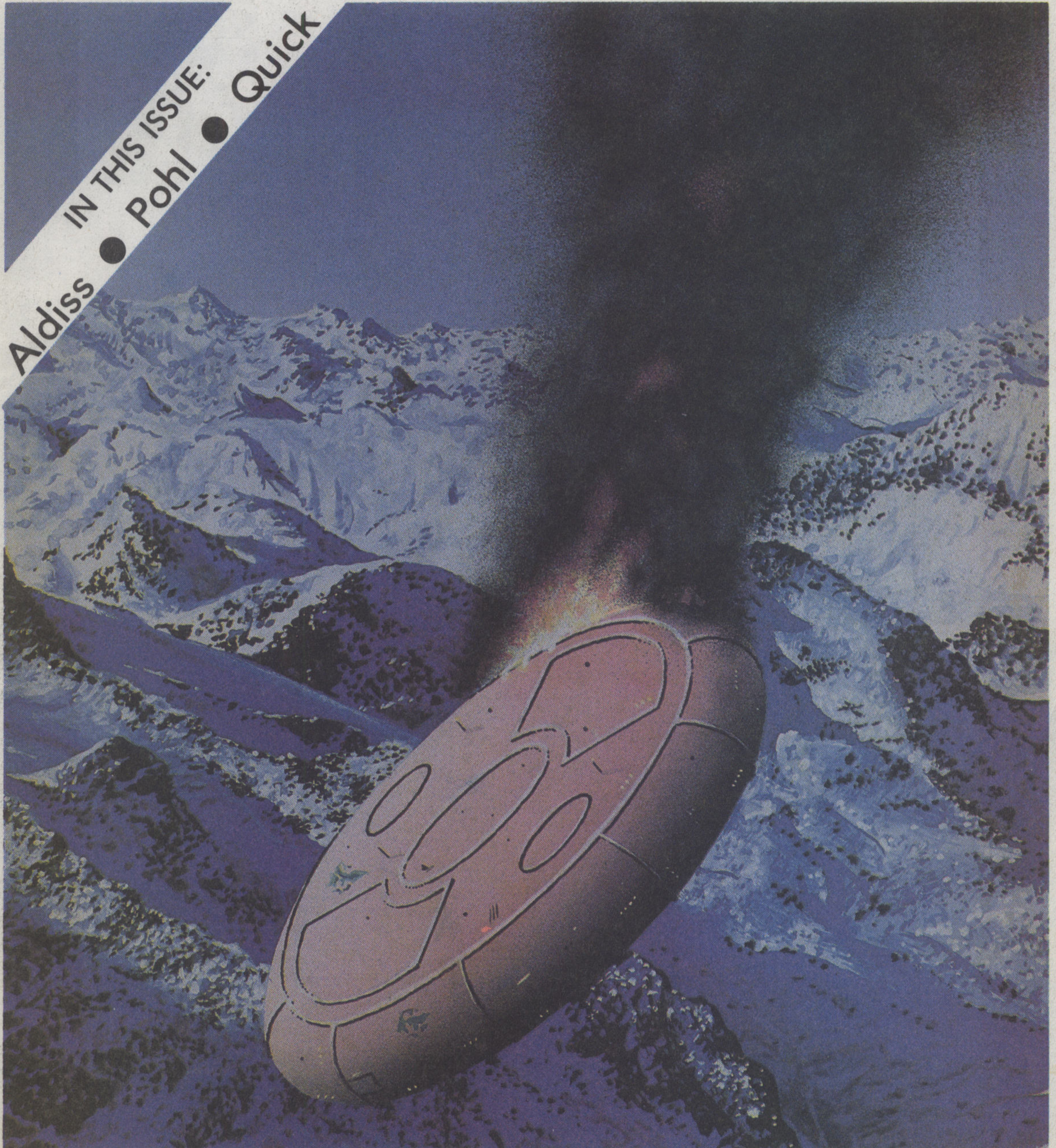


ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind

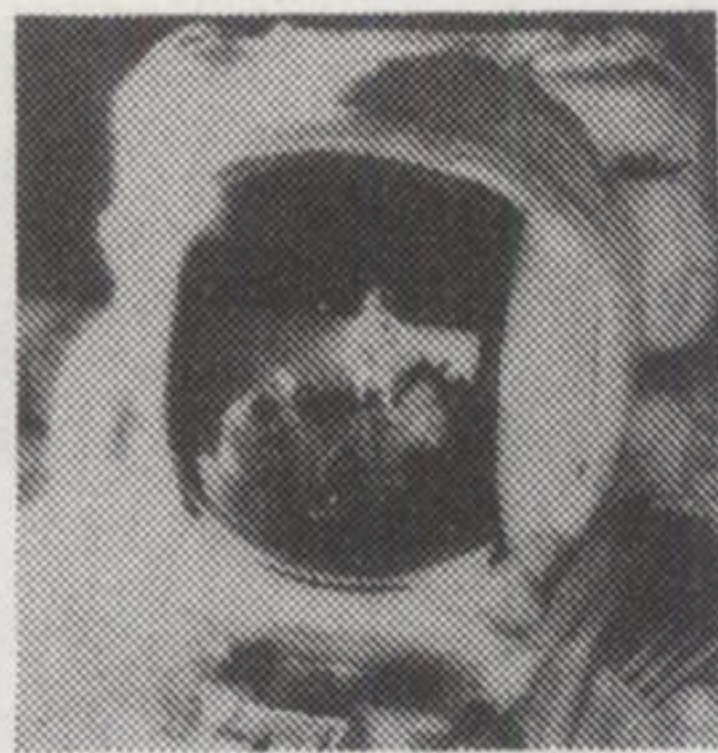
May-June 1987/\$2.50

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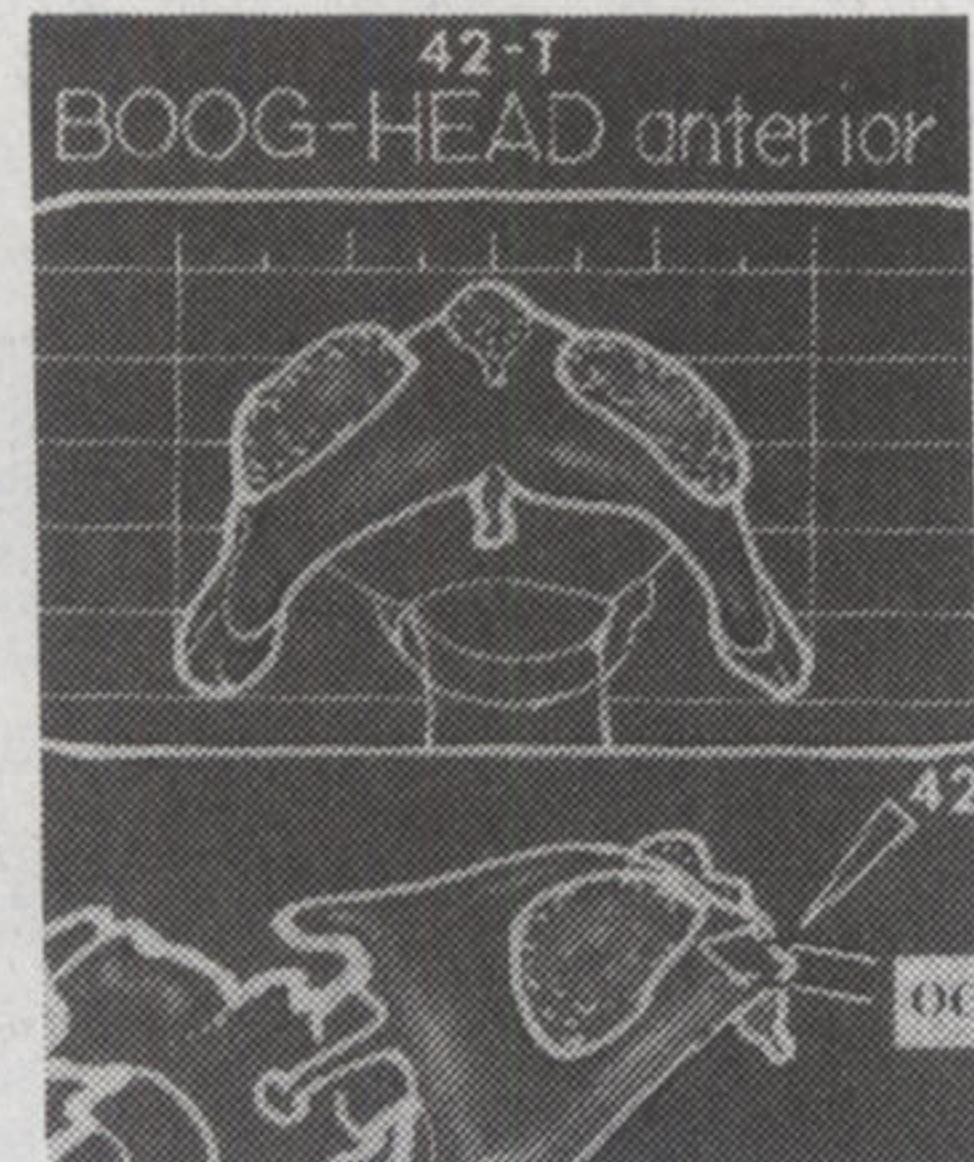
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A Message From Our Alien Publisher

A Statistical Proposition

Ryan continues attempting to contact me. He has taken to running personal advertisements in major newspapers. He knows that I read virtually everything published or otherwise produced by human beings and that I could hardly miss his advertisements. They are pathetic.

"Alien publisher. I know you are here. Please talk to me. We have so much to offer each other." (Those aren't mine! — Ed.)

He always signs it the same way: "An Aborigine."

I don't know why he thinks it is so important to reach me. Lately I have thought that perhaps he wants some help reading manuscripts for his science fiction magazine.

He'll get no help from me.

His advertisements, however, have led me to concentrate more on advertising as one of humanity's exemplary activities. I have made a small study of it, and I find it an interesting way to communicate. I have been collecting specimens:

- European styling and performance in a classic American road car.

