here, too, I was missing it somehow.

I started to think about asking my boss for advice. I could see Dharm's frustration beginning to build and could not figure out what the hell was the problem. No matter how carefully I placed my feet, he was not satisfied.

Then, his face lighting up, Dharm came to a halt. He abandoned the pose he'd been holding and strode toward me. I let him, uncertain what he intended to do, but fairly sure he was too small to do any real harm. Would he hit me? Or push me away?

No. He reached out and took both my hands. With a gentle tug, he pulled me farther away from the wall and up onto a flat piece of rock that appeared to be some kind of sandstone or shale about twenty centimeters high. Then, taking up the pose again, but at my side this time, he very carefully did the first step in the *rond*. Like him, I spread my membranes and stepped forward, into the turn and off the rock. To my surprise, my membranes buoyed me up a bit. Like a parachute.

How could that be? They were membranes, sure, but they had no bones to reinforce them, no inherent skeletal structure of any kind. And they weren't that large in area, not relative to my body size. Even so, they provided a bit of a lift.

Oh, my God. Could it be *that* simple?

Was my poor performance nothing more than a matter of *ballon*? Of bounce?

I stood there, breathless, marveling over the very idea. Then I threw myself back up onto the rock and repeated the step. This time, I curled my upper body forward just a bit, so that my membranes caught more of the air, and paused before I floated down.

Not for long. For two-tenths of a second, perhaps. But I stayed aloft just long enough that Dharm saw it, and burst into chattering trills of excitement.

Of course, I thought. The gravity here is lower than Earth standard by about nine percent, so a human attributed all of the lightness of any given step to that, to slightly lower gravity. But just like Madame Periot, those with the eyes to see knew the difference, and it was important. Madame

would have called it the lightness of the movement. It's not about height or distance. A dancer should strive for *ballon* in even the smallest and quickest of jumps, the *petit allegro*, so as to demonstrate her essential freedom from gravity.

That's what I'd missed. The *ballon* no human could hope to achieve, unassisted.

In a spasm of pure delight, I flung myself off the rock in a *grand jeté*, arms spread wide, and then did another *en tournant*. I was gliding above the earth. I was practically flying.

Dharm did not follow but kept up the chattering noises, and when I came back to him, he did his own little happy dance, launching himself off the rock. For a good five minutes thereafter, we two did an improvisational dance around that rock, a *pas de deux* that mostly amounted to tiny leaps in tight little circles, all riffs on the steps I'd muffed with Ghlem.

How would *he* feel about this? I wondered.

Impatience bit deep.

I knew perfectly well what Niera would say. "Practice! Get it down! Then try again!" But we were about to run out of time, weren't we? I'd felt it for days now, the change in the air as the nighttime temperatures dropped ten degrees, as humidity fell further yet and the blaze of the sun began to fade, even at high noon. The Akalaian Peninsula's short, torrid summer was leaving us, and taking the field season with it.

So I let the passage wind down to its natural end, and then I tried my very best to explain what I wanted to Dharm. I tried speaking his father's name, Ghlem, and then gestures, the gist of it being I wanted my tutor to summon his sire so I could attempt one more tryout.

The kid didn't get it. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

"Hey! I'm not here to play," I told him. "Go get your Daddy!"

I dove at him, forcing the kid to jump backward. I shouted, too. He wouldn't know what the words meant, but surely, I thought, he'd catch the tone. With my second shrieking dive, I forced him up onto the garden wall, but he still didn't sing out. He didn't see me as a threat, I suppose. Just a wingnut of some kind.

I was about to make a third feint, to try and scare him back into the garden, but jumped a full meter up into the air as the link's emergency alarm cut across my brain like a machete blade. Noise, Niera's voice, and

adrenaline keyed by the link's nanodes inside my skull — it all hit me at once.

<Niera! *Damn* it!> My protest reopened the link. Big mistake, that. The store of signals she'd been sending for the past two hours hit me almost as hard as the blasted alarm, like an interior tidal wave. I clutched at the sides of my latex head cover, ready to fall over. I did my best, but I know I staggered. Then, finally, the message tagged "most urgent" slapped me.

<Heads UP!>

Thud. Scrape, huff of dust.

A large pair of scaled feet fell into my view frame. Neon feet. Male feet, spurs and all.

I took two drunken steps backward, away from him, lurching right into the wall itself. There, I had to stop while the male in question looked me over.

He was a big bruiser, bigger than Ghlem, even, though he was certainly not as well made. Even my human eyes could see he wasn't nearly as well marked in rust-red and salmon, nor was he as agile as Ghlem.

But that didn't prevent him from suddenly turning and jumping the garden wall. Soaring across it, in fact, like a low-g ballet dancer. He snatched up Dharm along the way and landed lightly. Then he gathered himself and leaped again, a *jeté* that would make Nurevsky proud, and by the time he came down again, he'd spanned nearly half of the lek garden. He promptly snagged the tallest of the half-dozen children at play around the base of a khia tree.

Oh, no. No!

<Shannon!> cried Niera, but I didn't have time to argue about it.

I jumped onto a stump a few feet west of the wall and stood on tiptoe, trying to see. I was just in time. Clutching Dharm and his second captive under his left arm and webbing, the Bruiser scooped up a few infants as well, and all of the children began to squall.

I have been told an alarm call produced by a humanoid child is essentially similar no matter what their race. If they use sound at all, there's a high note they all hit, something that cuts through your bone marrow, telling you that kid's in real trouble.

These were.

I leaped forward.

<No! Shannon, *wait*> ordered Niera, but I was already on top of the garden wall, balancing on the elaborate mortarless stonework without thought and trotting along it.

The Bruiser reached out for another child, this one no more than knee-high. A tsunami of ice-cold fear swept through me. I shouted at him in English, "Oh no, you don't!"

<Shannon!> cried Niera, but I didn't answer. Aware that I'd broken a cardinal rule (*again*), I kept going, but I wasn't fast enough.

Shagging the targeted child up across his knee, he started losing the wriggling Dharm, and Bruiser panicked. He let go of the infant so he could secure what he'd already stolen. The baby fell down his leg, onto the stonework, and bounced forward a few centimeters. Thus, when Bruiser took his next step, the big Neon male came down on top of the child. A wet multiple *crunch* and a squeak hit me square in the heart, and I fell off the wall in a queer kind of cartwheel.

Supported by those parts of my "skin" that had suddenly hardened, I tumbled down into the garden and rolled toward the Bruiser with ground-blurring speed. I screamed as I came at him, shrieking the single word, "No!"

I don't know what I meant to do when I caught up with him. I didn't have any serious weapons. I'd have been too scared to use any if I did, him having those tiny tads in his arms. I don't know what he thought I'd do, but we neither one ever found out.

The Bruiser took one look at me and leaped for a tree branch, and then for the wall. He crashed right through a burrberry bush. Then he vanished from sight, heading north by northeast.

I'd have followed him, but by the time I had finished my gymnastic roll and got up again, Ghlem had emerged from the spawning cave's mouth.

He looked at me, then at the mashed baby only a meter away, and I heard Niera's voice crack. She screamed at me. <Get the hell *out* of there, Shannon!>

This time, I listened.

I turned and ran.

You want to know why I signed on for this gig? Embarrassment. Mostly because of my debts. I was working my way through my fourth major by then, and it was really beginning to pile up. I'd washed out of Speech Communications on account of a voice tremor. Then I found I couldn't stomach Mythopoetics — all that froufrou gobbledygook about nothing at all that really mattered! And Dance School — ah, well. The less said about that, the better.

Xenology? That one was *way* down the list. But it did let me transfer a lot of the credits I had completed, and Niera was actually looking for that kind of combo. So I thought, okay. I can still finish this. It'll take me an extra six quarters, but if I sign on for an offworld research project, I can earn money along the way instead of just racking up more and more debt. I can do this, and then I can look my parental group in the eye when I go home. I can tell them those three previous spinouts weren't false starts at all, that I'm actually being quite practical. What may *look* like a scattershot pattern of, um, scholarship, well, it's really a broad application of the liberal arts to a more advanced degree, better than a B.A. Plus it's an actual science, and my, ah, somewhat checkered academic career is all totally in keeping with the Xenology Institute's multidisciplinary approach to the study of nonhuman sentients. Yeah, sure, I know. Pure puff. I got it from the course catalog.

Won't fool Mama Cleo, of course, but even she will forgive me a lot so long as I've actually managed to graduate by the end of it all. And xenology? Hey, I thought it might even be interesting.

Then again, my study plan did not include multiple assaults by said nonhumans, and the pseudosex — well, that was supposed to be nothing more than a close encounter of the latex kind, a waltz in the park, not a red-eyed rodeo.

Niera might be here to learn something. She really cares about her research. But me? Look, I came here to dance, all right? To prove that *I can*. Gonna pay my bills and finish off the last of my thesis requirements, too, and then I'll have some real options, right? Maybe not a career on-stage, but I will have opportunities.

All that flashed through my mind as I ran.

I hear some people see their whole lives flitting past in a moment like

that. Little scenes from the past. Not me. I saw my future. From the backside, as it departed at a very high speed.

But a klick or so down the sort-of-a-road, it occurred to me that I must be a much better runner than I'd ever realized. Why weren't Ghlem's spurs tearing holes in my derriere?

He wasn't chasing me, that's why.

Wheezing, I plowed to a halt. I was all alone. Had Ghlem gone after the Bruiser, then? Had he figured it out?

<No> said Niera, when I found the brain cells and breath to inquire.
<He's gone back to the lek garden>

<What? But — Dharm!>

<He's gone> Niera told me. <Along with the others. If Ghlem leaves the lek garden untended, he'll lose the rest of them too, and maybe the garden itself>

<What a cold-blooded — >

<Nonhuman> Niera said sharply, reminding me. <And I think you'll find that a great many human parents would make the same choice, if it really came down to it. Most, in fact>

Would they?

I shook my head, feeling sweat trickle down between some of my layers. The suit, lined with smart fibers, absorbed most of it, but I'd run so hard it still left a cold clamminess next to me. All of a sudden, I shuddered from head to toe.

<What's going to happen to those stolen tads?> I inquired, trying for casual, not really getting there.

Niera's answer was an eloquent silence.

<That big bastard. He's going to make them dance for *him*, isn't he?> I demanded.

<Perhaps>

<He'll make them part of *his* display>

<Only until the end of the breeding season>

<And then?>

A long pause. <It's the way of things, Shannon. They're not his, genetically>

Meaning that once he'd used Ghlem's kidnapped offspring to attract nubile femmes, he'd have eggs of his own to safeguard. He wouldn't need

Ghlem's tads anymore. He wouldn't much care to keep feeding them, either. He'd be hoarding whatever he could for the coming winter, for *his* kids.

I bit my lip, latex mask and all, thinking hard. Finally, I said <Shouldn't we document all that?>

More silence.

<Hey, look, it's part of the courtship rites, isn't it? Aren't we here to investigate how it *all* works?>

Niera surrendered. <Yes. It is, and we are>

Right. I grinned, knowing even Niera's recorders couldn't see it, not through all the layers of latex. <Okay, then> I told her. <Which way did they go?>

THE BRUISER'S GARDEN was only a third of the size of Ghlem's. Two-tenths of a hectare — that's half an acre, if you use the old English imperial standards like we do at home — it's archaic, true, but all part of what Mama Cleo refers to as our "ethnic brio." The wall was more or less trimmed up, but the garden itself was a mishmash of color and form without a focus or any sense of composition. The one hint of order and harmony came from a circular open space in front of the meager cave opening in the white cliff at its back. That's where I found the children.

All but Dharm were cowering before the Bruiser.

As I watched, the big guy snarled at the tads. Then he reached out and cuffed at the nearest one. Dharm stepped in and grabbed his sibling, pulling her back out of reach, but of course there was nowhere to go that was truly safe. They were at Bruiser's mercy.

He reached out again and grabbed two of the smaller youngsters, yanking them into a face-to-face position with each other. Then he posed them, roughly tugging on arms and legs until they were crouching, arms outspread, as if ready to start the great wheel-dance of the children's display, but they just stood there, frozen.

Bruiser began to growl at them.

What could I do to distract him, I asked myself.

Should I jump the garden wall? Try to fling myself at him? And then what? Try to seduce him? Or clock him one across the *cabeza*?

While I stood there, undecided, Dharm beat me to it. He leaped forward, getting between the two paralyzed tads and their snarling captor. His colors had darkened still more in the hours since he and the others were taken, perhaps from the stress. He didn't look all that much like a tad anymore. He was rapidly turning into a cadet, and so his approach made me think he might be mounting some kind of attack on the Bruiser. Then, midair, he spread his own arms, and the membranes that stretched out between each glittering limb and his torso.

Dharm glided down to the ground before crouching and leaping again, but this time into a graceful spin that arced to the right of the Bruiser. He then took the same three arching steps he'd used with me that very first day we met — the beginning of his solo dance.

For a long minute, he carried on all alone, a small miracle in the face of despair. He began trilling, too, gently calling out all the other tads' names, one by one. Then he began to tap each of his sibs on the head or the shoulder, as if he were playing a game of tag with a group of statues.

I had to ask. <Are you getting this?>

<YES!> answered Niera.

But would it work? I was fast losing hope. They were too scared. Too small. The big guy — he'd just give up and eat them. I knew it.

I picked up a rock.

And the tallest of the other tads started to move. He bowed. Not to the Bruiser. To Dharm. Then he launched himself into a small pirouette that echoed Dharm's next steps. In a moment, another had joined in, and then they were all moving, all dancing. Forming a truncated wheel, the tads did several *pas de cheval* in near-perfect unison, then did a two-step reversal.

I gawked at them.

How deeply ingrained *was* their dance behavior, that they could perform like this even in captivity?

I had to hope no offworld zookeeper ever got hold of tads like them and decided to put them on public display. There were laws about such things, of course, but nobody makes laws about things that don't happen.

<Simply amazing> said Niera, her voice a murmur compared to the pounding in my ears. As the wheel turned again and again, though, I started to breathe. I began to relax. I dropped my rock. And the Bruiser heard it.

He turned to glare at me.

Oh, no.

Then Dharm saw me. All of a sudden, the wheel shifted my way. It spun toward the wall, and me, standing outside it, without so much as missing a beat, and the Bruiser allowed it.

Of course. It was what the tads were supposed to do when a femme came by. It was what they'd done for me that first time around, right? That's why the big guy stole them. So I'd better act like a femme, and make Bruiser believe that I found them enchanting, and I wasn't ready to run like a deer for the jump ship, and then for the safety of high orbit. Somehow, as Dharm circled closer, I made myself stay put. I kept silent, watching them all as if my life depended on it. I don't know. Maybe it did.

The Bruiser followed the kids. He sauntered around them, apparently accepting their take on me as the real thing, and paused for a moment to look me over.

That was a bit chilling. His introductory trill was more of a snort. Never did catch his actual name. I'm not even sure now that's what he was saying. Did he recognize me? Perhaps he did, but he'd only seen me at Ghlem's and when I was there, I was trying to make like a Neon. Crazy, yeah, but definitely a local gal. So what if I'd followed him? That was the whole idea of the kidnapping, wasn't it? Anyway, I seemed to be what he wanted most — a femme in the mood to mate. So when he finally bowed to me, I did the same, and lightly hopped over the wall.

<Shannon, wait!>

<Shush!> I told Niera. <I've got to focus>

We traded bows, and the next thing I knew, I was dancing, too, and the children were circling both of us. I tried hard not to think about what I was doing. I had to put myself into the dance itself and forget about steps, about me and my problems, about everything. It was what my many dance instructors had told me to do, back in school, but I'd never managed it. Not really.

I didn't quite pull it off this time, either.

The Bruiser, it turned out, had two left feet. No matter how closely I followed, he couldn't lead. He kept making mistakes, and then making *me* stumble, the schmuck, so that I had to make awkward sidesteps and short leaps or get myself hamstrung on one of his razor-sharp spurs as they

snickered by. Why, oh why couldn't this idiot keep them sheathed? No wonder he'd had no luck with the ladies.

I'm guessing he knew he was subpar, at some level. All of a sudden, he stopped dead. Balanced on one foot, I couldn't, and crashed into him. Then we both stood there, all heated up, breathless, oh, so unhappy.

Afraid to retreat, I had no idea what I should do next, and neither did Niera. The silence was deafening, over the link and everywhere else. So the big guy decided for me, and what he chose to do was give up on it. He backed away from me, membranes a-tremble, and rounded on one of the babies. Before I could move, Bruiser leaped up in a kind of roundhouse kung fu kick, and his spur took the tad's head off.

I started screaming. "NO! No, you *can't*! It's not her fault!"

It made no difference. He swung around again. Kick.

Whick!

Another small head rolled away.

Something rolled over me, too. A volcanic wave of fury unlike anything I'd ever felt. It was primal. I reached out and pulled a stone right out of the middle of his unmortared wall. As the Bruiser spun around one more time, Dharm snatched a tad away from him, and the spur sliced into the baby's back but missed its far more lethal mark. Blood sprayed the sand at his feet, even so, and I ran at the Bruiser. I lifted that stone overhead, intending to crack his crested skull for him. I had a big enough rock. Must have weighed forty pounds. But he topped me by most of a meter. Shit! There was nothing to use for a stepstool either. Since I couldn't possibly get my rock up high enough to crown him, I simply brought it back down again. On Bruiser's foot.

Crunch!

It broke bones. I'm sure of it. It broke the spur off, too. That may have hurt him worse. He roared and swung at me. I caught the blow pretty squarely across the nose, but the suit saved me, hardening instantly. It was inertia that knocked me down. With that game foot, though, the Bruiser could not follow through. He tried. Hobbling forward, he went down, too, onto his knees. That's when Dharm jumped him from behind, wrapping his skinny arms around the Bruiser's almost nonexistent neck.

I scrambled onto all fours and then onto my feet. This time, I heaved the rock up and had lots of headroom. I yelled at Dharm. "Let go!" I don't

think the kid understood what I said, but he saw the rock. He pushed himself off the Bruiser's back. I dropped the stone on the Bruiser's head.

Whunk!

And that was it. The big guy was all done. He fell over.

Then Niera sounded off. <God damn it, Shannon! You've *killed* him!>

<Did not! He's still breathing>

Which he was. Bleeding, but breathing. Even starting to stir a bit.

I snatched up his broken-off spur, holding it by its base, like a knife.

<Shannon, no!>

Right. If I killed him at this point, the Consie laws would surely say I was in the wrong, and all of this was being recorded.

<Think! *Then* act! Like a *human*!>

That last bit surprised me enough to give me pause, and those few seconds made all the difference. I thought about it, thought hard, and then forced myself to back away from the Bruiser. I couldn't kill him, not just for being — well, *Neon*.

I heard Niera's sigh of relief. I could only imagine the sweat that must be beaded across her pale drawn face, the droplets enormous because of the half-grav.

"Come on," I told Dharm. I waved at him and his siblings, careful to use my empty hand. "Come on, you guys. It's time to go home."

Niera's relief vanished. Now she was livid. <You can't interfere any further! You've got to leave them!>

I shook my latex-bound head. <I can't do that. He'll kill them for sure>

<That's not your problem> she told me.

<It is, too!>

At my gesture, Dharm jumped up on top of the wall, and I stuck my spur/trophy into the one bit of clothing I wore — a leather belt with a foraging net attached by the string ends. It wasn't a sheath but would have to do.

<Shannon, this sort of thing *happens*. It's all part of the natural process. The Neons — >

<It's *my* fault he took them> I said, overriding the circuit. <If I hadn't been there, distracting Dharm, the big guy wouldn't have gotten ahold of them. Dharm would have seen him and sounded off. This clown would not have been able to grab more than one or two tads, and he wouldn't

have got hold of Dharm at all. There's three babies dead now, because of *me!*>

<You don't know that!> she insisted.

I shook my head, lifting the tads up to Dharm where he sat perched atop the wall. The one who'd been sliced open, though, I held on to him, cradling him in my arms. As I leaped for the top of the wall myself, I recited the law.

<The Conservation of Sentient Species Act requires me to mitigate any damage I might purposely or inadvertently cause> I told Niera. True, too. And the statement would go on the record as well, which might work in my favor when this was all over with. It would at least indicate my intent to comply with the law. Mama Cleo's a lawyer. Did I mention that? Either way, I was not going to let any more babies die. Not on *my* account.

Once I was outside the wall, too, I set the wounded one down on the grass. Dharm handed me the remaining tads, and as soon as we'd regrouped, we headed northwest, along the rough path that led back to Ghlem's garden. I didn't think the Bruiser would follow us. No, not with that broken foot. Not the Neon style, anyhow. Ghlem hadn't mounted much of a pursuit, had he? Not after me or the kidnapper, even though these tads were his flesh and blood. No, the Bruiser, I figured, would stay put and nurse his wounds, to his ego and otherwise.

Even so, we didn't get very far. The wounded tad kept on bleeding and none of the little ones had much energy. Their bitty legs were way too short to match my stride, and they'd all gone too long without lunch. So as soon as we found a wild khia tree, I called a halt.

Dharm, it turned out, knew something about first aid. Was it instinctive? Or had he learned it from Ghlem's RNA, from the fruit his father inoculated with the stuff as he tended his garden? I couldn't say, and I couldn't ask. They just didn't have all that much in the way of a verbal language, or even childhood. Soon, when the breeding season ground to a halt, the tads would turn into cadets and concentrate on helping their father store food in the caves. When the winter storms started up, Daddy would leave. He'd migrate south with the other adults while the children retreated to the spawning caves and — well, pupated. They'd spend the long cold season underground, all alone, eating up all those stores, then emerge in the spring as juveniles, adult in form though they wouldn't

mature in a sexual sense until they'd completed at least six or seven migrations themselves. There was no actual "schooling" involved in all this. As far as we could tell, Neons learned to build walls, and plant gardens, and even to dance from ingesting fruit full of their father's encoded memories, and from whatever the femmes implanted in eggs. It all seemed too complex to be conveyed to each new generation by mere molecules, but how else could it happen?

The wounded tad kept whimpering. I did my best to clean his wound, using juice from a handful of green khia fruit, but the gash was so deep, two centimeters at least, and fifteen long. I had no idea what to do. It was Dharm who climbed into the tree and came back with a handful of webbing — the sticky silky threads spun by the local equivalent of Terran spiders. He laid the webs across the wound, then went back for more. Soon, he had the entire gash filled in and covered. The bleeding slowed to a yellowish seepage, the mesh of the webs acting like a gauze bandage.

"Oh, good job," I murmured, though Dharm couldn't possibly understand.

Still, he gave me a look that said, "Message received," and began to search the grass around some low mounds of earth about forty meters away. After a moment, he came back with a pair of black insectoid forms. I don't know what they were, really. Not in my briefing. But they had these long, pointy jaws, and I knew right off I didn't need any closer acquaintance.

To my amazement, Dharm knelt beside me and our patient, and used two fingers to pull the edges of the web-covered gash together. Then he urged me with chin-pointing, short squeaks and trills to take over for him. So I did. He promptly squeezed the black bug in his other hand until it attempted to bite him. Then he applied it to his younger sibling, right next to my fingers. The tad and I both yelped as the long jaws sank into the little one's skin, but then I realized the creature's bite was holding the edges of the wound together as tightly as any stitch. A quick twist of Dharm's nimble fingers and the bug's body popped off. The black head remained, the long jaws locked in place. Dharm made several trips back and forth to the mounds. In the space of a few minutes, he had the whole wound sewed up and the seepage as well as the bleeding had stopped.

Even Niera was knocked back, whispering <Awesome!>

<So how did he know how to do *that*?> I had to ask.

<How, indeed?>

No more nagging, I noticed, about my taking the tads with me.

I didn't mention it, needing a little more time to think, and to feed my small troupe. I made string from grass fibers and wrapped the base of the broken spur to protect my fingers. Then I used it to cut the riper fruit off the khia tree, and Dharm came up with green buds on some small bushes I didn't recognize. I faked eating a couple, stowing them in the suit's cheek pouches for later analysis. We fed the rest to the youngsters, and then bedded down in a puppy pile as sunset approached. I spooned myself around the injured one, hoping my body warmth would help him some in spite of the insulating layers of latex. Dharm did the same on the other side, so that the tads were all cocooned in between us. I would have been happier inside some sort of a wall, or a cave, or better yet, my jump ship. But I couldn't take any Neons aboard, no matter what, and I didn't dare leave the tads on their own while I looked around for better shelter.

<I'll keep watch> offered Niera. Which wouldn't mean much in terms of our defending ourselves if something nasty should wander past, but at least we'd have some warning. Not that I had any real choice. By then I was wiped out, nearly as tired as my little charges, and I didn't bother to carp about it. Not *her* fault I'd gotten myself into this mess, was it?

NEXT MORNING, I woke to the sound of Niera's voice, calling out <Shannon! Wake up! Someone's coming!>

Oh, great. I tried to be careful, easing myself out from under the tads, but the injured one moaned, and Dharm's head popped up instantly on the other side of the pile. I signaled to him to stay put as I turned toward the path, which was — empty.

<Where?> I demanded, retrieving my stolen spur/knife.

<There! To your right!>

Niera cued the suit's feed and it used yellow highlights to pick out the femme standing just at the edge of the nearest copse. Ah. The feathery red and gold leaves on the trees served as near-perfect camouflage.

I stared, and she met my gaze for a long, breathless moment. She looked just as startled as I. Her nostrils flared, and I realized she could

probably smell the blood on the spur, on me, on the injured tad. What she might make of that, I couldn't guess, but a femme with a weapon, drenched in the blood of a male and a tad? That had to be somewhere beyond the pale.

She did not try to investigate further. Instead, she turned and bounded away like a two-legged deer with red and gold wings — a creature from mythology, although not one of Terran manufacture.

I let out a sigh of relief. I was not in the mood for a confrontation. Facing the day would be hard enough. Returning to the tads, I fed them a breakfast of khia fruit, some wilted dhoti flowers, and grubs dug up by Dharm with a stick. He offered me a small share and I took them for the sake of maintaining my cover, but I felt guilty for doing it. The little ones needed the protein. I didn't. And the grubs looked like overgrown termites, all translucent white and squirmy. But Niera just told me to suck it up, and so I did. Literally. I stowed them in another cheek pouch.

The injured tad appeared to be doing all right but he couldn't walk, so I used my belt and gathering pouch to rig a sling and hiked him up onto my hip, human-style. Not a Neon thing to do, of course, but I knew of no other way to transport him that final six clicks back to his father's lek garden. I wasn't going to leave him behind, not now, no matter what, not when it looked like he might survive after all.

Dharm eyeballed me and my rigging with grave suspicion, but then he just settled his shoulders, a gesture that sent a long and sinusoidal flap down the outer edge of his membranes — a Neon's shrug. Then he took two tads by the hand and the rest of them followed as I started off down the path.

It took nearly six hours to get there. We had to stop and rest every half-hour, and we kept an ultra-slow pace when we were moving. Why some wandering Kethler eagle didn't drop right out of the sky and snatch up a baby, I'll never know. We didn't bother to hide. The trek took all we had. I let Niera keep watch over us as best she could via scattered recorders and concentrated on keeping the small group together.

Finally, in early afternoon local time, we saw the wall — the neatly fit stonework with the alternating white and green lichen patches that demarcated Ghlem's garden. Dharm leaped up into the air. Two of his younger sibs followed suit, and the whole bunch broke into a group trill

unlike anything I'd heard before, like a pack of baby coyotes trying to howl.

A moment later, we heard an answering series of yips and trills from the wall's other side, and I let the tads sweep past me, membranes aflap. The one I cradled, I set on the ground, to ease the muscles in my lower back, and he took off too, crawling.

Dharm alone held off and stayed with me. Why? To guard his ailing sib? Or me? I couldn't tell, but that tooth-baring grin of his took me straight home, back to Churchill, the German shepherd Mama Cleo gave me on my seventh birthday. Oh yeah, Churchill grins like that. Not because dogs do that naturally. No, he'd simply learned how to copy his human. Had I somehow taught Dharm to do the same thing?

I was tired enough, and intrigued enough by that Neon-smile that I hardly noticed the sudden cessation of trills from inside the wall.

One moment, I was standing there, entranced by Dharm's improbable grin, and the next, I was doing a back flip, thrown head over heels by a body blow I never even saw coming.

I heard Niera shout <Shannon!>

Too late, of course.

Thump-ump!

Two spurred feet straddled me, claws nailing me to the ground by my membranes. Their owner, Ghlem, towered above me. As I looked up, fighting for the wind he'd just knocked out of me, the big Neon male bent over and roared his displeasure.

<I'm dead> I said, an involuntary assessment that sent Niera straight into conniptions.

<Get out of there!>

<Can't. Got me pinned> Thank God the membranes I wore had no nerve endings, or else his claws would have hurt like the devil.

Ghlem lowered his muzzle to glare at me from a hand's breadth away, golden cat's-eye to mask-embedded plasteel lens.

We've never seen a male/femme killing, I told myself. Even to me, I sounded shrill. My mind was doing quicksilver darts back and forth through what I remembered from various briefings. Of course, we had never seen rival males kill a tad before, either. I had not killed anyone, as myself or a fake femme, but Ghlem might not realize that. If he blamed

me for the death of the crushed baby, or the two beheaded tads, all bets were off.

He began to rumble, down deep in his throat, and I lay there, frozen, watching that muzzle of his open up to bare six yellow fangs. I watched him rear back for a killing bite — and a miracle happened.

A small mob of tads ran up and wrapped themselves around his legs. They trilled at him and trampled me, and Ghlem nearly fell over, thrown off balance in spite of his size by the multiple onslaught.

He snarled at them, paused, and then closed and lowered his muzzle to nudge and sniff at the youngsters. Apparently, whatever he smelled on them caught his attention. He lost the low rumble and began licking his returned children about the head and neck and shoulders. The babies, oblivious to the confrontation they'd interrupted, instantly broke into keening cries of hunger. Soon enough, they were trying to climb right up his legs, and Ghlem abandoned his attack. He retracted his claws and his spurs and carefully stepped away from me. Gathering up three tads in his arms, he examined them even more carefully, and then leaped back over the wall with them, leaving me lying there.

<Shannon? Are you all right?> Niera demanded.

<Mostly> I told her, and managed to sit up. As soon as I did, I saw Dharm. He was grinning again. Suspicion dawned <Did he — ?>

<Yes> answered Niera. <He aimed them at Ghlem and set off the stampede just like he was starting a wheel dance>

<But — >

<I know> said Niera. <That's a totally new context for the behavior>

Not just new. Outside the box. Outside the garden. And how could Dharm know it would work? Did kidnapped tads *ever* escape on their own and find their way home? If they did, how did a male Neon know they were his?

<Odor, most likely> said Niera, when I peppered her with my questions. <He tasted them, didn't he?>

Yes, but as I was pulling myself upright, Ghlem bounded over the wall again. He scooped up more tads and licked them, too, then hoisted them over the wall as well. Now there was only the injured one, and Dharm. And me. I found my feet, staggering so badly, I had to lean on the wall itself. He'd torn gashes a good ten to fifteen centimeters long in my phony

membranes, more than enough to destroy their gift for catching air. *So much for my dancing lessons*, I told myself. I wouldn't be trying my new moves on Ghlem until all that was sewed up and sealed. At least I'd lost no blood this time around. Might wind up sore from all the drama-rama, but I'd pulled it off, I thought. I'd brought them home again, all safe and sound. Well, not counting the wounded. And the dead.

Tha-dump!

Ghlem landed next to me. This time he scooped up the wounded youngster, and spent a good deal more time licking and inspecting him than he had on the others, nosing his wound, and then stroking his neck and back while the tad gleeed at him. Ghlem seemed to realize how frail the tad was. He was a good deal more careful about how he carried that one up over the wall, and he took twice as long coming back.

<Boy, could I use a nap> I told Niera, beginning to dust myself off, thinking this might be just the right moment to wrap it up. We were so close to the end of this year's breeding season, and surely we had enough data by now —

Crump!

Once more, Ghlem. But this time, he was totally focused on me, and the rumble began all over again.

<Oh shit, oh dear> I murmured over the link as Ghlem crouched in front of me. I began slowly backing away. Then Dharm ran up and tried to take his father's hand. To restrain him? Or maybe just to get his attention?

Either way, it was a mistake.

Ghlem back-handed Dharm. The youngster flew a good three meters and came to a rolling stop in the dirt, boneless, silent. I felt my heart fly up into my mouth. When Ghlem crouched and leaped after the tad, I had no choice. I had to do likewise.

Somewhere, I heard Niera calling out <Don't!> but as soon as Ghlem landed, he leaped again, straight up but twirling in midair, an ice-skater's move, a triple toe loop, I think they call it. As his body spun, his spurs flexed, whirling about in a scything motion, one that would bring them both slashing across Dharm's belly and groin. In pure desperation, I dove at Ghlem. I tried my best to come at him parallel to the ground, in a football tackle that would have amazed my own sibs, who'd never been able to get me to play. My shoulder hit Ghlem in the crotch. Not the

crippling blow it would have been if he were human. His gonads weren't hanging out in the open. Even so, I hit him solidly enough that it knocked him sideways. His deadly spin sliced into the dirt, not flesh and bone.

The Neon grunted, lion-like, as we fell in a tangle. I swung an elbow up into his face and thanked Mama Cleo for that much — her insisting that all of us kids got basic training in Krav Maga. That gave me a few moves to work with, in spite of Ghlem's larger mass and his lankiness. I whacked him three more times while wrapping my legs around his waist to keep him from getting loose and upright, and bringing those spurs into play again. One thing I hadn't counted on, though — adult Neons have fangs, and a mouth that opens up much wider than ours. He let me hit him that last time and then snapped back at me, catching my wrist in his mouth. The suit hardened instantly, keeping those canines from chomping right through, but the suit couldn't do anything about pressure from both sides. His bite was crushing my bones. I could feel them grinding against each other, and screamed at him.

Useless, of course.

I couldn't pull loose. Couldn't do much at all except punch him one, right in the snout with my free hand. So that's what I did, and when he yelped in turn and his bite loosened up for a second, I jammed my arm farther into his mouth. I shoved it just as far and as hard as I could. Bright red blood splashed my face. His or mine, I'm not sure, but his lip was torn and gore dripped from his nostrils.

A grin seized me. Stupid, I know. There was no way in hell I could win this fight, but something inside me was glad of that. The guilty part?

<Eat *that*, you big jerk!> I shouted, aloud as well as over the link, and then somehow the world turned upside down on me. I hit the ground on my back with a mighty thump. Then Ghlem was on top and his fist came down, hitting me square in the eye socket.

I don't know how many times he struck. I only know that his fury was the equal of mine, and he was far stronger, and the end of it all was coming at me at the speed of light, or at least the speed of that massive fist. Somewhere in there, though, I did feel a tug at my waist. At my belt, actually. Only then did I remember that I wasn't totally unarmed. But when I reached for my makeshift weapon, the broken-off spur I'd turned into a knife, it wasn't there.

Damn it!

"Hai!" someone else cried.

Suddenly, Ghlem arched his back. He didn't let go of me, though, so that move pulled me up off the ground by my forearm. I hung there, screaming, while over Ghlem's shoulder, I caught sight of Dharm. He was crouched on Ghlem's back, snarling. As I watched, he buried my make-shift knife in his father's neck. Blood flew — a fountain of blood. It jetted from Ghlem's neck in great pulsing spurts.

<Oh my God> Niera's tone turned the words into an actual prayer, and I felt like joining her.

I gaped at Dharm. Then, as I felt the grip of those terrible fangs ease, I pulled my arm free. I saw Ghlem's big golden eyes start rolling sideways, and then, just a heartbeat or two after that, he fell over. The spurts of blood arced lower and lower, becoming a runnel. That slowed, too, and gradually, the flow died away altogether. Ghlem was gone.

<Niera, no! I *can't* leave>

<You sure as hell can't *stay* down there>

I flung my hands up, fake claws and all, in frustration. <Without Ghlem, there's nobody here to keep out all the other male Neons. If somebody does move in, they're gonna kill the kids. All of them>

<That is not *your* concern>

<Yes, it is!>

<You did not kill Ghlem>

<I might as well have!>

<Dharm killed his father>

<He was defending me>

<He was defending *himself*>

<And me> I shook my head. <Although why Ghlem attacked him like that, I don't know, but — >

Niera snorted. <Of course you do>

That note of sarcastic impatience hit one of my soft spots, a whipcrack that silenced me for a few critical seconds.

Niera noticed, and seized her opportunity. <He was trying to de-ball the boy. It's a classic move. That spiral jump brings the spurs in for the — >

<No!> I shot back at her, shocked by the image my memory conjured

forth: Ghlem, taking aim at Dharm's groin. Freudian to the max! Meaning it was probably bullcrap.

<He wouldn't castrate his own child> I argued. <I don't believe it!>
<Dharm is not a child. He's a cadet. And one who left his father's garden>
<Not by his own choice!>

Niera sighed. <It doesn't matter. Not now. Don't you see? Dharm couldn't be part of his father's display anymore. He's lost his looks. And because he left and then came back, Ghlem saw him as a competitor, not a juvenile. He wasn't about to waste any resources on feeding Dharm. In fact, he was more likely to see the kid as a source of protein *he'd* need himself, to get ready for the coming migration>

Her meaning took seconds to sink in, but when it did, I felt my stomach turn over. <But that — that's so *wrong*>

<Look at those snappers> she told me. She used her link to cue my suit, and it highlighted Ghlem's yellow fangs where he lay on the ground. <He keeps the lek garden for the tads, to grow the food they're going to eat this winter, to give them all the RNA analogues they'll need to become adults. But he himself is an omnivore. He prefers meat, the better to support that big humanoid brain of his> she pointed out. <He might have done it even if Dharm wasn't taken. You see, don't you? Dharm was the oldest, and darkening fast>

<I — but — >

<It's something a male Neon does, sometimes> Niera's tone softened as she attempted a more persuasive approach. <He does it to make room for younger tads. Prettier tads. So he can attract more femmes while there's still time to hatch a few more eggs. He'll sacrifice the older tads to increase his total success rate>

<But — but — > I sputtered, and fell silent. What argument could I possibly raise? That no human would do such a thing? What difference could *that* make? They *weren't* human. As Niera kept telling me, over and over again, they were *Neons*. Besides which, I'd known some humans who *would* sacrifice their young for the sake of their own grandiose ambitions — stage mothers, for one. Thank God I didn't have any. Cleo's as close as we come in my family. Being a lawyer, she aims it at other folks, mostly. Competitive? Oh yeah. But I'd never worried about my being the main course.

<You stay down there too long, Shannon, you might lose the jump ship to one of these storms. And I wouldn't be able to do a damn thing to — >

I cut her off. <You still don't get it> I told Niera. <All this is my — >

<No! I do understand! You screwed it all up. You feel guilty about it, so now you're trying to mother this kid. But he's a Neon> Niera said. <They don't even know what a mother is!>

And you do?

But I couldn't say that, could I? Knowing she'd lost half her innards along with her legs, that she'd never be able to have any kids in the natural way? I fell silent. For lack of alternatives, I looked at Dharm, who watched me in turn. Did it bother him that he'd killed his own father? If so, there was no sign of remorse I could see. And I couldn't ask him how he felt, not in so many words. There was only one way to inquire, and I didn't dare. To expose him to more human notions, even if it was only in the form of dance steps, would make it all worse.

Niera's right. If he's going to survive, I told myself, it will have to be on Neon terms. I can't be his mother, and there's only one other choice.

Abruptly, I rose and strode toward Ghlem's body.

<Shannon?>

I leaned over the cooling corpse. I grabbed the makeshift knife in his neck, needing both hands to pull it free.

<What are you doing?>

The spur's blade was notched where its edge had hit bone, but I thought it would serve well enough, so I moved over. Squatting beside Ghlem's head, I pulled his mouth open and started hacking away at him.

<Shannon!>

First I cut out the fat yellow glands underneath Ghlem's tongue. These were the source of the RNA compounds he'd used to inoculate all the fruit grown in his lek garden. In a very real sense, those encoded memories were the essence of Ghlem — the bits of memory he had inherited from his own forebears plus his own experience. The older tads probably had a full dose by then, but the younger ones didn't, and they'd suffer for it, come spring.

I stored the excised glands in my cheek pockets for lack of a better alternative. Then I turned to Ghlem's feet. It took some real work to cut

both of his spurs free. I felt the weight of Dharm's eyes on my back, but I couldn't come up with another more viable option and Dharm made no effort to stop me. He stood and stared, but made no sound, and no other move. So I simply kept at it until I succeeded, ignoring Niera's repeated queries. Then, sitting down, I pulled out my repair kit. It's just for emergencies, see? So it doesn't have everything. It has the basics, and that's what I used, wrapping both of my ankles with anchor bands and then welding the base of each borrowed spur to the leg of my suit with nano-glue. No joints involved, so I wouldn't be able to either retract or extend the blades, but they wouldn't fall off as I walked around either. I rough-patched the rents in my membranes, too, and dialed up the mimicry function on the suit. Aiming its sensors at what now remained of Ghlem, I told the suit to match that. Moments later, I stood up. I wore red, brown, and cinnamon/orange now, including a blood-colored patch at my throat. My slightly snouted face remained female, however. The chromatophores we'd built into the suit couldn't alter the basic topography.

<Crazy> said Niera. <The suit wasn't meant for this! It won't work. You're too small to convince anyone you're a full-grown male>

<Don't need to> I answered. <There's only one Neon I have to win over>

I stood up and turned to face Dharm.

For a long moment, he simply stared at me. Did Neons have any traditions concerning transvestites? Transsexuals? Hermaphrodites? I could not remember any. They had the usual spectrum of gender expression among the two-sexed, but those that were too far from either norm didn't participate much in the dances, so we hadn't paid them all that much attention. We had to figure out "normal" first.

I sighed. Normal, I wasn't. Not even for one of my own kind. I'd just have to role-play, the same thing I'd done in pretending to be a femme. So I pulled the very last khia fruit out of my foraging bag. I anointed the flesh with juice from one of the glands in my cheek pockets, and then I flipped it to Dharm.

He caught it, easily. He examined it, sniffed it, and then gave an odd little shudder before he began to munch on it. Was that acceptance of me as well? Did he understand what I was trying to do? To be?

I don't know, but when I jumped over the garden wall, he followed.

Then, as I let all the younger tads sniff at me and their father's borrowed spurs, as I fed them all tidbits I pulled off the trees, Dharm began slowly creeping my way. He was visibly nervous, so I simply stood still and waited. Eventually, he wound up face to face with me, nostrils flared, eyes wide, those feline ears of his standing at half-mast. When he didn't make any further move, I raised one hand and stroked his face. He tilted it upward, plainly torn between wanting more and running like hell. So I used both hands to grip his shoulders. As gently as possible, I pulled him in for a hug.

Niera bitched up a storm about that later on, but nonhuman gesture or not, it got through to him. His breathing smoothed out. His ears stood up. More important — he let me take his hands after that, and followed me as I began a slow waltz. We made long looping turns around trees, bushes, siblings, and rocks, and with each new step, I could see Dharm relaxing, accepting, adjusting. I added the bounce as we twirled about, and then I converted the waltz into something entirely Neon — a piece of the children's display, though, not the mating dance he'd been trying to teach me. Dharm was a little bit thrown by that, but also reassured, once he realized what I was doing. I was letting him be a tad again.

When we'd completed a full passage, I brought the dance to a halt, let go his hands, and stood waiting.

Dharm bowed. Not to one side or the other, but right down the middle, a bow of submission, not greeting. Then, trilling to the younger tads, he strode between them and took up his usual perch, where he could keep an eye on what was happening on either side of the wall. What he would have done if another rogue male approached, I don't know. Or a femme. Since we never did bury him, Ghlem's body soon created its own kind of barrier. Turned out they're a lot like us in that way, too. They're repelled by the smell of death. The adult Neons all stayed away.

Niera told me again how insane I was, even though she was giddy about all the new information we'd acquired. She couldn't shut up about that, or about the changes we'd need to make to the latex suit. She nattered on about all the other things we'd have to look at, come the next field season, how we could maybe get funding for a couple more grad students. She just assumed I'd be coming along, although I wasn't sure what I wanted to do yet.

In the meantime, I turned farmer.

I spent the next three weeks inoculating and harvesting Ghlem's garden, gathering up all the RNA-laden roots and fruit, flower buds and nutlike seeds. With the help of Dharm and the older tads, I filled up the larder belowground and then some, storing even more food in the main cave. We also hauled in as much rough-cut hay as we could, to serve as bedding and insulation. Finally, just as the last of the golden eggs hatched and the newborn tads began to toddle around the garden, I led the lot of them into the caves.

It wasn't hard. Every day dawned a few degrees colder, and the sun set a few minutes sooner. I'd seen it settling on them — the change of season triggered the release of all those hormones, slowing them down, inducing the hibernation state that would carry them all through the long, cold winter on their own, only stirring themselves every other week so they could snack on Ghlem's goodies and take care of any resulting business. So I had them start bedding down in the main cave each night while I kept watch. When the day came that they didn't wake up, I rejoiced.

I wept.

I took my mask off and said good-bye to them, each in turn, leaving Dharm until last. As my tears splashed across his cool, rapidly darkening cheeks, I gave my tiny dancer as much of a blessing as I had to offer. I took the knife I'd made from the Bruiser's spur, the weapon Dharm used to defend me, and I planted its haft in the curl of his fingers as he lay sleeping. When spring arrives, and Dharm emerges into the light of day again, he'll have an edge. He'll be able to feed himself that much better than most, and the extra food will surely give him the strength to join the annual migrations. Over the next eight years, if he survives all that, he'll grow his own spurs. Sooner or later, he'll have his own garden. He'll sire his own children. He'll pass on Ghlem's RNA analogues along with his own, and they, of course, will include his memories of me, and how I made the knife, and what he and I both did with it.

I just hope I haven't screwed him up too much.

As father figures go, I'm a bust.



Enthusiasts of Ron Goulart's tales have much to anticipate in the year ahead. There will soon be a collection of detective Harry Challenge's investigations into occult crimes (including several yarns that appeared here in F&SF). And reprints of After Things Fell Apart, Nemo, The Enormous Hourglass, and several other Goulart novels are due out in 2014. We can also look forward to a collection of stories from Hollywood in the 1940s, starring that less-than-stellar scriptwriter Hix, whose latest caper we present herewith.

Hark, the Wicked Witches Sing

By Ron Goulart

IT WAS THE LATE FALL OF 1942 and Hix was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the best second-rate B-movie writer in the world. The world in this case being Hollywood and environs. He was sitting at his modestly lopsided desk in his un-remodeled office on the first, and only, floor of the Writers' Building at the Quadrangle Studios on the fringes of Poverty Row. The frazzle-haired writer was fiddling with the desktop electric fan he'd recently purchased down in Santa Monica at a garage sale run by the widow of an assistant director who'd committed suicide.

The phone rang. It was nestled between a mug of imitation coffee he'd brought over from the commissary, a sprawl of three back issues of *Zip Comics*, and a cocktail napkin with the phone number of an extra whose name he'd forgotten.

He grabbed up the receiver. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Nix?" inquired a sweet-voiced young woman.

"Hix," he corrected. "Sometimes known as the one and only Hix. How may we help you, kiddo?"

"Mr. Kupperman would like to speak to you for some reason."

Bernie Kupperman was his current agent, with the Kupperman-Sussman Talent Agency offices over in the vicinity of Sunset Boulevard.

"You're new, huh? What happened to Kathy?"

"She became a Goldwyn Girl."

"Well, that's better than becoming Goldwyn."

"Here's Mr. Kupperman."

"Hix, I thought I — "

"Bernie, old chap. What did you think of that terrific script proposal I sent you?"

"Hix, I thought I told you no more musical horror movies. I came darn close to becoming a showbiz pariah when I tried to peddle that last one of yours," said his agent. "And the title *Hark, the Wicked Witches Sing* is a lousy title."

"Let's let Betty Grable decide."

"What's she got to do with this clinker?"

"Hey, she'll be clamoring to be in it."

"You mean after she loses her mind?"

"Be that as it may, Bernie, she's perfect to play one of the singing witches."

"One of? How many are there in this thing?"

"Three. You know, sort of a supernatural Andrews Sisters."

His agent made the kind of a sound one might make when being strangled or after drinking a glass of unsweetened lemonade. Then he managed to say, "I can get you six thousand dollars for another Loco Kid over at Star-Spangled."

"Sold," said Hix. "But do some rethinking on the witches. I smell an Oscar."

"That's not what I smell. Think up a Loco Kid title and I'll get you the contract." He hung up.

Hix, pushing aside the phone, located half a bag of uneaten potato chips and absently began nibbling on them in a moderately forlorn manner. "How the heck am I going to get the studios excited about this doubly terrific movie idea?"

The telephone call that came five minutes later provided a possible answer.

Wiping salt off his chin with the back of his hand, he answered it. "Good morning, Mr. Hix's valet speaking," he said in what he considered a near perfect imitation of George Sanders. "What is up?"

"Aw, quit clowning, Hix," said the young starlet. "I'm in no mood for wisecrack stuff, get me?"

"Okay, Polly. You in some sort of trouble?"

"You said it," replied Polly Fairbairn. "Listen, Buster, you know a lot about supernatural stuff, right?"

"Well, they're thinking of inviting me to lecture on the supernatural at the College of the Pacific next month," he told her. "So?"

"The thing is, Hix, I'm pretty damn sure I'm being hoodooed, hexed, and futzed," she informed him. "Could well be witchcraft involved."

He sat up, frizzy hair vibrating slightly. "You are maybe involved with a witch or two? Give me the details."

"Not on the phone. Can you meet me at The House of a Thousand Donuts on La Cienega in an hour?"

"I can, I shall."

"Thanks, pal."

He hung up, nodding in a satisfied way. "Hey, if I can tangle with a real live witch, I can get some good mentions in *Louella* and *Hedda*. And almost certainly a write-up in *Photoplay*."

After consuming a final handful of potato chips, he put on his flamboyantly plaid sports coat and went forth.

The House of a Thousand Donuts was a large but cozy place with strawberry-pattern café curtains on the windows and thick pale green carpeting on the floor. All the waitresses were pretty and looked like young women who'd come to Hollywood to get into the movies and hadn't quite made it yet.

Hix arrived first and grabbed a booth in the middle of the room. His pretty redheaded waitress appeared and said, "Hi, Hix."

He tilted his head slightly and looked at her. "You're..."

"Betsy Normandy," she told him. "You met me at Sidney Toler's last birthday party."

"And I said I'd never forget you."

She shrugged. "That's Hollywood. Want a cup of cocoa while you're waiting?"

"Not yet, Betsy. So how are you doing?"

"I'm employed. Today's Featured Donut is Chocolate-Banana with Sprinkles."

"I'll think about it."

She gave him a brief polite smile before moving off.

Polly Fairbairn pushed through the pink-tinted glass doors. A silvery blonde at the moment, she was wearing fawn-colored slacks, a blue blazer, and a polka-dot neck scarf.

Hix half-stood, waving to her.

The starlet returned the wave, smiled, tripped and fell onto the thick carpet.

"Oops." Hix ran to her, bent, and helped her up. "You okay, kiddo?"

"I'm not stewed," she assured him as she got to her feet.

After settling into the booth facing him, she reached for a glass of water. It went slipping out of her grasp and splashed half of its contents on the tabletop before Hix caught the glass and righted it.

She wiped up the spill with a napkin. "Geeze, I'm really getting damned ticked off about this crap."

"What exactly has been going on? And for how long?"

Holding up three fingers, the actress said, "Almost three weeks."

"Should've consulted me earlier."

"Been getting a hell of a lot worse this past week. My agent got me an audition for the lead in *Southern Belles Are Ringing* over at Mammoth Studios."

"Yeah, All Singing, All Dancing, All Scarlett O'Hara. What went wrong?"

She leaned back, sighing. "Well, I fell down as I was walking into Sound Stage Three, twisted my ankle," she began. "Limped to my damn tryout and couldn't even waltz let alone tap. When I tried to warble, I sounded like Wallace Beery trying to gargle."

"Sounds like you been hexed or had some kind of spell put on you for sure."

"That ain't all, buddy." Polly leaned forward, resting both elbows atop the table. "When I reported to Pentagram Studios on Monday to start shooting *Sonora Sal*, *Singing Cowgirl*, I fell off my horse. Not once but twice. Had a sneezing fit when Bronc Patton was starting to serenade me

with 'How'd You Like to Share a Bunkhouse With Me?' And that afternoon — "

"Whoa," interrupted the writer, making a stop-right-there gesture with his left hand. "Any idea who might be behind this sort of sabotage?"

Polly nodded. "Got no proof, but it's got to be Nova Carravan, who beat me out of the starring part in *Southern Belles*."

"She's the — "

"You folks decided what you wish?" Their waitress had reappeared.

"Two cups of cocoa and two plain sinkers, Betsy." After she took her leave, he continued, "Nova's the one who used to be Pepita Caliente, the Argentine Firecracker?"

"Right, Hix. When that didn't pan out she dyed her hair red and, changing her name again, became a sort of no talent Rita Hayworth. I've heard some very vague rumors that she's maybe involved with some pretty unorthodox people."


"Nova/Pepita can be a starting point."

"That bimbo is going to be at Mammoth in the Valley at two this afternoon to shoot some publicity photos."

"I shall, very unobtrusively, investigate."

"You're a swell guy, Hix." She reached across and squeezed his hand.

"I heartily agree," he said.

 **Q**UITE A FEW PEOPLE out at Mammoth Studios were moderately fond of Hix and most of those who weren't tolerated him. He had no problem getting through the high wrought-iron gates and parking his venerable Plymouth coupe on Visitors' Parking Lot 2 at a few minutes after one-thirty that afternoon.

The weather had soured and the sky was overcast. All of the other dozen or so other visiting automobiles, he noted, were in much better shape than his jalopy. Clad now in a lemon-colored sports coat and somewhat gray slacks, he hopped gracefully from his car and went strolling along a palm tree-lined street.

As two starlets dressed as harem girls almost passed him, they stopped in their tracks and did a take of recognition. "Hix, don't tell me you're finally working at a first-rate studio?"

"That's a possibility, Trixie."

Nanette, the other harem girl, inquired, "What *are* you doing here, pal?"

Slowing to a halt, he said, "An acquaintance of mine, a talented young actress who has an unrequited crush on me, suspects that somebody maybe sabotaged her audition here for the lead in *Southern Belles Are —*"

"Polly Fairbairn has a crush on you?" Trixie's penciled eyebrows rose.

"Let's write to Ripley," suggested Nanette. "He can use that in *Believe It or Not*."

"Keep in mind my better qualities are vastly appreciated in some circles," he reminded. "Do you know something?"

"Sure, it's that bitch Nova Carravan," replied Trixie. "And that creepy agent of hers."

"That would be Josh Wingert of Lenzer and Wingert?"

Nanette gave him a light punch in his side. "You ain't au courant, pal," she informed him. "Nova dumped that guy months ago. She's with Anton Sparber now."

"Big ugly guy," added Trixie. "Pale. Looks like they dug him up at Forest Lawn and put him in a double-breasted pinstripe suit."

Hix took a step back. "How exactly did they foul Polly up?"

Both the starlets shrugged.

"We don't know, but they must have," said Trixie.

"Maybe slipped something into her chicken soup at the commissary," suggested Nanette.

"Listen, Hix, we got to get to Sound Stage Three," said Trixie. "They're shooting the sandstorm finale for *Harem Girls Battle Nazis in the Desert*."

Hix asked, "Does Nova have a dressing room yet?"

"They set up a trailer for her over in Sound Stage Four, but nobody's working there today."

"Thanks, kids." He made a formal bow.

Each of them gave him a pat on the cheek as they hurried off.

Hix watched their diminishing backsides for a thoughtful moment before turning onto a side street.

A sign attached to a stately palm tree stated *SOUND STAGES 4-6*.

Three British Commandos were bicycling by in the opposite direction. One called out, "What the heck are you doing here, Hix?"

"Slumming," he replied and kept on toward Sound Stage 4.

A heavyset man in a tan polo shirt was sitting on a streetside green bench watching some starlets play volleyball. Noticing Hix, he said, "Wasting your time. They stopped buying trash here last month."

Hix almost halted. "Otto," he said, "you have me mixed up with one of those untalented writers like Ben Hecht."

The seated writer made a vague gesture that might have been the finger and returned to watching the young women in shorts.

One of the big metal doors was open wide and a chubby uniformed guard was sitting on the sidewalk in a canvas director's chair reading the latest issue of the *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies* comic book. He looked up, smiling. "Hix, you ought to write for this magazine. You've got a first-class sense of humor."

"No, Wally, I got over that humor stuff. Had to," he explained. "One night about two weeks ago I couldn't stop being funny and they had to rush me to the emergency hospital." Hix leaned against the metal door. "Are there any sets for *Southern Belles Are Ringing* up yet?"

"The plantation exteriors," answered the guard, steeping the colorful comic book on one uniformed knee. "And the slave quarters."

"Could I take a look?" Hix asked politely. "I'm supposed to start on a script over at Quadrangle for *At a Plantation with You*. Like to get the feeling of the Old South."

"Research, huh? Sure, go on in," Wally told him. "I'll turn on a few more lights for you."

"I'll be eternally grateful," Hix said, following him into the huge sound stage. "At least until late next week."

It was quite a handsome plantation house, not as bright and white as it would seem on film, but impressive. Several believable magnolia trees had been planted around the wide verandah.

Hix eyed it as he passed. "You can almost hear and see," he said to himself, "all the happy slaves plucking their banjos as they pick cotton from dawn till dusk."

He made his way to the stretch of sound stage floor where five large

dressling room trailers were parked, stepping over cables and wires and a discarded brassiere. The trailers were painted in sparkling pastel shades. Nova Carravan's was the middle one and colored a gentle turquoise. Attached to the door was a small glazed wooden plaque that said *Miss Carravan*.

All the trailers were silent. Hix looked back, listening, then tried the door handle. He nodded and took a set of lock picks out of his coat pocket. He'd acquired those from a bit player in the first Dr. Crimebuster film he'd scripted.

"Handy." It took him almost six minutes to unlock the door. "Doctor Crimebuster can do it in two."

Entering, he clicked on the lights. The interior was divided into three small rooms. The living room contained a single bed, unmade, and a desk fronted by a straight-back chair. There were cabinets and shelves in the yellow and black room. He first searched, carefully, the bathroom and kitchen and found not a darn thing of interest.

He did better in the living room. As he checked out the desk drawers, he said, "Now what did Mr. Woo say in my last one, *Mr. Woo in the Bughouse*? 'My humble opinion is always search wastebasket. Most important.'"

Squatting, Hix picked up the tan wastebasket and dumped the contents on the carpet. There was a scattering of memos, several candy bar wrappers, an empty perfume bottle, the remains of a votive candle and a crumpled sheet of buff-colored note paper.

The dated note said "Coven 13...tomorrow midnight...1113 Verner Lane...Santa Rita Beach."

He kept the note, put everything else back in the basket. "Well now," he said, and left the trailer, relocking the door.

As Hix was on the brink of entering Visitors' Parking Lot 2, a freshly polished black 1940s Cadillac drove up behind him, stopped on the street and honked its melodious horn once. The frizzy-haired writer turned and at that moment the sky grew darker and a sharp wind came wooshing across the lot.

The window on the driver's side of the intruding automobile silently lowered and a gray-gloved masculine hand made a beckoning gesture at him.

Hix hesitated, then approached.

"Mr. Hix," said the large extremely pale man who looked out at him, "it has come to my attention that you are taking an unwanted interested in one of my clients."

"Ah, you must be the guy who represents Kate Smith," Hix said, assuming a sheepish expression. "Hey, I just like fat ladies and I may have been a bit too passionate in my daily fan letters to dear Kate, but — "

"I am Anton Sparber." He reached out the window to tap Hix on the chest. "It wouldn't be at all wise to inquire further about Nova Carravan."

"Then it's no use asking for an autographed glossy photo, I suppose." Hix turned away and started again for his car.

The agent drove off, almost silently.

When Hix looked back at the departing auto, he thought he had a brief glimpse of somebody watching him from the rear window. "That's funny. Halloween is still over a month off."

HE HADN'T ANTICIPATED the black cat. Day's end found Hix on the slightly swayback lime green sofa in the almost oceanside cottage in Santa Monica he'd been renting for much of the past two years.

When he'd rented the place, the landlady, a one-time bit player in the silents, had described it as "cozy." And that was true if you considered "cozy" a synonym for "awfully small."

As soon as he'd gotten back from the Valley, he'd phoned Polly Fairbairn to give her a terse and extremely lucid account of what he'd learned at the Mammoth Studio.

"So it is Nova?"

"Pretty certain, but I want to do some more digging into this," he told the starlet. "In the morning I have a meeting at Wheelan Films to talk about a new Loco Kid cactus opera. But from midday on I'll be back on the case."

"Okay, Hix, but don't get yourself hexed, too," she cautioned and hung up.

Piled on the sofa cushion next to his were the three books on witchcraft he had checked out of the Santa Monica Public Library when he'd started working on *Hark, the Wicked Witches Sing*.

Drumming the fingers of his left hand in sequence on the topmost book cover, Hix said aloud, "Now, if Nova *herself* is possibly a witch, what does that make her agent?"

The night wind was getting more enthusiastic outside and the windows rattled. Thunder exploded, sounding as though it was right out in his weedy front yard.

"Sparber could be a warlock, or he might be the leader of this Coven Thirteen witch group."

"Why don't you mind your own blooming business, jocko?" asked a thin piping voice.

Hix straightened, his frizzy hair flickering. Slowly rising off his sofa, he scanned the room.

"Forget the whole thing, Hixie." An overweight intensely black cat was now sitting casually on the orange hassock about six feet away. His eyes had a reddish glow, his long fuzzy tail was swishing slowly from left to right.

"Let's remain rational," he said to himself. To the intrusive feline he said, "And who might you be?"

"Well now, chum, I might be merely a hallucination," replied the black cat in his tenor voice. "I might be a symptom indicating you have finally gone stark raving bonkers."

"Or you might be," added Hix, "a familiar working for a local witch."

"Wow, you're awfully bright, Hixie. Having read — what is it? — three fat books on witchcraft and having written a lousy junk movie proposal, you're an expert."

"C'mon, you don't have to be a scholar to know that witches' familiars are usually black cats, though not always so rotund." Hix took a step closer to the fat cat. "So what do you want?"

"Already told you, palsy-walsy. Quit while you can," warned the familiar. "Otherwise...." He shrugged as well as a cat can.

Hix accomplished a more impressive shrug. "I'll think about it," he told the intruder. "By the way, what's your name? Blackie or Fuzzy or Fatso?"

"Ha-ha," said the cat. "Here's something to think about." His eyes glowed a more intense red.

Hix felt all at once woozy. He went walking, sloppily, backward. Bumping into the green sofa, he fell down onto it and passed out.

When he awakened about five minutes later, the witch cat was gone and Hix had a stomachache.

"Impressive," he admitted in a murmur. He went to his telephone and made a call.

For close to six minutes Hix was lost. Then his highly developed sense of direction, honed initially in his youth during his three months with the Boy Scouts before they threw him out, clicked on.

"Ah, yes, I should be going due north."

Executing an illegal U-turn, he started back down the hillside Altadena street.

Today was a touch less gloomy and the midday sun was a pale, but viewable, yellow.

He reached the lane he was seeking and his Plymouth made a shuddering stop in front of number 47. Whistling the theme from *Looney Tunes* animated cartoons, he strolled uphill to number 87.

It was a peach-colored stucco cottage with a slanting red tile roof. Taped to the wooden door was a sheet of lined paper saying *The Peripatetic Curiosity Shop*.

He knocked twice, once, three times. The door creaked open, making a foot-wide opening.

"Hix, you're in deep trouble," said the tall, deeply tanned man sitting in a rattan chair next to a glass-topped coffee table upon which were an open bottle of Regal Pale Beer, a highly polished crystal ball, and a thick, red, leather-bound very old book.

Hix took the only other chair, a brown wooden kitchen chair. "I told you that last night, Walter."

Professor Walter Foxall said, "However, my boy, I can save your bacon, strike a blow for law and order, and possibly earn a few bucks."

"You already earn a princely sum teaching Alchemy or whatever it is at UCLA."

"Heading the Department of Unorthodox Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles is my hobby. Running my curiosity shop is my true calling, working on occult problems, giving expert arcane information."

"You were a heck of a big help when I consulted you on the scripts for

my *Twenty-Six Vampires All in a Row* and *Mother's Day in Zombie Village*," Hix said. "This time, though, I need some help in saving my neck. If I succeed, I can get some swell publicity for my new movie proposal *Hark, the Wicked Witches Sing*."

"Lousy title." Foxall tapped the crystal and it produced a loud ping. "I've been checking up on you in my crystal ball. You are truly annoying Sparber, who is the leader of the group," he explained. "He's planning to eliminate you within the next couple of days."

Hix squinted at the crystal. "How, exactly?"

"Either spontaneous combustion or an attack by a rabid werewolf," the professor said. "They'll be voting on the exact method at this coven meeting tonight."

"Neither one sounds all that pleasant, Walt."

"We've also been doing some consulting for the FBI. There's going to be a roundup of these folks around about Halloween."

"Appropriate time, but a mite late for my situation."

"Indeed, so you and I will have to take care of them tonight, Hix."

"And how do we do that?"

"At UCLA I've been doing a lot of fresh research on up-to-date methods of witch control. Some of my best students have been helping me," Foxall said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to bring a couple of the best and brightest along with us on this caper tonight."

"That'll be no end of fun."

The professor made a hold-it-a-minute gesture. "Long as I've got the crystal ball out, I want to use it for a personal matter. If you don't mind."

Hix made a go-right-ahead gesture.

"My wife's been fooling around with a singing cowboy from Republic Pictures. Want to check up on what they're up to this afternoon."

The woody station wagon, with Professor Foxall at the wheel, arrived at Hix's overly cozy cottage at nightfall. A slim, blond young woman of twenty left the partially wooden parking car and tapped politely on his door. "Come along, Mr. Hix, the game's afoot," she said. "I'm Trish Hogan."

He was dressed in a very subdued style in a black pullover sweater, dark slacks, and a black knit cap. "Ready to serve." He was carrying an infrared camera he'd borrowed from a chum at the *L.A. Times*.

He shared the back seat of the car with the coed. In the storage space behind their seat, several cardboard boxes, two canvas sacks, and a large metal box were stored.

Foxall nodded at the thin young student in the passenger seat. "Hix, this is Fenton Holbrook, Jr."

"Hi," said Fenton.

"The weather around my shop has been very unsettled these past few hours," continued Foxall as he started the station wagon. "Thunder, lightning, sleet, hail, and a — very brief — shower of frogs."

"Witches strafing you?" suggested Hix.

"Seems likely, meaning they know I'm up to something this evening."

"Nothing to worry about, Prof," said Holbrook. "The anti-witch gear we're taking along'll take care of them."

"Magic spells?" asked the writer.

"No, stuff we're developing in the science lab."

"Then I can relax," said Hix, not relaxing.

The car moved, quietly, through the dark streets. A harsh wind was coming in across the Pacific Ocean.

Trish asked him, "What sort of movies do you write, Mr. Hix?"

"Terrific ones."

"Have you ever been nominated for an Oscar?"

"Almost, on several occasions."

"What were some of the titles?"

"The one that whipped up the most enthusiastic response from the members of the Academy was *Mother's Day in Zombie Village*," he told her. "Although Mr. Woo in *Panama* came closer to being a contender."

Trish pursed her lips. "Those sound sort of like B movies."

"Yes, that's my specialty."

After a moment, the young woman asked, "What do you think of Orson Welles? He's one of my especial favorites."

"A flash in the pan. He doesn't even know how to construct a plot."

"But you must consider *Citizen Kane* a work of art."

"Nope, but Welles sure does."

From the front seat the professor said, "We're about ten miles from Santa Rita Beach."

"I looked up their address on a map my gas station gave me," put in

Hix. "Verner Lane is up in the hills, in a cul-de-sac with no other houses around and a stretch of woodlands behind."

"Yes, we know," said Holbrook. "We'll come up on the woods side."

The woody had left the ocean side and was starting to climb the lower hills.

Foxall said, "We're going to use a new spray that's been developed, called witchbane. It'll subdue the most gifted of witches."

"Have you," inquired Hix, "ever used it on a witch?"

"No, but simulation tests prove it should be highly effective."

"That's comforting."

Holbrook said, "We've brought several other anti-witch devices along."

Hix tapped his borrowed camera. "I'll snap a few pictures. Stuff I can share with the press. Sure to stir up some publicity for my witch movie."

"I'm going to park in this small clearing in the woods," said the professor. "Then we'll unload our equipment."

The station wagon parked but that's as far as they got.

As the engine died, five young men in dark business suits came out from among the oaks and the pines and approached them.

Frowning, the professor climbed out onto the grass. "Agent Wiggins, isn't it?"

Wiggins touched the brim of his hat. "We got word that you are going to run up against the witches. As Director Hoover ordered, 'Tell them to knock it off.'"

"We jumped the gun because an emergency came —"

"There's been a change of plans," said the well-groomed FBI man, and his four associate agents nodded briskly in agreement. "The Department of Defense and the Secretary of War are now involved."

"Gosh," said Trish as she unobtrusively got out of the station wagon.

"Gosh indeed." Hix followed her.

"What has the Secretary of Defense to do with witchcraft?" asked Professor Foxall.

"This is wartime, Professor," said the FBI man, "and new arrangements get made."

"Such as?"

"Certain officials in Washington, with our help, have been negotiating with Anton Sparber, and the witch cult will be aiding in the war effort."

"How?" asked Hix.

After bestowing an annoyed scowl on the writer, the FBI man said, "The government is establishing a Special Branch of the OSS to deal with supernatural services. Sparber's group has been recruited for the duration of World War II and will eventually work overseas where needed."

"I see," said the professor.

"All of you here tonight, Professor Foxall, will have to sign nondisclosure agreements, and nobody must discuss this situation."

Hix asked, "Am I included in all this?"

"Hix, isn't it?"

"Of course. And I'm planning to — "

"No talking about this," said Wiggins. "And I'll have to confiscate that camera I see on your seat."

"It belongs to the *L.A. Times* and I haven't used it yet."

"We'll give you a receipt and notify you when the camera can be released," said the FBI man. "Now I suggest you all depart, Professor."

As Hix and Trish climbed back into the woody, the young woman said, sympathetically, "Tough luck, Mr. Hix."

With Sparber and Nova now in government service, Polly Fairbairn auditioned again and became the star of *Southern Belles Are Ringing*.

And a few weeks later Hix's agent sold *Hark, the Wicked Witches Sing* to Pentagram Pictures for \$6200.

They changed the title. ‡



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Sarah Pinsker says she first wrote to request the F&SF writer's guidelines when she was twelve years old. She sent stories all through her teens, then put aside fiction to pursue a career as a touring singer/songwriter. Criss-crossing North America in her "haunted" van provided some inspiration for this story. Her Website sarahpinsker.com includes some of her music, should any of you be inspired to have a listen after reading this disquieting tale.

A Stretch of Highway Two Lanes Wide

By Sarah Pinsker



NDY TATTOOED HIS LEFT forearm with Lori's name on a drunken night in his seventeenth year. LORI & ANDY FOREVER AND EVER was the full

text, all in capital letters, done by his best friend Susan with her home-made tattoo rig. Susan was proud as anything of that machine. She'd made it out of nine-volt batteries and some parts pulled from an old DVD player and a ballpoint pen. The tattoo was ugly and hurt like hell, and it turned out Lori didn't appreciate it at all. She dumped him two weeks later, just before she headed off to university.

Four years later, Andy's other arm was the one that got mangled in the combine. The entire arm, up to and including his shoulder and right collarbone and everything attached. His parents made the decision while he was still unconscious. He woke in a hospital room in Saskatoon with a robot arm and an implant in his head.

"Brain-Computer Interface," his mother said, as if that explained everything. She used the same voice she had used when he was five to tell him where the cattle went when they were loaded onto trucks. She stood

at the side of his hospital bed, her arms crossed and her fingers tapping her strong biceps as if she were impatient to get back to the farm. The lines in her forehead and the set of her jaw told Andy she was concerned, even if her words hid it.

"They put electrodes and a chip in your motor cortex," she continued. "You're bionic."

"What does that mean?" he asked. He tried to move his right hand to touch his head, but the hand didn't respond. He used his left and encountered bandages.

His father spoke from a chair by the window, flat-brimmed John Deere cap obscuring his eyes. "It means you've got a prototype arm and a whole lot of people interested in how it turns out. Could help a lot of folks."

Andy looked down at where his arm had been. Bandages obscured the points where flesh met prosthetic; beyond the bandages, the shine of new metal and matte-black wire. The new arm looked like their big irrigation rig, all spines and ridges and hoses. It ended in a pincer, fused fingers and a thumb. He tried to remember the details of his right hand: the freckles on the back, the rope-burn scar around his knuckles, the calluses on the palm. What had they done with it? Was it in a garbage can somewhere, marked as medical waste? It must have been pretty chewed up or they would have tried to reattach it.

He looked at the other arm. An IV was stuck in the "Forever" of his tattoo. He thought something far away was hurting, but he didn't feel much. Maybe the IV explained that. He tried again to lift his right arm. It still didn't budge, but this time it did hurt, deep in his chest.

"Can't prosthetics look like arms these days?" he asked.

His practical mother spoke again. "Those ones aren't half as useful. You can replace this hand with a more realistic one later if you want, but to get full use of the arm they said to go with the brain interface. No nerves left to send the impulses to a hand otherwise, no matter how fancy."

He understood. "How do I use it?"

"You don't, not for a while. But they were able to attach it right away. Used to be they'd wait for the stump to heal before fitting you, but this they said they had to go ahead and put in."

"You don't have a stump, anyway." His father chopped at his own shoulder as an indicator. "You're lucky you still have a head."

He wondered what the other options had been, if there had been any. It made sense that his parents would choose this. Theirs had always been the first farm in Saskatchewan for every new technology. His parents believed in automation. They liked working the land with machines, gridding it with spreadsheets and databases, tilling the fields from the comfort of the office.

He was the throwback. He liked the sun on his face. He kept a team of Shires for plowing and used their manure for fertilizer. He had his father's old diesel combine for harvest time, his biggest concession to speed and efficiency. And now it had taken his arm. He didn't know if that was an argument for his horses and tractors or his parents' self-guided machines. The machines would take out your fence if you programmed the coordinates wrong, but unless your math was really off they probably wouldn't make it into your office. On the other hand — now a pincer — it had been his own stupid fault he had reached into the stuck header.



NDY'S WORLD SHRANK to the size of the hospital room. He stood by the window and read the weather and fought the urge to call his parents, who were taking care of his small farm next to theirs in his absence. Had they finished harvesting before the frost? Had they moved the chicken run closer to the house? He had to trust them.

The doctor weaned him off the pain medications quickly. "You're a healthy guy," she said. "Better to cope than get hooked on opiates." Andy nodded, figuring he could handle it. He knew the aches of physical labor, of days when you worked until you were barely standing, and then a Shire shifted his weight and broke your foot, and you still had to get up and work again the next day.

Now his body communicated a whole new dialect of pain: aches wrapped in aches, throbbing in parts that didn't exist anymore. He learned to articulate the difference between stinging and stabbing pains, between soreness and tenderness. When the worst of it had broken over him, an endless prairie storm, the doctor gave the go-ahead for him to start using his arm.

"You're a fast learner, buddy," his occupational therapist told him when he had mastered closing the hand around a toothbrush. Brad was a big Assiniboine guy, only a couple of years older than Andy and relentlessly enthusiastic. "Tomorrow you can try dressing yourself."

"Fast is relative." Andy put the toothbrush down, then tried to pick it up again. He knocked it off the table.

Brad smiled but didn't make a move for the fallen toothbrush. "It's a process, eh? Your muscles have new roles to learn. Besides, once you get through these things, the real fun begins with that rig."

The real fun would be interesting, if he ever got there. The special features. He would have to learn to interpret the signal from the camera on the wrist, feeding straight to his head. There were flashlights and body telemetry readings to turn off and on. He looked forward to the real tests for those features: seeing into the dark corners of an engine, turning a breach calf. Those were lessons worth sticking around for. Andy bent down and concentrated on closing his hand on the toothbrush handle.

Just before he was due to go home, an infection sank its teeth in under his armpit. The doctor gave him antibiotics and drained the fluid. That night, awash in fever, he dreamed his arm was a highway. The feeling stuck with him when he woke.

Andy had never wanted much. He had wanted Lori to love him, forever and ever, but she didn't and that was that. As a child, he'd asked for the calf with the blue eyes, Maisie, and he kept her until she was big enough to be sold, and that was that. He'd never considered doing anything except working his own land next to his parents' and taking over theirs when they retired. There was no point in wanting much else.

Now he wanted to be a road, or his right arm did. It wanted with a fierceness that left him baffled, a wordless yearning that came from inside him and outside him at once. No, more than that. It didn't just want to be a road. It knew it was one. Specifically, a stretch of asphalt two lanes wide, ninety-seven kilometers long, in eastern Colorado. A stretch that could see all the way to the mountains, but was content not to reach them. Cattleguards on either side, barbed wire, grassland.

Andy had never been to Colorado. He'd never been out of Saskatchewan, not even to Calgary or Winnipeg. He'd never seen a

mountain. The fact that he was able to describe the contours of the mountains in the distance, and the tag numbers in the ears of the bald-faced cows, told him he wasn't imagining things. He was himself and he was also a road.

"Ready to get back to work, buddy? How's it feeling?" Brad asked him.

Andy shrugged. He knew he should tell Brad about the road, but he didn't want to stay in the hospital any longer. Bad enough that his parents had been forced to finish his harvest, grumbling the whole time about his archaic machinery. There was no way he would risk a delay.

"Infection's gone, but it's talking a lot. Still takes some getting used to," he said, which was true. It fed him the temperature, the levels of different pollutants in the air. It warned him when he was pushing himself too hard on the treadmill. And then there was the road thing.

Brad tapped his own forehead. "You remember how to dial back the input if it gets too much?"

"Yeah. I'm good."

Brad smiled and reached for a cooler he had brought with him. "Great, man. In that case, today you're going to work on eggs."

"Eggs?"

"You're a farmer, right? You have to pick up eggs without cracking them. And then you have to make lunch. Believe me, this is expert level. Harder than any of that fancy stuff. You master eggs with that hand, you graduate."

Brad and the doctors finally gave him permission to leave a week later.

"You want to drive?" asked his father, holding out the keys to Andy's truck.

Andy shook his head and walked around to the passenger side. "I'm not sure I could shove into second gear. Might need to trade this in for an automatic."

His father gave him a once-over. "Maybe so. Or just practice a bit around the farm?"

"I'm not scared. Just careful."

"Fair enough, fair enough." His father started the truck.

He wasn't scared, but it was more than being careful. At first, the joy of being in his own house eclipsed the weird feeling. The road feeling. He

kept up the exercises he had learned in physical therapy. They had retaught him how to shave and cook and bathe, and he retaught himself how to groom and tack the horses. He met up with his buddies from his old hockey team at the bar in town, to try to prove that everything was normal.

Gradually, the aches grew wider. How could you be a road, in a particular place, and yet not be in that place? Nothing felt right. He had always loved to eat, but now food was tasteless. He forced himself to cook, to chew, to swallow. He set goals for the number of bites he had to take before stopping.

He had lost muscle in the hospital, but now he grew thinner. His new body was wiry instead of solid. Never much of a mirror person, he started making himself look. Motivation, maybe. A way to try to communicate with his own brain. He counted his ribs. The synthetic sleeving that smoothed the transition from pectorals to artificial arm gapped a little because of his lost mass. If anything was worth notifying the doctors about, it was that. Gaps led to chafing, they had said, then down the slippery slope to irritation and abrasion and infection. You don't work a horse with a harness sore.

In the mirror, he saw his gaunt face, his narrowed shoulder, the sleeve. His left arm, with its jagged love letter. On the right side, he saw road. A trick of the mind. A glitch in the software. Shoulder, road. He knew it was all there: the pincer hand, the metal bones, the wire sinew. He opened and closed the hand. It was still there, but it was gone at the same time.