- A fragrance that captures time and space... and love. Stand out of the crowd.

- Full flavor without tar.

- Flatten your stomach without discouraging diets.

- Often imitated. Never duplicated.

- Pamper yourself. You deserve it.

- I made over a million dollars in 10 weeks!

Advertising is mostly a statistical proposition. The advertiser prepares a message intended to motivate the human beings who receive it. Of course, most of the human beings ignore the message or are simply entertained by it. Few of them ever respond to it. But a reliable proportion of them do. That's not to say that it is the same human beings who respond to advertising all the time. Indeed, it is a different population that responds to each and every advertisement on each and every occasion it is published or broadcast.

Some human beings are motivated by nothing more than an artfully arranged presentation of product specifications. Some are motivated by sexual fantasies. Some are motivated by humor. Some by scenes of the great outdoors. Some by pandering to their smaller (or larger) vanities. Now, here is the interesting part: some are motivated by one force on one occasion and another on another.

When you compare it to the entire population of human beings receiving a message, you see that the response to any advertisement is quite small. But it is often predictable for certain types of audiences. So the goal of the advertiser is to find the largest predictable audience for any particular advertising investment.

This is all complicated by the shifting nature of the responding population. Not only does the responding population vary from one type of advertising message to another, but it varies from one presentation of the same message

to another! A single person might ignore an advertising message on four out of five occasions and respond on the fifth encounter.

It doesn't matter that any single prospective respondent ignores a message. That person's place in the responding population will be taken by some other human being, perhaps one who is not even a prospective respondent!

It is all very complicated. But you cannot talk about advertising in terms of individuals. It functions on the basis of collective response. The advertiser can predict the number of respondents to a particular message presented under particular conditions but can never predict who the respondents will be. Advertising is rather like quantum physics in this regard.

I have been collecting these advertising messages in an effort to understand the exact response mechanism. Again, I offer some of the items from my collection. These particular messages are designed to sell books.

"In the wickedest city in the world, this copper-haired giant built an empire out of gunplay, gambling, and the eager hearts of women."

"He knew the whole town's secrets, but he had one secret of his own: the huge white bride's bed that he kept for the wife of another man."

These advertising messages were written by the same human being. He is an advertising writer of great talent, a man in his seventh decade of life who used to live in the area of New York. My

special favorite among his works is this one, used on a series of "direct mail" postcards:

"Have you got a big bookcase? Because if you have, we have a big book for you."

He wrote this as the last in a long series of advertisements conceived to sell an over-sized picture book of wildlife paintings. Forty-nine thousand copies remained unsold at the time he set about to compose this message. The vendor of the book had attempted every conceivable approach to advertising: those extolling the beauty of the book, those promising the book's utility, those based on the educational advantages offered to the prospect's children. Nothing worked, until this man was employed to write the big book message. This message sold every copy of the book in the inventory.

Not all human beings respond to advertising messages promising large products, of course. Indeed, among some human populations, a large book would never sell, and respondents would only purchase one that promised to be small.

Some others would only purchase on the basis of beauty, or quality of information, or portability, or how many other people already own the thing.

It is part of the genius of the writer of this appeal that he recognized it as the one to use for the human population he wished to reach. This writer was born in 1919 and lived his childhood in Brooklyn. He was always passionately interested in science, and he dropped out of the public education program before completing the curriculum because it held no challenge for him. Even so, at nineteen he became editor of a couple of small magazines desperate for the help, at the depths of a period the human beings call "the Great Depression."

As the years went by, he held a succession of occupations, becoming a writer, a practitioner of something human beings call "public relations" during a term with the Army of the United States, a literary agent, and a lecturer. For a time, he even collected urine specimens for drug testing at a

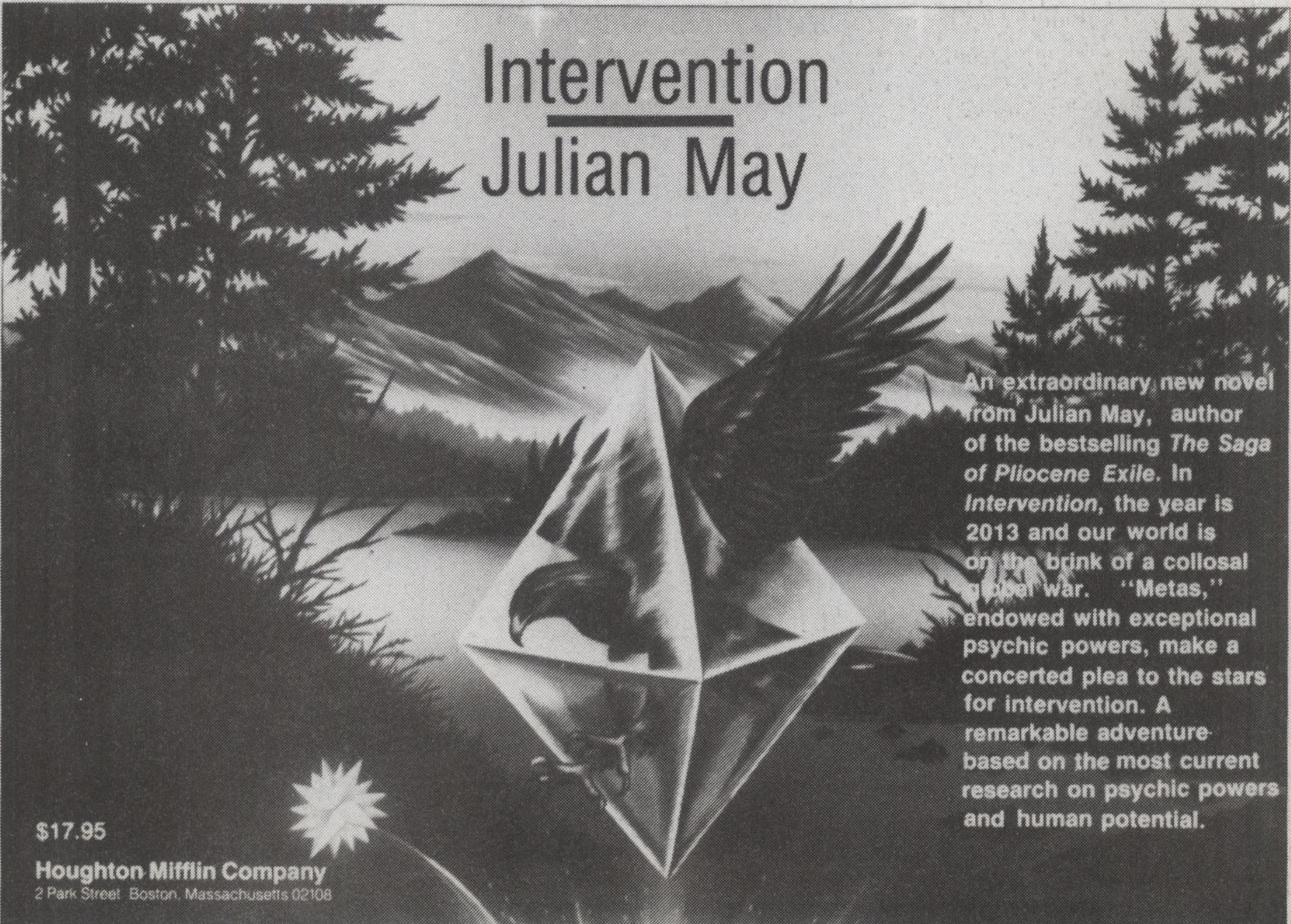
horse race track, a job he claims to have liked but which he finally gave up at the insistence of his embarrassed family. His family connections, by the way, are complicated. He has been married at least three times.

He passed through some kind of crisis at the age of fifty. He has not written advertising messages for more than four decades. He does not appear to be ashamed of his work in advertising; he has merely followed a different calling since writing the big book message. It is a shame, because he is an advertising genius.

Oh, in addition to his masterful work in advertising, he has written some fiction along the way, and I am attaching it. It runs to some forty or fifty volumes. Among them, you will find his own vision of advertising, embodied in the book called *The Space Merchants* and its sequel, *The Merchants' War*. Like many practitioners of science fiction, he speculates about a broad range of subjects: alien

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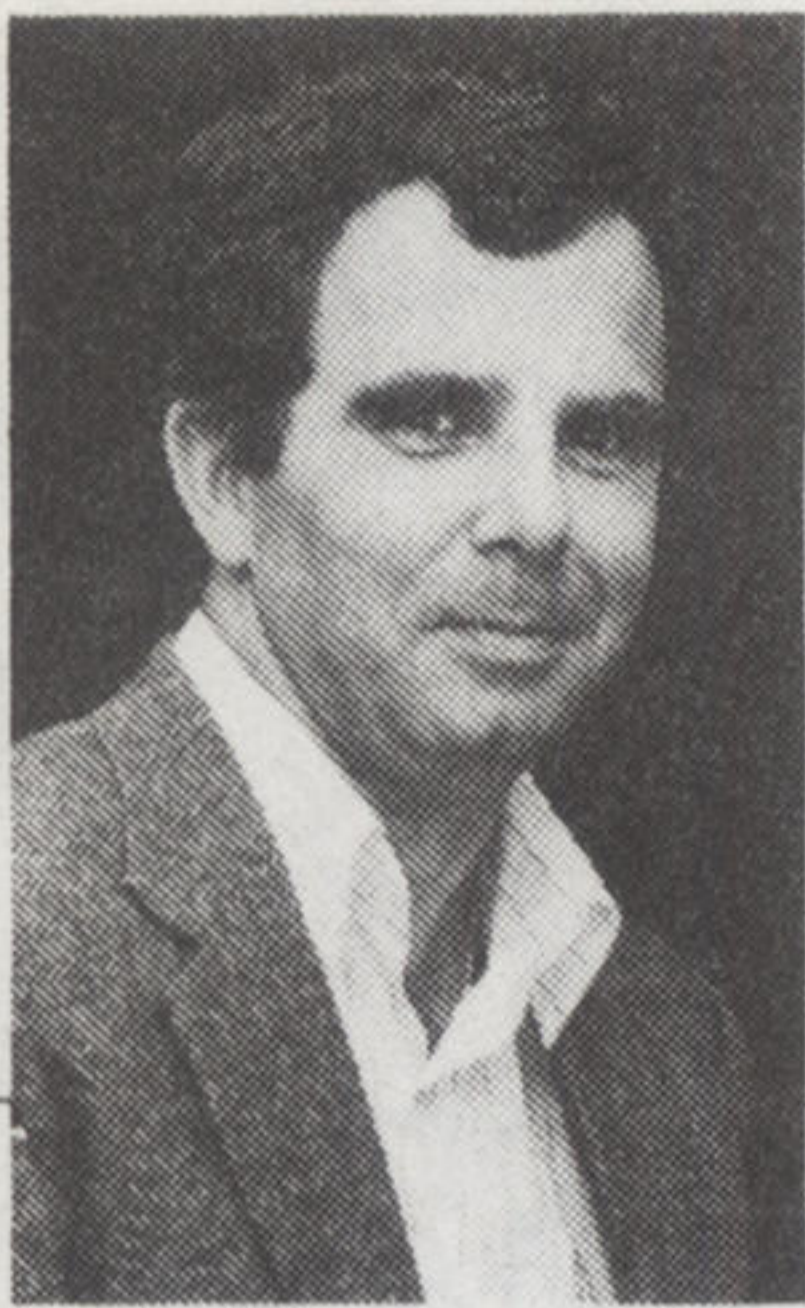
Intervention Julian May