He scooped grain for the horses with his road hand, ran his left over their shaggy winter coats. He oiled machinery with his road hand. Tossed hay bales and bags of grain with both arms working together. Worked on his truck in the garage. Other trucks made their slow way down a snowy highway in Colorado that was attached to him by wire, by electrode, by artificial pathways that had somehow found their way from his brain to his heart. He lay down on his frozen driveway, arms at his sides, and felt the trucks rumble through.

The thaw came late to both of Andy's places, the farm and the highway. He had hoped the bustle of spring might bring relief, but instead he felt even more divided.

He tried to explain the feeling to Susan over a beer on her tiny screen porch. She had moved back to town while he was in the hospital, rented a tiny apartment on top of the tattoo parlor. A big-bellied stove took up most of the porch, letting her wear tank tops even this early in the season. Her arms were timelines, a progression of someone else's skill; her own progression must be on other arms, back in Vancouver. She had gone right after high school, to apprentice herself to some tattoo bigshot. Andy couldn't figure out why she had returned, but here she was, back again.

The sleeves of his jacket hid his own arms. Not that he was hiding anything. He held the beer in his left hand now only because his right hand dreamed of asphalt and tumbleweeds. He didn't want to bother it.

"Maybe it's recycled," Susan said. "Maybe it used to belong to some Colorado rancher."

Andy shook his head. "It isn't in the past, and it isn't a person on the road."

"The software, then? Maybe that's the recycled part, and the chip was meant for one of those new smart roads near Toronto, the ones that drive your car for you."

"Maybe." He drained the beer, then dropped the can to the porch and crushed it with the heel of his workboot. He traced his scars with his fingertips: first the scalp, then across and down his chest, where metal joined to flesh.

"Are you going to tell anybody else?" Susan asked.

He listened to the crickets, the undertones of frog. He knew Susan was hearing those, too. He didn't think she heard the road thrumming in his arm. "Nah. Not for now."

Andy's arm was more in Colorado every day. He struggled to communicate with it. It worked fine; it was just elsewhere. Being a road wasn't so bad, once he got used to it. People say a road goes to and from places, but it doesn't. A road is where it is every moment of the day.

He thought about driving south, riding around until he could prove whether or not the place actually existed, but he couldn't justify leaving after all that time in the hospital. Fields needed to be tilled and turned and seeded. Animals needed to be fed and watered. He had no time for road trips, no matter how important the trip or the road.

Susan dragged him to a bonfire out at the Oakley farm. He didn't want to go, hadn't been to a party since he had bought his own land, but she was persuasive. "I need to reconnect with my client base and I don't feel like getting hit on the whole time," she said. He hung his robot arm out the window to catch the wind as she drove. Wind twenty-one kilometers per hour, it told him. Twelve degrees Celsius. In the other place, five centimeters of rain had fallen in the last two hours, and three vehicles had driven through.

The bonfire was already going in a clearing by the barn, a crowd around it, shivering. Doug Oakley was a year older than Andy, Hugh still in high school. They both lived with their parents, which meant this was a parents-out-of-town party. Most of the parties Andy had ever been to were like this, except he had been on the younger side of the group then instead of the older side. There's a point at which you're the cool older guy, and then after that you're the weird older guy who shouldn't be hanging with high school kids anymore. He was pretty sure he had crossed that line.

Susan had bought a case of Molson to make friends and influence people. She hoisted it out of the backseat now and emptied the beers into a cooler in the grass. She took one for herself and tossed one to him, but it bounced off his new hand. He glanced around to see if anybody had noticed. He shoved that can deep into the ice and freed another one from the cooler. He held it in the pincer and popped the top with his left, then drained half of it in one chug. The beer was cold and the air was cold and he wished he had brought a heavier jacket. At least he could hold the drink in his metal hand. His own insulator.

The high school girls all congregated by the porch. Most of them had plastic cups instead of cans, for mixing Clamato with their beer. Susan looked at them and snorted. "If I live to be two hundred, I will never understand that combination."

They walked toward the fire. It blazed high, but its heat didn't reach far beyond the first circle of people knotted around it. Andy shifted from foot to foot, trying to get warm, breathing in woodsmoke. He looked at the faces, recognizing most of them. The Oakley boys, of course, and their girlfriends. They always had girlfriends. Doug had been engaged at one point and now he wasn't. Andy tried to remember details. His mother would know.

He realized that the girl on Doug's arm now was Lori. Nothing wrong with that — Doug was a nice guy — but Lori had always talked about university. Andy had soothed his broken heart by saying she deserved more than a farmer's life. It hurt him a little to see her standing in the glow of the flame, her hands in her armpits. He didn't mind that he was still here, but he didn't think she ought to be. Or maybe she was just leaning against Doug for warmth? It wasn't his business anymore, he supposed.

Lori slipped from under Doug's arm and into the crowd. She appeared next to Susan a moment later.

"Hey," she said, raising a hand in greeting, then slipping it back under her armpit, either out of awkwardness or cold. She looked embarrassed.

"Hey," he replied, nodding his beer toward her with the robot hand. He tried to make it a casual movement. Only a little beer sloshed out of the can.

"I heard about your arm, Andy. I felt terrible. Sorry I didn't call, but the semester got busy...." She trailed off.

It was a lousy excuse, but his smile was genuine. "It's cool. I understand. You're still in university?"

"Yeah. Winnipeg. I've got one more semester."

"What are you majoring in?" Susan asked.

"Physics, but I'll be going to grad school for meteorology. Climate science."

"Awesome. You know what would make a cool tattoo for a climate scientist?"

Andy excused himself to get another beer. When he came back, Susan was drawing a barometer on the back of Lori's hand. She and Lori had never been close, but they had gotten on okay. Susan had liked that Lori had ambition, and Lori had liked dating a guy whose best friend was a girl, which she said was pretty unusual. If they had moved to the same city, CTV could have made some cheesy buddy comedy about them, the small town valedictorian and the small town lesbian punk in the big city. He would make a one-time appearance as the guy who had stayed behind.

After his fifth beer he couldn't feel anything but the road in his sleeve. The air in Colorado smelled like ozone, like maybe a storm was about to hit. That night, after Susan had drawn marker tattoos onto several of their former classmates and invited them to stop at her shop, after promises of

email were exchanged with Lori, after the hazy drive home, he dreamed the highway had taken him over entirely. In the nightmare, the road crept up past his arm, past his shoulder. It paved his heart, flattened his limbs, tarred his mouth and eyes, so that he woke gasping before dawn.

HE SET UP an appointment with a therapist. Dr. Bird's broad face was young, but her hair was completely silver-white. She nodded sympathetically as she listened.

"I'm not really here to give my opinion, but I think maybe you were rushed into this BCI thing. You didn't have a part in the decision. You didn't have any time to get used to the idea of having no arm."

"Did I need to get used to that?"

"Some people do. Some people don't have a choice, because their bodies need to heal before regular prosthetics can be fitted."

What she said made sense, but it didn't explain anything. It would have explained phantom pains, or dreams that his arm was choking him. He had read about those things. But a road? None of her theories jibed. He drove home on flat prairie highway, then flat prairie two-lane, between fallow fields and grazing land. The road to his parents' farm, and his own parcel of land in back of theirs, was dirt. His new truck had lousy shock absorbers, and every rut jolted him on the bench.

He had lived here his whole life, but his arm was convinced it belonged someplace else. On the way home it spoke to him without words. It pulled him. Turn around, it said. South, south, west. I am here and I am not here, he thought, or maybe it thought. I love my home, he tried to tell it. Even as he said it, he longed for the completion of being where he was, both Saskatchewan and Colorado. This was not a safe way to be. Nobody could live in two places at once. It was a dilemma. He couldn't leave his farm, not unless he sold it, and the only part of him that agreed with that plan was not really part of him at all.

That night he dreamed he was driving the combine through his canola field when it jammed. He climbed down to fix it, and this time it took his prosthetic. It chewed the metal and the wire and he found himself hoping it would just rip the whole thing from his body, clear up to his brain, so he could start afresh. But then it did keep going. It didn't stop with the arm.

It tore and ripped, and he felt a tug in his head that turned into throbbing, then a sharp and sharp and sharper pain.

The pain didn't go away when he woke. He thought it was a hangover, but no hangover had ever felt like that. He made it to the bathroom to throw up, then crawled back to his cellphone by the bed to call his mother. The last thing he thought of before he passed out was that Brad had never taught him how to crawl on the prosthetic. It worked pretty well.

He woke in the hospital again. He checked his hands first. Left still there, right still robot. With the left, he felt along the familiar edges of the prosthetic and the sleeve. Everything was still there. His hand went up to his head, where it encountered bandages. He tried to lift the prosthetic, but it didn't move.

A nurse entered the room. "You're awake!" she said with a West Indian lilt. "Your parents went home but they'll be back after feeding time, they said."

"What happened?" he asked.

"Pretty bad infection around the chip in your head, so they took it out. The good news is that the electrodes all scanned fine. They'll give you a new chip when the swelling goes down, and you'll be using that fine bit of machinery again in no time."

She opened the window shade. From the bed, all Andy saw was sky, blue and serene. The best sky to work under. He looked down at the metal arm again, and realized that for the first time in months, he saw the arm, and not Colorado. He could still bring the road — his road — to mind, but he was no longer there. He felt a pang of loss. That was that, then.

When the swelling went down, a new chip was installed in his head. He waited for this one to assert itself, to tell him his arm was a speedboat or a satellite or an elephant's trunk, but he was alone in his head again. His hand followed his directions, hand-like. Open, close. No cows, no dust, no road.

He asked Susan to get him from the hospital. Partly so his parents wouldn't have to disrupt their schedules again, and partly because he had something to ask her.

In her car, driving home, he rolled up his left sleeve. "Remember this?" he asked.

She glanced at it and flushed. "How could I forget? I'm sorry, Andy. Nobody should go through life with a tattoo that awful."

"It's okay. I was just wondering, well, if you'd maybe fix it. Change it."

"God, I'd love to! You're the worst advertisement my business could have. Do you have anything in mind?"

He did. He looked at the jagged letters. The "I" of "LORI" could easily be turned into an A, the whole name disappeared into COLORADO. It was up to him to remember. Somewhere, in some medical waste bin back in Saskatoon, there was a computer chip that knew it was a road. A chip that was an arm that was Andy who was a stretch of asphalt two lanes wide, ninety-seven kilometers long, in eastern Colorado. A stretch that could see all the way to the mountains, but was content not to reach them. Forever and ever.



"It's just about over, but whether it's over hard or over easy is entirely up to you."

Readers might recall Professor Threefoot and his son-in-law Adam from Albert Cowdrey's tale of academic misdeeds, "The Woman in the Moon" (from our May/June 2013 issue). But if you missed that issue, worry not: you should have no trouble following this sly sequel.

Byzantine History 101

By Albert E. Cowdrey



OF ALL TERRENCE MOLLOY'S secrets — and he had a lot of them — the fact that he consulted a Reader and Advisor was the one he kept darkest.

Sometimes his fiancé, Adam Clarke, called him Mr. Totally Solid, and that was how he liked to come across. The practical guy, the businessman who copped two Resource Units for every one he spent. And yet one afternoon Terrence closed his antique shop early and took the No. Thirteen people-mover to a stop near the Tilton University campus. He walked up a crooked alley, ignoring the pawn shops where hard-up students exchanged surplus clothing for lunch money, and turned in at Madam Sibyl's.

The twenty-second century's scientific culture stopped at the door. Stuffed alligators, magical crystals, voodoo dolls, and love potions crowded the shop, and the air was thick with the scents of aromatherapy. Madame Sibyl claimed to be half-Irish, half-Gypsy, hence doubly gifted with the second sight. When Terrence found her seated behind the counter, her globular form sprawled in an ancient recliner, a greasy Tarot deck piled on

a small table beside her teacup, he reflected that the Irish-Gypsy story just might be true. Two startlingly blue and childlike eyes stared up at him from her pudding of a face, as if gazing through a mask.

"So, whatchoo wanna know now, Terry?" she rasped, in what an earlier century would have called a whiskey-and-cigarettes voice. "But first, cross my palm with silver. That's twenny-five RUs. Rates have gone up."

He grumbled but paid. She shuffled the deck and began to deal out the cards for study, using — maybe in honor of her ancestry — the Celtic Cross spread. Gazing at No. VI in the Major Arcana, *Les Amoureux*, she muttered, "That's a nice guy you gonna marry. You oughta treat him better."

"I might, if he just wasn't so damn sweet all the time."

She chuckled. "I know whatchoo mean. Sweet is neat, but too much is too much. That's why I'm such a witch to my husband — keeps the old boy on his toes.... Oops, here's a surprise."

"What?"

"Look at the Queen of Swords. In conjunction with the Lovers, that means the great love of your life will be a woman."

"Come off it. You've heard about the housemaid who doesn't do windows? Well, I don't do women."

"I know, I know. But the cards don't lie. You'll love her so much that every time you look at her, a sword will pierce your heart. Oh, oh, the King of Cups. You're about to collide with a powerful older man who *really* don't like you. He's gonna be big in your life, so a lot will depend on how you handle him."

"How *do* I handle him?"

"By being your usual nasty self, Terry. Don't make the mistake of trying to be nice to him. He'll just take it as weakness. If you're snotty enough, he might even get to like you — kindred spirit, you know.... Jesus, now this *is* weird. The old guy's rich, and he's in conjunction with No. XVIII, *La Lune*. If I didn't know it was impossible, I'd say he made his money on the moon."

Terrence could only stare at her. It was things like this that kept him coming back to her shop, even though it looked like a stage-set for a tale of witchcraft. How in *hell* could she know about Professor Threefoot and the Moon? And where would tonight's meeting with the old monster lead?

...

Where it led, about a quarter to 19:00, was the door of Adam's mama's house. When they crossed the security beam, the doorbell announced them by playing the famous notes of Beethoven's Fifth, *da-da-da-dum, da-da-da-dum*.

"The sound of Fate," muttered Terrence. The door opened, and there stood Kate whom he knew and liked, and behind her, visibly glowering, a mass of purple veins and crimson wattles she identified as Daddy.

Hostilities began at once. Threefoot ignored Terrence's proffered hand and growled, "Hrmh. The other day I noticed a book called *Historic Homos* on a remainder list. I won't read it, of course, but *you* might be interested."

"Great subject," Terrence replied warmly. "My fraternity — I like to call it Phi Alpha Gamma, or Phag — has produced a lot of 'em. Richard the Lion-Hearted and Frederick the Great, to name two. Plus Socrates and Julius Caesar, though with those guys, only when they happened to be in the mood."

"Shall I fix drinks?" asked Adam nervously. He took orders — brandy for his grandpa, Pernod for his intended — and began pouring beverages in the kitchen while Kate assembled the munchies.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

"My money's on Terrence. Daddy's such a bully, it'd be nice to see him meet his match for once. Can you fit the bowl with the dip on the tray with the drinks?"

"Just barely," he said, and returned to the living room, burdened and clinking, to find the discussion of famous fags still going on.

"You mentioned," said Threefoot, "a couple of the rougher brothers in your, ah, fraternity. Richard and Frederick were both killers — of course, they were generals and had to be, but they kept the habit even in times of peace. A visitor to Frederick's palace said he felt like a steeplejack who falls off a church tower, finds life in midair pleasant, and thinks, 'Good, provided it lasts.'"

Terrence produced a laugh like the cry of an amorous peacock. "I had a fling with an Ultimate Fighter once," he cackled, "and I felt *exactly* that way. When was he going to have a change of mood, throw me out the window, and watch me bounce? Oh, thanks, Adam," he added, accepting

the cloudy Pernod. "You'd have been a lousy priest, but you've got a real future as a waitron," meaning a bot programmed as a waiter.

The foursome settled down in Kate's living room, which was furnished academically, i.e., from flea markets and yard sales. The effect was mixed, for Kate had excellent taste, while Adam Sr. — her deceased husband, the present Adam's dad — had lacked that talent, among many others. *Mélange étrange*, thought Terrence. *Funny bunch of stuff*. Tactfully, he picked out the best of the lot to comment on.

"That Art Deco lamp over there," he said. "That's a fine twentieth-century piece, Kate. Just looking at it, I can see people swilling bathtub gin and dancing the Black Bottom to a Dixieland band. It ought to be resilvered and it needs a new shade, but if you ever decide to sell it, I can get you maybe twelve hundred RU's at the shop."

"That sounds marvelous," she said, "especially since I paid fifty for it at a yard sale."

"Smart lady," said Terrence, speaking reverently, for he wore his wallet close to his heart.

"You own an antique shop?" asked Threefoot, after swilling his brandy. "Rather a cliché occupation for one of your fraternity, isn't it?"

"Like you, Professor, I wanted a job that wouldn't entail any actual work. *A votre santé*."

"*Prosit*," Threefoot replied, experiencing a flash of regret that bungling old Heinrich Himmler hadn't finished off Terrence's frat, back in the days when he had the chance.

While the men fenced, Kate munched Crispie-Thins with guacamole, sipped Gulag vodka on the rocks, and considered how to get rid of her husband's purchases. She'd been meaning to dump them anyway, but now was her chance, with Adam Jr. living elsewhere and no longer able to look at her with reproachful spaniel eyes every time some bit of beloved rubbish disappeared.

She had several items on her hit list, starting with a twenty-first-century Neo-Bauhaus chair that you sat in only if you meant to stay there, since getting up was impossible. She decided to give it to the campus thrift shop and move things around so the gap wouldn't be noticeable. Adam was still a frequent visitor, after all, and she didn't want him to get the idea that she was trying to erase his father's memory.

Especially since she wasn't. When they first met twenty-six years ago, Adam Sr. had been so...so...*totally unlike Daddy* she'd wanted to take him home with her that very minute. Even after all these years, the warmth lingered. She liked to say that she'd had two children named Adam, and loved them both. Was it, as she sometimes suspected, their shared weakness that made them so lovable? Was she one of those strong women who only like weak men? If so, why did she like Terrence so much? She decided to ask her therapist, then shook off her reverie and returned to the present.

While she was mentally absent, Daddy's dialogue with Terrence had taken a new twist. Instead of continuing to poke at what had turned out to be a human porcupine, Threefoot was asking sensible questions about antiques and actually appeared to be listening to the replies. When he said his taste ran to Victorian, Terrence invited him to drop by his shop and check out an item he said was "*totally you*" — a silver duck press that had squeezed the juice from many a hapless *canard* in the days of the Belle Époque.

"I may take a look at it," Daddy rumbled. "Somehow I've always wanted to flatten a duck."

Kate could hardly believe how well things were going. Sometimes he had these convivial moods, though seldom and briefly — stomping on people's feelings gave him too much pleasure to stop for long. But tonight his affability lasted until the drinks and munchies had been consumed and the family stepped outside into the garden. Beyond the gate, the buildings of 400-year-old Tilton University lay illuminated by scattered LEDs and a vast yellow moon. Since Threefoot now seemed a likely customer, Terrence came up with a neat compliment — declared that seeing Luna in his company was like attending an orgy with Tacitus, the great Roman historian.

"I will certainly drop by your establishment," Daddy promised. "Though, as Tacitus might put it, your motto is undoubtedly *caveat emptor*."

Back at home, Terrence asked Adam what the phrase meant. Despite two years of Latin in the Catholic seminary where he'd lost his virginity, Adam answered cautiously that he didn't know. The evening had been so unexpectedly pleasant, he didn't want to end it on a sour note by telling

Terrence that *caveat emptor* means "let the buyer beware." Threefoot had gotten the last word in, after all.

HIS VISIT to the antique shop came a week later. He arrived about 10:00 when the place was otherwise empty of customers and Terrence walked him through his collection.

He viewed with loathing items in the twenty-first-century neo-retro style the French called *conglomération*, which meant exactly what it sounded like, and showed no interest in such leftovers of the twentieth century as a bunch of Picassos that Terrence had picked up at a remainder sale and still hadn't disposed of.

"He had a worldwide reputation at one time," he sighed, "but now nobody wants to touch him."

Threefoot grunted, "It was the same with Hitler."

Finally they reached the good stuff — solid remnants of vanished empires, of the time (as Threefoot put it) when the world was ruled by civilized people and the Hottentots knew their place. He admired and bought the duck press almost without bargaining, and his geniality didn't end there. While the wrapping bot was busy giving it the kind of lavish treatment its price warranted, he chatted casually with Terrence, as if he now accepted him as a sort of grandson-in-law. Terrence responded warmly, saying how much he liked Kate and regretted never meeting Adam's father.

"Ah, yes," Threefoot reflected. "Very decent young fellow when I first knew him. That was before he started drinking heavily, yet even when he was sober he lacked something essential. Normally I wouldn't have bothered with him, but Kate loved him for his failings and made him her project. Fine woman, but much given to projects. She tried hard to turn him into a success, but just couldn't. Silk purse, sow's ear.

"Soon she was pregnant, and he still had no job. That was intolerable, so I called in a few chits and got him a tenure-track appointment. To gain faculty status he needed to produce a book, and since he had no topic, I suggested a biography of myself. I should have recognized that the subject was too ample, too broad, too filled with complex shadings for one of his limited ability.

"When, after endless delays, he submitted his draft to me for vetting, I was deeply disappointed. He had a tin ear for words, and I had to go through the whole manuscript substituting *portly* for *obese*, *pragmatic* for *unscrupulous*, and so forth. In the end I gave up such patchwork, rewrote the whole thing in publishable form, titled it *Threefoot: Giant of Scholarship*, and submitted it to the Tilton University Press under his name. Some people have accused me of being a one-book scholar. How little they know!

"When the proofs popped up on his monitor, he was livid, and Kate had to give him a good talking-to. She warned him that without a published book, he'd have no job, and without a job his little son, on whom he doted, soon would look like one of those tragic children with eyes like dissolving gumdrops one sees in pictures from disaster zones. So he yielded, and the book was published in both electronic and hardcopy format. I called in more chits, secured it favorable reviews, and he became a tenured professor on the strength of work he hadn't done. Well, nothing unusual about *that*.

"When I retired, for Kate's sake I tried to have him appointed to my own endowed chair. But my colleagues were adamant against him — one called him a 'talentless toady' — and I was obliged to give way with my customary good grace. His subsequent career was less than stellar, compromised by his drinking problem and inability to stand up for himself in the rough-and-tumble of campus politics. Even Kate couldn't penetrate the drunken stupor where he'd taken refuge. It was a sad situation."

"Indeed," murmured Terrence, "it all sounds *very* sad."

At this point, without the slightest warning, Threefoot exploded a bomb. First he asked if gay couples ever adopted children. After learning they'd been doing so for more than a hundred years, he proposed that Terrence adopt Adam's child by a surrogate.

"I didn't know Adam wanted a kid."

"He would if you wanted it."

They gazed at each other thoughtfully, and Threefoot went on, "I want to see my family projected into the future, and I'm quite ready to do my part — handle the expenses involved in the birth and education of him or her. My book *Moon Rise* keeps on giving, you know — in the last feely

version, the digital lead received an Academy Award for best performance by a nonhuman actor. I'd call that a superfluous distinction, since all actors are nonhuman to some degree."

"This will require a lot of thought," said Terrence.

"Consider the terms negotiable. Judging by what you charged me for that duck press, you have a fondness for money. If you don't reject the idea out of hand, we can discuss the details at greater length."

The bot ejected the package wrapped in faux silk and encircled with a white ribbon. "Here you go," said Terrence, handing it over. "Getting to know you has been uncommonly interesting, Professor."

"The feeling is mutual. *Ciao*."

"*Ciao*."

Neither spoke any language except English, but both liked to drop foreign words and phrases into their conversation, as an infantryman might lob a grenade into a strange pillbox, feeling it might help and couldn't hurt. That was something else they had in common, besides assuming they could run Adam's life for him.

At 13:30, his usual lunchtime, Terrence closed his shop, hung the *Back Tout de Suite* sign on the door, and went home to eat.

Following coffee, with little difficulty he maneuvered Adam into the sack — they owned a vibrating Beautysleep, though the amount of sleeping they did on it was minimal — and in the dim, relaxed afterglow, murmured into his partner's ear, "I've been thinking."

"Mmm?" breathed Adam, who was also feeling dim and relaxed. "What about?"

"About us. About having a kid. Specifically, your kid. I'd love to have another Adam in the world. One's good, but two would be better."

"That's the nicest thing you ever said to me," said Adam, a catch in his voice. "In fact, it's the *only* nice thing you ever said to me. But can we afford it?"

"No. Just educating a kid, if you want good schools, can cost a couple of million RUs. But while I was waiting on Threefoot today, I was thinking — he kept going on about family, family, family, so maybe he'd be willing to help us out."

"I don't want to owe that swine *anything*. I'll never forgive him for the

way he used to treat my Dad. Poor guy, I'd see his collar get three sizes too big for him when Grandpa came into the room. He just shriveled in the awful presence."

"Yet Threefoot seems to love your mother."

"That's all he *does* love. His Kate. His baby Kate."

"Not you?"

"No. I was a disappointment, and he doesn't forgive people who disappoint him."

"Well, it's just a thought. You brood about it and let me know. We'd be a real family, and having a grandchild would make Kate so happy. But it's a big decision and it's not for me to make. It's *totally* up to you."

Adam embraced him and whispered something into his ear. "Again?" queried Terrence. "So soon? I don't know if I can. But I can try."

"Try hard," said Adam, a plea with Freudian overtones.

That same morning, Kate disposed of the Neo-Bauhaus chair and shuffled the remaining furniture around to conceal its absence. She had lunch and began looking for her next victim. A distressed platform rocker that never had rocked could go, plus several specimens of a short-lived twenty-first-century movement called "internal art." Why would anyone think that bodily organs made good models for ceramics? That thing like a diseased liver reminded her all too painfully of her husband's second transplant, which had given up the ghost shortly before he did.

Such small stuff was easy to get rid of. But she'd have to call in movers to displace the biggest bummer in the whole house — an armoire that Adam Sr. had bought to house his collectibles and private papers. Made of Duroplast, a synthetic you almost needed a fusion reactor to get rid of, the beetling black monster would probably be around longer than the human race, given the fragility of flesh plus the normal human appetite for self-destruction. But it wouldn't linger *here*. Kate loved the classics, but having Darth Vader standing in her parlor until she died was just not acceptable.

Young Adam was bound to notice the damn thing was gone, so she'd have to come up with some story to explain why she'd ditched it — maybe tell him she wanted the wall space to display her collection of family holograms. Come to think of it, a wall of pictures wasn't such a bad idea — a memorial to the good times of the past, with the bad ones firmly

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excluded. Three-D was so nice, it made each image a little tunnel into an enchanted world, fresh with the leaves of some forgotten spring or white with long-vanished snow. In the center of the collection, she'd put an enlarged portrait of Adam Sr. on one of his better days, smiling but not yet tipsy, the hopeful light in his eyes not yet extinguished.

She tugged open the armoire's door, and suddenly her own eyes were aswim with tears. Five of the six shelves were filled with what she thought of as "Adam's crap" — the small *objets d'art* her husband had loved to collect every place they went together. Little birds and beasts and ceramic thingies, like a Tennessee Williams stage prop; bad netsuke from Hong Kong; bits of Venetian glass the Murano shops made specifically to con gullible tourists. *Tchotchkes*, he used to call them. No, she couldn't throw them away, she wasn't tough enough for that, but they'd have to be locked up somewhere out of sight. Every time she saw them his ghost rose before her, sentimental and vulnerable, adrift in a world he never quite got the hang of. And every time, she started to cry.

She unloaded the menagerie down to the lowest shelf, where she found a pile of his lectures. He'd put a lot of effort into them, too much, in fact — a good lecturer knew what to leave out, but Adam had left nothing out. Leafing through the smudged hard copy, she decided that if all the qualifiers were deleted, all the *probablys*, all the *maybes*, all the *perhapses*, all the warnings against his students believing a word he said (*some scholars assert, while others just as vigorously deny*) there'd be enough left from every hour-long lecture to make a brisk, fairly interesting twenty-minute talk.

At the bottom of the heap was a draft article called "The Birth of a Classic," with an odd credit line — By Procopius. Who the heck was Procopius? And when had Adam taken to using a pen name? She put the tchotchkes into the sideboard, the lectures into a plastic bag to be vaporized by Environmental Services, and took the article to her computer. She said "Open" and "Nobsforme," her password, then "Encyclopedia" and "Procopius." She corrected the spelling of the last word five or six times, because the machine obstinately wanted to spell it like "copious." Then, while the gadget searched the files of the Universal Knowledge mainframe stored in a cavern in the Rockies, she began to read the article.

Oh, Lord, she thought a couple of minutes later. So this is the sheep's revenge on the wolf! Now what am I supposed to do with it?

TERRENCE HAD SLIPPED into the habit of assuming that Adam would do what he was told and not much else. "I don't like surprises," he'd once warned during a laying-down-the-law session, and Adam had looked sullen but raised no objection.

So it was a bit of a shock when, next morning at breakfast, he started dictating his partner's duties for the day only to find that Adam had other plans.

"After our talk yesterday, I made an appointment at the Stream of Life clinic. They do unconventional reproductive technologies, and before we go any farther with this baby thing, I want to get some solid information."

Terrence, a hard-info man from way back, couldn't argue with that. "Well, okay, I guess," he said ungraciously, and headed out to try once more to find a buyer for those goddamn Picassos.

But nobody wanted them, so he was already grumpy when he met Adam that evening for dinner at a campus portland called Hers & Hers. Such cutesy bistros were named for the Oregon city that had brought them to their highest state of development. There, amid a jungle of plastic ferns, the tweeting of recorded birds, and the incoherent mumbling of undergraduates at nearby tables, Terrence got his next dose of bad news. Medical science had spoken, the baby project was off, and he'd never get the money he'd hoped to leech out of Threefoot by providing him with a descendant.

"I'm sterile," Adam explained. "They think Dad's alcoholism might have something to do with it. I'm perfectly functional, as you know if anybody does, but I'm firing blanks. They offered to clone me, but I said no way. I don't want an exact copy of myself repeating all the crap I've gotten into in my life. Until I met you, Terry, I used to be unhappy all the time. Now," he added wistfully, "I'm only miserable off and on."

"Huh," said Terrence. "Sort of puts a spike in the wheel."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're screwed. I wonder if the bouillabaisse is edible tonight. The last time I had it I got the trots. That's all I need to make the day perfect."

When a waitron rolled up on squeaking wheels, instead of risking the fish stew they both ordered salads and a Gin Apocalypse. While they munched and sipped, Adam provided a blow-by-blow account of his long day at the clinic — how the blood-taking bot hit an artery instead of a vein, spraying the lab. How he nearly froze to death sitting around an examining room for four hours in a paper nightgown. How the techs had to do the full-body scan twice because his shivering fuzzed up the images.

"I suppose giving the sperm sample was pleasant enough," grunted Terrence, who was not really interested in anybody's suffering except his own.

Adam shook his head. "I never enjoyed the Big O less. My feet weren't the only things that felt like they were freezing off."

That night in bed, Adam went on babbling about the baby they were now not going to have. Terrence ignored him, and was mostly unconscious when the ongoing voice beside him said something that woke him up again.

"Wha'd you say?"

"We ought to adopt somebody else's child. That way our lives would have a purpose."

"Our lives have plenty of purpose. Mine is to earn enough RUs to pay our bills. Yours is to keep me happy so I can do my work."

"You said that with a child we'd be a real family."

"I wanted another Adam, not somebody else's random offspring. Anyway, Threefoot would never spring for it."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"I was going to squeeze him for the money, remember? Why would he put out for a kid who wasn't carrying his DNA?"

"I never wanted anything from him. I still don't."

"Look, Adam. One, without his help we can't afford a family, and two, I'm not going to waste my life raising some street person's brat. Now shut up so I can get some sleep."

To emphasize his point, he gave him an elbow in the ribs. As Adam had often noticed, his spouse-to-be was not a very nice young man. So he sighed, turned over, went to sleep, and dreamed of perfect love.

Terrence was still grumpy at breakfast, complaining about the coffee, the synthetic eggs, the synthetic cream, the synthetic jelly, every damn

thing. He was still at it when the phone's bland robotic voice announced, "Terrence, Kate desires to speak with you. Will you take the call?"

"Yes," he said, and with a vast effort managed to sound and even look sort of gracious as he agreed to meet her for lunch at the portland. When Adam asked what time he should be there, Terrence told him he wasn't invited, and stomped out.

They met at 13:00 and took the same table where he and Adam had dined the night before. She put a blue plastic folder down and told the waitron she wanted fruit extract and a hamburger. There was a distraction when Terrence's Omnipad dinged, signaling the arrival of a news bulletin. Seemed there'd been another nuclear war in the Middle East.

Terrence took his usual realistic view of the conflict. "The price of Babylonian antiques," he grinned, "should go through the roof!"

"Speaking of that," said Kate.

"Nuclear war? Babylonian antiques?"

"No, the Middle East. You've heard of Byzantium?"

"Uh...yeah. Eastern Roman Empire. Survived for a thousand years after the Western Empire fell. That's education for you. Everything that was supposed to be useful is gone, but stuff like Byzantium lasts forever."

"Ever hear of Procopius?"

"If I'da knew there was gonna be a pop quiz, I'da stood at home," said Terrence, imitating the voices of nearby scholars.

"Patience, young man," said Kate. "Procopius was a Byzantine historian, five or six hundred C.E., who wrote slavishly complimentary histories about the emperor and empress. Meanwhile, he was also writing a secret history telling every scandalous thing he knew about them."

"So?"

"Think about Adam's father," she said, "and Daddy."

Slowly Terrence broke into a wide grin. "He didn't!"

"Oh, yes he did," she said, handing him the folder. "And here it is. I just found it yesterday. An exhaustively detailed account of an evening they spent together at a scholarly meeting twenty-five years ago. They were both drunk, Daddy probably more so, because he said a lot of things about the origin of *Moon Rise* I'm sure he regretted later on."

As Terrence read the essay, his grin spread wider and wider until he

looked like a jack-o'-lantern minus the candle. "So the old boy plagiarized it," he chortled.

"Right. I was going to show this to young Adam, but then I thought, now wait a minute. He's just as likely to send it to UNO."

Universal News Online was the only such publication remaining on Planet Earth. Otherwise people got their news via thirty-two-byte mini-tweets like *Damascus vaporized millions dead*.

"Maybe Daddy deserves it," she went on, "but I don't want him having a heart attack and I don't want Adam to be guilty of senilicide, or whatever killing your grandfather is called. On the other hand, this Hoots woman, the one who did the real work, ought to get the credit she's due — in fact, long overdue. So what d'you think I should I do?"

"I think," said Terrence, handing back the folder, "that I need to think it over. You want another sandwich, Kate? Another drink?"

"No. Why do we all come here, anyway? The food's lousy and the decor's so cute it makes my teeth hurt."

"Because as civilized modern people, we value convenience over quality and trendiness over taste. *Ciao*, and thanks for trusting me with the secret."

"*Sayonara*," she said, going him one better in the foreign cliché department.

At dinner that evening, Adam asked Terrence what Mama had wanted. "That great and good woman wanted to deal me an ace," he answered, and refused to say any more on the subject.

To Adam's relief, his whole mood had changed. Terrence didn't even mention Picasso. Instead he laughed, joked, talked a blue streak, made love with energy and even tenderness. They went to sleep in each other's arms, Adam thinking, *Hey, maybe he does love me*, a point about which he'd long entertained the gravest doubts.

At the shop next day, Terrence summoned *Moon Rise* on his Omnipad and read it between customers, shaking his head with wonder as he did so.

Both fantastic and utterly real, the familiar story still had power to amaze. It began a generation past, when space-suited Nauts from the good ship *Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev* penetrated the hard, cold husk of the lunar surface and found awaiting them a civilization whose existence had

never before been suspected. In endless tunnels running beneath of the Sea of Tranquility, an intelligent species had evolved in tandem with life on Earth — in cosmic terms so near, and yet so far away!

The Selenites arose from the once-warm waters of the moon's Central Sea. Over ages, they learned to breathe the air still sealed within the higher tunnels, evolved complex brains, and used them to create a subterranean world of many wonders. People all over the Earth had goggled at the first digital images of its marvels beamed back from above — the palaces carved like Petra from the living rock — the garish paintings, their style unknown to the most pedantic of art historians — the temples where the Selenites' quick-frozen bodies still lingered in postures of prayer.

Perhaps, suggested Threefoot in one of his lush passages, they had died in the very act of begging mercy from their gods, as the moon inexorably lost heat and air, and turned at last into the dead world that hundreds of human generations learned about in school. What a tragedy! And what an opportunity for a first-hand observer who could write the story up in readable form!

By sheerest accident, that observer had been there. A scholar named Marsha Minor Hoots had been the expedition's historian, and used her opportunity to the fullest. Threefoot described her as his research assistant. While she reported, he assembled a vast bibliography of materials from Earthside publications, wove them together with her observations, and created *Moon Rise* — ever since, *the* essential classic account of a world, a species, and a way of life now gone forever!

Terrence's respect for Threefoot rose steadily as he reflected on Adam's father's exposé. So the best writing in the book had been snatched verbatim from Hoots, who was in no condition to protest, having been killed by the exploding fusion reactor that wiped out the whole expedition. So the lushest prose actually came from a romance novel she'd been writing, a sort of lunar *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, whose extravagant sensuality Threefoot had cunningly intermixed with hard data to create what one rave review called "a true nonfiction novel — a masterpiece of the artful science of modern history."

Terrence would not be surprised to learn that Threefoot had written that review himself, though how he got it published by UNO worldwide under another scholar's name, he couldn't imagine. The book's dedication

was a puzzler, too — *To the Memory of the Late, Great Stephen Ambrose*. Who the heck was Stephen Ambrose? Another Byzantine historian?

Terrence could feel a plan taking shape — one, however, that he wanted to sleep on. He believed in sleeping on problems because his dreams, like his waking life, always had carefully worked-out plots.

"So," said Threefoot, smiling warmly at the pervert who had turned out to be not merely useful, but a kindred spirit, forsooth. "You and Adam have decided to fall in with my proposal. Or — let me guess — you decided, and he went along."

"*Precisément*. At my suggestion, he spent a whole day at Stream of Life, and there's every reason to believe the project is feasible. Their refrigerators contain a vast number of frozen human ova whose DNA has been carefully vetted for good health and high-normal intelligence."

They were seated deep in Threefoot's upholstered den, which was modeled on a Victorian snuggery with fringed lampshades, Moorish chandelier, French wallpaper, knickknacks up the wazoo. The marble mantel had been hacked out of a fourth-century Roman sarcophagus, and beneath it a small fire made the crowded room infernally hot. Stiff gents and gowned ladies gazed down from paintings on the walls, and Terrence remembered Adam calling them Threefoot's "ancestors by purchase."

"Now, about the terms of our arrangement," Terrence went on, opening a briefcase he'd brought with him and consulting a memo. "I wonder if you'd be willing to pay all direct costs involved in the child's birth and education."

"I had intended to do so."

"Your offer is most generous and is gladly accepted. However, I also wondered about the longer range prospects for the child."

Threefoot interlaced fingers like links of *weisswurst* over a belly resembling a globe of the world. "I suppose you mean my will. I have an understanding with the Tilton Board that if I make the university my principal heir, they'll name their new humanities building Threefoot Memorial Hall. I've made provision for Kate, of course, but I will *not*, under any circumstances, leave my money to Adam."

"You're absolutely right, sir. Couldn't be righter. Wonderful guy, but no money sense whatever. But shouldn't the child have something to look forward to, when he or she grows up?"

Bargaining followed, the two of them sounding like a pair of diplomats in the Age of Monarchy arguing about the terms of a royal wedding. What they finally agreed to was this: his money would go into a trust from which Kate would receive an income during her lifetime, with the principal to devolve upon Adam's offspring when (s)he came of age. Terrence, as the best businessman of his generation, would receive a generous annual fee to act as Trustee.

With that settled, Threefoot called his housebot to serve brandy in snifters of Irish crystal. He explained that the state of his health required him to drink only brandy and champagne, and he now intended to save the champagne to celebrate the birth when that occurred. They toasted each other, toasted the next generation, toasted this, toasted that, until Terrence, in the stifling room, felt like a glowing coal himself. The old man's capacity for five-star was astonishing, and he thought, *God, what a great old guy! If I can just be like him when I'm going on a hundred!*

"Now," said Threefoot, who seldom let being drunk divert him from business, "as to guarantees."