An extraordinary new novel from Julian May, author of the bestselling *The Saga of Pliocene Exile*. In *Intervention*, the year is 2013 and our world is on the brink of a colossal global war. "Metas," endowed with exceptional psychic powers, make a concerted plea to the stars for intervention. A remarkable adventure based on the most current research on psychic powers and human potential.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

By Charles C. Ryan

Our New Format

Welcome to our new format. We hope you like it. I'd like to apologize for the slight delay in delivering this issue to you, but we are unveiling a whole new look, and we believe you will find it was worth the wait.

Although your mail ran two to one in favor of us retaining our large, tabloid-size format, we have decided to switch to a magazine size for two reasons: to help bookstores that were having a difficult time displaying *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, and to silence some of the cynics in the SF publishing community who were mumbling, "It'll never work."

Becoming a full slick is our ultimate goal. We would like to see our art reproduced on glossy paper and think it would make *ABO* the best-looking SF magazine in the history of the field.

So what does the present change mean?

First of all it lets us modify our layout techniques and eliminate many of the "continued to's" and "continued from's" we all hate. There will still be some — it's unavoidable because of the way printing presses are configured — but there will be fewer.

It also means we no longer have color pages facing each other, allowing us to spread our color throughout *ABO*, making for a more attractive product.

And, of course, printing it is more expensive — for us, that is, since you will continue to pay the same price.

Everything, it seems, is more expensive. That's why the paper

for the inner 32 pages is a slightly lighter weight than the outer 32. The outer pages are still 50-pound offset stock, but the inner paper is similar to that used in the pages of *Analog* or *Isaac Asimov's*.

Two things will speed up our evolution into a full slick: More advertising and a bigger circulation. One, of course, is related to the other. The more circulation we have, the more advertisers we will attract.

And that's where you can help.

Talk us up to your friends and acquaintances (what the heck, even say something to your enemies — if any). Show your copy of *Aboriginal SF* to your local bookstores and suggest they carry it. (To help you help us, I'll list the addresses of our distributors at the end of this column.)

And renew your subscription. Many of you who subscribed for six issues will soon be receiving a little note in the mail asking you to renew. If you want to renew now, and not wait for the note, that's fine, but please be sure to mark it a renewal so you won't confuse our computer.

In addition to our change in format, we have some good news. *Aboriginal SF* has been approved for sale by Waldenbooks. The bookstore chain has more than 1,000 outlets, so that should help boost our circulation.

As I mentioned in February, this is our warfare issue. It has stories about all sorts of nasties

you wouldn't want to invite to your next barbecue. We promise there's a bad guy — or thing — in every story, even if it might take a bit for you to figure out who's who.

Leading off the attack, so to speak, is a story by Frederik Pohl. For those of you who didn't quite figure out the subject of our crazy alien publisher's comments — it's Fred that he, or it, seems so preoccupied with. Also, in fairness to Fred, I should note that he wrote his story well before Ronald Reagan made his announcement, which just goes to show how perceptive Fred really is. (I can't say more without giving away too much, but read the story and you'll understand.)

Also featured in the issue is a column by Brian Aldiss, one of England's best SF authors.

As always, we appreciate any and all comments and criticisms (and anything nice you might want to say, too). Just send them in for our Boomerangs column.