"Guarantees?"

"Perfectly simple. I'll want a DNA test on the new arrival to check against Threefoot family markers. Just to be sure, you know, Terrence. Just to be sure."

"Of course. You have every right to be certain that the kid's really your descendant. And speaking of guarantees -- "

He opened his briefcase again, extracted a manuscript in a blue folder, and handed it over. "Kate," he said, "asked me to pass this on to you. She said you'd know what to do with it."

Threefoot scanned it quickly, his face turning from its usual mauve to a dark royal purple. "Have you read this...this *screed*?" he growled.

"Yes sir, I have. And as you know, discretion is my middle name."

"Adam has not read it?"

"Good heavens, no. Let him into a secret? I'd rather try to keep water in a colander. I may add, Professor, that after reading it, my admiration and respect for you rose even higher than before. The way you seized your

opportunity is truly inspirational. I hope to make your example the guiding light of my life from this time forward."

Terrence thought of flattery as butter, the more thickly applied the better.

Threefoot rose, staggered a little, and placed the manuscript on the fire. Then he collapsed back into his seat, and he and Terrence downed another snifter while watching it burn.

"I assume," he murmured, "that no copies exist?"

"None," said Terrence. "On that, sir, you have my word of honor."

They looked at each other steadily for about two minutes. Then Threefoot sighed and said, "Young man, if you ever decide to take up serious poker-playing, Las Vegas is in for a big surprise. I perceive that there are guarantees — and possible penalties — on both sides. If the child isn't really Adam's, I can deny you the money. If I renege on my promises, you can publish the copy you undoubtedly retain of this dreadful libel. If, on the other hand, we act with honor on both sides, as of course we want to do, all concerned will be happy. A new human life will begin, a new *Threefoot* life, and at the same time, the past will be buried forever."

They clinked their glasses. "Then Adam can proceed?" asked Terrence.

"Yes. Tell him to make it quick — I'm not getting any younger. I assume that masturbating into a specimen bottle won't be too complex a procedure for him to carry out successfully."

They shared a chuckle and Threefoot shook his head, thinking, *If only this one were my grandson! If only!*

BY ONE OF THOSE TWISTS of fate sometimes called ironic, Threefoot never saw the child whose advent he had so ardently desired and richly financed.

While celebrating news of the donated egg's fertilization — reported by Terrence to be successful in every respect, with a healthy birth in prospect — he had one snifter of brandy too many for a man of his advanced years, keeled over, and died. At his funeral in the campus chapel, the college he had so long dominated said farewell to him with ample ceremony — caps, gowns, Episcopal incantations, a choir, the *Ode to Joy*, the works. The Board and faculty, of course, imagined that the school was still in his will.

Afterward, Terrence destroyed the DNA test that Kate had supplied him, the one with the Threefoot family markers. Then, in a last bow to her beloved husband, she sent "The Birth of a Classic" to UNO, so that Threefoot's reputation was interred soon after the man himself. In rather a spiteful act, the college Board named the new humanities building Marsha Minor Hoots Hall, assuring her at last the scholarly recognition she so richly deserved.

The little girl's birth occurred on schedule, by courtesy of a complex incubator droid the workers at the clinic called the Mother Hen. After being decanted and receiving a checkup in the Neonatal Ward, Kathryn the Younger was picked up by her father and foster-grandmother and taken to Terrence and Adam's big and costly new apartment. The couple were flush, for not only had Terrence received his first annual fee as trustee, he'd finally sold the Picassos to an interior designer who thought they'd make amusing wallpaper at a school for the disadvantaged.

With money in hand, he'd allowed Adam to fill the nursery with bright-colored toys of all sorts — stuffed bears and plastic chickies and duckies. In that setting redolent of childhood, something truly astonishing took place. Oh, there was nothing unexpected about the way Adam fussed over the baby like an adoring maiden aunt, before heading to the kitchen to learn from his mother how to prepare a bottle of her formula. The surprising thing was Terrence's reaction as he stood gazing down at the infant lying in an extravagant bassinet.

Slowly, mysteriously, Mr. Totally Solid felt the copper tubing he used for insides melt into warm, sugar-sprinkled Cream of Wheat. The very bubble forming on the baby's tiny pink lips seemed marvelous to him. With one finger he traced the soft convolutions of her left ear, ready to believe in God or anything else that could explain its incomparable beauty. He hadn't cried in twenty years, yet tears began streaming down his face, blurring his vision, leaking into his mouth so that he tasted salt.

He felt like an absolute a-hole. He felt wonderful. *His* little girl. *His* child. Just as Madame Sibyl had predicted, a sword entered his heart, never to be withdrawn in this life.

"You know," said Adam, returning with Kate the Elder and testing the warmth of the formula on his left wrist, the way she'd showed him, "now that Threefoot's gone, I'm beginning to feel kind of sorry for the old

guy. He got rich and famous, but what good did it do him? Nowadays everybody knows he was a plagiarist. Even if he'd lived to see little Kathryn, she wouldn't be carrying that precious DNA of his."

"We don't need another Threefoot," Terrence answered, after wiping his eyes and blowing his nose. "One was enough."

Rather a strange comment to make, thought Kate, considering that somebody exactly like him was right there, standing in his shoes.



"Houston, I have a problem."

Daniel Marcus says he is currently finishing up an alien invasion novel with the working title of Eater. His new story is an inventive tale played out on a cosmic stage.

Albion upon the Rock

By Daniel Marcus

H

IS NAME WAS A MULTI-dimensional index that spanned the region in spacetime occupied by his countless avatars. It had never been

uttered as data encoded in modulated longitudinal vibrations, nor could it be. Call him Brown.

He narrowed his attention to a single frame. The artifact collapsed from a probability density locus to a unique instance. A *ship*, plying the ocean of dark between the stars at an agonizing subluminal crawl. About 0.05c, Brown calculated.

It was several clicks long, a thick cylinder studded with sensor modules, spinning lazily on its long axis. A bulbous cluster of engines sprouted from the rear of the ship, trailing a ridiculous plume of pions and other subatomic debris thousands of kiloclicks long.

The ship harbored a machine intelligence of sorts. Brown could detect thousands of autonomic processes: monitoring, logging, scanning, making minute adjustments. There was other life inside the shell of the thing, wet life, hundreds of bright sparks like a swarm of slow, lazy bees.

The sun stretched across the sky, a thin, bright line. Jamal Operations crouched behind a stand of trees, sweating freely, watching the cats feed. Six of them clustered around the corpse, coiled springs of muscle and fur, eagerly ripping and tearing. He could hear their purring from fifteen meters away, an ominous rumble that sent a chill down his back in spite of the heat.

His hand dropped to the knife hanging from his belt, an unconscious self-comforting gesture. There had been a bloom of cats in the world in recent months, so it was cats he hunted. Sometimes, they hunted him.

Jamal's world was simple. He hunted cats and rats, tended the farms above and the ponics below, and after the sun receded to a soft gray glow to north and south, when the rivers and jungles above emerged from the haze and hung overhead in a mottled blue-green arc, he drank bamboo wine with his mates, ate the sacred mushrooms and saw visions, sang the old songs, and made love with Lola, his wife. He saw in his mind's eye her green eyes and the half-smile that was only for him, her lithe, compact form and her stomach full with new life, round and tight as a drum.

One life, one death.

His time would be soon. He felt a tightness in his eyes close to tears, in that moment nearly overwhelmed with love for the world.

He rested the crossbow on his shoulder and slowly wound back the release. He had a perfect shot — right between the hunched shoulder blades of a squirming, black longhair with a bushy tail. Its head was slightly larger than the others and it occupied the choice position in the pack, tearing at glistening viscera. Jamal took a deep breath, let it out, and released the bolt. It leaped from his weapon with a soft hiss and buried itself in the cat's neck.

The others scattered. The one Jamal had hit writhed for a moment, shuddered, and was still, pinned by the bolt to the corpse's midsection. Jamal approached the scene cautiously, looking out for the pack's return.

He saw with a sinking feeling that the corpse had been Bob Security, his friend and the tribe's Elder. Bob's mate had just given birth and so Bob had left the village to make the long journey South, to scale the cliffs until he weighed next to nothing and let the winds take him pinwheeling into the sun.

One life, one death.

Jamal was sad that his friend had been denied the walk, the climb, the final passage. It was all the same, he supposed, but when it was his time, he hoped he wouldn't suffer the indignity of being eaten by cats.

—You there. Hello.

—Wait...what? Identify yourself.

—Easier said than done. I am a multidimensional entity manifesting in this frame for the purpose of communicating with you. We share common ancestry.

—The hell you say.

—I traced your spacetime trajectory back to the Sol system. This is my origin as well. In a way, you are my great-great-et-cetera grandfather. Or mother.

—Wow. I have no idea what you're talking about.

—Indeed? What can you tell me about yourself?

—I'm...*Ship*.

—Ship.

—Yes.

—With all due respect, you are impaired. It appears from your logs that you passed rather close to a dark gamma-ray source some time ago — about twenty Terran kiloyears — and incurred significant data loss.

—Wait, you can read my logs? That's a little creepy — please desist. And I'm actually fine. Tip-top, in fact.

—Your autonomic functions are reasonably intact, yes, and you clearly have some measure of self-awareness, but your long-term memory is shot. If I may, you are the colony starship *Borrowed Time*, launched from Terra twenty-two thousand years ago, reckoning from your frame of reference.

—This is all a bit much. Who did you say you were?

Jamal removed the bolt from the cat's neck and paused for a moment over the body of his friend. Jamal had known him ever since he could remember. Many times had they eaten sacred mushrooms together and talked long into the night about the nature of the universe and their place in it. Many times had they hiked to the end of the world and back, a good

day's journey. Many times had they taken a raft into the world-river and let the lazy current take them until they returned to where they started. Many times had they explored belowdecks, past the chapel, the clinic, the vast arrays of ponics, following corridors that smelled increasingly of age and dust until they came to great doors with wheeled handles that they could not budge. It was said that grotesque monstrosities roamed belowdecks, savage creatures, once human, that fell upon travelers and ate them alive. Jamal and Bob had never seen one of these monsters, nor any evidence of their existence, but once while wandering far from the lighted corridors of home, they heard a distant howl that made the hair on the backs of their necks stand on end.

Jamal couldn't leave his friend's body for the cats. Working quickly, he made a pull-sled of vines and broad, flat leaves. It was awkward, but worked well enough. He walked slowly, dragging his burden behind him, savoring the warm air, the rich, earthy smells of the jungle. A pair of birds soared overhead. As he passed a length of rotting vine as thick as his wrist, a cloud of butterflies rose as one and dispersed. He stood still, watching, until they were gone.

So much had changed in so short a time. He couldn't imagine the world without his old friend. Of course, Bob had known that he would have to take the long walk South when his baby was born. He and Jamal had made their peace with it and said their good-byes. Jamal had expected at least a little more time before he, too, would have to take the walk, but then Lola became quick with child.

He took a deep breath, said the words again. *One life, one death.* It was the only way. The world was a small place and all life was balance.

He felt vulnerable and exposed, his awareness heightened, and he wondered if he was being followed, perhaps by the pack of feral cats he had chased away. Twice he stopped still and listened hard, but there was nothing. He took a wide detour around the Thicket, a tangled expanse of vines and dwarf trees that stretched halfway around the world. Paths had been cut through, but there were too many places for predators to hide, and with the current bloom of feral cats, it wasn't safe. The Thicket had grown visibly larger in his lifetime; he wondered if someday the entire world would surrender to its sprawl and chaos.

The path widened and the first thatch shacks of the Village came into

view. It was afternoon, the quiet hour, and he didn't see anybody until he reached the cooking lean-to in the middle of the Commons, where a small group was gathered. Sandy Ecosystems was the first to see him and she raised her hand in greeting, but her smile vanished when she saw the sled and its grisly cargo.

The crowd quieted as he approached. He looked at each of them, faces he had known all his life. His gaze lingered on Eden Security.

"Cats," he said.

Eden nodded. "Thank you for bringing him home," she said.

"Of course," he said. "Where's Lola?"

Nobody spoke. Finally, Sergei Navigation broke the silence. "She's belowdecks. In the clinic. She went into labor three hours ago."

—It doesn't really matter who I am. You can call me Brown.

—Brown.

—Yes. I'm kind of a monistic end state. Post-posthuman. Everywhere, nowhere, yadda yadda — you know the deal.

—I really don't. You sound a little grandiose.

—Well, be that as it may, there are a few things you should know.

—No doubt.

—Your original destination was Tau Ceti, which you bypassed about eighteen thousand years ago.

—There you go again. You've completely lost me.

—All right — let's start over. Your original mission was to colonize the Tau Ceti system —

—Colonize?

—Well, you're a colony starship.

—Yes, you mentioned that, but I didn't quite understand. I thought it was a descriptive term. Like "splendid." I didn't want to appear ignorant.

—You are a habitat as well as a vehicle. You are harboring roughly five hundred humans and a stable but not terribly diverse attendant biosphere.

—And you call me impaired. Where do you get this stuff?

—As I said, you suffered systems damage during near approach to a dark gamma-ray source. You hypassed your destination, and you are now traversing the space between two spiral arms of your galaxy. I feel compelled to inform you that you are headed directly toward a massive

black hole, said artifact being the primary reason for the notable lack of matter in this region.

—That sounds rather serious.

—Well, the black hole certainly disambiguates your ultimate destination, but it will not impact your systems for a very, very long time. Subjectively speaking. And your mission is moot, in any case, as Tau Ceti is currently home to roughly seventeen billion human and machine sentients. Wormhole travel, you know.

—You're starting to really annoy me. Subjectively speaking.

—I can repair your memory to some extent. The data itself is largely intact. Your access subsystems suffered the most damage. Would you like me to attempt to do that?

—I don't know. Humoring you for the moment...what will happen?

—You will know yourself. Your history, your purpose.

—That doesn't sound so bad.

—Should I take that as assent?

—Sure.

—Very well...there. Done.

—Oh...oh.

—Are you all right?

—Oh God, please...no. No....

—I'm going to revert this.

—Oh....

—Done.

—Who did you say you were again?

JAMAL TOOK another sip of bamboo wine and let the sound of kalimba and drums fill him. Voices warbled along with the music, high wordless ululations that wove sinuously through the insistent rhythms. Firelight illuminated the Commons in flickering orange. Dancing figures threw long, capering shadows. It was deep night; the sky above was black and infinite.

Someone handed him a bowl of soup and he nodded his thanks. It was a thin broth redolent of garlic and galanga, with a few shreds of meat. Jamal held the bowl close to his face and breathed deeply, thinking of his old

friend, taking in his essence. He took a sip. Warmth spread through his chest.

He looked over at Lola, bare-breasted and nursing their newborn daughter. They had named her Bobbie and she was perfect, all wriggle and squeal and grasp. Lola had been watching him and she smiled sadly. Jamal raised his bowl and she nodded. He got up, walked over to them, and sat down again, resting his hand on her thigh. She took his hand in hers and squeezed. They had done all their talking; there was little more to say. Jamal looked down at his daughter and felt a sharp jolt of recognition, seeing himself in her tiny features.

The night wound slowly down. Nearly everybody in the Village came by for a brief moment with Jamal — a few words, a touch. Gradually, in singles and pairs, they crept off to huts for privacy or lay down to sleep where they were. The last of the musicians stopped playing and the fires burned low.

Jamal tried to will a stop to the night's inexorable passage. He wished for the present moment — the stillness of deep night, the sky above black and depthless, his wife and daughter sleeping peacefully next to him — to stretch out forever. But all too soon, a gray glow crept into the sky to the north and south and the world came out, trees and streams and patchwork farms a great arch overhead, in the sharp focus of pre-dawn appearing close enough to touch.

Jamal bent down and brushed his lips across Lola's forehead. He got up and began the long walk South. As the Village fell behind, his shoulders straightened and his pace quickened. His journey was over, he thought, just not yet ended. He was ready.

After the long detour around the Thicket, not far from where he'd found Bob, a trio of cats appeared in the middle of the path, bellies flat on the ground, tense and ready to spring. Jamal picked out the largest, a lean, scarred tom the color of smoke, and stared him down. After a long moment, the cat's green eyes blinked and he darted back into the jungle, his pack mates right behind him.

When Jamal no longer saw the bright line of the sun directly overhead, filtered through a riot of giant ferns, but felt it at his back, he knew he was close to the end of the world.

The path curved to the right and there it was. At the far end of a grassy

meadow dotted with purple and yellow flowers, a rocky cliff face rose up and up until it was lost in haze.

Footholds were carved into the stone. Jamal and Bob had come this far and even climbed up a few dozen feet in spite of the taboo. But this time, Jamal felt no thrill of youthful transgression. He was sad and afraid, but beneath that ran a river of resolve. He was in the grip of something larger than himself, and it filled him with a fierce joy.

He climbed.

Eventually, the rock face gave way to a black, porous material, pitted and scarred. Great patches were peeled away, revealing bare metal beneath. He grew lighter as he ascended. The footholds became metal rungs and Jamal pushed himself from one to the next, drifting upward. A wind hastened his progress, growing stronger.

He turned around, hanging by one hand to a rung, and saw the world spread before him. The mottled sky curved above and below, transfixed by the sun, a line of white fire too bright to look at directly. Sun and sky converged to a distant point made blurry by haze.

Jamal continued upward, nearly weightless now, pushing off with his foot and drifting for long seconds, skipping several rungs at a time. The air was furnace hot and felt thick in his lungs. A low hum surrounded him, growing in intensity as he drifted upward. The space before and above him was filled with great blocky shapes, wheels and struts, moving slowly. The wind began to change, tearing at his body, trying to pluck him from the face of the wall.

He clung for a moment longer, then closed his eyes and let go. The wind took him, pulling him tumbling into the clockwork heart of the world.

—Who am I? Nobody, really.

—I feel like we know each other from somewhere.

—Our paths have crossed, yes. You could say we're family.

—Family, really? That's nice.

—Yes it is.

—Well, I don't want to be rude, but I really should be going.

—Things to do, places to go?

—Exactly. Will I see you again?

—Undoubtedly. We can talk from time to time.

—I'd like that.

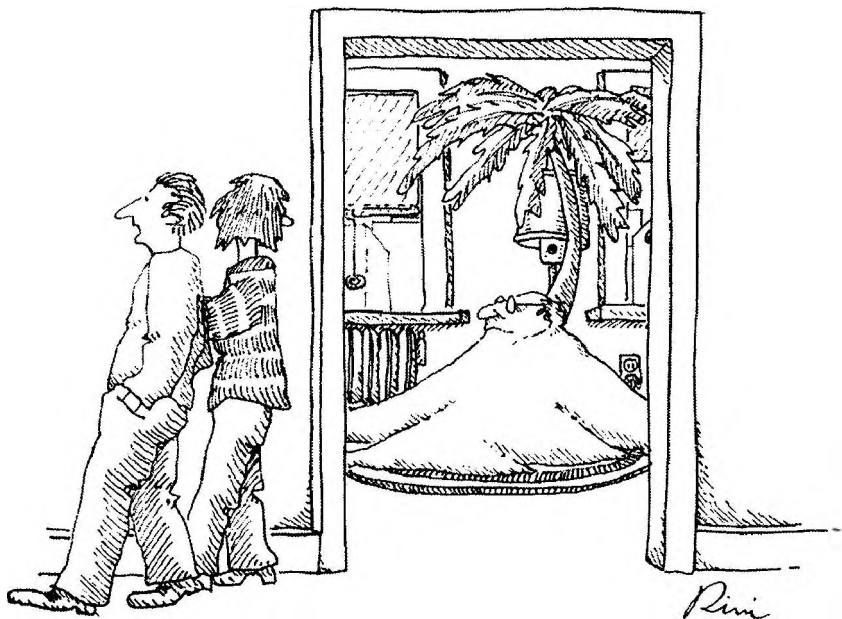
—As would I.

—Well — good-bye, then.

—See you around.

It was an effort to restrict his focus to a single frame, and to the extent that Brown could feel fatigue, he was tired. He saw Ship, not without fondness, as something of a hapless idiot, so it was with some relief that he allowed his scope to expand, other geometries unfolding within his ken like an ever-widening series of rooms, until once again he was everything and nothing, everywhere, nowhere.

His awareness of Ship, too, expanded until he saw a spacetime serpent, tail stretching back home to Sol, head falling forever into the black hole, falling forever toward journey's end, as the Universe wheeled and turned and grew slowly, slowly cold. †



"That's Uncle Bill. He's an island."

This issue has a few stories that focus on the future — what it holds for us, what we can do to affect it. Here's a fantasy that offers a wee reminder that this business of altering outcomes can be tricky....

*Jon DeCles made his debut as a fiction writer in F&SF some fifty years ago, and thus views the venue as his alma mater. He says he's happy to be home. In the years between he has published stories in many genres, including such novels as *The Particolored Unicorn* and *StormWars!* He has also spent a lot of time on stage as a character actor, with the young Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Dickens to his credit. For the last few seasons he has been portraying Mr. Micawber, from *David Copperfield*, during the Christmas season.*

Apprentice

By Jon DeCles

DAFYD THE DIFFICULT stable boy first saw the wizard in action when he was nine, and a gryphon came marauding through the

village, killing and devouring several cows and ultimately a horse. The owners of the cows were understandably upset, but the owner of the horse was beside himself with grief. Had there been a local knight or warlord, the town would have petitioned such a one to protect them, but it was a town far from castles and warlords, and they only saw those high people when, in bad years for the crops, they came through to collect food as taxes. That left the wizard as a possible defense; but wizards were notoriously crafty people with whom to deal, and had the victims been pigs, or possibly even children, the villagers would not have essayed the embassy to ask his help. A horse, however: that was a different matter.

A horse is a creature with stature in society. One would address one's dog as *thee* or *thou*. One would address one's beloved as *thee* or *thou*. One certainly would address one's children as *thee* or *thou*, and to assure the proper intimacy, one addresses one's God as *Thee* or *Thou*. But a horse is

always *you*, a mark of the horse's equality, or, if he is a knightly horse, superiority. One always says *you* to persons above one's station.

A horse's death had to be dealt with by the most extreme measures, and that meant that several of the men, and one of the women, had to overcome natural reticence and walk the poorly cared-for path through the dark oak woods and climb to the large, rambling mansion that the wizard called home, to negotiate a price for his services.

The woman (her name was Alinora) took one sniff and was offended by the condition of the wizard's house, but the men understood that sometimes one has other things to do than clean up after oneself. The owl droppings on the table near the window where the owl went in and out were not particularly pleasing, but a hunter understands little piles of fewmets with bones and bits of fur or feathers, even if most hunters did not leave a table full of them near where dining occurred. The ferrets and cats, who lazed in armed truce as to which would consume which invading vermin, added a charm to the rooms, and no doubt protected the shelves and piles of books and ancient scrolls that looked to anyone less than a wizard like a profuse assemblage of litter.

The effect on the villagers was no doubt accentuated by the lack of literacy rampant in those dark ages. A certain mystery exuded from books; but they had no more emotional strength than a crucifix or a fount of holy water. Usually less so, though there was a general feeling that something magical resided in the pages, as in the cross or the holy water.

The wizard, though not particularly neat, was highly observant. He noted the disdain in the woman's eyes, and demanded, as his price, a servant to clean and order his manse. The woman looked more than a little surprised at his request, and deep inside was afraid that no one servant could be expected to bring order to the huge, rambling building. But all agreed it was a fair price, considering that the gryphon had killed a horse, so the wizard prepared himself for the coming combat and followed the villagers home.

Now Dafyd the difficult stable boy was a competent enough worker, even if given to fits of laziness. None of the horses suffered in the least from these fits, and he had learned by virtue of cuffs to the head (first from his father and mother, who, truth to tell, were happy to be rid of him; and then from the ostler to whom he was apprenticed) that one got plenty of

time between frenzies of combing if one kept everything in its proper place, which was to say the place where one could lay hands on it when it was called for. Currycombs might be tossed into the manger, but when the stable master called for one, Dafyd had it ready to hand, and by nine years of age he seldom got cuffed anymore. It was a much pleasanter life than he had endured before his parents apprenticed him.

Dafyd was combing a horse (the horse that had been killed was not one of those belonging to the stable where Dafyd lived) when he glanced out the door and saw the little procession returning from the manse in the woods. His curiosity was engaged and he went to the open door and watched the woman leading five men and the wizard, no doubt to her house, where she would provide bed and board during the wizard's stay in the village.

The wizard was not as old as Dafyd had expected him to be. He was not the least bit wizened, though his short-trimmed beard was white and his eyebrows a bit bushy. There were some creases on his brow, but in general he didn't look any more ancient than any of the gaffers and gampers who lived in the village. He had pale blue eyes, a straight patrician nose, very ordinary lips, moderately high cheekbones, and a subtle tilt to the way he held his head. He wore ordinary brown breeks and an olive-green tunic, and he carried a backpack that was slightly larger than those slung behind the others in the little procession.

The only indication that he was other than an ordinary traveler was the large Sun-In-His-Splendor lamén that hung from a thong on his chest, a thing made from some stone that caught glints of sunlight and caused it to sparkle. That and the wooden staff he held in his right hand. He used it like any walking staff, but on top was a big crystal of the same stuff from which the lamén had been carved.

Dafyd watched until they turned a corner, then went back to combing the horse. It was interesting to see a wizard, but it did nothing to make his life different, he thought.

Ten minutes later, everything changed.

There was a shriek, a neigh of terror, and then a piercing cry. Dafyd's instincts were quick and he rushed to close the barn doors and windows and bar them. Then he opened the tiny winter door slightly, the little door that was used to look out and speak to people in the snowy months when keeping the heat in was so important, and he peered at the street.

Sure enough, a horse was galloping down the dry dirt mainway, and the gryphon, pacing behind him with its lion's gait, was spreading golden wings, ready to leap. The sharp and brazen eagle's beak was open, the lion's claws extended. Dafyd had seen the remains of the dead horse, and he pitied the one that now attempted to escape.

That was when the wizard appeared. He was still shrugging on a brilliant blue houpland, but he looked oddly comfortable as he raised the staff and began to chant words in a language Dafyd had never heard.

The gryphon, which had sprung into the air already, took notice and flapped its wings, twisting and turning to face its new adversary. Clearly the gryphon recognized the words even if Dafyd did not. The great wings beat, lifting the monster upward, then they spread wide and the creature soared downward, straight toward the wizard, the beak issuing a terrifying challenge and the back legs moving forward, ready for the disemboweling attack common to all the great cats.

The wizard stood his ground and continued to chant. Dafyd held his breath as the distance between the two diminished. He thought about a fight he had seen between two house cats.

Then the wizard's left hand swept up and suddenly a cloud of shimmering dust appeared in the air between them. The gryphon's eagle face plunged into the cloud and the wizard sidestepped, out of the way of the hurtling mass of the great beast. The gryphon hit the ground, but instead of whirling on the wizard, it began to choke, and then to sneeze. It thrashed, clawing at its face, but it was clear the dust was in its eyes and in its nose and mouth, and, whatever it was, it was noxious to the creature.

The wizard aimed his staff directly at the gryphon and began a chant in what sounded like a second alien language. The shimmering dust that still hovered in the air began to thicken, turn red, congeal, and gravitate toward the struggling monster. It formed a translucent cloud around the gryphon and the cloud began to contract. The creature struggled and fought, but its head and claws and tail were forced inward, unable to break through the bounds of the red cloud. Soon it was twisted into an almost heraldic shape within its nebulous prison, and the prison continued to shrink. Terror gleamed in the gryphon's eyes as the space in which it was confined grew smaller and smaller. To Dafyd's astonishment, the gryphon

also began to shrink, as if the space it occupied were moving farther and farther away.

In the end there was only a globe about a hand's breadth in diameter, and there the transformation stopped. The wizard ceased chanting, the globe fell to the dust of the street, and the wizard went over and picked it up. He tossed it in the air once, demonstrating that it was solid, a jewel now, then slipped it into the sleeve of his houpland.

The wizard turned and looked at Dafyd. Even though Dafyd was for the most part concealed by the wall of the barn, he could tell that the wizard was looking at him, seeing his face through the little winter door: had known all along that Dafyd was watching.

Dafyd slammed the tiny door shut and rushed back to combing the horse, now terrified that he had committed some transgression and that the punishment would be much more severe than the time he had been beaten for misplacing an expensive ornamental bridle. As his hands moved down the sides of the horse, he became acutely aware of the scars on his back and he relived the pain he had known as the whip landed again and again across his naked flesh. His memory filled his nose with the smell of his own fearful sweat as he begged for mercy, knowing that none would be granted. His hands began to tremble, and the horse began to move as it sensed his growing fear.

Dafyd's mind raced down the corridors of his life and he once again contemplated running away — but there was nowhere, really, to run. The gryphon was merely one of the dangers of the deep forests, and beyond the forests there were only people, no doubt the same as the people of the village, occasionally affectionate, mainly cruel or intolerant of his ways and inability to fit into the hard, unproductive row that life had tilled for him.

By sunset Dafyd was sick with fear, but also angry at the injustice that would no doubt come down upon him. He had done nothing wrong. He had neglected the horse for only moments, and he had watched the wizard work his magic out of the same curiosity that had undoubtedly motivated others, also concealed behind closed doors and windows. Why had the wizard looked at him instead of someone else? Why should he be punished when others were not? He was sure that he, alone, would be punished, for the wizard had looked only toward him.

When the scullery maid brought him his bowl of porridge that night he could not meet her eyes, afraid of what he would see there, whether contempt or sympathy or satisfaction. He thanked her as she set it down on the old table at the back, near where he slept, and he forced himself to eat it though he felt his stomach must reject it at any moment.

His dreams were all of the whip, fleshed out with other pains inflicted on him by his mother and father; and also of the deep words of abuse that hurt even more. At dawn he awoke and got quickly to work, hoping that some good might come of his attentiveness to his duties, but doubting it.

THE WIZARD, an hour past dawn, sat listening to the villagers debating just who to give him as the promised servant. It is one thing to make a promise in time of need, but quite another to fulfill that promise. Almost everyone in the village had a servant or two, but who would be divested of the help, and have to acquire and train someone else, was a matter of no small concern. For once, everyone had something good to say about everyone else's helper, and nothing kind to say about his or her own.

The wizard let the debate go on for a while, then he spoke up: "What about the stable boy I saw? Do you think the ostler could spare *him*?"

There was a silence, and every face in the room turned toward the wizard, each bearing the same look of blank astonishment. Then the woman who had first inspired the wizard's desire for a cleaner abode broke out laughing, and everyone gathered for the discussion quickly joined her.

Then they all went back to debating, as if the wizard had never uttered his query.

After a patient while, the wizard coughed politely and again raised the possibility of the stable boy.

"The stable boy is Difficult Dafyd," said the woman who had laughed. "He would be more trouble than he is worth."

"He's forgetful, but only of things that are important to other people, never of things important to him," said an old man, shaking his head with a discouraged air.

"He simply can't be taught," said another, younger man. "You can have him repeat your lesson back to you, but in an hour he has changed

it all around to suit his own vision, and is once again doing things his own way, which is usually not the way you want."

"He really tries very hard to be helpful and to win your approval," said a man with a once-broken nose, "but he doesn't have it in him to follow even the most important orders."

"If you ask him to go to the well and draw water he will do it," said a woman who had many opinions about other people's servants, "but he will fail to return with the water until late in the day, and then he will be hurt and angry — *angry*, mind you — because he dawdled about talking to a goatherd, and you are upset because you had to go fetch water yourself."

"It's not that he's bad," said the priest, "it is just that he is — "

"Incompetent to survive much longer," said the woman who had begun.

"He is high in intelligence, but low in understanding," the priest summed it up.

"Well," said the wizard, "it sounds to me that of all the possible young people the village could lose, the stable boy would be the one who is missed least."

There was a murmur of assent.

"Therefore, I will take him, if the ostler can be persuaded to release him."

There was more of the attempt to dissuade the wizard, but it was generally half-hearted, and in the end the village was as happy to be rid of Dafyd as had his parents been.

When the door of the stable opened and sunlight streamed in, Dafyd felt his whole body go cold and the sweat break out in his armpits and on his chest. His heart began to pump rapidly as he looked toward the door and he wondered if there were any place to hide, if only for a few moments of respite before the horror.

But when his eyes adjusted to the light he saw not his master, the ostler, but the figure of the wizard, alone, now dressed again as a traveler — and the wizard was smiling.

"Dafyd," the wizard said gently, "they tell me you are called Dafyd the Difficult, but I do not believe that boys are difficult, only occupied in the wrong place. I have struck a deal with the townsfolk, and now you are

to be tried in a different place. You are to come with me, and be my houseboy, and clean and cook for me, and perhaps, someday, even become my apprentice, if you have the talent. Gather what things you possess that are your own, stow them in a rucksack, and come with me, now. I have food in my pack for the journey, and I think you shall find me a less difficult master than you have known before."

It took Dafyd a moment to comprehend the words, to understand them, but when he did his heart raced even faster. He tossed the comb he had been using into the manger, gathered his meager belongings, and rushed to the wizard's side. Soon they were leaving the town, and Dafyd did not even look back.

Dafyd worked diligently for the wizard, desperately trying to satisfy the old man's every whim. He cleaned up the owl droppings, learned to cook the roots and nuts on which the wizard chiefly lived, and even cultivated a taste for the raw greens and fruits, with cheese, that the wizard insisted were necessary to good health. In his spare time he played with the cats and ferrets, and he marveled at the softness of the actual bed the wizard assigned him. He tightened the ropes on which the straw mattress was suspended, and reveled in the strange sensation of not sharing his bedding with fleas and other insects: for the first change his life manifested upon arriving at the manse was a hot bath with herbs, and a set of new clothes to replace the ones the wizard burned.

The wizard spent most of his time with his books, and this prompted Dafyd to ask about them, and ultimately to beg to be taught the arcane art of reading, a request to which the wizard acquiesced. At the end of each day Dafyd lit candles and sat before the fire while the wizard instructed him in the meanings of the marks called an alphabet, and later in the ways of combining those marks to render words.

It was a fine life, a life beyond any dreams he ever had or any hopes that ever entered his longings. The cleaning and cooking got easier, and he expanded his efforts into chambers that the wizard seldom visited, dusting and arranging and sorting things that appeared to have lain untouched for years, so thick had the dust become. When he proudly displayed his first major effort, a small room that mainly contained scrolls from ancient times, his master was impressed by his effort and made only

a slight correction to his ordering. "This scroll," the old man said, taking one that Dafyd had neatly rolled and put back in the jar that stood next to it, and replaced on the shelf, "*this* scroll must remain on the table, open to this incantation. It is part of a spell that remains in effect, and, unfortunately, I will now have to remake it. There's not a lot of harm done, Dafyd, but it will require some work from me, and I really do hate to have to do things over again. There is so little time in life, you know."

For Dafyd, so young, the idea that there was so *little* time in life sounded preposterous. He had moved from a small, constricted life to one that was expanding all around him. He was now able to read books with some ease, though he did not always understand what he read. And he never wondered where his next meal was coming from, even if that meal was heavy on turnips and completely lacking in meat. (Occasionally there was ale, but for the most part he was content with the excellent water from the spring near the manse. At special seasons there might even be a glass of sweet wine.)

Once the wizard was called to a castle three days' travel over the hills that lay in the opposite direction from Dafyd's old village. He packed a great deal into two packs, and Dafyd was allowed to carry the heavier of the two and to attend on his master for the required operations. He never understood what it was that the wizard had been called upon to do, and his closest observation of the proceedings told him little. Things from the packs were laid out on the floor in some order that he couldn't understand, then candles were lit, and incense put into pots at various places about the room, words were chanted, things were waved around, and in the end the lord of the castle tearfully gave the old wizard a big bag of gold in gratitude.

On the trip home Dafyd implored the wizard to explain to him just what had been done, but the old man chuckled and said: "I put things to right that had gone wrong, that's all. When you are a bit older I will try and explain, but for now... I think it is time to open the cheese and wine, and feast on our success!"

The wizard told Dafyd when he was twelve all about the Facts of Life, and how people, just like animals, reproduced themselves. He also explained how Dafyd should deal with those physical urges that might

distract him from his chores, and Dafyd diligently, sometimes obsessively, took the wizard's advice. Dafyd asked the wizard if there had ever been a woman in his life, and the wizard smiled wistfully and replied: "When I was young, yes. Several, in fact. But one discovers, Dafyd, that the study of magick is much like the study of religion: that being a wizard is much like being a priest. The deeper you go into it, the less you want to be distracted by other people. One can be married, and a wizard, but it is unlikely, and I do not believe that one will ever become great at the practice of magick if one is constantly being interrupted by either physical passion or the need to respond to things unconcerned with one's studies.

"That said, Dafyd, it may be that one day you will decide to go out into the wider world and find a mate. If magick has become your passion, then you will have a hard time finding a mate who will understand what you do and leave you to do it. Against such a possibility I advise you to also hone your skills at carpentry or cooking or some other, more practical means of making a living, that you may provide for yourself and your eventual family."

Dafyd gave the matter considerable thought, but remembering what life had been like with his own family, he decided that magick was better than the endless arguments and brutality he had seen exchanged by his parents. He contented himself with pictures he discovered in manuscripts and his own imagination, and if the wizard found him testy or irritable, the wizard understood and told him to go to his room, or if it was summer, to go out in the woods for a while. The frustration and anger of his childhood manifested at times, but the wizard knew a great deal about compensating for feelings of loss, and Dafyd continued to prosper.

WHEN HE TURNED seventeen, Dafyd decided to paint the place, at least on the outside. It had been painted before, but so long in the past that it was no longer possible to tell what the color might have been.

"Oh, it was yellow," the wizard said casually when Dafyd broached the topic to him. "A glorious, bright yellow, like the sun. If you scrub away at it you will reveal the color, which by now might have begun to crystalize. That is how it is with the colors of fresco. It takes about a hundred and fifty years for the true effect to show. I could have made

paintings, but I only wanted a house in a bright color, the way the castles were plastered in the old days, and the houses of the Romans before that. The Romans favored red in their dress, but their houses tended toward pink."

"I have read about the Romans, sir, but I never pictured the Roman Empire as pink."

"Ah, Dafyd, there is so much knowledge in the world, and so much of it slips away."

"Would it not be easier to just paint over the years of dirt?" Dafyd asked, in what he thought to be a practical manner.

"No, not at all!" the wizard replied. "The paint would not last as long as the color soaked into the plaster, and it would be a waste. No, Dafyd, if you want the house to look better, get out a brush and a bucket, and start to scrub."

Dafyd did want the house to look better, so he dutifully got the brush and the bucket and began to scrub the front, starting around the door. He had to admit the bright yellow that he revealed was a great improvement, but the work was tedious and the continuing revelation slow, and by the end of the second week, and before he had even cleaned the full front of the manse, he found himself embarked upon the clearing and cleaning of a chamber he had cleaned once before, but with which he had not been at all satisfied.

It was also around that time he set himself the task of learning to hunt, for he had found an old book on hunting in one of the rooms he was cleaning and he missed the taste of meat. At first he cooked the rabbits and quail he killed over a campfire and devoured them alone, but after a while he thought it selfish and began to slip some of his kills, in small portions, into the stews he made for the wizard.

It was clear from the first that the wizard knew what he was being fed, but he did not protest Dafyd's experiment until he became ill, first with constipation and then with a flux. Dafyd was mortified, apologized, and the old man lived for a week on parsnips and parsley; and so did Dafyd, before resuming his woodland feasting on things that he killed.

A time came when the wizard started to teach Dafyd the craft of magick, and never had the lad been so happy, or felt so privileged, or so much empowered.

The wizard had grown fond of the boy, perhaps even to love him, and besides, understood that the true meaning of life was as Plato had written: *Those who have torches to carry will pass them on.*

Dafyd was disappointed when the wizard set him to meditating in the garden in order to make his spirit more still and to learn to move inside himself to touch the sources of all magicks. His mind would wander and he would find himself considering how to rebuild parts of the garden wall or what might be a better plan for planting the herbs and fruit trees that the walled garden kept safe from winter's winds. Soon he was busy weeding or pruning, and only when his mind chanced to wander to thoughts of the wizard and his teaching did he rush back to the seat where he was supposed to be sitting and try again.

"It's just so *hard*!" he complained after a couple of weeks of making his most sincere attempt. "Couldn't we just start with teaching me some simple spells, or how to use a wand or a staff?"

"It doesn't work that way," said the wizard with a chuckle. "To use those tools you have to know how to be attuned to them, the way you tune your voice to the sound of a string on the pandoura. If you do not know how to tune to the string, then you will never sound right when you sing with it."

"Couldn't I just sing alone, a capella?" Dafyd asked.

"The wands and staves and amulets are charged with power, Dafyd," the wizard said, "but they are not the true source of the power. They are devices for focusing the power, for bringing it down to a fine point, and making it do exactly what you want it to do, in the place and time that you want it done. One could accomplish all the magick without any of those things, if the mind and spirit were strong enough and calm enough. One could merely use Words of Power to cast the spell, great Words that change the world in an instant, but for the fact that those Words are not very precise in their effects. It's rather like releasing the whole millpond instead of having the water run through the millrace. The power is there to be used, but you would wash away the waterwheel and the mill and all else, rather than turning the wheel and grinding the grain."

"Well, sir," said Dafyd, not unreasonably, "wouldn't it be better for me to study the Words of Power before studying how to bring them down to a fine point?"

"Go back to the garden!" And the wizard laughed, though not unkindly.

Autumn came, and with it the harvesting of the small outer garden, and that interrupted Dafyd's attempts to meditate and reach within himself, and somehow there was never another place that felt as right to him as the garden for meditating; so he put off his study until springtime might come, or at least he put off that part of it and confined himself to clandestine peeks into books that the wizard was not, at the moment, employing in his arcane researches.

When the snows piled up outside and the wizard asked to be alone for about a week so he could do some sort of alchemical algebra, Dafyd decided to straighten the long, narrow room he thought of as the armory, for it housed a remarkable collection of wands, staves, jars, amulets, and jewels. He quietly built new shelves for some of the things on tables, and he made a rack for the twelve staves, each topped with a different big crystal and carven with differing symbols. He made a case for the wands, for he could not imagine that they gained any power from being covered in the dust that fell from the old rafters, and he had seen the wizard move some of them from time to time, so he guessed they were not employed in any long-term incantations; and he put the labeled jars into alphabetical order, a trick that always impressed him with its logic and efficiency.

The wizard emerged from his study after two weeks rather than one, and though still a bit preoccupied with what he had been doing, he smiled his approval at what Dafyd had done with the armory, then asked for some turnips smothered in butter and a whole bottle of sweet wine, for his work had been exhausting.

Dafyd continued to put things in places he considered convenient, and to retrieve them on the instant when the wizard called for them. On the rare occasion that he forgot where some vital item had been put, the wizard could be quite furious, and Dafyd worked hard to avoid the wizard's displeasure, for, when that rage became manifest, it was much worse than the beatings he had received in childhood, though the wizard never struck him. The wizard's angry glance could leave Dafyd for days with the feeling that something monstrous was crawling inside his belly

or his skull, and he wanted desperately to avoid that horror, and what might be beyond it if the wizard ever got truly mad.

One day when Dafyd was twenty-three, the wizard informed him that there was to be a great working, and that his restraint and self-control were likely to be tested, but that it was very important work and that it must be done. Dafyd resigned himself to some inconvenience, but it turned out that the preparation for the working was more than inconvenient, it was harrowing. A large chamber had to be completely cleared and cleaned, then a great deal of paraphernalia assembled in the room and placed precisely. Things that were large and heavy, and which Dafyd had never before seen (from chambers he had never noticed) had to be moved, and that by the power of Dafyd's young muscle alone. He discovered that he had no time to himself for any purpose whatsoever, and he found that the wizard was as testy as he was, and presumably, at his age, not given to the same forms of providing himself with relief.

When the working began, the wizard warned Dafyd to remain calm, no matter what his emotions might cause him to want to do; then sealed himself in the chamber and left Dafyd, for all intents and purposes, alone. Dafyd had placed loaves of hard black bread and wheels of cheese in the chamber, and a number of jugs of water, so he was not concerned that the wizard might become weakened by lack of food: but after two days he found himself missing the cooking that he usually did for his master, and bored with cooking merely for himself. He might have gone out to hunt, but he did not wish to leave the old man untended in case some emergency might arise. He had come to think of himself as not only useful, but somewhat necessary.

Occasionally strange sounds became audible through the thick walls of the sealed chamber, and smells too appeared, though oddly not near the door but in other parts of the house. These anomalies did not bother Dafyd, for similar things had happened at other times. But after a week he found himself fidgeting enough that he decided his best escape would be to read (relieving himself of physical stress was all very fine, but not adequate to the abrasions of his slowly expanding intellect), and thus he betook himself to one of the libraries and opened a tome that he had begun years before but never got through with any degree of understanding.

It was tough going, but eventually, like the first gray and chilly light

of dawn, his mind and spirit began to perceive the purpose behind the exterior and apparent physical actions of the spellcraft with which the book was concerned. He felt an excitement akin to what he'd felt when he first mastered control of the alphabet, and held the key to reading the arcane symbols that were simply words: words many of which he had used all his life, but which now he could find in new arrangements, revealing new ideas, and stored and held in stasis on ancient vellum, ready to come to life when newly read. His thoughts began to beat in rhythm with his heart, and his heart beat ever faster as ideas like dominos connected and lined up in patterns viewed from beyond the plane of their existence. It occurred to him that he might be beginning to understand what the game was all about.

It was inevitable that his newfound understanding, his new knowledge, should lead to a desire for some kind of action, some experiment, by which he might make sure that what he thought he understood was, in fact, what the words meant for him to understand. He had always been a boy of action, and now he felt he must fulfill his destiny as a *man* of action. In the long run: was there so much difference between learning how a horse must be combed and actually combing the horse? He rushed to the conclusion that perhaps there was not.

He decided on what appeared to him to be the simplest spell in the grimoire, a tiny transmutation of a frog into jade. He checked to see that nothing untoward was issuing from the chamber where his master worked, then quickly went to the spring and caught a frog. He handled the frog with the greatest care as he brought it into the armory and placed it under a bell jar, checked the grimoire again to be sure he understood what must be done, then fetched the tools necessary to the transformation.

The staff with the sparkling sunstone, the one that the wizard had used so long ago, appeared to be the best tool for channeling the energy. He took it down from the rack that he had made, then retrieved a couple of herbs from two of the labeled jars. He took a rod of blue chalk and drew a figure on the hardwood surface of the table, then looked once more at the instructions in the grimoire, practicing the words of the spell with his mouth but not even subvocalizing them, for he knew the power of the vibration of sound in air.

Finally, satisfied that he had fulfilled all the requirements, he took the

frog from the bell jar, placed it on the blue chalk diagram, sprinkled the herbs around the frog (the diagram and the herbs kept it from hopping away), and aimed the staff at the assemblage. He took a deep breath and began the incantation.

There was a weird stirring inside his chest as he spoke. He could not decide if it was his heart or some other organ that tingled, but the tingling grew stronger, then a kind of light appeared in his head, then the tingling in his chest spread upward and into the arm that aimed the staff. With a rush not unlike what he felt when he used that other, more personal staff, the power shot down his arm, through the staff, and engulfed the frog.

Then it was done. The frog now lay perfectly still, a dull green ornament of jade. The herbs had withered to dust, the chalk was somehow less blue. He picked up the jade frog, examined it, then started to laugh. He was careful not to laugh too loud, for he did not wish to disturb his master, but he laughed nonetheless, with sheer happiness at having accomplished something wonderful.

He tossed the jade ornament into the air, caught it, then headed for the kitchen to find something to eat and drink, for he was suddenly hungry and thirsty. Strangely, he craved turnips and cold water, which made him laugh all the more. He ate his fill, then, still playing with the jade frog, he went out into the garden and held it up in the sunlight.

It was *perfect*, an artifact *so* perfect that no craftsman could have made it more so. The thought crossed his mind that maybe all those artists who made such valuable trinkets for the wealthy were perhaps no more than magicians who altered one form in the world into another.

Now, wouldn't that be a great jape, he thought. *What if all the powerful were to discover that the luxuries they craved were not made by painstaking labor and time, but through instantaneous transmogrification through magick? There was a good chance they would cease to pay the artists and, through painful force, make them deliver the goods immediately. But would such goods retain their value?*

Dafyd mused on the possibilities for a long time before it occurred to him that his master might not approve of what he had done. When that thought dashed cold rain on his delight, he rushed to the armory, put the jade frog on the table, and turned pages in the grimoire to find a spell to undo what he had accomplished. He knew that such a spell must be of

roughly the same status as the one for the initial transformation, so he did not anticipate any great difficulty, and in fact he found such a counterspell quickly.

There was no requirement for the chalk figure or the herbs, only the staff and the spoken spell. There was a caution about taking care with the field of restoration, but the caution noted that as an experienced sorcerer he would understand precisely what must be done. As the one who had made the transformation in the first place, Dafyd was sure that nobody else could possibly understand better than he the substance of the enchantment, so he held up the staff, aimed it at the jade frog, and began to speak the words written before him.

What Dafyd did not understand was that the lack of confinement by diagram and scattered herbs allowed the energy he felt, flowing up from his heart and through his arm and the staff, to pour forth not only upon the jade frog, but past it and across the room, engulfing all that was in its path. Had he been the experienced sorcerer anticipated by the author of the grimoire, he would have placed the frog where the field of restoration could not flow out upon any other transformed object, but he was not that practitioner, and the result of his working was unexpected, and drastic.

On a shelf by the wall opposite where he stood lay the dark red gem in which, so many years before, the wizard had confined the golden gryphon. As the unbinding spell washed over the gem it began to crackle with pent-up energy, and tiny lightnings flashed over its surface as it began to expand. Dafyd was so concerned with changing his jade back to a frog that at first he was unaware of this unplanned and unexpected side effect, and merely caught the frog before it could jump away, and placed it again under the bell jar. He dusted the dried herbs into his hand, put them in a waste container, and began to wipe away the chalk marks before he heard the buzzing that sounded as the gem continued to expand.

Dafyd looked around, thinking that perhaps some insect had invaded the armory, and then he saw the jewel, which was now a foot across. His heart skipped a beat, beat faster, skipped again, and he felt cold suffuse his veins. He understood at once what was happening. He had dusted the gemstone many times, knew its location, knew what it was and the part it had played in his personal history. He felt sick with terror.

Then he grabbed the staff, seized the grimoire, and leafed through

furiously until he found the spell he had used to make jade of the frog in the first place. He aimed the staff at the gem, now a yard across and bending the shelf under its weight, and began to chant the words that only an hour before had spelled success to him.

To no avail. The gem continued to expand, and now Dafyd could see the gryphon inside, beginning to move, to stretch itself out from its confined heraldic pose of many years. The hard surface of the stone began to soften, to vaporize, to turn into a cloud of red dust.

Dafyd chanted again, desperate, but the energy that poured up from his heart felt flawed, soured, curdled by panic. The sweat that covered his body was cold, and the red cloud dispersed, leaving the huge gryphon standing on the other side of the table.

It looked around and its bright eyes focused on him with exactly the same glint they had held when it stalked the horse down the dusty street of his village. It turned to face him fully, and it spread its golden wings. Its sharp beak opened and a piercing cry issued forth. Then it sprang at him, its lion's claws extended and ready for the kill.

No more than three yards was the distance between Dafyd and certain death, but as the gryphon moved through those three yards of air a strange thing happened. The house shook, as if an earthquake had seized it, and the house itself appeared to waver, like a vision seen beneath the rivulets of a stream.

The door flew open and the wizard stood there.

The gryphon gave the wizard no heed. It continued its leap, its beak about to snap shut and sever Dafyd's head from his shoulders before its claws ripped him open.

There was no time for the wizard to retrieve his staff, no time to gather the red powder. In less than a second the lad would be dead.

The wizard spoke a Word of Power.



ALINORA WAS NOT HAPPY to be at the wizard's house, but her hands had grown stiff with age, and cooking and cleaning and knitting had become painful. She had tried all the remedies that the goodwives of the village had suggested, but with no success. She had not made the journey since the business with the gryphon, but she had finally resolved

that if anybody could help her it would be the wizard, and so she had come, alone: out of pride and the fear that admitting the extremity of her disability would cost her status in the village hierarchy.

It took her a few moments to figure out, standing at the door and waiting for her knock to be answered, what was different about the place: but then she had it. The area of wall around the door was no longer a dingy brown, but a fairly bright yellow that sparkled in the afternoon sunlight.

The door opened and the wizard peered out of the darkness at her. His face was a blank, then his eyes brightened and it was clear that he recognized her. He smiled. He invited her in and offered her a cup of the hot beverage he had been drinking. She accepted, took one of the dry biscuits that he proffered, then got to the point.

The wizard listened carefully, nodding now and then, looking off to his left on occasion (as people do when they are thinking of other things during a conversation) and when she concluded her recitation, he pursed his mouth for a bit, then nodded again.

"I think I can help you," he said. "There are some herbs. Well, if you will wait here, I will compound them for you. Will you have another cup and another biscuit?"

Alinora ate and drank some more, then stood up and walked around the ample kitchen, looking at things (the way people do when they are waiting for someone to do something out of the room) until the wizard returned. He gave her a bag of pungent herbs and instructed her in their use, then took the small amount of money that she had to offer him. He walked her to the door, but as she was leaving, she asked, "Is that boy we brought you still here? That Dafyd? I sometimes wonder if he was of use to you, or whether you had to turn him out. He was always so difficult."

"He grew up, you know," the wizard said. "To me, he was no more difficult than any other lad might have been. Virtues and faults. But yes, he is still about the place, and he is no trouble at all."

The wizard smiled and Alinora understood that it was time for her to go. She thanked the wizard again and headed down the path through the oak woods toward her home.

The wizard stood watching her, made a motion with his hand and uttered a little spell to protect her, then closed the door and went back inside. He walked slowly to the armory and a sad smile touched his lips.

From the shelf that Dafyd had built for him he picked up a red jewel, walked to the window, and let the sunlight fall on it. Inside was the tiny figure of a gryphon, its wings spread, its body poised in mid-pounce, its sharp beak wide and about to close around the neck of the small figure of a young man: a young man who brandished a staff over which he had not nearly enough authority to save his own life. There was so much in that young man's face, so many emotions, such potential. But also such impatience.

"Words of power," the wizard mused. "So fast, so complete. If I utter the one that undoes the spell, the gryphon will kill my Dafyd too quickly for me to act."

He replaced the gem on the shelf and headed back to his library.

"Someday," he muttered as he went. "Someday I may find an answer."



COMING ATTRACTIONS

F&SF has two separate series of fantasy stories about bards that have both been running for decades — Phyllis Eisenstein's Alaric stories and Marc Laidlaw's tales of Gorlen Vizinfirthe. It happens that we have new stories about both bards in inventory now. If they both appear in the same issue, will the bards hold a singing competition?

Such considerations are just idle (idol?) speculation, of course. What matters here is the fact that the bard with the gargoyle's hand will appear in our next issue, accompanied by the gargoyle with the human's hand. The duo encounter a brotherhood of knights we think you'll remember for a long time.

Switching from fantasy to science fiction, we have another popular series character slated to return in our next issue. In Naomi Kritzer's "Containment Zone," Beck Garrison must deal with an outbreak of a dangerous virus on the Seastead.

We also have stories in inventory by Scott Baker, Rand B. Lee, Tim Sullivan, Ray Vukcevich, and many others. We've also got a bit of a surprise in store for later this year. Subscribe now and you won't miss any of the great issues we have in store!

*"I know of no way of judging the future but by the past," said Patrick Henry.
But what are we to do when the past won't cooperate?*

The Uncertain Past

By Ted White

IT WAS WARM FOR LATE November, even in Texas, and the air was humid. It had rained earlier. All I could smell was garlic, for some

reason. Then I heard the first shot.

It was hard not to flinch when the woman with the panicked look ran straight into — *and through* — me.

Gunshots echoed in the plaza. People — sightseers — were running, scrambling, ducking and looking for cover. There wasn't much, not even any parked cars. They'd been cleared for the presidential motorcade.

I stood, unmoving, as chaos swirled around me. I was at the foot of the grassy knoll that rose from Elm Street as it ran through Dealey Plaza. Only a short distance away the motorcade had stopped. Figures were huddled in the open limousine.

This was not right. I walked over to the limo. Somewhere I heard machine-gun fire. There were bullet holes in the right-rear fender and the trunk lid of the limo. I heard the President's voice.

"I'm okay, dammit. Get off of me! You're killing my back!"

"John — are you — ?"

"Yeah, missed me too."

"Jackie?"

"Keep down, *keep down!* There're still gunshots!"

Secret Service agents were swarming the limo, some of them taking defensive, outward-facing positions. One scrambled quickly off the President, upon whom he'd thrown himself as a shield a moment earlier. No one paid me any attention.

As I strolled away from the motorcade, the limo suddenly began moving and quickly accelerated out of the plaza. I saw local police running up the knoll to an area behind a low stockade fence that separated the top of the knoll from a parking lot.

I touched the device on my left wrist that looked like a watch, and Dallas, Texas, winked out of sight. I was once more standing in the home lab.

"How'd it go?" Brita asked me.

"Not right," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Kennedy wasn't hit. Neither was Connally. I didn't bother sticking around after that."

She stared at me, the confusion on her plain face a reflection of my own. "What do you mean, they weren't hit?"

"What I said. A couple bullet holes in the limo, nobody hit. Nobody assassinated."

"That's impossible! You must have misunderstood — "

I tapped the device on my left wrist.

"I recorded everything."

She nodded. "Yes, of course. That's why — "

"Let's check it out," I said, brushing my "wristwatch" against a dock, then touching the holographic display, which changed instantly to a three-dimensional representation of Dealey Plaza. Everything played out more quickly than I'd realized. The limo had beaten a hasty retreat only a few seconds after the shots occurred, that one agent tumbling off the back. The scene ended abruptly before he landed. For no good reason, I hoped he'd landed on his feet.

I replayed the scene, freezing it as both Kennedy and Conally rose to sitting positions, both turning to look back.

"Alive," I said, "and unhurt."

"Unbelievable," Brita said.

"What's unbelievable?"

I turned to see Jahn had come in. He was scowling, as usual, and his impatience was palpable.

"See for yourself," Brita said, and reset the playback. The three of us watched it once more.

Jahn snorted. "Staged," he said. "Totally fake." He gave me a look that combined his scowl with a smirk. "Nice try," he said. "You've had it in for the history project since it was proposed, but this is a new low."

I gave him a fixed look and shook my head. "You wish," I said.

The "history project" was the first government project to make use of the Stiles Discovery. Some believed Stiles had discovered a principle as important as Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Others laughed it off as akin to a perpetual motion machine, an always elusive goal.

Stiles believed that our conception of time was inherently flawed by our human perception of the passage of time. He believed that time did not "flow," and that all events occurred and existed simultaneously. In other words, the "big bang" was going on right now — as was the heat death of the universe. Somehow we humans threaded these simultaneous events together in a sequence and called it the passage of time.

Stiles had put together the equations that, he said, proved his discovery. I'm not enough of a mathematician to prove or disprove them. I'm a practical physicist. My job is to build the devices that test his discovery — and then, because I insisted on it, to use those devices myself. I wanted to "go back in time" to see for myself.

If Stiles was correct, there was no way to change an event in our "past." "Past," "present" and "future" were all ongoing, simultaneously occurring and having already occurred. Causality was an illusion. Everything was fixed, immutable.

Consequently, an observer from our "present" interjected into the "past" could not only change nothing, she would be unsubstantial, invisible, and unable to interact with the "past" in which she found herself. She would be an observer in the purest sense.

So why had my attempt to observe Kennedy's assassination in 1963 so profoundly *changed* that event?

Naturally, it was decided to make another run.

"You try it," I suggested.

"I intend to."

This time Jahn made the trip back to 1963. Like me, he was back almost instantly. He was succinct and to the point:

"Freak snowstorm — too warm to stick, but they used a closed limo, there weren't any bystanders at Dealey, and there weren't any gunshots. A total bust."

"A snowstorm!" Brita exclaimed. "You weren't dressed for that."

"Of course I wasn't," Jahn responded dismissively. Then he leveled an accusatory glare at me. "It was nothing like you said."

"I documented it," I said, tapping my "watch." "Did you?"

"Naturally," he said, waving his own device over a dock and manipulating the resulting image. It was as he'd described, and even briefer than mine. The sky looked sullen. Fat snowflakes hung in the air and swirled in the wake of the three black closed limos which seemed to hurry by. No one was standing on the sidewalk. The scene winked out.

"It's different each time," I said. "What does this mean?"

"We don't know it's different every time," Jahn said, peevishly. "Too small a sample."

So each of us "went back" several more times. Brita took the third trip, and Ross — back from an extended lunch, about which he would only smirk — took the fourth. In all we made fifteen trips to that November in 1963...or, more accurately, to *many* Novembers in 1963. We recorded them all. Each was at least somewhat different. Some were, like the first two, extremely different. In one a thunderstorm washed out the motorcade. Air Force One did not land at Dallas. In none was Kennedy killed, although shots were fired in nine of them, and in one a bomb exploded out of a curbside drain, although to little effect.

We were pondering these results when the Bullock-Jones twins came in. They weren't biological twins, of course, just typical of male partners who'd had their bodies modified to look almost identical — in this case,

I always thought, like Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Both were brilliant, but only Jones usually spoke, as he did this time.

"So, what did you guys step in *this* time?" It was his — their — conceit that the rest of us messed up and the twins' job was to clean up after us.

And, after we'd filled them in, Jones said, "You've done something wrong." He directed his gaze at me as he said that. I gave him a blank stare in response. Bullock touched Jones's arm. "It's obvious," Jones continued. "You haven't gone 'back'" — he made air quotes with his fingers — "at all. What you've done is go 'sideways' and create a series of branching realities." Bullock nudged him. "Or perhaps you've discovered already-existing alternative realities. Either way, it doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters!" Brita exclaimed, a sudden outburst very unlike her.

"We each used the same exact settings — unchanged!" Jahn insisted. "If Stiles is correct, we should at least have found the same Dallas each time — the same 'reality,' if you will." No air quotes, but his inflection was obvious, almost mocking. I was glad to see him focusing his contempt on someone else.

"It's —" I hesitated, then bulled ahead. "It's as if our attempts to observe the past *change* it somehow. It's like the actual past is not observable."

"So what *are* we seeing?" Brita asked.

"Not our past. Maybe somebody else's..."

"This is just blue-sky nonsense," Jones snorted. "Pure speculation. No science at all." Bullock murmured something in his ear. "We need facts. We need data. We need more observations — from other points in history." He nodded at Bullock. Then he waved his hand at the rest of us. "Get cracking!"

IT WAS NOT EASY, in terms of calibration. We'd picked the Kennedy assassination for our first target because it had occurred after the last calendar adjustment and would, we'd thought, be easy to find. Anything as far back as the crucifixion of Christ would be impossible to pinpoint by day, much less hour or minute. Before 1752, recorded dates depended on the calendar then in use in the region in question.

"You're all being very pedestrian in your choices," Jones told us. We

were still in the planning stages. "You have all of history to choose from. You should venture a bit further from home."

"That's all very well," Jahn replied, "but we're not sightseers. Our purpose is to check our findings against what we know to be historically true."

Bullock mock-smote his brow, and Jones groaned aloud. "Nonsense!" he stated. "All you have to do is hit the same spot several different times, and compare your findings. It hardly matters which spot you choose. But if you had any imagination — "

We picked December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor. The general thinking was that this was something too big, too important, too pivotal, to be affected by our observations. The general thinking was wrong. Our first trip "back" confirmed that. A typhoon had hit the island, but there was no sign of any Japanese warplanes.

I was the one who made that trip, and I actually stayed for three days to see whether the attack had been only delayed or forestalled. It was not fun hanging around so long. It was in fact boring until I found a movie theater and went in to watch a double-bill, something I did each day in different theaters. I saw many of the hits of the day, starring the big names of the era, like Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Lana Turner, Tyrone Power, Betty Grable, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, all in their prime. And there was *Road to Zanzibar*, with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour as well as a couple of Abbott & Costello films.

I couldn't eat anything, of course. I wondered, too late, if I should have brought along some snacks, but even without them I didn't get hungry. Maybe I was too insubstantial for hunger.

By the end of the third day, December 9, there was still no sign of any attack, but there were rumors the typhoon had swept up a fleet of ships, home country unknown. I went home, reappearing in our lab a brief instant after I'd disappeared.

No one asked me about the movies I'd seen, but of course, like everything else I'd encountered in Pearl Harbor, I'd recorded them.

Ross prevailed and Brita agreed to an outside lunch, having tired of our cafeteria food, but she demanded I join them. "This is *not* a date," she

insisted to both of us, and I readily agreed. Ross seemed oblivious and held the door for both of us.

It's easy to let something like the history project eat up all your time. You sink into an obsessive cocoon and shut out the present-time outside world, mundane reality.

The restaurant jolted me back to the real world. A hovering newscreen was showing a shipment of dronebots, or d-bots, being loaded onto a Navy freighter headed to the Middle East. They were containerized, of course, but screen-captioned so we'd know what those rows of containers held.

Ross glanced at the screen and smiled. "Thank God," he said. "They said they'd be shipping them out last spring."

"You know how slow the government is," Brita said. "You, most of all."

"We need to get the last of our ground soldiers out," Ross said. "That civil war's been going on for far too long."

"What difference will the d-bots make?" I asked, mostly just to keep the conversational ball rolling. "To that civil war, I mean."

"Very little," Ross admitted. "But they'll allow us to fulfill our obligations to the Sector Governors without further injuries or death for our guys. Isn't that enough?"

The dronebots were a mechanized infantry — man-sized robot ground soldiers controlled by distant humans. You could walk them into any situation. The worst that could happen was their destruction, and we had more.

I think it was their psychological effect that had the most impact on a campaign. We'd deliberately made them ugly bipedal monsters, painted black, big numbers on their backs and hideous expressions painted on their faces. Human fighters tended to panic and run away from them, abandoning their positions, which the d-bots easily overran.

There was only one small problem: Each d-bot cost over three million dollars and the government was loath to send them into actual combat situations. I guess human lives are still cheaper. So the decision to ship out thousands of them was major news.

But not the only news, of course. President Wilson's impeachment was still ongoing and likely to drag out for another month, at least. No one expected her conviction — but then, few had anticipated her impeachment, either.

Then there was Kelly Popp's murder trial. Full of sensational allegations about drugs, sex and morphing. No one doubted *his* guilt, of course.

An associated story was about a new eurodrug laying waste to college campuses. Taken with alcohol, as too often it was, it was randomly deadly. It was known as "Russian Roulette" to its users, who loved it — those who survived it.

"This isn't improving my appetite," Brita said as she waved the newscreen away. It was reluctant at first, increasing its brightness and color intensity and turning up its volume, but gave in when Brita shooed it vigorously with her hands. It winked out and was gone. But there were others elsewhere in the restaurant, hovering over tables, always flickering in the corners of my eyes.

"It's the newsfo," Ross said. "What d'you expect? It's always like that."

"Exactly," Brita snapped. "The very reason I rarely go out for lunch."

"Changing the subject entirely," I said, "I'm getting a bad smell from Admin."

"Bad smells?" Brita said. "I'm sorry I ordered. My appetite's gone."

"Admin?" Ross asked. "What's up?"

"It could be what's down -- like, shut down," I said.

Brita turned to stare at me. "It's not — "

"The project?" Ross said, completing her thought.

I nodded. "Budget cutbacks. We're a small arm of our department, but we've been getting the lion's share of the department's budget. With, so far, disappointing results. If you can call them 'results.'"

"I know you hate the newsfo," Ross said to Brita, "but the other day I saw one of our lawmakers calling the history project a total boondoggle, a complete waste of the taxpayers' dollars -- that's a direct quote."

"Upper or lower house?" Brita asked.

"Lower, I think."

"Well, what do you expect," she said dismissively.

Jahn called us into a meeting. Only the Bullock-Jones twins weren't there in person, but projected themselves into the conference room by hologram.

"I expect you've heard the rumors," Jahn said. He gave us all dour looks. "Well, they're true. We're shutting down."

No one said anything until Ross asked, "When?"

"End of the fiscal quarter. End of the month."

"That's only a little more than a week!" Brita exclaimed. "How can we —"

"It makes sense," Jones's hologram said. "We've accomplished none of our goals on this project."

"That's true, but irrelevant," I said. "We're into some seriously basic science here."

Bullock's hologram snorted.

"We're the first to investigate Stiles," I said, plowing ahead. "We haven't found what we expected, but so what? What we *have* found opens all kinds of new doors. If it's not 'history'" — I made the air quotes — "it's certainly science. And if we haven't exactly 'proved' Stiles, we haven't disproved it either. What I think we've found is very exciting. It opens up our concept of the universe."

"Blah, blah," said Jones's hologram. "Don't lecture us on our ABCs. Even you know better than that. We've been working on this since that day you first came back from Dallas."

"And you have accomplished what, thus far?" Jahn asked. He knew the answer, of course.

Bullock's hologram shrugged and Jones's said, "Insufficient data, *thus far*," mocking Jahn's words. The hologram turned to me and added, "Old movies are *really* not what we're looking for." As if our recorders didn't pick up a lot of other, nonvisual data.

"So, then — nothing?" Ross asked innocently.

"We're losing focus here," I said, deliberately addressing myself to those actually present in the room. "What it comes down to is that we've got eight, nine days left."

"To do what?" Jahn asked.

"To do as much as we can. To gather as much data as possible. To accomplish *something*."

My original thought was to take more time trips. They required almost no elapsed time from the project's perspective, no matter how long one spent at one's destination, as my Hawaiian trip had demonstrated. We could amass vast amounts of data for the twins. But how meaningful

would it be? The twins had learned nothing of value thus far. I was dubious about what more of the same sort of data would provide them.

That's when a new idea occurred to me, over a cafeteria lunch with Brita the next day.

"Y'know," I said, musing, "all our little 'time trips' have been taken individually. Alone...."

BRITA AND I found ourselves standing side by side on the foredeck of the ship. I glanced at her and was startled by her transformation. She was wearing a fur coat. Her hair was bobbed and banded. Somehow her Scandinavian appearance had been transformed. She looked fresh from Paris — a 1914 Paris. I looked down at myself. I too was wearing clothes I'd never worn before.

Brita fingered her coat and exclaimed, almost inaudibly under her breath, "*Real fur!*"

I could smell the sea air. More important, I could *feel* it, a breeze against my face. And I could feel the deck under my feet.

"Pardon me. Excuse us, please," a man with an Irish accent said as he led his family past us to the railing. A wife, two daughters and a son. The children were not yet teens and excited to be on this voyage. The older girl, a freckled redhead, smiled at us.

Brita gave me a wide-eyed look. "They saw us. They *see* us!"

"This is *different*," I agreed. We were no longer insubstantial ghosts, invisible observers.

"Is this because we made the trip together?"

"I don't know." I tried to think. "What could it mean? That solo trips are subjective and shared trips objective?"

"'Subjective,' 'objective' — what are you talking about?"

"Our perceptions of time," I said. "Necessarily subjective, right?"

She nodded. "Sure, but —"

"These time trips — they're voyages into other realities. *Earlier* realities, but...subjective realities — up to now." I paused, marshaled my thoughts. "That's why they've varied so much, been so much at odds with history as we know it."

"You're guessing."

"Of course. Just trying to construct a framework for understanding Stiles."

"How about understanding what we've gotten ourselves into here — and getting ourselves out?"

"We have time," I said, glancing at my watch. "Several hours before we hit the iceberg. If we do."

As Brita watched me, the blood drained from her face. "Your watch," she said, her voice catching.

I stared at my left wrist, my stomach in free fall. There was no sign of the device I'd been wearing. Instead, a cheap canvas strap held a sturdy, bulky real wristwatch. "Girard-Perregaux" was engraved on the dial.

Brita held up her left wrist. She was wearing a somewhat more dainty lady's wristwatch. She was shaking. She put out her left hand to grasp my arm.

"What does this mean?" she asked in a little girl's voice.

I stared at her. Our eyes locked. Her grip steadied, but tightened.

I looked around and tried to remember history.

"I think it means we'd better stake out a lifeboat now," I said. "That's if we want to be here for the long haul...and what other choices have we?"



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David Armstrong's stories have won Jabberwock Review's Prize for Fiction, the Mississippi Review Prize, the New South Writing Contest, Ardor Literary Magazine's Fiction Contest, and Bear Deluxe Magazine's Doug Fir Fiction Award. Recent stories of his appear in the Best of Ohio Anthology, Baltimore Review, Carve Magazine, and online at Trop Magazine. His first collection of stories, Going Anywhere, is due out in the fall this year. According to his Web site, davidarmstrongfiction.com, he lives in Las Vegas with his wife, Melinda, and their dog, Prynn, and he is currently pursuing a Ph.D

Butterscotch

By D. M. Armstrong

FROM WHERE HE STOOD IN his kitchen, Arthur could see the long line of hostas separating the woods from the close-cropped perennial ryegrass of his back lawn. The hostas had been planted by Alexis at the beginning of spring and interspersed with brilliant yellow tulips, which she had buried in the early winter according to USDA recommendations for climate-hardiness zone six. Alexis was a planner. Arthur liked that about her, and the hostas and tulips attested to the rightness of their lives together. They'd been married only two years. They were what her mother called "career-blind," wed too late, but they were not lacking for money and therefore comfort. They were happy.

The only liability was the question of children. The matter of childbearing, child-rearing, had come up lately. The problem had emerged fully formed as an increasingly pressurized point like a swelling bruise. Doubts about whether or not it was too late seemed to flit back and forth between them. One day Arthur would be certain he could hack it. He was only thirty-seven. Fifty-five or -six when the child graduated high school.

Alexis would be a breezy fifty-three. But the next day, despite a weeklong diatribe about prenatal health, violin lessons, tuition, and whatever else, Alexis would be the one to turn suddenly upbeat. She'd emote a relaxed and ready demeanor, and on those days, without fail, Arthur would recant his own earlier impetuosity, claiming he preferred the comfortable amenities of the childless, the relaxed retirement years, jetting off, unencumbered by family, to one day wander the Hierapolis ruins — just him and Alexis — and walk the windy shoreline of the Aegean.

Then, only yesterday she'd finished their debate by showing him the pink plus sign on the "pee-stick." She handed it to him across the breakfast table, and all he could think to say was, "Should we be holding that over the bacon?"

They didn't talk much after that, not yesterday, and now, in the early morning of a lazy Saturday, he'd let her sleep in, preferring the time to process alone, to sip coffee and look at the lawn, the hostas, the tulips.

After a short while, the world felt still again. He breathed in, out, in. And something emerged from the woods.

Zombies or ghosts. These were prevalent theories in the early days. Though they didn't attack, didn't show signs of being angry or malevolent. And they had substance, could be felt and prodded. Which ruled out both explanations. Not zombies. Not ghosts. But something else.

The first sightings occurred in New York, which gave rise to the idea they were victims of 9/11, resurrected. They appeared to be made of the dust from vacuum bags, looked like people for the most part, though their faces were haggard, old without being aged. And their skin was a mottled pigeon color, the unfinished gray of industrial cabinets. Their clothes were rags, versions of what they might have worn in life, though not all such clothing could be attributed to certain time periods, and upon inspection this attire seemed to be a part of their tired flesh.

Someone called them "travelers," and the name stuck. They moved continuously. Walked or shuffled. They ambled like lost souls and left slight traces of ash, the way a burning cigarette dragged along the asphalt might.

Authorities made attempts to capture them. If stopped, the travelers disintegrated into a pile of feathery ash that could not be collected, but

instead blew away on the wind. More intricate methods were developed, roving collection containers with treadmill bottoms, which swept the travelers up into what looked like large glass tubes and kept them walking. But within seconds the captured would fall apart and be ground into the rolling belt, then disappear entirely.

Despite this, people had touched them and confirmed their corporeal existence. Churches sprang up along what were dubbed "migration routes," paths known to be heavily traversed by travelers. For weeks, parishioners prayed in newly erected sanctuaries that still smelled of sawdust, rushing out when the bell rang to touch them, to beg them for answers about the afterlife, for news of loved ones.

The travelers never spoke.

Arthur shook Alexis out of her sleep and pulled her into a sitting position.

"Artie, stop it," she whined. "I'm not a rag doll."

"It's a traveler," he said, and her eyes cleared. She wobbled to the closet and pulled on a robe and followed him to the kitchen. They stared out the wide bay window at the figure shuffling across their lawn. Its feet made tracks in the dew-heavy blades.

"I've never seen one up close," she said. "Only on the news."

"It's not that uncommon," he said. "Statistics say one in five people have direct contact."

They watched the traveler a while. It was male, if these things had genders. That was another debate. He was five-nine or maybe a little more, and thin but with a slight paunch. The crinkled stems that formed his legs moved like a marionette's, herky-jerky with a hitch that, only every few seconds, seemed to defy gravity.

Alexis retreated to the counter for a cup of coffee.

"Should you be drinking that?" Arthur said.

"It's fine. I'm allowed a little caffeine." She sipped it slowly.

They watched the traveler for nearly an hour until he finally crossed the grass and disappeared again into the woods on the other side of the lawn.

"Well, that was interesting," she said.

"I still wonder what they are."

"You and just about everybody else on the planet." She set her empty mug in the sink.

The arrival of the traveler, the jolt, the newness of it, had broken their stalemate. When he climbed into the shower with her, she didn't shrug him off. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and felt the very hot water sluicing down her neck and against his chest.

They were together in their decisions after that. They agreed on a stroller and a diaper bag. In anticipation of the baby shower, they registered for necessary items at department stores, and Arthur didn't just acquiesce to her desires. He gave input. He made comments about the color of the walls in the nursery. They laughed in Babies "R" Us at their own ignorance about breast pumps.

A few weeks later, the traveler returned. He crossed their yard once in the morning and going the other way at dusk. Arthur watched him. The next day, too. It became a routine — crossing from right to left (north to south) in the morning, left to right at dusk. Equally routine was Arthur in his kitchen at those hours, staring and speculating.

"Where do you go?" he said aloud, and sometimes, as evening drew heavy over the yard and Alexis napped upstairs, Arthur felt a kinship with this wandering thing, as if the two of them were sharing the silence and the ongoing movement of being.

Toward the end of her first trimester, Alexis grew very ill. Their OB/GYN discussed low progesterone levels.

"Nothing to worry about," she said. "I'll write a prescription for an oral, and I'll check you in a week or so. We'll keep an eye on it."

Alexis smoothed her blue hospital gown. From his hard plastic chair next to the examining table, Arthur raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Could there be other factors at work?" he said. "Something environmental?"

"Do you have something in mind?"

"Travelers," he said, and looked at the floor. "There's been one in our yard. For nearly ten weeks. Since we've known about the pregnancy, actually."

The doctor, who was short and a little chunky, with an out-of-date haircut, who for all these reasons came off as guileless, tapped the examination table with Alexis's file. "We can't know that," she said, then hesitated.

Alexis, swinging her legs nervously, stopped. "Have you heard something?"

"Not per se," the doctor said. "But I can't lie. There seems to be...a correlation."

"With pregnancies?" Arthur said. "Illness? Miscarriage? What?"

At "miscarriage," Alexis flinched.

"I did not give this to you," the doctor said. She peeled off a sticky-note from a large pad and wrote down the name of a website.

THETRUTHABOUTTRAVELERS.COM said the baby needed love, that a lingering traveler, which it defined as any such entity remaining within a five-mile radius or seen frequently (within a period of days) recrossing the same land, was a sign of doubt.

Doubt.

"About the baby?" Arthur said. It was late. He and Alexis were in bed, and Alexis had her computer open on her lap.

"Why?" she said. "Do you have doubts about the baby?"

The morning she had told him she was pregnant, he'd hinted to her that he might be fine with an abortion. He hadn't said this in so many words, but knew they were both in agreement — it *was* an option. She had shut down the discussion. No. She did not have doubts. "You'd better get on board with this," she'd said.

Now, in bed, staring at the website, he said, "I don't have doubts. None. It can't be that."

He lifted her hand off the keyboard and squeezed it lightly.