As promised earlier, here is the list of our national distributors:

Ingram Periodicals
347 Reedwood Drive
Nashville, TN 37217
Attn: Marlene Scott

Diamond Comic Distributors
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Baltimore, MD 21207

Capital City Distribution, Inc.
2827 Perry St.
Madison, WI 53713

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SF: From Secret Movement to Big Business

By Brian W. Aldiss

Amiens is a French town with a fine cathedral. A mile from the cathedral, in the Cemetery of La Madeleine, stands the tomb of Jules Verne. An extraordinary monument it is, with the author's figure in stone rising naked from beneath a slab, hand upraised towards heaven.

I was there this summer, to cast a white carnation from our garden on to the old magician's grave. I was pleased to see that someone had inserted fresh flowers between the thumb and index finger of the upraised hand. If Jules Verne was not exactly the father of SF, he certainly was its first successful practitioner, and was blessed by the Pope for his writing — something which has yet to happen to any British SF authors, whose novels tend to be of a somewhat skeptical cast of thought, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818 onwards.

Success and failure are constant factors in writing and publishing, as in most things, and David Wingrove's and my *Trillion Year Spree*, which tells the story of science fiction from *Frankenstein* onwards, is certainly a success story of an unusual kind.

Why? There are two predominant strains at the least in SF as it is today. One is the philosophical strain deriving from the utopias and serious sociological and scientific thought; the other is the kind of wild "anything goes" strain deriving mainly from early twentieth-century magazines. It is this

precarious blend of antithetical elements which readers find so exciting.

This blend developed in such magazines as *Astounding*, which still thrives almost fifty years later — against all probability — as *Analog*. When I began reading it, back in the early forties, the war years, SF was virtually a secret movement. The first time a science fiction novel was published in hardcover — it was van Vogt's *The World of Null-A* from Simon & Schuster — in 1948, there was general rejoicing among the membership of the movement. From then on, SF developed, to become something of a publishing phenomenon, never content to obey general publishing rules.

Two examples. One of the senior editors at the French paperback house J'ai Lu, Jacques Sadoul, claims that the publication of van Vogt's novel in the land of Verne virtually restarted a French SF publishing industry. Sales of SF in this country do not tend to peak and then rapidly decline, as is the case with an ordinary novel; rather, they will sell steadily for months, perhaps years. No rapid movement, but no bad stock.

In the United States, things are slightly different. There, SF titles appear regularly on bestseller lists. Recent examples are *Contact* by Carl Sagan, and *The Mammoth Hunters* by Jean M. Auel, of which Crown published over a million copies in hardcover. Nor do popular SF novels necessarily streak

through the bookselling firmament and then disappear, like shooting stars. H.G. Wells's scientific romances, written at the end of last century, are always being reprinted. Other English novels, such as John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* — such a success when first published by Michael Joseph in the early fifties — or Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud*, never lack for an audience. Nor do C.S. Lewis's novels. My own early novel, *Hothouse*, first published in 1962, has so far appeared under six different English imprints, while the *Penguin Science Fiction Omnibus*, which I edited in the same period, has been selling steadily ever since. Such eminent British authors as J.G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock — both of them geniuses, to my mind — could easily claim as much or more.

Heinemann started publishing SF in the early fifties, disastrously, and apparently not knowing what it was about. Those novels were remaindered, among them Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, a perennial favourite, and still available.

Gradually, sales increased, the prejudice threshold against SF was lowered. J.R.R. Tolkien's monumental three-volume *Lord of the Rings* was a milestone along the way. It was significant that this author's popularity and vast sales had to originate across the Atlantic before he became all the rage here. The English lack enthusiasm. Tolkien enlarged the SF field to in-

clude other-world fantasies and alternative histories, such as the one cunningly depicted in Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration*.

The startling popularity of big budget SF films in the late seventies, particularly *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* appreciably added to the SF audience. It has led to much imitative rubbish being published, but that happens anywhere; it has also led to some beautiful recent novels, such as Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, an interesting metaphysical foretaste for the biochip industry.

From being almost a secret movement, SF is now big business for such publishing firms as specialize in it — which means, roughly speaking, having an editor, art director, and sales force who like and understand the type of story they are dealing with. SF and fantasy offer marvelous opportunities for imaginative cover art, just as they do to the special effects departments of movie studios.

Most European countries have limited but thriving outlets for SF. Such countries as Portugal and Finland — where Kirjayhtyma Publishers run a select and impressive line — are recent newcomers to the field. They generally concentrate on translations of American and British authors until local authors mature. For some years Germany has been a prosperous SF publishing scene, with leading firms like Wilhelm Heyne in Munich and Bastei Lubbe in Bergish Gladbach acquiring long lists. The pace has slackened a little since 1984.

SF also thrives in Japan. Its concerns are power; so it prospers in industrial countries. Even Singapore, with a population of two million, has produced its own SF anthology. But the great commercial center of SF is, naturally, the States.