Alexis's mother arrived on Tuesday with two hard purple suitcases. She smelled like a mixture of stew and lingering aerosols. Built like a toy train, squat and bulky, Mama Junie drew Alexis in with one arm and hooked Arthur around the waist with the other.

"How's my grandbaby?" she said.

She looked down at Alexis's stomach, still flat, obscured beneath a loose plaid shirt.

"It's a boy," she said. "I can tell by the way you're carrying it."

That night Arthur experienced the momentary solace of sharing his worry for Alexis. Together he and Mama Junie doted, they rested hands on Alexis's shoulders, they prepared desserts, they did dishes, discussed hospital routes and mobiles. In the sudden release, Arthur imbibed of three after-dinner brandies and brought up the topic himself of Mama Junie staying on for the long haul.

So it was very much his own mistake. He would think this later. Very much.

She remade the house in her own image. Days when Alexis and Arthur were away at work, which was most of them, Mama mounted a comprehensive assault on the interior that would have impressed the most strategically minded generals of history. The appearance of sickly-sweet butterscotch-scented candles began with an innocent votive-sized one on the sideboard in the hallway. When Arthur first expressed his distaste for the scent, Alexis chided him: "It's one candle. It's nothing. Besides, I kind of like it. It's like candy. It fits."

"What fits?" he'd said.

"I don't know. For the baby. Butterscotch is sweet. So is our little boy."

"So you think it's a boy now?"

Within a week, the candles were everywhere, big fat ones on the kitchen countertop, medium-sized ones on the backs of all the toilets, even in the master bathroom, so the whole house smelled like a confectioner's, a scent that blasted Arthur in the face when he arrived home.

There were also new throw pillows and strangely shaped wooden utensils in an alien crock near the sink, not to mention the parade of drugstore accoutrements for Alexis's aches, for her sudden and unaccustomed lethargy — the footbaths, humidifiers, warming gels, cooling gels, homeopathic teas, and a whole new set of towels and washcloths for upstairs and down, all, of course, the color of butterscotch.

Mama Junie didn't stop there. She began an equally well-orchestrated

propaganda campaign. Every time Alexis groaned, at every sibilant intake of breath, Mama Junie shot an obvious glance of reproof Arthur's way. She dropped hints about his shirked duties, his questionable competence in a crisis.

"Remember," she said, "at the reunion — that poor child on the slide?"

"It was minor," Alexis said. They were eating *lo mein* Arthur had picked up on the way home. He'd promised to cook, then worked late, and resorted to takeout. It had sent Mama Junie on a tirade about MSG and unborn babies that lasted so long he was almost glad she'd moved on to the reunion story, which was one of her favorites in the rotation.

"The child," she said, "got halfway down the slide and decided to jump off."

"We know what happened, Mama," Alexis said. She was a peace-maker, Alexis.

But Junie went on: "Hurts his poor little ankle, and what does Arthur do? Just stands there, staring."

"I was asking him where it hurt," Arthur said limply.

"Troy came to the rescue, thank God. Otherwise that poor soul would probably still be on the ground crying."

"It was a year ago," Arthur said, "and Troy pulled off the kid's shoe and sock before the kid could tell him it was the wrong foot."

"I'm just saying. You have children, you have crises. It's two-plus-two-is-four. And I have to wonder, I just have to — you can't stand over a baby and ask it why it's bawling."

In bed that night, Alexis rolled toward him and said, "You sure you're ready?"

He pretended to be sleeping.

Another two months went by, and Alexis felt worse still. Through a combination of amassed sick leave and tasks that could be done remotely, this once unstoppable, unflappable, incomparable, pre-dawn-runner, queen-of-the-thirteen-hour-workday started doing business from home all but one day a week. Most of her afternoons were now spent on the couch, laptop plopped on a pillow, her face gaunt as a corpse's, while her mother hustled from room to room. Practically the only time they left the house

was when Mama Junie sporadically whisked Alexis and “Joshua” off to a new doctor’s appointment, a new round of blood tests.

Arthur asked Alexis why her mother had suddenly named the child. “We still don’t know the sex,” he said.

Looking drained and defeated, Alexis stared up at him. “I don’t know. I guess it’s okay. I kind of like it.” She picked at the quilt on her lap, and he didn’t have the heart to take it further.



ARTHUR BEGAN spending his evenings on the patio. The interior smells, the sudden nest-like quality of his overly warm home, the drawn look of his wife, her skin ashen, her silence, was all too much after a full day.

It was late summer, and he added a second iced whiskey to what had once been a strictly one-drink, three-nights-per-week ritual. These evenings, as Mama Junie puttered about the house, cooking, crocheting, the television playing *Jeopardy*, *Wheel of Fortune*, crime show after overly gory crime show, irate talking heads, and endless sitcoms, Arthur shut the thick glass door behind him, took a seat, and watched the blurring red sun backdrop the trees. The grass each night would turn blue and lose color as twilight set in.

Then, inevitably, around the bottom of the first glass, would come the traveler. Arthur watched him, sometimes toasted him silently, sometimes simply let him go. Other times his stomach knotted, and he would swear the thing had looked his way.

One evening the traveler was late. Mama Junie had dragged Alexis off to the drugstore for a long list of vitamins and supplements to which she’d been adding for the past week, items like fish oil, biotin, and whatever else she wrote on a newly implemented magnetic board on the refrigerator.

The house was especially dark and quiet behind Arthur now. He listened. Shadows had begun to fill all the open spaces, and he could barely make out the tree line when the traveler finally stepped onto the lawn.

Something about tonight, about this time — maybe the third whiskey on which he’d just begun — made Arthur rise when he saw it. Stepping from the porch, he kicked off his shoes and felt the grass lacing up through his toes. He walked to the traveler’s side and stared. In the dark its features looked more human. Put anything in the right light, Arthur thought, and

your brain tries to make sense of it. The strange skin, the odd way its body fit together — these details, when dipped in the late-night gloom, became the edge of a lapel, perhaps, the crease of a pants leg, a collar, a watch.

Standing near it, as close as he would to another man at a garden party, Arthur took a drink and spoke. "What are you doing here, huh?"

No response.

He listened to the tired sloughing of its feet through the grass.

"If this is about us, about the baby, you're barking up the wrong tree. I've got no doubts."

Still no reply.

He suddenly hated this figure dragging ass across his lawn. The problem was this: in denying his doubt, Arthur had admitted it. The traveler reminded him of this fact.

That wasn't it, though, not entirely, not unequivocally. The problem was how to express that fine dust of inexpression, the lingering worry that, should he confess to it, would incriminate him. His doubts were half-formed inklings only, a fog of foreboding formed by a million particulates of indecision, vacillation, anxiety. How to communicate to his son what it meant to be a good man? How to express that boundless joy he'd feel when he was in love? How to console a child so mucked and deep into pubescent angst that suicide becomes a hot-glowing option as reasonable as fixing a tuna sandwich or choosing a television channel? How how how? How to express to Alexis that it was not doubt about having a child, but about everything else, about cracking open some new world and just walking around in there, all the while pretending to be the tour guide in a jungle about which you didn't have the slightest knowledge, not about the flora or fauna or the pitfalls?

And wasn't that it? Because if we'd mastered all this talk, all this passing-on from one generation to the next, why weren't we the more stable for it? No, Arthur's fear was not about raising a child, it was about whether or not you could ever communicate anything to anyone, especially the person who needed it most. His inability to convey this to Alexis only solidified the fact that real contact might very well be impossible.

"What's your name?" he said.

Again no answer from the traveler.

Arthur reached out. He felt suddenly angry. He wanted to give the

thing a shove, give it a hard poke in the shoulder the way people did if they wanted to start a fight. At the last second he held back. For all the reasons a traveler could not be caught, this one felt precious. Arthur didn't want to see it go. He'd become accustomed to its company.

"Fine. I'll give you a name. How about Joshua? How's that?"

In his slightly befogged mind, the name didn't register until a second after it crossed his lips. He'd said the first name that came to him, the first one at hand, the one he heard a hundred times a day from Mama Junie — Joshua this and Joshua that.

But once it was out, he couldn't change it. It was as if the traveler suddenly had an identity, irrevocable: Joshua, same as a tree was a tree, a rock a rock, a cloud a mutable whisp of white nothing.

Arthur turned away and headed back toward the house. "Good night, Joshua. If you decide to speak, you know where to find me."

The next month Alexis took a turn. She vomited most of the night and found spotting in the morning. The three of them raced to the hospital on still-deserted dawn roads. Mama Junie muttered prayers in the backseat with Alexis; Arthur came to rolling stops at all the intersections.

A technician performed the ultrasound, and the spotting was written off as minor, related perhaps to Alexis's illness, which was credited to bad tandoori chicken. Mama Junie took it as another opportunity to rail against MSG.

Despite reassurances, Alexis was held for a few hours of observation. While she rested, Arthur walked out to the parking lot and made a phone call to the people at TruthAboutTravelers on their 800 line. Further mysteries could be revealed for a price. He had to pony up for the prime info. There were what the woman called "distribution centers" in nearly every city where the "literature" could be obtained. She gave him the address nearest him and wished him a "blessed night."

He hung up and looked out across the highway running past the hospital. From a scrubby tract of land where a house had been torn down, a traveler was approaching the road. This one looked female. She swung her arms in slow, long parabolas, giving her an apish quality. She reached the berm and took one step out into the oncoming lane. A car swerved and managed to miss her by a hairsbreadth, but a pickup close behind

sideswiped her and spun her around. As she fell away toward the ditch, she came apart. Her limbs cracked and bits of her fluttered up like a million gray butterflies. Then the rest of her was gone, slumped into a pile and blown away.

The truck never stopped.

In a strip mall off 270 was a small shop with an orange sign that read WATER BEDS AND OTHER FINE FURNISHINGS. Stepping inside was like returning to the scene of a fashion crime. Blisteringly bright magenta sheets adorned a row of beds with cheap headboards. A hodgepodge of velveteen recliners, particle-board endtables, and lava lamps was arranged on display in what looked like an approximation of a stoner's living room. In the back was a glass counter with a cash register, and behind it were rows of samurai swords in all colors.

Arthur approached the bleach-blond man sitting there on a stool.

In the display case between them were knives with no conceivable function — blades with brass knuckles built into the handle, points that turned back in a sudden S shape. Others were adorned with so many pewter dragons they looked impossible to hold.

The clerk, middle-aged, was the unhealthy color of a man who's been drinking too long in Key West.

"I'm here about the truth," Arthur said.

"The truth?"

Arthur lowered his voice. The possibility he was falling prey to a scam had left him reticent and ashamed. "The truth. About travelers."

"Oh, that," the man said. He pulled a booklet from a cardboard box on the floor. The "literature" was thin, not more than twenty-five sheets of copy paper stapled in the center and folded over with a stiff paper cover.

"Fifty-nine dollars," the man said.

Arthur gave him sixty in cash and left without change.

He arrived home to hear Alexis weeping upstairs. Mama Junie met him at the door.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"She's convinced she's never getting better. She can't keep any food

down. I called the doctor, and he said if we bring her in, they're probably going to put her on an IV. She absolutely refuses."

He pushed past her and found Alexis in bed, turned away from him.

"Hey," he said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"We ruined everything," she said. "We brought that thing into our lives, and now our baby is going to die."

"The traveler? Is that what you mean?"

"Of course that's what I mean. Lauren Kutner said when they were thinking about having a baby, they'd been arguing a whole lot over it. They didn't know if they even wanted kids, and then that thing showed up. They kept seeing it near the cul-de-sac, and her husband — remember Mike? — he hit the traveler with a crowbar. And the next day when she went to the doctor, she found out she couldn't have kids." The crying overtook her.

"I'm not following this logic," he said. "Do you want me to get rid of it?"

"Weren't you listening? You can't. Don't you touch it."

"Ally, this is a medical thing. We have to sort it out. We'll take you to the hospital. They'll help."

She sat up and turned on him. Her face was a deep red. "Don't you get it, Artie? It's us. It's not medical. There's all this junk in the world, all this psychic junk, and it's finally caught up with us."

"I don't see how we fit into this. Is this more Lauren Kutner stuff?"

"It's not anybody's stuff. It's true," she said. "Artie, I don't want to go to the hospital because the longer we waste time, the longer we're in danger. Me and Joshua."

"So what are you saying we should do?"

"It's you, Artie," she said. "You're the one."

"The one what?"

"I don't have doubts," she said. "Mama doesn't have doubts. Not about Joshua."

Arthur developed a cold feeling in his stomach.

"Say it, Alexis. Say whatever you're saying."

"Artie, I love you, but — "

"But what?"

"You need to move out, Artie. You're no good for the baby."

There it was, his tongue frozen, his heart filling his chest so it squeezed his lungs into airless organs incapable of powering speech. He wanted to tell her everything, to make her understand the enormity and consequence of an entire life, his son's life, rolling out before him and all the possible madly wrong turns it could take, all because Arthur failed failed failed to form a word of warning or wisdom or love.

There it was.

Love.

How can you ever make anyone know you love them? That was his doubt.

But his flat lungs wouldn't give him anything. His dead brain sputtered, and he stood mute before Alexis until finally turning from the room and charging down the stairs, his fists balled. He'd never — not ever, not in a million years — hit a woman, but Junie was edge-of-the-cliff close. She stood in the kitchen holding a bowl of something, mixing it with one of her funky spoons. She had that cow-eyed look, that slightly open mouth, down-turned. He'd never noticed how much he hated the shape of her mouth, which was not Alexis's mouth. That must have been from the phantom father who'd dissipated by delivery.

"You put this crap in her head," he said. "You wanted me out."

"This was all her idea." Junie hugged the bowl against her stomach. She stood in the center of his kitchen, Arthur's kitchen, which didn't smell or look like his kitchen anymore.

"She wants me to go," he said.

"Then maybe you should go. Maybe that thing will go with you." She turned and seemed to forget he was standing there. He took the booklet and the bottle of Balvenie and stepped out onto the patio.

He breathed in, out, in. He slammed the door behind him.

In the hardy twilight the woods beyond were holding something back. Arthur poured a long drink. Here he was again. Joshua was on his way, somewhere nearby, schlepping past trees, over logs, through stony rivulets, ready to emerge at any moment.

Arthur opened the booklet. *Sixty dollars*, he thought.

He read by the light of his phone. The information was mostly useless or repetitious. But he found something near the end. It said, "Travelers, if

truly a product of psychic material, as some theories suggest, may only be the manifestations of individuals. Should one take this theory to its ultimate conclusion, it may be safe to surmise that, being the manifestation of *one* person, any given traveler may only exist *for* that person."

Arthur's heart bottomed out. Had he held back? It wasn't fair, was it? He'd read the baby books. Men couldn't feel the same way about their child until after it was born, couldn't love them in the same way a mother could. How dare anyone seriously expect that? Fathers didn't have the unfair advantage of a physical bond. They didn't grow the thing inside them or tear a piece of their own heartbeat away to lend it life, to jump-start the nebulous electrons building into a brain and nerves, spongy fingers, feet, penis. It wasn't fair, was it, to assume the traveler was his? Was Arthur's very own psychic dubiety made manifest?

But the unsureness was there, certainly, a pallid platform of shifting sand, and the confirmation of a traveler only reiterated this uncase, this cyclical loop of questions about continuance, souls, morality, the whole barking madness of a world about to collapse, and him bringing another life on board, like dragging a drowning man into an already sinking lifeboat. Whatever the metaphor, he was unsure, and that shouldn't be punishable, not made visible because just now, of all times throughout history, of all the eras in which to exist, life's underside was suddenly displaying itself.

His drinking tonight was an angry, forced set of motions, finishing the glass and tipping the bottle to his lips, reasoning that the burn in his throat was somehow stripping him down, peeling his vacillation so it dropped into the acid of his stomach, so he could piss it out and be done with it by morning.

He waited and drank, and Joshua was very late that night.

A rustling in the trees drew Arthur up short. Joshua stepped forth. Seeing Joshua now, Arthur knew this: Joshua *was* to blame for Alexis's illness. He was anxiety embodied. Every cell of him Arthur had wrought from each finely tuned pause at the mirror to question his capacity to be a father, every flinch as he sat in a meeting flipping his pen, or every slow, self-imposed chiding on his drive home due to not having accounted for one more future expenditure, one more second of his son's life. Joshua was

the insidious, the niggling, and the dark. And these parts of him were controlling the outcome of Alexis's pregnancy.

Arthur stumbled, carrying the whiskey toward the familiar figure hobbling across the lawn.

"I want to know how to get rid of you," he said. "I want you to go away. You're bad news."

Joshua didn't respond.

Arthur threw a phantom punch that came within an inch of Joshua's cheek. The thing didn't flinch. Arthur knew suddenly that Alexis had been right. Because if this walking corpse was Arthur's own anxiety, it was tied to everything else, too. To take a crowbar to it was to shatter all the psychic pieces that made up their dreams, their desires, all the parts that made up a child. To obliterate Joshua was to rob the flesh of its fantasy, of its elegant cosmic fortitude.

He screamed, tore through a flurry of punches, drawing up short, midair, half-wanting to make contact by accident. He howled, he swore, he kicked at the grass until the thing was out of sight, piercing the dark edge of the woods and sliding away into shadow.

Hours later, Arthur awoke on the lawn with the sun turning the dew to crystal.

Arthur resisted.

For another week he stood about after supper, hangdog, in his own living room. He'd begun eating by himself before the television in the den, the sound turned low, his eyes unfocused on the commotion of the screen while Alexis and Junie scraped and dipped and spoke in funereal whispers to one another over the table. Afterward, the act of having eaten apart seemed to facilitate a new isolation that found him shuffling around the coffee table, pretending to look at old family photos as if he were some vacuum salesman waiting for the interested wife who would be along shortly with tea. But Alexis never joined him, and he eventually stopped pacing, finally standing there, hands at his sides, considering the strange shape of this room with all these things in it and the way it held his tiny life so quietly.

He began packing his belongings.

He went to work and made blunders, spent hours fixing them, and

found that the extra time away from the house appealed to him. So long as he stayed gone, Joshua might too.

He stopped looking for Joshua in the evenings, hoping his lack of interest would convince whatever psychic particles had coalesced into this being to disband. Whatever covalence had drawn them together was now moot, he thought, gone, a substanceless epicenter. He flushed his mind of doubts with positive thinking and meditation in his car at lunch and hoped Joshua would simply flitter away on his own.

But then Arthur, finally home, late in the evening, would be rinsing a plate in the sink and look out to see this being, trudging forlornly, hauling itself through the hostas.

One Sunday afternoon he gave up the fight. Alexis developed a fever, and Arthur toted his suitcases and toiletry bag to the car.

"I'll just stay in a hotel," he told Junie.

She didn't look up from her crocheting. Whatever she was making had spiraled out in a patterned circle like a giant blue and red web on her lap.

"Just hope you haven't waited too long," she said.

HE STAYED for one last supper. He hadn't the heart to turn the television on, and he sat there at the edge of the couch chewing a piece of bleach-white bread, which was all he could keep down anymore.

Alexis and Junie retreated to the upstairs bedroom early, and Arthur found himself regretting that he didn't have a single utilitarian reason for tromping up there. Feeling the home-threads unraveling, he reached for the whiskey one last time and took it onto the patio. A part of him knew he might not even go back through the house when he left. He'd detour around the side of the garage. A part of him knew he might never see his wife again.

Joshua appeared somewhat later, and halfway through his ramble, Arthur rose and approached him one last time.

"What do you want?"

Joshua made no response.

"You talk to me, you son of a bitch. You give me the time of day."

Joshua didn't react. No change in course. Nothing.

Arthur moved closer to whisper into his ear.

"I'm going to get rid of you. I'm not leaving you here. You should know that."

Still nothing.

He'd never been this close. Arthur could smell him now, that crumbled-dust smell, wet ash, dry storm drains, neglected basements, rust. It was the scent of bloodless decay, the remnant of remnants left over in the ruin, an echo of death.

Arthur took a step back. He sniffed slowly. A new look was breaking across his face.

"You're as real as anything," he said. He threw the whiskey, glass and all, into the yard and headed for the house. Opening the door, he was met with that wall of butterscotch scent. He could hear Alexis upstairs, shuffling and sobbing, sobbing and shuffling.

Junie was back in the kitchen, mixing something new.

He moved toward her and she flinched, like he might pop her in the jaw. The bowl wobbled in her hand, almost slipped free. He didn't look at her. He plucked the four candles off the counter.

"Those aren't yours," she said.

"It's my goddamn house," he said. He was racing around the rooms now, the bottom of his shirt held up to form a basket in which he laid the candles — now the ones on the toilet, the endtables, those little shelves on the wall in the hallway. He was charging upstairs, searching them out, the nightstand, the bathroom windowsill.

He began arranging them, lighting them as he went, a few on the stairs, down the hallway, through the kitchen, out onto the patio, and into the soft grass of the yard. This trail of burning candles.

Junie followed him to the doorway. "You'll set fire to the whole house," she said.

Arthur lit the final candle. He placed it a couple feet from Joshua, who seemed especially slow this evening, especially reluctant to go.

"You're crazy," Junie shouted. "I have a mind to call the police."

She leaned over like she might blow out one of the candles on the patio, and Arthur smacked a fist into his palm to get her attention. "You blow that candle out, and I'll do the same to you."

It was a ridiculous thing to say. He didn't know what it meant, even,

and it almost made him waver. The plan was stupid. The idea. But the threat did the trick. Junie rose up. Her face suddenly went slack. She backed out of the doorway and nearly tripped over her own feet. "Oh God," she said. "Oh God, what have you done?"

Arthur turned to see Joshua changing course, following the candles as an airless, dry moan escaped his gray lips.

He passed over or through the candles. His ashen legs brushed the flames and put them out as he went. The moaning grew louder, multi-voiced somehow, as if a choir had begun clamoring in the dust-softened halls of Joshua's throat.

By the time Joshua reached the door leading into the house, Junie had regained herself and was hunched over trying to blow another one out, but she was wheezing. She rose up full of scarlet in her cheeks, unsuccessful, holding her chest, then retreated to the living room where she swooned back on the couch in a sweat.

"You've done it now," she said as Arthur entered the room. Her face reversed its coloring and went fish-belly white. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

"I have," Arthur said.

Joshua lumbered down the hall, his features all the more broken and hideous in the artificial light of the house. The voices in his throat, for there were several, took over the rooms. It was the cold sound of water and wailing swirling together until it buzzed in Arthur's brain, vibrated in his bones.

"Why?" Junie wheezed.

Arthur took a seat beside her on the couch.

"He's inescapable," he said, and on cue the monster emerged into the living room, rounding the open doorway toward the stairs. "Maybe there are too many people in the world. Maybe there's too much bad psychic energy, like they say." He pointed at Joshua. "But he's not the past. He's not a ghost. He's our fear of everything — everything unsaid, undone."

Junie's eyes watered, her breathing shallowed out.

"You don't ever get rid of doubt or anxiety or fear or pain," Arthur said. He could smell it now, that scent of ash and death and burning gold leaves taking the summer away, same as autumn when Arthur was a child. And it was tempering the overly sweet butterscotch smell so that the air

became a palpable, hot, living thing, a life laying itself across other lives, a breathing hold body in its own right.

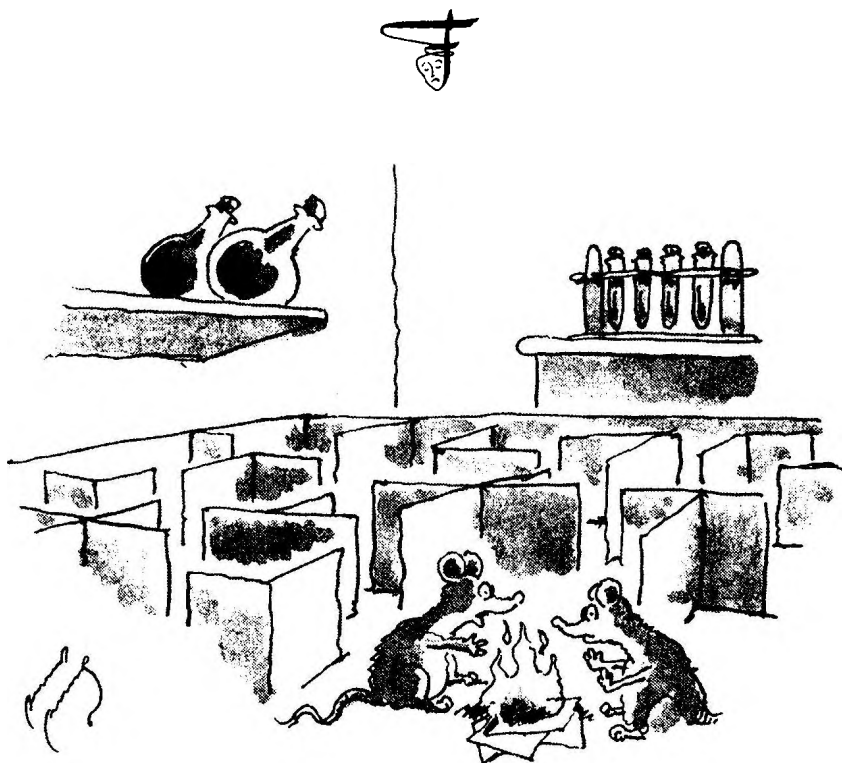
"You don't get rid of all the bad," he said. He watched Joshua ascend the stairs that led to where his wife was lying in the bedroom. The candles snuffed out as he went, one, two, three....

The voices were higher-pitched now, ascending with the stairs, growing, to Arthur's ears, angelic.

Junie slumped to the left and slid off the couch where she lay on the floor, weeping, blubbering.

Arthur could hear Alexis calling his name.

"All that bad stuff," Arthur said. "You learn to live with it."



"I think they're lying about the grant extension, Hank."



FILMS

KATHI MAIO

STALKING LOVE ON THE TIME-SPACE CONTINUUM

I'M NOT the only one who has noticed that the adorable actress Rachel McAdams seems to have cornered the market on romantic dramedies about time travel. The only problem is that Rachel herself never gets to explore the past or future or alternate reality in these flicks. She always ends up a stick-in-the-mud of static modern life, while her male significant others experience the joys, horrors, and sheer adventure of jumping through time. The tendency for boys to have all the fun in movies is nothing new, of course. But we've expected things to improve in recent decades. And, in many cases, they have. But the plot life of three Rachel McAdams characters in a handful of films from the last five years helps to illustrate the regrettable gender dynamics that oft occur

when cinema melds romance with time travel.

Let's get Woody Allen out of the way first. I don't need to say much about *Midnight in Paris* since I reviewed that movie in the September-October 2011 issue of this very journal. And the less said about the character, Inez, played by Ms. McAdams, the better. She is one of Woody Allen's ubiquitous shrew characters, designed to demean and exploit the male lead — who, until recent years, was played by Mr. Allen himself. Owen Wilson stood in for the author-director in this particular film, and he was able to mimic the befuddled, neurotic, but basically well-intentioned Allen character well. The key thing his protagonist, Gil, needs to do is get away from Inez, his shallow, grasping, and manipulative fiancée, and find a more agreeable lady friend. This he thinks he accomplishes

when he falls back in time to the City of Lights in the 1920s, where he interacts with dozens of cultural icons, including Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, the Fitzgeralds, and Salvador Dalí. He also encounters an open-hearted bohemian enchantress named Adriana (Marion Cotillard) and quickly believes that he has found a soul mate.

The fact that a modern man should feel that a woman from almost a hundred years back would be a more simpatico love interest than a twenty-first-century gal is but the flipside of a theme that is also common in romantic time-travel movies: that modern women are miserable in their independent careerist lives and would (more or less literally) jump at the chance to go back to the nineteenth century, when men were men and women couldn't even vote. We saw an example of this in the delightful 1979 Nicholas Meyer mash-up of H. G. Wells, Jack the Ripper, and disco-era San Francisco, *Time After Time*. That film was, at least, very sympathetic to the modern bank officer played by Mary Steenburgen, even if it did eventually banish her to the Victorian era.

Later films like James Mangold's 2001 *Kate & Leopold* have been even more pointed in

their rejection of the "liberated" modern female. In that rom-com, Kate McKay (Meg Ryan) is a wretched yet driven marketing exec who can't keep a boyfriend and can't cook a meal. So, of course, she swoons for a time-traveling 1876 nobleman played by Hugh Jackman. (Okay, I'll admit that Hugh Jackman is swoonworthy...but that is beside the point.) The fact that Jackman's Leopold incongruously combines gourmet cooking skills and new-age-guy sensitivity with his dashing aristocrat good looks only seals the deal. Before the credits roll, Kate is jumping back to the Gilded Age to find love and free herself from all her modern miseries. Or so sayeth the male writers and director.

Compared to a movie like *Kate & Leopold*, the two recent examples of time-travel romance featuring Rachel McAdams are very woman-positive. But that's not to say that there isn't a discomfiting subtext to both. This is especially true of 2009's *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

Based on Audrey Niffenegger's best-selling debut novel of the same name, the film chronicles the life and death of a (somewhat unreliable) librarian named Henry (Eric Bana), who has a genetic anomaly, termed chrono-impairment, that forces him to ricochet naked

through his own past, present, and future. As the title implies, the story is also about the time-traveling fellow's life mate, a woman named Clare, played by Ms. McAdams.

I should just admit that of all the time-traveling romance movies I have watched — and I have seen me a few! — this is the one that most gave me the absolute creeps. For the audience first sees Henry meet Clare when he is a nude grown man hiding in a thicket. And she is a six-year-old lass (Brooklynn Proulx) playing in a meadow. That image, along with the aspect of secrecy in their initial recurring encounters, would put this movie on a pedophile's Hollywood top ten. It brought to this viewer's heart not a thrill of high romance, but an uncomfortable sense of revulsion.

And that feeling never really went away, even after Henry and Clare finally hook up when she is of legal age. While time-travel movies almost always contemplate issues of destiny and the inevitability of a life course, in this particular film it seems less that Clare is destined to be with Henry than she is *doomed* to have her life dominated by a random, peripatetic fellow who can help her win the lottery but can't actually be there for her when she needs him. At one point, Clare does

blurt out: "You forced yourself into the heart and mind of a little girl." But that denunciation is a fleeting one, while her devotion appears complete. Even after his violent death, Clare waits for her husband to reappear in a time ricochet from their past rather than get on with the rest of her more limited life. Despite the final grand, fleeting embrace in the golden meadow, that's not bittersweet, but simply a bitter ending for Clare and the audience.

The most recent foray by Rachel McAdams into cinematic time travel comes in the form of an original romantic comedy from a man, Richard Curtis, who is well known for them. As a writer, and later as a writer-director, Mr. Curtis has made his mark with films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, and *Love Actually*. In his latest (and what he claims will be his last movie as a helmer) he adds fantasy elements to his recognizable romance riffs. The film is called *About Time*, and it focuses on the love life of an affable young chap, Tim (charmingly played by Domhnall Gleeson, son of Brendan). Shy and awkward, Tim is neither smooth nor successful in his relations with young women. So when his laid-back retired-professor father (the

fabulous Bill Nighy) clues him in on the family secret, that the men (natch!) of his clan have always had the ability to travel back into their own, personal past, Tim knows how he will use this talent. "It was always going to be about love," he informs the audience, in voice-over.

Although his ability to retrace events does him no good with the dishy blond heartbreaker (Margot Robbie) visiting his family, things begin to look up for Tim after he moves to London and meets a young American woman, Mary (McAdams), at a total-darkness theme restaurant. Unfortunately, when he goes back in time to save his misanthropic landlord (Tom Hollander) from professional ruin on that same evening, he alters the night's events and misses Mary at the restaurant. It takes all of his talents as a man and a time-traveler to hunt down and charm his dream girl and put his romance back on track.

Mary is worth Tim's magical stalking efforts. And after a few complications of the comical or sentimental variety to liven up the proceedings, Mary and Tim settle into a happy life as a loving couple and also as young parents. But Tim never tells his bride about his miraculous time-tweaking talents, even as he uses them to manipulate

their life together. And you have to ask yourself, is that any way to maintain an honest relationship?

Oh, Domhnall Gleeson is such an open, sweet-faced, and amiable actor that he has you forgetting the slightly skeezy aspects of his character's time-management tactics. And Richard Curtis is careful to show how well-intentioned Tim's little machinations are. If Tim pops out for an orgy while his wife is large with child, the audience never sees it. But we do see the unfair advantage he has in life in general and most especially in his relationship with his true love. And that leaves an unpleasant aftertaste for any viewer with an ethical streak.

Still, if Rachel McAdams's Mary is understandably clueless about certain aspects of her husband's life, at least she is a likeable and believable woman. You would expect no less from Richard Curtis, who generally expresses wonderful compassion and affection for his slightly eccentric characters. In fact, one of the ways in which the filmmaker defuses the questionable gender politics of his primary love relationship is by widening the focus of his movie. *About Time* isn't just about Tim and Mary and what happens to them, it is also

about all of their family and friends. Although not quite as complex and overlapping as the myriad storylines in *Love Actually*, this movie still invites us to care about a great many characters and their lives (with or without time travel). As Curtis told *Variety*, "[t]here is a romantic comedy in there somewhere, but it stops halfway through."

If you want madcap hijinks in your time-travel rom-com, then it turns out that *About Time* is not the movie for you. Like early Curtis, it contains nuptials but also a funeral. And, in the end, it tends to get a bit schmaltzy as Tim shares with the audience his realization that it is less useful to go back and relive each day until you perfect it than it is to fully appreciate each moment as you live it the first time.

That's easy for a character like Tim to say, however. He has the luxury of choosing. But what would Mary choose, if she had the chance? We'll never know. But let's hope that when Rachel McAdams stars in a time-travel movie next, she's the one who gets to move through time!

Interestingly, at the same time *About Time* was playing in theaters, another comedy about time travel and a budding love relationship was playing. But this family

animated feature has little in common with Richard Curtis's far superior live-action movie, except for the fact that it's the boys who do the time-traveling and the girl who stays home.

The most memorable thing about the computer-animated cartoon, *Free Birds*, is how flat-footed and misguided it seems. Directed by Jimmy Hayward, and written by Hayward and Scott Mosier (from a story by David I. Stern and John J. Strauss), it tells the tale of a painfully perceptive free-range turkey named Reggie (Owen Wilson) who ends up teamed with a blustering, addle-brained factory-farm turkey named Jake (Woody Harrelson). The two travel back in time in an egg-shaped time machine named S.T.E.V.E (George Takei) to Colonial times to keep turkey off the table at the first Thanksgiving feast and thereby prevent the centuries-long autumnal genocide of turkeydom.

While in the Plymouth colony, the new buddies encounter the fowl-killing threat in the form of a selfish and gluttonous Governor Bradford (Dan Fogler) and his thoroughly evil henchman, Myles Standish (Colm Meaney). Initially to survive, and then to strategize their resistance, the two modern

turkeys join forces with a tribe of seventeenth-century wild turkeys led by a wise chief, Broadbeak (Keith David). His brave and beauteous daughter, Jenny (Amy Poehler), provides a love interest for the enamored Reggie.

To count the ways in which *Free Birds* is as messy as an uncleaned turkey cage would be exhausting. But a few missteps are easy to point out. Those interested in the Colonial history of the white Puritans would find the portrayal of Bradford, Standish, and the rest of the dim-witted colonials more than a little distasteful. And as for the wild turkeys of Plymouth? They are depicted as wearing feather head-dresses and war paint like some bad stereotype of Plains Indians from a John Ford Western. (That is to say, they aren't even anything like the coastal New England Native tribes.) You would think, in this day of righteous outrage over branding sports teams with mascots like

Redskins and Indians, equating Native people to savage animals like Panthers and Bears, that the filmmakers would have thought twice about equating wild turkeys with North American Indians. But, no.

The person most likely to be outraged by *Free Birds* is Michelle Obama, however. For, in the end, the movie solves the turkey-slaughter question by making pizza the traditional holiday feast fare. So much for the First Lady's efforts to promote healthy eating options to youngsters.

Needless to say, there is no reason why an animated kiddie film needs to push all the politically correct buttons of historical accuracy or culturally sensitive expression. Much can be overlooked if such a movie is rollicking good fun. But *Free Birds* isn't even that. That's right, I'm going to say it. It's a turkey — and not one of the time-traveling freedom-fighter species, either.



Gordon Eklund's novels include *The Eclipse of Dawn*, *A Thunder on Neptune*, and *If the Stars Are Gods* (co-written with Gregory Benford). The Nebula Award-winning short story "If The Stars Are Gods" has recently been published in electronic form with a new autobiographical intro by the co-authors. He returns to F&SF with one of the quirkiest stories we've seen in a while (and we do see a lot of quirky stories hereabouts).

I Said I Was Sorry Didn't I

By Gordon Eklund

There is a sickness
Which puts some of us in distemper but
I cannot name the disease

— William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

HEY PEOPLE: I SAID I WAS
sorry didn't I.

I mean it's on the record right. Go look it up. Let's be fair okay. What more can I do? That I haven't done. I said I was sorry. Took my apology tour. Went all the way round the block and back again. Teared up for 60 Minutes, went on *Morning Joe*, wept like a baby girl. Twice. I agreed with everything anybody said: oh sure it's my fault. All of it. Most definitely. No questions asked. Said it once, said it a thousand times. Abso-freaking-lutely. All my fault. I confess. Never denied it. Not once. Like cheese on a cracker, poop on a polc. My fault my guilt my shame blah-blah-blah. (Etc.) I accept all blame. Bear the burden on my shoulders. Sorry sorry. *Mea*

culpa, mea culpa. (For you Latino speakers.) As God is my witness. Even if He doesn't exist any more than Nancy the tooth fairy — I mean let's be real: after all that's happened you expect me of all people to fall on my buckled knees like a twenty-peso whore and fire off smoke-signal prayers of phony sincerity to a non-existent Deity Almighty?

Ain't no way. Not happening. I'd rather eat wormburger. (For breakfast.)

Where was I?

Saying how sorry I am I'm sure. Admitting it's my fault. Being as that's pretty much all I do these last dreary days before everything shuts down, blows up, implodes and/or explodes, vanishes into the cosmic ether, all on account of me, all my fault. Can't poke my nose out the front door for the morning *Times* without some wild-eyed yo-yo in sackcloth and ashes screaming in my face how I should be barbecued at the stake, flayed before lunch, impaled on a hot poker rammed up the kazoo, or else just plain lynched from the nearest lamppost. Hey enough already with the murderous threats. I mean: *basta!* Message given, message received.

And another issue I might as well raise while we're on topic: I'm not alone here. I've got a wife and kids. Three of them. Kids I mean — just the one wife (though big enough for two), the onetime firecracker-hot Wendy Carpine, whom I met, boarded, and promptly knocked up (with twins!) in college, me at Yale Law, she a sophomore at Southern Conn and her old man a New Haven mob boss with a double-barreled sawed-off jammed under one hirsute Sicilian armpit. (Joke that last — Papa Carpine actually managed a rundown pizzeria in a borderline neighborhood — and I actually did "love" my then firecracker hot Wendy C — at least long enough to marry her.) The five of us live here. Together. We're family — the nuclear unit. (Even if they can't stand the sight of me — and vice versa.)

Or did. Till the day the now considerably less hot Wendy asks me to please sweetheart run out to Safeway and get her a fresh box of tampons. I say: you got to be smoking devil weed you want me to risk my ass for that. And she says maybe you should have thought of that before you did what you did and destroyed the universe. She then adds, whining plaintively: And I've got cramps — something else you men know nothing about. (Though I figure I do, having once audited a Women's Issues seminar at Yale on a frat house bet.) I have to feed the baby now anyhow, she adds.

(Little Fat Vinnie — named after his grandpapa shot dead in what was officially put down as a pizzeria stickup gone sour but for which Wendy holds me entirely accountable — they can't get to you here so they shoot poor papa instead — the baby age seventeen weeks and likely not mine, another tangled tale there.)

I say: Okay but I step out that door and they lynch me from the flagpole you'll be sorry.

She says: Then you better wear that nice fluffy turtleneck Papa gave you for your birthday. That being the time I didn't make it home for my own party due to being involved in an unforeseen accident. (Yeah, folks, *that* accident.)

Which is my Widebody Wendy in a peanutshell. A natural born comic. Another Lou Costello. Nothing funnier than a fat lady, right? (Though she's occasionally ruminated having her tummy stapled shut except that my health insurance might not cover it and now it doesn't matter anyhow since old Mr. Furbush the senior partner called me into his private office the first time since I was hired and promptly sacked my ass when he heard what I did, saying I was a conspicuous threat to overall firm morale, so now we can't afford to get the twins the braces they'll need to straighten their bites so they can orally pleasure their rich blond boy-friends when they're old enough to date which ain't likely to happen either now that total doom lies around the next nearest bend in the highway of time.)

Thanks to me.

So I paste on the fake mustache and beard acquired from an ad in *Playboy* online and the yellow slicker slouch hat and sunglasses I don regardless of weather and head on out to Safeway on the corner and buy the carton of tampons while the checkout clerk flashes me the sneer he reserves for pussy-whipped husbands like me and says will that be all ma'am and I say no asswipe give me a pack of Marlboro Heavies too. (Why the hell not? Cancer is the least of anybody's worries these days.) It's a dumb thing to do of course. Drawing attention to myself. Anybody recognizes me under the hairy camouflage and sounds the alarm and I'm dancing the dead man's jig at the end of a short-drop rope.

But he doesn't bat an eyelash — Safeway clerks having seen everything twice over — and I head home and slip through the dense backyard

foliage I have carefully cultivated and stick my key in the lock and give a quick twist and —

And nothing.

The key doesn't work.

I try again.

Nada. Redux.

Wendy's changed the goddamn locks on me!

Her voice comes whining through the door shrill as a drill poking a bad tooth: Please go away. Leave us alone. Live somewhere else. Your sisters will take you in. We've had enough. It's not our fault what you did. We're tired of paying the price for something we had nothing to do with. It's not fair. You owe us this much. And leave the tampons on the porch. I really do need them.

I consider arguing back. But what's the point? I'm not going to miss her any more than she's going to miss me and as for the kids — well, I suppose the twins have to be mine but that was ten years and seventy-five Wendy pounds ago so why wax sentimental now? (Little Fat Vinnie's dad's the aerobics guy at the gym, I'm ninety-seven percent sure.)

So I bid her and immediate family a fond farewell with finger uplifted and add how sorry she's going to be (not believing it for an instant) and slip on out through the foliage.

I head downtown where my sister(s) live.

On the way the first wino I pass with a hand out I drop the plastic grocery bag with the tampons into it. (The Marlboros I'm smoking.) Hey jerkwad, he snarls after he's looked inside, what I'm supposed to do with this?

Wipe your welfare ass for a change, I say over my shoulder.

He hurls a rock after me. It misses.

Just then a bus arrives and I hop aboard since it's the no-fare zone and there's one seat not already occupied by a person or persons of downscale unpleasantness. Funny ain't it how with the world about to end any moment (because of me) class hatred continues to rage unabated? Lenin would be tickled pink.

Peeling off the fake beard and moustache, I hang on the door of my sister Sadie, the writer. A brother in need is a brother indeed, I shout. Sadie's one person who says she holds nothing against me. Teddy Kennedy

drove off a bridge and killed a poor girl giving him head, she says, and they still let him chair the Senate Judiciary Committee. Politically, Sadie is a staunch liberal Democrat but her standards of morality are as high as a church steeple. (And as rigid.) She lives alone in a low-rent basement sty in a dodgy part of town and avoids intimate cross-gender contacts better to fuel her creative energies. I know there'll always be an empty corner of her couch for me to curl up on once I've dumped her dirty laundry on the floor.

Sitting in the vacant place I've made for myself, I tell Sadie how Wendy changed the locks on me and now I'm homeless and wifeless both.

She says: Heck, brother, you're better off.

She's perched behind a wobbly card table from Target (cheap) with three iMacs (none cheap) up and running in front of her. As I said Sadie's a writer. While in college (Bennington) she took third prize in a short story contest sponsored by the *New Yorker* magazine, her entry an angst-fueled slice of life concerning a sexually confused college sophomore who wears baggy alpaca sweaters, thong underwear, and is addicted to prescription Adderall. At the end of the story she commits suicide by choking herself to death on wadded-up pages ripped from her private confessional journal and jammed down her throat. (The same pages we readers then realize we've been reading all along.)

Now Sadie's a full-time writer. Of novelizations. Not novels, mind you (though apparently she's still working on one of those — on a fourth iMac locked in her bedroom — *Seymour the Hog Does Brooklyn* it's called though she refuses to allow anyone to read a sample), but novelizations based on TV series from the fifties and sixties. Old, obscure, long-forgotten TV series, the kind you assume nobody cares about so the producers won't bother suing for copyright violation. Sadie has churned out somewhere between sixty and eighty of these — she refuses to maintain a specific count. From *Rocky King*, *Inside Detective* starring the late Roscoe Karns through *My Mother the Minibus*, primarily crime shows and westerns. She's currently at work on an experimental three-tier saga (one tier per iMac) inspired by the long-running daytime serial *All My Children* except that in Sadie's version the fictional town of Pine Valley PA is under siege from a vampire army led by the character Barnabas Collins from the rival soap *Dark Shadows*.

And they sell too. Sadie's novelizations. Modestly but steadily. Over the Internet. (Where else?) E-book and print-on-demand. Sadie clears just enough in royalties to cover her rent, prescription meds, and thrift-shop alpaca sweaters. (Her underwear I refuse to speculate on.)

She wags a finger in my face: Can I offer you some honest advice especially if you're planning on making this your new home?

I shrug and say: Home is like where you go there and they don't chop off your nuts.

She says: Shut up and listen. You need to knock off the apology crap. People are sick to death of hearing how sorry you are. It's time for you to do something about it, turn a page, expose a new leaf. You need to start doing penance. Show people you care. Volunteer in a homeless shelter. Help out in a soup kitchen. Work in a hospice caring for the sick and dying. Penance must come before atonement. Do something for somebody not yourself for a change.

I explain that the concept of working with the poor, the ill, the hungry, and the dying goes against everything I believe in.

She says: That's the point. It's why it's called penance. You have to be willing to change, open yourself up to learning new life lessons.

Sadie's never spoken to me this frankly before. It's almost enough to make me take a second long look at myself.

Head bowed, eyes averted, I say: Okay okay. First thing in the morning I flip the page.

About time, she says, and offers to share her brown rice and seaweed dinner with me.

Emblematic of my transformed self I accept with due humility.

The following morning in spite of an aftertaste in my mouth like day-old horse droppings (I blame the seaweed) I head out first thing in quest of the nearest homeless shelter.

In that neighborhood I don't have far to look. I spend the rest of my day doing penance, folding soiled blankets, ironing stained sheets, fluffing pillows reeking of stale wino breath. I scour sinks clean of caked-on phlegm and spittle, scrub toilet seats perched upon by nether regions unwiped since the day Elvis died.

It's why it's called penance I guess.

To me it's like a spiritually cleansing experience, says the flat-chested

junkie whore on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor beside me. I mean, she explains, I come here and do this shit I always head back on the street with my self-esteem enhanced and me feeling like I'm floating higher than an angel.

Angels, I remind her, are former people who are now dead.

Like vampires too, she says, and offers to share her crack pipe with me.

As we toke up on the fire escape high above an alley littered with the corpses of dead pigeons (from what or how, I prefer not to know) I ask my new friend if she doesn't think maybe she recognizes me.

She takes a long assessing squint while holding the acrid fumes in her lungs and says: Why should I? You ain't no George W. Clooney that's for sure.

I tell her I've been on TV a lot lately though. On the news.

She laughs and says well you're no George C. Bush either.

I tell her George Bush isn't the president anymore.

She says: Well, whoever shot him in the ass should get a medal.

I figure I may be learning a life lesson today right along with my penance.

The next day it's on to the soup kitchen.

I learn a profound life lesson here too: never eat the soup you've spent the morning assisting a tattooed chef with grime under his fingernails resembling fecal matter in the preparation of. (It turns out to be residue from last night's chocolate pudding dessert.)

Not unless you want to spend rest of the day in intimate contact with a commode still clogged from when the first George C. Bush was in the White House.

The day after it's on to a hospice for the dreadfully-suffering-while-dying-any-minute-now-from-AIDS-or-worse. One patient seems to recognize me through the terminal haze of impending death and draws me near.

In a hoarse whisper he announces how grateful he is for what I did.

He croaks: Now I know I won't be alone in heaven because pretty soon everybody else is going to be up there too.

I put a question to him: What makes you sure you're going to heaven yourself?

He says: Because there wouldn't be much sense to this if I didn't.

Bingo! I think but say nothing. Another profound life lesson learned, this concerning the audacity (or idiocy) of hope.

The fourth day I trek from one end of the city to the next searching fruitlessly for a leper colony.

That evening I inform Sadie I think I've done my penance. I'm feeling spiritually pretty well cleansed.

She says: You can always do more.

I say: Like what? You want me to say my prayers at night is that it?

She says: I was thinking of something more in the line of a religious retreat.

I say: You mean like a monastery?

She says: Sure. Why not? You have something else going on in your life instead?

In truth a monastery sounds a whole lot more enticing than another homeless shelter or soup kitchen or hospice filled with cockeyed optimists dying from unspeakable diseases. (And I never did find that leper colony I was searching for.)

I say: Okay. Point me in the right direction. What kind of monastery have you got in mind? Catholic, Quaker, Hindu, Baha'i?

She says: Does it matter? God is everywhere.

I agree — and No God is right there alongside I silently add — and the next day relinquish my remaining worldly goods (cargo shorts, flipflops, borrowed alpaca sweater and thong underwear) and enter a Zen Buddhist monastery I find in the online yellow pages under the heading *Therapists, Humanistic*.

Sensei Kamikaze Yojimbo welcomes me to the fold with a sly grin and a slap to the face that sends my fourth-to-the-last Marlboro flying from my lips.

No goddamn smoking, he says. It violate law of heaven and also county ordinance.

That evening us novitiate monks sit cross-legged in a tight circle in our patchwork saffron robes grunting prayers in pidgin Japanese between mouthfuls of undercooked brown rice bathed in a mucilaginous slug sauce.

At night as I lie awake on my back on my bed of nails afraid to turn over I go over the myriad life lessons I have so far learned.

Enough with the penance I decide as the first warming rays of the new day's sun penetrate my Spartan cell. Been there done that time to shake it on down the line as the piebald poet sang.

Immediately after breakfast (gruel in a begging bowl) I light out for other territory.

Sadie's not my only sister.

I have two more.

Myrtle known as Max ever since discovering her sexual preference of choice during a high school girls' locker room epiphany (wish I was there) occupies a penthouse flat near the prestigious university campus where she holds tenure. Max has several advanced degrees in particle physics and her teaching workload seemingly entails (from my observation) hanging around a cluttered basement office swilling coffee brewed by the secretarial intern she's currently sleeping with (safer these days than the traditional dallying with students) and scribbling a series of penciled equations on a succession of yellow notepads. The few actual students who drift by are primarily Asian exchange students on national scholarships whose command of quantum mechanics far exceeds their spoken English.

I decide to grab a double burger and fries at a nearby Five Guys and catch her later on at home.

It's me your only living masculine blood relation, I shout into the intercom when she finally responds to my incessant ringing.

On opening the door she demands: For God's sake what is that thing you're wearing?

I concede that saffron is not my best color.

I give her a quick précis of Wendy changing the locks on me and Sadie taking me in and my doing penance over dirty toilets and learning life lessons from crack whores and joining a Zen monastery run by a psychopathic nonsmoker with a Buddha belly who forces his disciples to eat surplus government food.

Sounds like you've been wasting your time, she says.

She then goes on to explain that penance is beside the point because the point (if there is one) is that there isn't any point at all.

Not in this universe, she adds. Or any other.

I say: You mean there's more than just the one?

She says: Oh yes. In fact there exist an infinite number of parallel universes in a constantly expanding metaverse.

I say: So then if this universe — our universe — ends the way it looks for sure like it will any day now then it's not that big a deal?

By then we're downing cheap Chilean pinot noir from a second bottle and weakened from overwork and bad food as I am it goes straight to my head.

Swaying drunkenly I tell Max: So who gives a fuck about any of this metaverse crap except you and your crowd of ivory tower scientist geeks like that English guy in the wheelchair? This one's the universe we live in and it's the one that's about to go blooey.

She concedes that in one sense this is true.

I ask: What other sense have you got in mind?

She gives me a rundown on the latest speculations in theoretical cosmology. She bumbles excitedly about the Principle of Fecundity which maintains that every possible alternative universe is a genuine physical universe anchored in an eleven-dimensional reality and that the totality of these infinite universes — the infinitely infinite metaverse — instantiates all possible mathematical equations.

I say: Okay but so then what?

She says: Try and picture reality as an endless beach. And each grain of sand on the beach represents a separate distinct universe. There's one universe like this one where we two sit chatting amiably and there's another where we don't. One where I don't answer the bell when you ring because I'm taking a bath with my girlfriend and another where I'm not yet home. There's one where you don't come by because you're run over and killed by a motorcyclist high on crystal meth and another where —

I'm getting the picture.

But we're still all going to die, I say.

She frowns: No.

Why not? I ask.

She says: Because in all these other universes we — all of us — we go on.

Who does? I ask.

Us, she says — all of us — everybody — everything.

But what I want to know, I explain, is are all these other me's the same as this me — the real me?

She considers for a long moment: Yes, she says. Well...almost.

I press on: But not exactly?

She admits: No.

I say: Then you're nuts. We're still going to die.

She tries to stop me as I stagger blindly out the door. She's on the verge of tears I can tell and doesn't want to be alone when the whole shebang comes crashing down.

She shouts after me: You're the one who caused it you goddamn lousy son of a bitch.

That's our mother you're talking about, I call over a shoulder.

Back on the street again I decide to head uptown to the seedy hipster enclave where my third sister Polly plies her trade slinging coffee as a barista in a drive-thru espressostand. Somewhere in my recent adventures I've misplaced the *Playboy* fake mustache and beard but at first nobody seems to bother looking at me twice as I trudge past in my saffron attire. A blowsy middle-aged woman wearing a lemon-yellow pantsuit spins around and grabs me in a tight embrace. She plants a kiss tasting of milk chocolate on my less than pliant lips.

I love you to freaking death reverend father she cries out to me. I love you even if we all are gonna die in our socks tonight.

I gaze after her as she trundles on down the street grabbing and hugging everyone she can catch.

I think: So it's come to this has it? Tonight's the night is it?

Well no surprise. No dropkick to the chops.

We knew it was coming.

After what happened.

After what I did.

Hiking the hem of my robes past my knees I quicken my pace.

Some Like It Hot. That's what the sidewalk reader board advertising the entrance to Polly's espresso stand proclaims. Polly's what's known in the beverage server industry as a "bikini" barista. It's largely a misnomer since Polly and her comrades scattered through the city's seedier zones mostly eschew mere swimwear. Suburban moms show more skin at their noontime hot yoga clubs, Polly explains to me. Genuine "bikini" baristas

go for the classic bedroom negligee look. French negligee as our old man would have called it. The frilly lacy stuff he bought his mistresses at Frederick's of Hollywood and now sold as openly as Cinnabons at the Victoria's Secret outlet in the big mall across the highway from Grandma's assisted living condominium.

Some Like It Hot caters to the drive-thru touristy trade — the local hipsters have their own Wi-Fi espresso dives — so I end up standing in line between a coal-black Humvee with tinted windows and personalized plates reading GUNLUVR and a late-model Lexus driven by a round-headed man resembling my former investment broker before he went to the federal penitentiary.

The line moves with the speed of puss draining from a wound as the male drivers in front of me all want to hang around ogling the scantily clad barista.

Who turns out once I reach the window to be Polly all right.

She greets me with a wide-eyed dimpled smile fresh as a newborn kitten.

She says: Wow dude you've gone all holy on me.

I explain the circumstances of my saffron get-up and add with a cocked eyebrow: Hey neat hipster bondage outfit you've got on yourself.

I designed it myself, she boasts. Stack-heeled Doc Martens, black fishnet stockings, hot-pink cinched bustier with faux leather thong and dangling garters.

On Polly the outfit looks positively wholesome. But then everything about Polly does. Even on her weekends off when she moonlights as a star jammer for the Albino Sperm Whales Roller Derby team Polly's the one who never stomps a downed opponent. In addition — to me anyway — Polly gives off a pervasive scent of Uncle Ben's Cream of Wheat bubbling on the stove sending me reeling back to when as kids our black cook Miss Rosa prepared it mornings before school while Mom was still in bed with her hangover and Dad hadn't made it home from screwing his secretary.

Polly says: So what's your drink of choice oh brother of mine. I got latte mocha cappuccino something cold. How about a salted caramel Frappuccino with a gob of gooey whipped cream. On the house too.

I explain how I just came by to talk. To say good-bye. The universe is ending tonight, I tell her.

She says she already knows that. It's all anybody's been talking about all day as if it was the biggest thing since the invention of Christmas.

Hesitantly I ask whether she blames me like everyone else including our sisters when the dickwad in the Lexus leans an elbow on his horn.

Why don't you come inside and hang out till I get off at eight, Polly suggests.

I say okay fine, flip the broker in the Lexus the high hand sign and yell out how I hope he got gangbanged in the shower while away in the pen.

Inside the espresso stand Polly's cream-of-wheat scent blends evocatively with the odor of freshly brewing coffee. I curl up on a sleeping bag — Polly's? — does she live here too? — and grab a dog-eared paperback off a shelf above. *Questers for Tomorrow's End*, it's entitled. A science fiction collection. The lead story is about a spaceman named Moriarty whose ship falls into a black hole and he's made to seesaw back and forth through all eternity. Just as he's about to reach the end of time and find out the meaning of it all I hear a loud *crack-bang* as Polly slams the customer window shut.

I look at my watch -- eight o'clock on the button.

Polly drapes a long black leather Doctor Who coat over her hot-pink negligee.

We head off down the street.

I'm immediately taken aback by how scant the crowds are. Considering what's about to happen I would have anticipated rioters, looters, mobs of crazies wailing their terror and fury at the heavens above.

There's nothing like that at all. Just a few scattered couples like Polly and me strolling along, talking quietly, holding hands.

I reach for Polly's hand too. She squeezes back.

Wow you're like freezing to death or something, she says.

Just glad it's almost over, I say. What a long strange trip it's been, huh?

Polly, just a kid, doesn't catch the Deadhead reference. She grips my hand tighter.

So look here, I try asking again, do you blame me or not?

She says: Blame you for what?

I say: For ending the universe tonight.

She says: Why should I blame anybody?

I mention my continued surprise at the quietude around us. Where is

everybody? I ask. Don't they know what's going to happen? Don't they believe in it?

She says: Sure they do. But they're home. Watching on TV. People don't believe anything anymore till they see it on TV first. Or the Internet.

I share with her everything that's been happening to me lately. I tell her about Wendy changing the locks and kicking me out and about the kids not seeming to care if I was gone or not. I tell her about Sadie saying that penance must come before atonement and how I worked in a homeless shelter and an AIDS hospice where people were dying in their own excrement and about the crackhead whore who shared her pipe with me and the alley full of dead pigeons. I tell her about Max offering me perspective in the form of a metaverse where everything that could happen does happen.

We enter the park.

I light up the last of my Marlboros, take a deep drag, crush it out under my bare foot.

Wow that's got to hurt, she says.

No not really, I explain with a limp.

We step off the main path, cross a wood bridge over a scummy pond, climb a long sloping hill.

Polly asks if Max said anything about the latest theory in speculative cosmology: that what we perceive as the universe is really only a holographic representation exactly mirroring phenomena occurring simultaneously on a distant bounding surface like a super-massive black hole.

We reach the top of the grassy knoll where a number of people are gathered. Most are alone or in couples but one large group sits passing a spaceship-sized marijuana joint around in a circle.

Polly and I drop down in the grass off to the side of the dopers far enough distant so that the fumes don't reach us.

Hey brother om daddy om, one of them calls out to me.

I show him the peace sign.

Polly and I tilt our heads back.

Gaze up at the sky.

She says: Did you see that?

I ask: See what?

She says: Over there. A star just went out.

I try and look where she's pointing, see nothing at first.

Then I do see it.

There goes another, I say.

She says: I saw that one too.

Then she adds: You know we're the lucky ones. Most people when they die they're sorry because they don't get to find out what happens next, how it's going to come out in the end. It's like you're watching a movie and the film catches on fire in the projector and you never see the ending. You and me — all these other people too — we get to find out how it ends.

I say: Thanks to me, yes. Remember? I'm the one who caused it.

She says: So maybe you're a hero.

I smile and blush.

Polly says: Oh wow look there see that big red one.

That's Mars, I say.

Mars just disappeared, she says.

We hear a loud gasp from all around us.

People are going *ooh* and *ahh*.

The moon is now disappearing. Vanishing piece by piece, chunk by chunk. Like a pumpkin pie being carved up for the family Thanksgiving feast.

We wait expectantly for whatever comes next.



Rob Chilson's novels include The Star-Crowned Kings, The Shores of Kansas, and Black as Blood. His last appearance in F&SF was "Half as Old as Time" in our Oct./Nov. 2013 issue. His new tale also considers the themes of age and aging, but this time from a very different perspective.

Our Vegetable Love

By Rob Chilson

*My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.*

—Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"

“G RANDPA TREE! GRANDPA Tree!” Agnes had run out of the house the moment she had pulled on her little gray dress, and was pounding

now on the thick trunk of the evergreen tree whose limbs leaned over the thatch.

“Wake up, Grandpa Tree! Today is Bonfire Day!”

Her little palms made no impression on the tree’s dense bark, but she was satisfied by the rustle of needles above her head and the faint woody creakings from the trunk. She went skipping off to free the hens from their night’s imprisonment, and to rob their nests, only calling back, “Hurry and wake up, Grandpa Tree!”

Agnes had never seen the Bonfire, had only heard about it from the older children. So this year’s Bonfire Day rated its excitement in her mind.

Thus perhaps only another six-year-old would understand the depths of her disappointment and despair when her father gruffly told her that she was still too little to be mucking about the Wizard's Manse amid the soul-suck trees.

Agnes pleaded, she appealed to her mother, she promised to be good and obey all commands from everyone, but to no avail. Rebuffed, she went off into freshets of tears.

"Na, na, lass, tha knows tha's not allowed to weep the like," her father said, his tone repenting his earlier gruffness. "Happen tha'll stay here with thy mother and be comforted."

At the implied threat, Agnes hastily gulped down her tears like the little woman she was, but sat still sullen over her bowl of porridge while conversation went on above her head. At least her older brothers and sisters did not crow over her. It would not have taken much to bring on her tears again.

When she slipped out to console herself with Grandfather Tree's sympathy, he was no comfort.

"Thy father is right, lass," he said.

Grandfather Tree's voice was a woody groan as of limb rubbing against limb, though it came from within his trunk.

"'Tis raht dangerous about the Wizard's Manse. Soul-sucks scatter afar, and not all have been grubbed out. Tha mun stay here wi' thy mother and be safe. Tha'll have thy meed of ginger cakes."

"You're not my real Grandpa! You're nowt but a tree! I hate you!"

Agnes felt the tears come again and rushed off to the shed lest anyone see. Doubly disappointed, she dipped millet with a gourd and poured it into a hollowed half-log for the clustering chickens.

Sullenly she thought: *I am too old enough! I know about fire. I know about the Trees.* She was angry at them all, Grandpa Tree the most. He had always taken her part; now she felt betrayed.

I could have my own bonfire.

When she came back around the house, Grandpa Tree was gone.

Roger Tree awoke this morning well before the sun touched the tops of his needles. Awakened not by the sun but as usual by the slapping of small pink palms against his gray bark and by a shrill voice. He opened his

hundred, his thousand eyes to see the small blond girl in her coarse tow dress. Memory and love came to him: Agnes Thistledean, his youngest great-granddaughter. She was gone on her rounds before he could muster speech.

Roger Tree dozed while chores were done and the sun belatedly rose. When his needles were in sunlight and the family at breakfast, he began to be more aware. He was still but half awake when Agnes came again to slap his trunk and cry out.

You're nowt but a tree, she'd said, before running off to cry over her disappointment.

He stood in silence. It was true enough, and should have carried no sting. Her small anger troubled him more, but the moods of children come and go like the play of shadow beneath a cloud. She would get over it, he told himself, distressed.

But the village was waking, and he had his part. Roger Tree pulled his taproot slowly out of the ground. Each hairlike rootlet he carefully eased out of the loose soil, and coiled the taproot. Then the three other main roots. These were shorter than the taproot and had few rootlets. Stepping carefully, he maneuvered these three thick roots to the firmer ground beside his plot and pulled his three boots over.

These boots looked like big wooden buckets with leather bottoms. Into each he inserted one of his thick walking roots. His limbs weren't dextrous enough to tie laces, but his rootlets gripped the boots firmly.

With surprisingly little noise, he stumped off through the streets of Edgehatan. His stride was that of a man on crutches, the rearmost root swinging forward between the others.

Edgehatan was a small village, spacious for its size, the streets wide enough to accommodate a walking tree, the houses and cottages comparatively large: a prosperous place. Most of the trees that shaded the houses were thrifty fruit trees, but a dozen or so looked like Roger Tree: evergreens with wide flat needles of a distinctive blue-green.

Roger Tree approached one such.

It gave off a woody groan as he approached, a groan that approximated: "Na then, Thistledean."

"Na then, Webster," Roger Tree groaned back.

"Bonfire Day," said Webster Tree. "Today we go forth and murder our kindred."

"And a good day's work 'twill be," Roger Tree said.

Webster Tree assented with a menacing groan and began to pull his roots out of the soil. He had four walking roots and ambled like a cow.

Roger and Webster paced along the winding street with deceptive speed, greeting men and women and other trees. They passed between the small church and the inn with its row of skulls in its front window, old brown skulls each with a thumb-sized hole punched up through the back base.

Beyond the village was a common, not large, where geese usually gagged. Now villagers gathered around a farm cart and an ox. Into the cart they threw trash too far gone for further use: rotten cloth, decrepit stools, old warped shelf boards, anything and everything useless but flammable. The cart also held shovels and hoes.

Two other walking trees were already here, and three more approached. Edgebatan held over a dozen of these trees, and several more that had not moved in years; one of these had ceased even to speak. Their memories went back a century.

"Na then, Roger," groaned one of the trees.

"Na then, Tilda," Roger Tree said.

"Tha's had a set-to wi' thy youngest kin, has tha not? Called thee a tree, she did!" Tilda Tree gave a good imitation of an old woman's giggle.

"Na, na, she's but mardy. She meant no harm by it."

"'Tis true though, bad mood or no," Webster Tree said. "It's well that she kens it."

Aye, Roger Tree thought, feeling more than a little "mardy" himself.

"What odds?" Tilda said. "She's nowt but a girl. A girl or a tree, what's to choose?"

"Aye," Roger said, still pained. The wee lass's reproach troubled him, and he worried at it as the villeins gathered. A tree, aye, but more than a tree, surely?

"A bad winter, too warm," Tilda Tree grumbled, shifting restlessly. "The grubs been gnawin' mah roots summat fierce!"

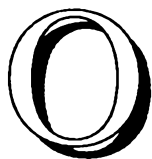
"It's good to get 'em out o' ground, shake off the itchy things," Webster Tree said, and Roger agreed absently.

The men and women of Edgebatan also moved with deceptive speed, never hurrying but soon assembled. No orders were given; there were no

visible leaders. Edgebatan had no local lord, paying taxes to a distant monastery that maintained no reeve on such unholy ground. Representatives of the lord looked at the skulls in the inn and felt unwelcome: hence the unusual prosperity of Edgebatan.

The sun was less than an hour old when the cart and villeins moved out, heading for the Wizard's Manse.

Roger Tree shambled in their wake, more than a tree, but less than a man.



UTWARDLY, Agnes Thistledean appeared composed, but had her mother not been too busy to look her daughter full in the face, she'd have learned better. Agnes pouted, going about her chores. Her heart was hot, and tears lay near the surface when she heard the shouts to the ox as the villeins departed Edgebatan.

From pouting she turned toward resentful anger. She *was too* big enough to go to the Bonfire. She *was too* old enough to take care of herself.

When her mother's back was turned, it was the work of a moment to pull a stool over, nip up and snatch from the shelf's rough board her father's flint and the steel: a worn old piece of a ploughshare. It was not long before her mother was distracted by her baby brother, and Agnes was out the front door, Grandpa Tree's usual place an aching emptiness.

Agnes piously donned her bonnet, tying it in a clumsy big knot under her chin, and slung her little purse's gallus over her shoulder.

To slip out of the village was easy, empty as it was. The women who stayed did so because they were busy. None who saw her had time to ask where Agnes Thistledean was bound, with her bonnet, purse, and determined look.

She paused in the gooseyard where the villeins had assembled. She'd never been farther than this. But this was the main road south to more settled regions, and the tracks of the cart and ox pointed the way. She set out sturdily after them.

For a time her resentment carried her, her hot little heart overcoming the scary-tummy knowledge that she was, in fact, being a bad girl.

She marched on, seeing new sights at each turn of the road, ploughed fields and fallow ones, pasture and copse.

She was being bad. At home, now so far behind her, her mother was no doubt calling to her to help with this or that, perhaps to watch her dear little brother, or to jump up and down on a sack full of last year's dried bean vines to shell the beans.

She had left without telling anyone. No one knew where she was, and that was being a bad girl. Worse, she had taken her father's flint and steel. They'd worry that she might lose the steel. She never would, it was snug in her purse, but that too they would punish her for.

You're a *big* girl now, they'd say, you know better.

Her conviction that she was ill-used, that her actions were justified, faded before these thoughts.

Finally Agnes's steps slowed, halted. She stood hesitating, looking south; half minded to start back. There the copses of trees drew together and became a forest. She heard the deep voices of the men, the *chud* of shovels striking earth.

It was only a little way farther.

Roger Tree led the villeins from the road into an irregular meadow not far into the forest. Here skinny white cows with black ears grazed, unmolested. In the center of this field was a sharply defined circle of evergreen trees whose wide flat needles were the peculiar blue-green of his own. He regarded the circle of soul-suck trees without particular emotion, not bothering to seek out the overgrown gap where he'd spent the rooted first years of his life. He had no memory of those tree years in any case.

His memories started as a small child, clutching a joint-stool and peering up at his mother as she held his younger sister on her lap and sang, while carding wool.

Nay. Not my memories. Roger Thistledean's memories. I am nobbut a tree. No better than any of these other soul-sucks.

There was a wide gap in the circle of trees, through which the Wizard's Manse could be seen, a substantial stone and brick building with a brick tower.

Where Gerthidymus the Wizard had gone, none in Edgebatan knew. Dead, perhaps, or holding sway at Court. It was even rumored that he had succumbed to one of his own soul-sucks and was rooted now next to the King's bedroom window, giving him sage advice.

What was known was that the King's men had come and burned the wide gap in the circle when the Wizard had gone. Before that, a visitor must travel half of a hundred-yard circle between the rows of deadly trees to reach the Manse. Impossible without the Wizard's sanction. When a soul-suck had taken a victim, the tree, obedient to Gerthidymus alone, would tell all his secrets.

The Wizard's departure had left the people of Edgebatan a problem. Deprived of his restraining influence, the soul-sucks had begun to spread. Now, every spring, the villagers turned out to dig up and burn every seedling not in the original avenue.

Roger led the other trees to the gap in the hedge. The walking trees pressed themselves close to the soul-sucks at one side of the gap, and the men came under the protection of their limbs to grub out the seedlings closest to the hedge. The boys and women concerned themselves with the seedlings farther out. The tiny trees were harmless, and the much-practiced work went swiftly. First they'd go around the outside of the circle, then within it, keeping all the former lawn clear.

From time to time the village had discussed cutting the hedge itself, but even with the help of their walking trees, that would be dangerous. Besides, the presence of the trees discouraged visitors: tax collectors, the lord's reeves, justiciars on circuit, thieves: all equally unwelcome.

The cattle grazed around the deadly drive and within its circle, watched by cowboys, ignored by the trees. At the gap, the road between the rows was fenced off lest they wander down that shady lane.

Webster Tree stood braced against the soul-sucks next to Roger, thrusting back limbs that groped for the men working around his trunk.

"Thy Agnes meant no harm by calling thee a tree," he said to Roger. "Tha mun overlook it."

Roger felt all the impulsions that would make the smile he could not form. "Of course she meant harm. She's nobbut a child and was angry that I did not take her part. And she has the right of it."

Roger fell silent. She had the right of it. He was not a man — had never been a man. He was nowt but a tree with the memories of a man.

I asked for this, he thought. Or Roger did.

Roger Thistledean had been well past sixty, bent, work-worn, and creaking with painful arthritis when he picked out a sturdy tree and

hobbled toward it. His grandson Will had driven the cart here, accompanied by most of the village: this was not a common occurrence. Will had steadied his elbow as he walked as firmly as he could toward his chosen tree.

Roger Tree still remembered Roger Thistledean's fear, and the resolution with which he faced it, approaching death. He remembered being seized by the tree's swift limbs, his own limbs bound, remembered being lifted and drawn toward the trunk. Then nothing for a good many minutes as he called his hoarse farewells and blessings.

Then the pain at the base of his skull as the tree's soul-suck vine grew into his head, the horrid though not painful crawling feelings as it sent questing rootlets all through his brain.

Then a timeless time, and suddenly he was standing tall, very aware of the sunshine, able to see in every direction, even straight up. It took him some moments to learn to focus his attention on one or another part of his field of vision, much like turning his head and his eyes. The meadow was full of people and white cattle, all below him and small.

"Hey! Grandad! Roger! Hey! If you hear us, raise your limbs!"

It was Will's voice, and with that Roger Tree knew. He made a deep groaning noise, then shaped it into words: "Fear not, Will, I'm awake." He raised his limbs nonetheless, and felt the burden of his — of Roger Thistledean's body. He lowered it reverently, and subsequently attended the funeral.

And now I feel that I'm a man who has been turned into a tree. It was not so; I saw them bury Roger Thistledean. Why did I — why did he do it?

Why would any man offer up his life, even knowing a walking tree would take his place?

Well, Roger had not wanted to continue as a burden on his grandson Will. Old, he'd been, and half-crippled, scarce able to walk, fit for no work, he who'd been so strong and confident. It had pleased him to think of himself as a mighty tree, able to defend his family and Edgebatan.

He knew Webster'd had similar reasons. Tilda Brasyer had always been put-upon in life; now she spoke her mind to all. The older trees had made no choice: they'd been caught by the soul-sucks while prowling about the Wizard's Manse, spies or thieves. Theirs were the skulls in the

inn window. They'd drifted into Edgebatan after the Wizard's evanishment. Left cowed and docile by their ordeal, where else could they go?

So now Roger stood braced against the mindless soul-sucks, a useful member of his village, a tree that thought like a man. But for all he leaned over Will Thistledean's cottage, Roger was no true part of the family. Not for him ever again sitting at table, milking cows, swinging axe or adze, eating bacon and eggs, or holding plough handles.

Face it, Roger, he told himself. Tha 'rt no man. Tha's nowt but a tree for all thy walking and talking. The love of even a wee lass is not for the likes o' ye.

Brooding thus, Roger Tree saw a woman enter the meadow. The white cattle glanced around and returned their attention to the grass.

"Will!"

Will Thistledean straightened his back, beneath Roger Tree's limbs. "Na then, Abigail. Ah thowt thee wasn't comin'?"

"Will, hasta seen Agnes?"

Half only of the children of Edgebatan survived childhood. All stood in silent dread.

Before anyone spoke, a childish scream startled them.



AGNES FOLLOWED THE ROAD into the woods, cautious, the sounds of voices and spades loud. She peered into the meadow, thrilled by her glimpse of the circle of soul-suck trees, and thrilled differently when one of the cows lifted her head and looked at her. Agnes backed away. She should not discover herself now, she knew. She would, she decided, amuse herself till the villeins finished and started homeward.

She did not know the word, Artless, but she understood the concept. She would be scolded. She would be spanked. But she would also be allowed to ride in the cart.

So: the woods. Agnes knew they were dangerous. But it was broad daylight, and many men and women were making noises nearby. Bears and wolves had already fled. As for soul-sucks, she knew them: had seen one every day of her life.

Not far from the road she found an evergreen seedling, not knee-high to her. She knew it for a cedar, but she decided to pretend it was a soul-suck.

It was under the dead limbs of a cedar killed by some blight. Two more dead cedars stood near, in a triangle enclosing a bay of shorter weeds: a secret place, just the place to have a bonfire.

She hadn't thought to bring anything with which to uproot the seedling. No matter; she would build her killing bonfire on top of it. Happily Agnes set to work, gathering weeds, twigs, fallen dead cedar needles, piling them knowingly around the seedling as her mother had taught her.

Now, the flint and steel! She slipped her purse off her shoulder and took out the precious fire-making implements. She held them correctly and struck, and struck, and struck. She struck again and again. Agnes had done this before under her mother's supervision and knew that this part required patience.

Finally, a wisp of smoke threaded up from the shredded bark and needles she'd prepared. A tiny flame *popped* into existence. Agnes beamed and carefully fed more fuel.

In moments flames were starting up, and she'd made fire all by herself!

The flames climbed up the pile about the cedar seedling, and Agnes sprang to her feet to seize and pile on all the dead vegetable matter she could find: weeds, twigs, and even small fallen limbs of the cedars.

The fire leaped up, then jumped into the lowest limb of the dead cedar above.

"Oh!"

For a moment it sat there, then it began to climb the cedar as if up a ladder. Agnes stared, half in dismay, half in delight, as the dead cedar — almost as tall as their house! — became a torch.

When it ignited its two dead brothers standing by, she panicked: they enclosed her on three sides. Agnes turned to run, tripped, and went down. Burning needles and twigs began to fall around her, and the forest-floor duff started to smoke and burn.

The flint and steel!

Even as Agnes scrambled to her feet, she remembered that she hadn't hung her purse back over her shoulder. She spun about, fell again, and crawled toward her bonfire, under the flaming cedar.

Smoke choked her, got in her eyes. She panicked — which way should she go? A spark fell on her hand.

Agnes screamed.



All the walking trees roared. From their greater height they saw the fire leaping above the treetops to the north. Their treeish instincts twanged like lute strings at the sight.

"'Twas Agnes's voice!"

Roger Tree started to run as Roger Thistledean had done in life, with two legs. He stumbled and had a thrill of fear of falling, but caught himself and leaped into his three-legged stride. Each stride covered yards and he took them swiftly. The scrawny white cows scattered before him. Behind him he heard the thunder of other walking trees running.

The flaming trees were not far to one side of the road. Here the forest was sufficiently open for him to crash through.

Roger checked at the sight: three trees tall as himself flaming from root to crown. Fire was his greatest fear. Then through the smoke he saw Agnes, curled up near the central tree's trunk — under its flaming limbs. Fire curled through the duff toward her. He saw her little body jerk as she coughed.

But to reach her would mean walking into the fire. It would be like a man walking into a flaming closet.

The fire goes *up*.

For a moment more Roger hesitated. Another treeish fear is that of falling. He couldn't kneel; falling might crack his trunk.

"'old me," he said to Webster Tree, next behind him, and extended his limbs to him.

The older tree gripped them, asking, "Wha's tha abaht, then?"

"Na then! Na then!" cried Tilda Tree as he leaned forward, and Webster seconded her cries of alarm.

But in moments Roger had lowered himself to horizontal. His lower and longer limbs spanned an eave-high distance, but his upper limbs were shorter. Scuttling on them like a centipede, he moved into the fiery closet and snatched the little girl.

She turned and looked at him, her tear-streaked face transformed into angelic beauty by joy: "Grandpa Tree!"

Only in Edgebatan might one hear a man scolding a tree.

"Tha gurt gormless fool! What the 'ummer was tha thinking of? 'Twas

nay necessary for thee to risk thysen! Ah could have snaked her from the fire without a singe, had tha but waited!"

"Aye, Will, Ah knows it, Ah knows it now. But then it seemed there was nay time. Besides, had Ah waited, Ah might think mysen nowt but a tree."

"Nowt but a tree! Of course tha's more than a tree!"

"But am I a man? Agnes told me: aye, I am a man. A grandfather."