Figures for last year's American publishing, according to *Locus*, the *Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field*, are astonishing. They show 1,332 books published, of which 715, just over 50 percent, were new titles. The new titles consisted of 249 SF novels, 177 fantasy novels, 74 reference books, 64 anthologies, 48 story collections,

and so on (the "so on" including art books). Leading SF publishers were Putnam/Berkley/Ace, Tor, Ballantine/Del Rey, DAW, Bantam, and Baen. To me the most intriguing item here is the large number of reference books, something no other variety of current fiction could possibly claim. The growth of a whole critical industry, with publishers who publish only SF criticism, is one of the wonders David Wingrove and I chart in *Trillion Year Spree*. SF as a college and university syllabus subject is virtually new since 1970. The most impressive of last year's critical works is editor E.F. Bleiler's *Supernatural Fiction Writers*, in two volumes from Scribner, selling at \$130, with perceptive essays on many English writers, including Sheridan le Fanu and Bram Stoker. Such cherishable books do not appear on English publishers' lists.

Another thing which helps maintain SF's vitality is the way in which writers from "outside" contribute, often substantially. Anthony Burgess and Doris Lessing are two good English examples, and I see Paul Theroux is also venturing into the future.

The future, of course, is where we're all going. Hence the intense

interest in it, and the fun in chronicling the lives and works of those who are rash enough to speculate about the future. Despite the prejudices against it, SF's recent history makes a splendid story. Small wonder Jules Verne rises buoyantly from his grave!

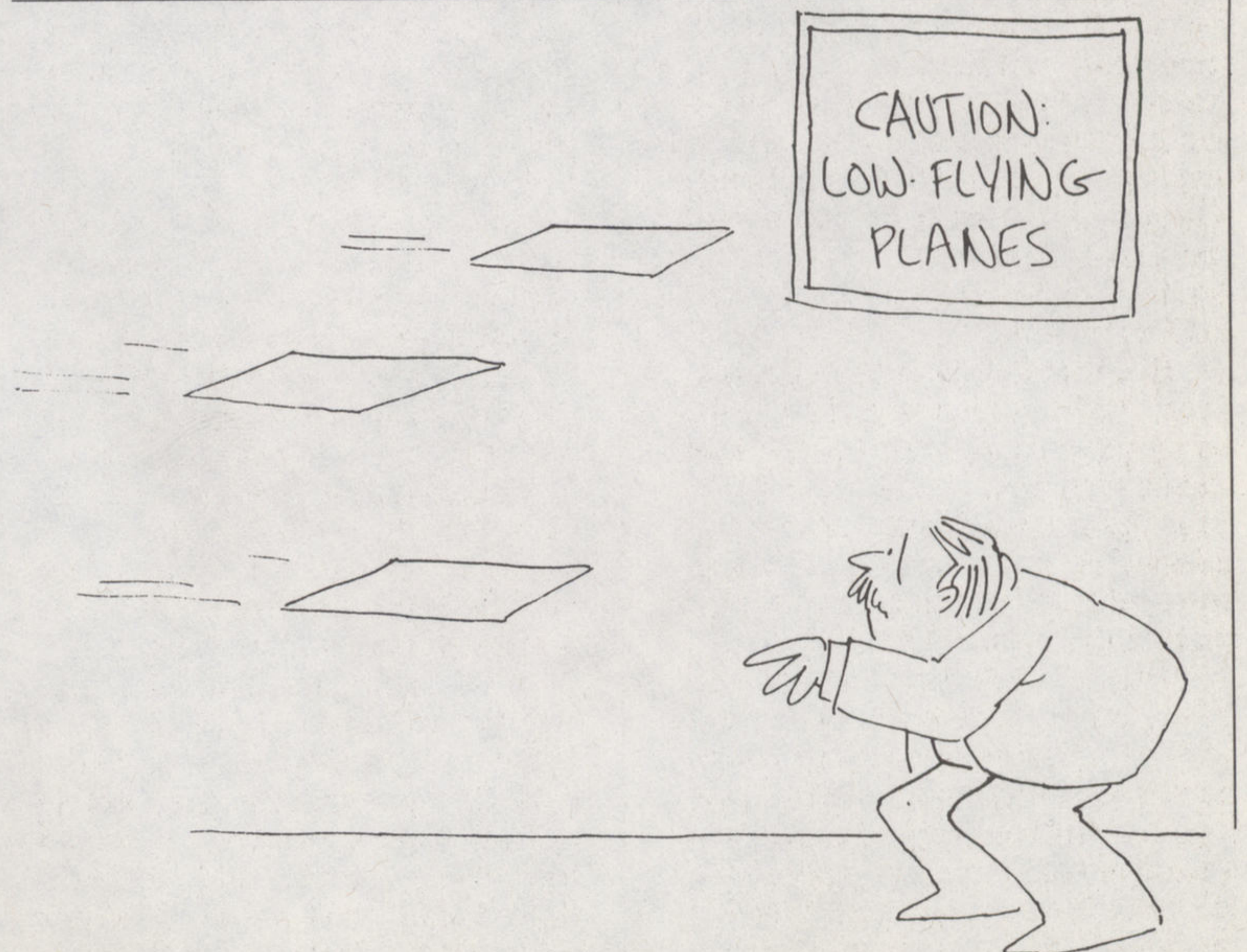
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Alien Publisher