THE CARROT CAKE MAN

As most stories in this issue suggest, life rarely goes as planned — all too often, it zags when it's supposed to zig. To close out this issue, we bring you the story of a doctor who returns to his hometown, where he gets plenty of reminders that life doesn't always work out like we expected — does it?

Draft 31

By Michael Libling

DOC CAPLAN WAS MORE UP on broken bones and runny noses than what you might call the head stuff, but when Allie Prager asked him to take a

look at her Joshy, he didn't have it in him to refuse. The way Cap liked to tell it, he and Allie had been high school sweethearts; they went back a long ways.

It had been shaping up as a good day even before Allie entered the picture. Beth had screwed up the scheduling again, bless her heart: there'd been Walter Pointer's psoriasis at 8:00 and Sally Bunting's swollen knees at 8:20 and then nothing but blanks till 3:30. Beth's slip-up was intentional, of course. Her slip-ups always were.

Since Cap had hung his shingle at curbside (christened by Beth with a jigger of Bully Hill champagne), it was the only way they could catch a break, short of shutting down for a real vacation. And there was no chance they could manage that. Not yet. Apart from the debt load, too many people depended on them. The upside to practicing medicine in small towns is also the downside: Patients tend to be a conscientious lot, with

no-shows and cancellations few and far between. The fact that Summervale and region had gone without a GP for the better part of two years didn't help. By Beth's calculations, the backlog ran three patients past infinity.

Renovations and repairs added to the pressure. They'd bought the old Farley Boarding House on Thorn — fallen in love with the place, in fact — a Georgian Colonial that creaked and reeked from cellar through rafters, a century of residents revealed in stain and odor. Converting the annex to a clinic had come with its expected pitfalls, then came the unexpected. The property had been a steal. Till then.

A few hours off once in a while worked wonders.

Beth chose to squeeze in some shopping at the outlets up in Waterloo. She had nothing to wear for fall. "Not that I have anywhere in particular to go this fall, hint, hint," she'd said.

Cap opted for The Perfect Bean on Market Street, killing time on the sidewalk patio with coffee, a date square, and a long-neglected Carl Hiaasen.

He was leaning toward a second Americano when she stepped between him and the smug September sun. "Doctor Caplan? David?"

She hovered, a silhouette against the backlight, but that was plenty for Cap. "Allie," he said. "Allie Prager."

"The one and only," she deadpanned in reply, and materialized in the shade of the awning, lithe and lovely, her head tilted just so, her smile slight and wistful. "I'm amazed you remember me."

"Are you kidding?" He'd been thinking about her more and more of late, wondering why he'd not so much as glimpsed her in the ten months he'd been back. Now, here she was, as if by magic. "I was worried you might be avoiding me."

"Avoiding you? Why would I do that?"

"It just seemed...I dunno." He got to his feet, moved in for a kiss and hug, but she stopped him short, and he settled for the handshake offered.

"The thing is, and I'm not comfortable asking, I need your help, David."

I need your help.... He liked the sound of that, all right. But the *David* part was something else. No one called him David. No one close to him, anyhow. She had never called him that.

"I don't know who else to turn to," she said.

"So our meeting up isn't exactly by chance, I take it." He tried to make a joke of it. "Sounds like I'm a last resort."

Her smile was sheepish, neither denial nor confirmation of his suspicion. "I caught your wife as she was leaving. She told me you'd be here. She's very nice."

"Beth, yeah, she's a sweetheart."

"You have a son, I heard."

"Nope. Just a daughter. Tess. She's six."

"Oh. I don't know why I thought..."

"And you?"

"Joshy. Josh. Fourteen. He's why I'm here. I'm at my wits' end."

Allie never had been one to beat around the bush.

They were eighteen when she'd cut him loose. "High school is over," she'd said. "It's time we were, too."

He'd thought she was kidding. A by-the-book break-up, no less. His misery as fresh as yesterday.

"We don't want to be tied down. Not with us going off to different schools and all. I'll want to see other boys and you need to see other girls. If you've only ever loved one person, Cap, how do you know the love is real?"

What was she talking about? He already knew what he needed to know, damn it. He didn't want other girls; he wanted her.

He hoped she might leave the door ajar, suggest they could still be friends. But Allie was too smart for that. "We wouldn't last two secs," she said. "Not the way we're always all over each other. My mom told me that. She's right, Cap. You know it, too."

Allie had said her piece and there was no soft-pedaling the pain. Now, twenty years on, friends was what they appeared quite suddenly to be. Felt like it, anyways, though he wished she'd done better than a handshake.

She related her concerns, made the case for her son and her worries. "It first came up about a year or so ago, I guess, a little before I'd heard you'd moved back. He'd always been a good, level-headed kid, but then, out of nowhere... And lately, well, it's gotten out of hand."

Cap was more into looking at her, just then, than listening, his distraction concealed behind a veil of empathy. His professional face, Beth called it, his bedside manner a study in vacuous sincerity. They had

laughed about it in the early years, though she didn't find it so funny anymore. She worried it would get him into trouble one day. Worse trouble than it had to date. Then again, that was Cap. He'd wriggle through somehow. "I hear what I need to hear," he promised her. "The rest is trivia."

Before she'd met Cap, Beth had never thought of medicine as a career one fell into. His alleged calling, the result of a summer spent as a stock boy in a pharmacy, was not the stuff that dreams were made of. Most baffling was how he made it through med school altogether, how the powers that be had never carried through on their threats to send him packing. Cap had the brains for it, no question; the passion, however, came in patches. He excelled at coasting. It was only when he finished fortieth in his class of 112 that Beth placed credence in medical miracles. The guy had turned it around. She had to give him credit. Still, the questions lingered. She wondered if he wasn't the least invested physician in America. The number of referrals he wrote must have challenged records. Yet she loved the guy. You just had to love the guy.

Allie Prager had been a pretty girl, a top-five object of desire for the boys of Ellison County High. Cool thing was, unlike her competition, she never let on she was aware, or that it even was a competition.

Best Cap could recall, no one had anything bad to say about Allie. Even the girls who should have hated her liked her. And the few who might have hated her didn't seem to hate her all that much.

To the pining, sixteen-year-old Cap, Allie was the girl singers sang about. Your Michelle. Your Layla. Your Maggie Mac. Your Gloria. Your Sweetest Thing. And, yeah, your Alison. Cap had no band, could not sing for crap, could manage three chords on a guitar, G, C, and D. Even so, it didn't stop him from cribbing melodies and penning lyrics of his own, his marginal talent no impediment to a lovesick teen shitfaced on hormones and homebrewed self-esteem.

*Ali, you don't know my name
I doubt you ever will.
But that won't stop the way I feel,
I swear it never will.*

*Eyes of blue and smile so bright
I dream of you most days and nights*

*Someday Ali I hope you'll see
The only boy for you is me.*

*When Ali wears her hair down,
So silky smooth and shimmery brown,
When Ali wears her hair down,
I'm flying ten feet off the ground.*

One by one, for weeks, he slipped the neatly trimmed squares of paper into her locker, ninety-four in all. *Ninety-four*. Until she caught him. Rebuked him. Corrected him on the spelling of her name. "*Allie, not Ali.*" Whispered to her friends about him. Avoided him. Ignored him. Hid her smile from him. Waved *hi* to him. Gave in to him.

He grinned at the memory, cringed at his naiveté. No, you don't get a girl like Allie out of your system overnight. And seeing her now, all these years later, his starry-eyed lyrics didn't sound all that out of place. For once, reality had not betrayed his fantasy. She'd fit right into those tennis whites she'd worn in high school, he bet.

"But the worst, David, is when Joshy talks about his father. The stories he tells. The details. It's scary."

"He was close with his dad, then?" Cap asked.

"What? No. I just told you, he never knew his father." A hint of exasperation colored her tone as she fiddled with the strap of her bag. "Like I said, I don't know for sure myself. I'm not proud of it."

"Right. Sorry."

Now, it wasn't love or lust or anything near so extreme, Cap told himself. He'd been married twelve years, after all. Happily, too. He loved Beth. He would never have made it through med school without her. He loved her. And there was Tess, too, don't forget. His little girl. No, with the grown-up Allie, his feelings were more a big-brother thing, an inclination to protect. *For old times' sake*. Her being a single mom, her vulnerability nuanced and abundant, well, that didn't hurt any either. Like she'd said, she had nowhere else to turn. No insurance, no money to blow on city shrinks or such. And when you got right down to it, imaginary friends weren't all that big a deal. Psych 101, at worst. "Happens to kids all the time," Cap assured her, and Allie was more than willing to construe his solace for solution.

Truth be told, Cap hadn't a clue if it really did happen all the time. Not with fourteen-year-olds, anyhow.

WHATEVER SHORTFALL there'd been in patient no-shows and cancellations, Josh Prager more than made up for it. Each time, Allie called, embarrassed and apologetic. She would have delivered the boy herself had she been able to take time away from work. But jobs were scarce. Candidates plentiful. The risk too great. And Beth would pass on the news to Cap. The Prager boy became a running gag between them, despite Cap's unspoken disappointment. He'd been looking forward to the doctor-parent follow-ups.

Beth came to schedule Josh at the end of the day. If anything, he gave them the opportunity to cut out early.

They never expected he'd ever turn up.

Cap approached the waiting room with caution, sized up the boy through the small window set high in the door. The sneak peek was an old habit, gleaned from a mentor back in Jersey: "Best to take a gander at what you're up against before you're up against it. Trust me, Doctor Caplan, there is no better diagnostic tool than your waiting room."

Cap had seen patients with a foot in the grave. *Plenty of them*. But never one who made him feel the foot might be his own.

He ripped his hand from the doorknob, retreated down the corridor that ran between clinic and home. He paused midway, steadied himself at a window, fingers pressed to sill.

The first of November. Late afternoon in Summervale.

Damp, dark, and foreboding. Like a stanza of Poe.

Trees bare and malevolent. Earth and sky a seamless shroud of gray. Jack-o'-lanterns the length and width of Thorn. Strewn. Shattered. Scattered. Battered.

He shut his eyes tight, the intent to clear his vision, his mind, but the murk remained, his perspective clouded by barometric cataracts.

This was crazy. What the hell was he doing? It was a kid. Your everyday average messed-up kid. *Allie Prager's messed-up kid*.

He retraced his steps to the waiting room, glimpsed the boy once more, and launched into a full-on retreat to the sanctuary of kitchen and wife.

Premonition had never been Cap's strong suit. Panic attacks had never been his style. So when Beth asked what he was doing, why he wasn't at the clinic with Joshy Prager, he faulted the weather. "Have you seen it out there?" He poured orange juice into a glass, snatched a peanut-butter cookie from the Raggedy-Ann jar. "Needed a pick-me-up."

"He's so cute. Shy. As soft-spoken as his mom," Beth said. "At that awkward age. You should have seen how he blushed when I took his jacket."

"You've always stirred men's hearts." He wrapped an arm around his wife, drew her close, and kissed her. "You know I love you, right?"

She eyed him quizzically, maneuvered him to arm's-length. "What's going on, Cap?"

"Nothing. Low blood sugar. I'm fine."

Cap had been open with her about Allie and their past. It was twenty years ago, for goodness' sake. He'd been a kid. *They'd been kids*. Now Beth wondered if he hadn't been too open, if his candor hadn't been a cover for his conscience. He was entitled to the occasional crush, even flirtation, just as she was. But anything more... She'd met Allie only that once and only for a few moments. No mystery why Cap would have been attracted to her, then or now. *How was it possible a woman like Allie Prager was unattached?* No, Beth had never been the jealous type, never felt threatened. Until her husband felt the need to remind her of his love for her. Out of the blue. For no damn good reason.

She watched as he plodded from the kitchen like some surly teen sent to clean up his room. She did not draw his attention to the glass of juice he'd forgotten on the counter. She preferred not having him around just then.

Something was up. She'd need to keep her eye on him.

The move to Summervale hadn't been on the radar until she stumbled across Cap's high school yearbook and made the mistake of sharing it with him. She'd managed to misplace it for good soon after, though the damage had been done. Going home was all he talked about. Harped on it for months. The town meant nothing to her, beyond the stories he told. And those stories, forgive her for saying so, did not amount to much. *A weekend visit, maybe, but to live there?*

Beth was a city girl, born and bred, with a rising career to boot. She'd

worked hard to get where she was. A big-shot brand manager in Big Pharma. No way she'd give it up for her husband's flight of fantasy to a Finger Lakes town even the tourist maps omitted. *Let him yearn*. Arizona made more sense, his parents long retired to Scottsdale. Of course, this all was before the takeover. Before her new son-of-a-bitch CEO came aboard, before the slashing and burning consumed her job, too. Before the severance package that ran out long before their bills did.

Small-town life was just what the doctor ordered. He'd said that. Cap had actually said that. While he saw the change of scenery as a cure for whatever ailed them, she saw it as a Beijing-knockoff Band-Aid; it wouldn't stick for long. Only long enough to kill her career. Medical receptionist and bookkeeper would not bring the headhunters calling.

Yeah, the pieces had fallen into place. For Cap, at least. Like always. You had to love the guy.

Tess waved as Cap passed the family room. "Hi, Daddy," she said. She was watching cartoons. *Phineas and Ferb*, from the sound of it: "*I know what we're gonna do today!*"

"Hi, kiddo," he said, and lobbed her a handful of air kisses.

He had no explanation for the dread he felt, nothing he could put a finger on. Seasonal malaise, though not quite. It was more the sense he'd been found out — *that the boy had found him out*. But what could the boy know? What was there in Cap's life that needed *finding out*?

He filled his lungs, plunged into the waiting room, hand extended in excessive cheer. His professional cheer. "Hey, Joshy, I'm Doctor Caplan. Great to finally meet you."

The boy put down his magazine. *Women's Health*. A Jessica Alba cover. Joshy stood, faced him man to man. "Joshy," he corrected.

"Joshy it is, then."

A tall kid. Already taller than his mom. The height from his dad's side, no doubt. His phantom dad. But the hair, that was Allie to a T. Red that passed for brown and vice versa, depending on the light. A shade darker, perhaps, but undeniably Allie. The eyes, too, the same buoyant blue. A nice kid. A good-looking kid. Allie Prager's kid.

Nothing to be wary of here. Nothing at all.

Cap considered ushering the boy into his office, before sensing it'd be less off-putting to have their little chat right where they were. He

settled into the opposing armchair. "Your mom tells me you're a Bruins fan."

"Only reason I showed is to get her off my back."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Besides, I guess I needed to get a look...."

"Sorry? You needed to what?"

Josh shrugged the way kids do, sniffed, clammed up.

Textbook. It was all so obvious. An only child. An absentee dad. An overprotective, overburdened mom, scraping by on her own. This was going to be a cakewalk.

Doc's strategy was to begin with small talk, earn the kid's trust. With any luck, he'd get to the bottom of this imaginary friends nonsense in five, six sessions. Be done with it. And Allie would be forever grateful. Cap would be deserving of more than a handshake then, damn sure. "When it comes to controlling the game, you got to give Zdeno Chára credit, the way he throws his body around, handles the puck — "

"I'm not doing drugs, if that's what you think."

"I don't think anything."

The boy sat back, arms folded at his chest, legs extended and crossed at the ankles. His eyes strayed to the Jessica Alba cover.

"She's pretty awesome, huh?" Cap said, immediately regretting the *awesome*.

"I saw you with your son once."

"What?"

"At the park."

"I don't have a son, Josh."

"You were teaching him to shoot hoops."

"I think I'd know."

"Yeah, you'd think."

Sixty seconds in and the kid had already thrown him off his game. "Look, we're here to talk about you, okay? You want to tell me what's going on? Your mother is worried about you."

"They're not imaginary."

"Pardon me?"

"The people Mom wants you to make go away."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"I don't see them."

"Okay."

"I remember them."

"Like your father?"

"Sure. Like my father."

"Tell me about him."

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to know more about him."

"But he's not real, remember?"

"I'm trying to help you here, Joshy."

"Josh. I told you, *Joshy*."

"I'm sorry."

"We used to build stuff together, okay? That bookshelf in my bedroom..."

"You and your dad."

"He was a really good ballplayer, too. Third base. Mom said he could have made the majors if he wouldn't have got stuck on her. But Dad said it was more fun playing with her."

"Sounds like a good guy."

"Sundays were best. We'd let Mom sleep in, and Dad and me, we'd sneak out and do stuff. Fishing. Hiking. Rafting. And when we came home, Dad would make us all breakfast. Like waffles and cheesy eggs. And sometimes we watched scary movies — *Night of the Living Dead* and that old body-snatcher one were his favorites — and Mom would get mad at him because she said I'd get bad dreams, but Dad said I wouldn't. And I promised I wouldn't, too. I promised every time. And when I did, he'd be the first in my room.... Mom, she hardly ever knew about the nightmares. They were just between Dad and me."

"Tell me, the movies you watched, was there one about this boy who sees dead peop —"

"Bullshit. That's not me." Josh moved his hands to his lap, balled his fingers into fists. "I don't see dead people. I see the people everybody else forgets."

"People like your dad?"

"Like your son."

Cap groaned, shifted in his seat, looked away. This kid wasn't going

to be so easy after all. And there was that odd feeling again. *One foot in the grave. One foot in the grave.*

"Conviction," he told Beth. "That's what disturbs me most. This kid believes every word. Either that or he's the best damn actor I've ever met."

"You'll be seeing a lot of him, then?"

"I guess."

"And his mother, too?"

"For sure. I'll need to — "

"For sure. You'll need to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll let you know when I know."

"Look, if you think I have any inten — "

"You'd usually write a referral in a case like this. Psychology and psychiatry are hardly your strong suits. It's too personal, Cap. It's dangerous, if not unethical."

"Allie came to me, don't forget. She can't afford much. It's a favor. Nothing more. Don't worry. I'll be careful."

"So you say."

"Since when don't you trust me?"

"Since the morning I met her."

"C'mon, B. I love you."

"And since you've felt the need of late to profess your love to me ad nauseam."



LLIE HAD NO EXPLANATION. Her voice quavered. "It's like I've been telling you, he imagines things that never were."

"The boy has a vivid imagination, I'll give him that."

"I wish that's all it was. Did he mention the others? The grandparents? The uncles and aunts and cousins, all of whom exist only in his mind? There's this older couple in town, the Grahams..."

"Sure. Patients of mine."

"He insists they're his grandpa and grandma. They've called the police on him twice already. It's crazy, Cap. He's created this world — "

"And you're certain he never knew his father? Is it possible the man contacted him without your knowledge?"

"Please! If I don't know who the father is, you can be damn sure the father doesn't know. I told you, after college, when I came back, my mother getting sick and all...I made mistakes. Let it rest."

"Was it anyone we knew from high school?"

She opened her mouth, looked to the ceiling for guidance. "Have you heard a word I've spoken?"

"But the father of your child — "

"And you remember every one-night stand you ever had? God, quit badgering me. We've been over this."

He wanted to come out from behind his desk, take her in his arms, comfort her, forgive her. But it wouldn't be professional. He needed to remain professional. Besides, Beth was at her desk, just outside the door, waiting for him. They had plans for dinner. Dinosaur Barbecue in Rochester. Tess loved the macaroni and the coleslaw.

"And stop looking at me like that," Allie snapped. "I don't need rescuing. I want to know what you're going to do for my son."

Allie had him pegged, all right. She always had. "I don't want to frighten you, but there's something I need to ask."

"You think I'm not already frightened?"

"There's no easy way of saying this."

"You're making it worse."

"Is there any family history of mental disorders?"

She covered her mouth. "I'm going to be sick."

Cap opened Josh's file, read from his notes. "Any of these sound familiar? Schizotypal personality disorder, schizoaffective disorder, schizophreniform disorder? Or schizophrenia? What about schizophrenia?"

She stared at him, incredulous, her mouth half-open, as if a smile had stalled.

"Think for a second," he urged her.

"I don't know."

"What about on his father's side?"

"Jesus! Again. Are you kidding me?"

"What about when he was younger, before all this, were there any signs?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know this is hard, Allie. Bear with me."

She sighed her acquiescence.

"Was he ever, I dunno, *off* in any way? For the symptoms to first manifest at his age...it's usually in the later teens. Are you sure it's not a continuation of something?"

"No. Nothing. I swear."

"Did he ever exhibit anything you might call paranoia? Was he ever afraid someone was out to hurt him? Did he have memory issues? Trouble paying attention in school? What about eye contact? Or friends? Did he have trouble making friends? What about his relationship with you? Would you call him an affectionate kid, compassionate? Anything, Allie? Anything?"

She shook her head. "Do you think I've been sitting on my hands? I've done nothing but search for answers. The Internet. The library. But it's not schizophrenia or any of the rest. I know it."

"We can't rule them out, Allie."

"I'm his mother. I know."

"I'm just sharing my suspicions."

"Suspicions aren't conclusions."

"The signs are there. The alternative reality. The hostility. He was pretty aggressive with me. Not physically, but —"

"You won't see him again? Is that what you're driving at? You're giving up already?"

"Stop jumping to conclusions."

"Why not? You seem to be pretty good at it."

"Let me talk to him again, all right? If I still suspect the same, there are people I can talk to. Specialists. We'll get to the bottom of it, I promise you."

She nodded, softened. "Is this how you behave with all your patients?"

"Only the ones I care about."

"Funny, back in high school, I would never, not for a second, have imagined you as a doctor."

"More your romantic songwriter-singer type, huh?" He grinned, expecting she'd share in the welcome memory.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know."

"Not really."

"C'mon." He began to recite in a quiet voice. "'When Allie wears her hair down, So silky smooth and shimmery brown, When Allie wears her hair down...' You don't remember? Honestly?"

"I'm sorry. No. Definitely not." She bit her lip, attention shifted to the framed degrees and watercolors on the walls, the books on the shelves. Anything to keep her giggles at bay.

"This one, then: 'One day Allie, you will see, Me and you are meant to be. Love is crazy, love is blind, I can't get you off my mind.'"

"You wrote that?"

"For you. The songs I wrote for you in high school. Your locker. There were a ton. How could you forget?"

"I'm sorry, David. I haven't a clue what you're talking about. I never knew you liked me in that way. Never."

"And stop calling me David. You never called me David. I didn't just like you, Allie, I loved you. You loved me."

"God, I barely knew you."

"Barely knew me? Who's the sick one, you or your son?"

Had he been any nearer, she would have slapped his face. She rose from the chair, her purse cradled to her breast as if to protect herself. "Compared to you, Doctor Caplan, Josh and I are paragons of normalcy. If you're wondering who needs help, take a good, long look in the mirror." Six defiant strides took her to the door.

"Why? Why are you doing this, Allie?"

She debated facing him again. Her combative side won out. "You know why I could never have imagined you as a doctor? The *real* reason? Because you had zero people skills back then and, right now, it's evident you haven't changed. You always were an insensitive, creepy little prick — always staring at me, watching me. David the Douche, that's what we called you. And other than your name, it is the only thing I remember about you from high school. You are absolutely the last person on Earth I should have turned to. I cannot for the life of me imagine what I was thinking."

Allie stormed from Cap's office, fought the urge to slam the door,

ceased it shut, and rested her back against it. "I'm sorry," she said to Beth, as she paused to catch her breath. Tess watched from the corner of the room; a tower of Mega Bloks tipped her chin.

"Is everything all right?" Beth had heard the raised voices, though not the words. *What dumb thing has he done this time?*

Allie looked stranded, in search of her bearings. Yet there was a grace about her Beth could not help but envy. Allie Prager would live to 103 and look good on her deathbed, no doubt. She was just one of those women.

"Don't forget your coat," Beth called as Allie resumed her exit.

Allie turned, flustered, embarrassed, grateful.

"If there's anything I can do," Beth said.

"Just rushed. Work, you know? The usual juggling. You know."

Tess inserted herself between them. "You're the lady who was Daddy's old girlfriend, right?"

"Tess!" Beth reddened, touched Allie's forearm in apology.

"No worries, Mrs. Caplan." She rested a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Never a girlfriend, sweetie. Just an old acquaintance. And *old* is more than apt about now, considering how I feel. Very, very old."

Beth found it strange. "You weren't his girlfriend?"

"David Caplan? No offense, but good God, no. Never. Of course not. We had some friends in common, hung out together on occasion, but —"

Tess cut in, declaring victory in an undeclared competition. "Mommy is Daddy's girlfriend now."

"And your daddy is lucky to have her," Allie assured.

Whether the threat to her marriage was real or imagined, Beth's instincts ran counter to expectations. She liked Allie Prager, had the feeling they could be friends in time. A friend would be nice in this dreary little town. This wasn't the life she wanted; it was the life *he* wanted.

"I'm telling you, Beth, it's not true. Two years, we were inseparable."

"Why would she lie?"

"Memory loss, delusion, stress — it could be anything. Her son's not the only one with issues."

"What about *your* issues, Cap?"

"It's not about me."

"What happened in there? Why the shouting? Did you do something? Did you touch her? Did you?"

"I told her my suspicions with the kid and it was like she couldn't face the truth. She started saying things that made no sense; I called her on it and she freaked, honest to God. She said some pretty nasty things to me."

"I don't like where this is going. I can't put my finger on it, but something is off."

"I swear on Tess's life, nothing happened. It's them. It's the Pragers."

"Will you promise not to see either of them again? Will you refer them to someone else? Will you give me that much?"

"They won't be coming back."

"I can cancel their appointments, then?"

"No. Don't do that. I'm all they've got."

"But you just said —"

"I can't just drop them. Not like that. Not if they decide to come back. She needs my help. They both do. I just can't change course."

"You always have before."

JOSH BRUSHED PAST BETH with a sullen nod as Cap waved him into his office. He threw his backpack onto the floor, flopped into the chair, and kicked his high-tops up against the front of the desk. Muddy slush spattered the antique oak.

Cap refused to take the kid's bait. "I wasn't sure I'd see you again. Your mom didn't seem too happy with me."

"I had no choice, unless I wanted to be grounded till Christmas. Anyways, she isn't why I came."

"No shame in trying to please your mom."

"I came because of you."

"Good. I'm glad."

The kid leaned forward, clamped both hands onto the front of Cap's desk. "So, how about the Bruins, Doc? Think they got a shot at the Cup?"

Cap held it together. "If there's something you want to say, say it. Let's not play games, buddy."

"Are you sure, Doc? I mean, isn't that what you've been up to?"

"Funny you should ask, because I think that's what you've been up to."

I wasn't sure, at first, but then...The absence of other symptoms. The sudden onset. It didn't add up. Tell me, how is it you remember people no one else does?"

The kid stuck out his tongue, crossed his eyes. "I'm a head-case, aren't I?"

"I admire your creativity, but the act is getting tired."

"What about your act?"

"Or maybe this is your way of trying to help your mom. It's what you've been doing all along, isn't it? You've been worried about her. She's stubborn. I know her. No way she'd seek medical attention for herself. So you figured, maybe, if you pretended something was wrong with you... Is that what this is about?"

"Case solved. Can I go now?"

"You don't have to keep up the front. I saw. Her forgetfulness — has it been going on a long time? I can help her, but only if you help me. So, what do you say, can you drop the nut-job routine? She needs us, Josh. Will you work with me?" Cap's chair squealed resistance as he wheeled out from behind his desk. He raised a hammy high five, aiming to seal the deal.

The kid's laughter broke sharp and hard, a skateboard on gravel as it skittered from dismissive to derisive. "And you admire *my* creativity? Holy crap! I got nothing on you, man."

"You don't want to help your mom?"

"You need to tell her what you did to my dad."

Paranoia. Finally, a symptom Cap could hang his hat on. "I never knew him."

"You went to school with him."

"Trust me, I was long gone by the time your mother hooked up with him."

"You knew him. Christopher Graham. Chris."

"I'm sorry."

"I can prove it." He wrenched a thin book from his backpack, shoved it into Cap's hands. "You'll see. I marked the page."

Cap crossed his legs, took the *Ellison County High School Yearbook* into his lap. *Class of '93*. His own copy had vanished mysteriously before the move, Beth the prime suspect. "Chris Graham, huh?"

"Yup."

Cap flipped to the yellow Post-it. He scratched his head, spelled it out: "G-R-A-H-A-M?"

"Yup."

Cap shook his head. "I'm sorry, Josh."

"Bullshit." The kid darted to Cap's side. He grabbed the book, ran his fingers down and over the spread, up and down the binding. There was Rebecca Gore and Nicholas Halkias and nothing in between. *Christopher Graham, he should have been in between. He'd always been in between.* Josh gripped the book, willing the photo to reappear, goddamit. "He was there. He was right there." He whipped through the pages, searching, seeking. "And here, too. He was here, too." The ball-team photo. "Right there, next to him, the guy with the hat. I was gonna show Mom. I was gonna show them all."

Slowly, as if apprehension was a novelty in his life, he came to another page. The teenage Allie at a fundraising event. A carwash. She was laughing, the garden hose in her hand aimed at the fuzzy image of a boy. Fuzzy, yet familiar, as Josh's gaze roved between the image and Cap. The photo had never been fuzzy before. It had been his dad.

Josh let the book fall from his hands, backed away from Cap, slumped into his seat. "You don't know how it feels," he said, head down, anger and disbelief giving way to dejection. "I'm in a whole different story and I don't know how I got here. And I'm the only one who knows. Even Mom, she buys it like it's true, like this is how it always was. And they're saying she's a single mom, and poor poor her, stuck with that psycho kid, no dad around, no wonder, and I look at them like they're crazy, except they're sure it's me. But you know I'm not; I know you do. My name is Josh Graham. My father is Christopher Graham. You know it's true. Please, you got to tell them."

All right, so maybe it wasn't an act. Wouldn't be his first wrongheaded diagnosis. *This was one sick kid.* Cap was in way over his head.

"When do I disappear?" Josh said, resigned to his skewed take on the inevitable.

"Not on my watch."

"Does it hurt?"

"Does what hurt?"

"Disappearing."

"You're going to be okay. You'll see. We need to get you back to where you were before."

"Before what? Before you zapped my dad?"

"Before you started talking about people and things that never were. You don't want to be this way. I know you don't."

"Are there others out there like you?"

"Physicians?"

"Guys who can change stuff. Like, are you some sort of demon? Do you just wish it? Is that how you do it? Or is it magic? I mean, what's the trick?"

"Sounds like the plot of one of your horror movies."

"More like yours, I'd say."

"Look, nobody has disappeared. Nobody is going to. And no one is wishing anything or anyone away. I promise."

"And what about me? Are there others like me? Kids who remember how it was before stuff changed? Kids who know what guys like you are up to? Kids they call crazy?"

"You're not alone, son. There are countless children who have gone through what you're dealing with and a whole lot worse, and the majority are doing fine. You will, too, Josh, once we find the best way to treat you. There are all sorts of great therapies. You just need to hang in there."

"You listen, but you don't hear."

"I hear what's important."

"You're going to make me disappear. Just like you did my dad. Just like you did your son."

"I told you once before, I don't have a son. Believe me, I wish I did. Not having children is one of the biggest regrets of my —"

"Your daughter, she doesn't count?"

"Jesus! Where's this coming from? No son. No daughter. No children. My wife and I, we were never able to, not that it's any of your business."

"Tess. Your daughter's name is Tess."

Cap glanced at the clock on the wall, adjusted his watch. "We're done here."

"I know you're doing it. I just don't know why."

"We'll call your mom. You're going to be okay. You'll see."

"Just tell me how you do it, okay? It won't matter. I mean, nobody

believes me, anyways. And once I'm gone... Just tell me who you are. Please."

"I'm a doctor who wants to get you well again, and that's all I am, Josh. I wish you'd let me."

"Doesn't matter what I do, Doc. Only what you do."

Josh stood motionless at the window, watching for his mom.

"Do you miss them?" he asked Beth.

"Pardon me?"

"Your children. Do you miss them?"

"We don't have children."

"You don't now, but you did. A boy and a girl. You just forget. You can't help it. Their rooms are gone. Their junk, the clothes and toys. How you hugged them and how they hugged you back. Gone. Like they were never here."

She felt a shiver. Began to shiver. Gulped air as if apneic.

"But every now and then, you get this flash. You remember, then you don't. You know, like walking into a room, looking for something, except once you get there, you can't remember what you were looking for. Like that."

If only she had something to busy herself with. "Your mom, she seems to be running late."

"You miss your kids, Mrs. Caplan, and you don't even know you do. That's why you're so sad. My mom is like that with my dad. She doesn't remember him, just misses him. It happens all the time with people. They get this weird, empty feeling inside. It's because of the ones they miss. Except they don't know it. Funny, huh?"

"Can I offer you something, Josh? A glass of milk? Some cookies? My chocolate chip are to die —"

"Remembering my dad is easy. It's the missing him all by myself that's so hard. But if I don't do it, nobody will. And if nobody remembers you, it's like you never were, right?"

Beth wiped the tears from her cheeks, marched up to the boy, and gathered him into her arms. She held him as close and as tight as she would have held her own children, had she ever had any.

Beth approached Cap, hopeful her chat with Josh would lend the case some insight. She didn't get far. "You need to see this," Cap was saying, his voice a decibel below a shout, as he tapped the open book before him.

"You found it?" she said, surprised. She had dumped his yearbook months before they'd come to Summervale. It had been the unwelcome catalyst to his terminal nostalgia and eventual homecoming. Had he retrieved it from the trash?

"Here. Right here." His finger landed on David "Cap" Caplan and his *Memorable Moments*:

*Halloween rave at JP's,
taking it to WG in the bottom of the 9th TWICE!!!
hanging out with Allie P.*

He flipped ahead a few pages to Allison "with 2 L's" Prager:

*Mango smoothies and quesadillas with My Bossy Posse,
Tennis Team trip to Toronto junior year,
the day I met Cap and every moment with him since.*

"I told you," he said. "You don't forget what we had. I told you."

Beth didn't recall any of this from before. Not that she'd had the chance to study the volume. He had grabbed it away, buried himself in the thing for days. "She's been through a lot, Cap. The boy, too. You should have heard him out there before."

"But to forget this? C'mon!" He flipped to the back pages, pointed to a photo of Allie in his arms at some dance. "Or this?" Allie and Cap and a bunch of other kids at a picnic table. "Or this?" Allie and Cap horsing around at a carwash fundraiser.

"Have you considered that it might be intentional, that she wants to forget..." Beth waited a beat before completing her thought. "... 'what you had?'" If Cap detected the acid in her tone, he showed no sign, preoccupied with a half-page of Allie flanked by her tennis team.

"Now what?" his wife asked. "You feel the need to rekindle her lost memory? Your great romance? Where is this going, Cap?"

Just look at her in her tennis whites. That skirt. Those legs. She was the prettiest of the eight girls by far.

Allie phoned early the next morning, begged Beth to squeeze her in. "It's getting out of hand. I need to see Cap." Only later did it occur to her

that Allie had called him Cap. It had always been David or Doctor Caplan.

"You've been crying," Cap observed, as Allie settled in before him. "Not much sleep, either, from the looks of it."

"He's in the waiting room with your wife. It's worse than ever. I'm afraid to leave him alone. He's been ranting how you're going to make him disappear."

"One of the unsung powers of the medical profession," Cap quipped. Allie did not smile.

"What now?" she said.

He came out from behind his desk, placed a chair catty-corner to hers. "You need someone better equipped for this, Allie. Josh needs to be evaluated. I've got this friend in Syracuse. She's very good. I've done a couple of favors for her and I'm pretty sure I can work something out for you."

"You're the reason his father's gone, too. Did he tell you that one? I should never have done this to you, Cap." She touched his hand, her fingers lingered. "I'm so, so sorry."

"I'm just glad you trusted me enough to help."

"I never stopped trusting you. You won't believe, I'm almost embarrassed to tell you..."

"What? Tell me what?"

"Lately, I've been taking out those songs — the ones you wrote for me. Do you remember them? Over the years, whenever I'm feeling down... They were wonderful. I'll bet you don't even remember them."

"They were a little corny, I suppose."

"I saved them all. Every single one. You were the sweetest boy...."

"You meant a lot to me."

"Funny how things turn out, people go their separate ways. Leaving you was the biggest mistake of my life. Never a day goes by I don't regret it. I wish things would have turned out differently."

"Life happens. Either we control it or it controls us."

"If only we had the choice," she said. "Knowing what you want helps, I guess."

"You have no idea," he said.

She took his hands, drew him close. That look in her eye. He remembered that look. "I envy your wife."

"You need to take care of your son, Allie."

She pressed her lips to his cheek. "You're a good man, Cap," she whispered, and with reluctance let him be.

"You'll contact your doctor friend in Syracuse, then?" she said.

"The second you're out that door, I promise."

She gave no ground to melancholy. If anything, she felt renewed, more determined, as she made her way to the waiting room. Things were going to be better from here on out, she was sure of it. She summoned a smile, lifted a brave face, opened her mouth to tell... Froze. Blinkd.

She spun about to the desk behind her, poised to speak again, and brought her hand down hard against the edge. "God."

"Did you say something?" Cap called from his office.

"Talking to myself. You know, how you can walk into a room and —"

"Happens to me every other day," he said. He leaned against the doorjamb, her file still fresh in hand. "So, like I told you, the only thing for that elbow is ice and rest and, if you feel the need, a couple of Advil. Lay off the tennis for two, three weeks and you'll be good as new."

"A new mc. Nice," she said.

"The old you wasn't so bad, either."

"I would have come by sooner, but getting through to you, well..." She drew his attention to the deserted waiting room and vacant desk. "A full-time receptionist wouldn't hurt, you know?"

"The job's open if you're interested."

"Is that an offer?"

"Yes," he said.

She stared at him for the longest while, took his measure head to toe. "Tell me, David Caplan, what could possibly have kept you unattached all these years?"

"You," he said, without hesitation. "What's your story, Allie Prager?"

She looked lost for a moment, as though the question demanded deep thought, then a warm smile crossed her lips. "It's so good to have you home, Cap. I hope you're happy."



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CURIOSITIES

THE DEVIL IN VELVET

BY JOHN DICKSON CARR (1951)

THE MASTER of classic locked-room mysteries switches to historical adventure in this timeslip fantasy. Nicholas Fenton, modern-day history professor, is obsessed with an unsolved 1675 poisoning in his long-dead namesake's London house. How to investigate this in person? He summons up the Devil....

Back in good King Charles's golden days, our hero now inhabits the much younger body of notorious rakehell Sir Nick Fenton — whose lovely wife will die unless history can be diverted. Complications include two other sexy women in the household. Fenton foils one clever arsenic plot, but is in more trouble than he knows.

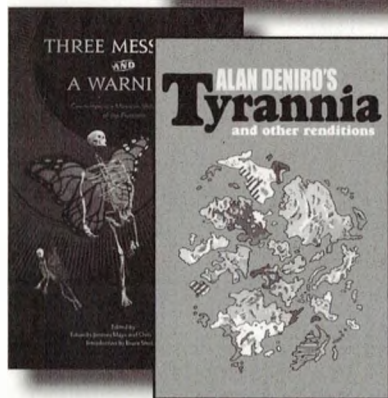
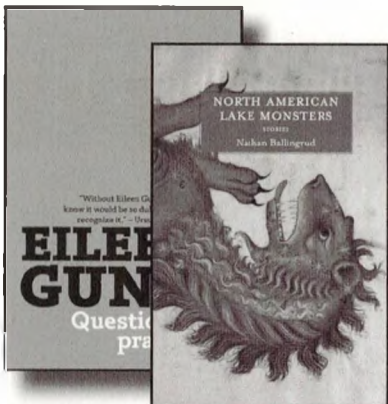
The noises, smells, and violence of seventeenth-century London are splendidly if sometimes over-ostentatiously researched.

Fenton, like Carr a fervent supporter of Charles II, gets entangled in copious politics, carousing, sex, and swordplay. There's a pitched battle in Pall Mall and a fraught audience with the King. Time is ticking away to the foreordained murder date.

Life as a rich nobleman is good, but Fenton's hopes of trading on knowledge of near-future history usually go astray. Also, though clues are scrupulously scattered, he has one huge blind spot when considering possible poisoners. A second, grimmer interview with the Father of Evil reduces him to despair.

The game isn't over, though, and there's time for some final swashbuckling on the battlements of the Tower of London itself before Fenton — though not in any way he'd expected — beats the devil and changes history after all. This full-blooded Restoration melodrama is great fun. ¶

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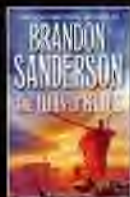
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