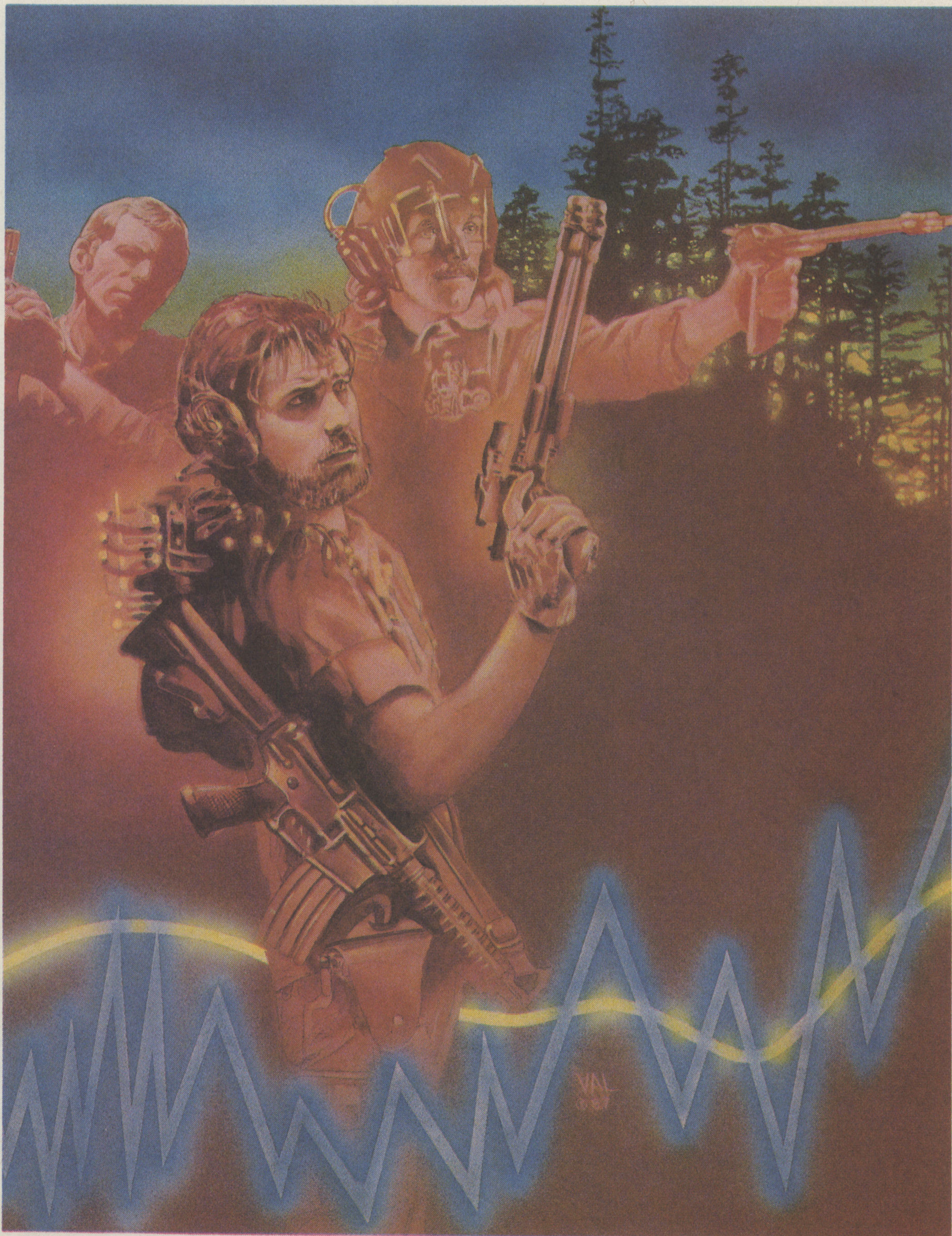
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life (see the novel, *Gateway*), what it means to be human (see *Man Plus*), and the inordinate difficulties human beings have in getting along with other human beings (see *Jem* and another shorter item called "Search and Destroy.") In these forty-odd volumes, you will see a lot of human frailties and a few human strengths. You will see adventure, humor, pathos, and moral dilemma. You will probably even enjoy decoding this fiction for your entertainment. A predictably reliable number of human beings do.

— ABO —



MASON



Val Lakey Lindahn

Search and Destroy

By Frederik Pohl

Assault Team Bravo moved up to the jump-off position in daylight, but then they had two hours to kill. Clouds were gathering, but the sun peeped out from under them just as it was setting, like a red seal pasted against the horizon's strip of sky.

Some of the nine men slept. They'd humped their blankets this far, they certainly wouldn't get any use out of them once the assault began, they figured they might as well use them now. Not Gamble. They were all tired. They'd marched the last two miles, because you couldn't risk using powered vehicles so close to the farm colony they were after. Gamble was probably the tiredest of the team, because he'd been the one stuck with unrolling the ball-breaking reel of fiber-optics cable, because you couldn't risk radio, either, and for the same reason. Still, Gamble didn't want to sleep. He sat watching the sun set, and for variety watching MacReady's screen to see if anything showed up yet, seismics or infrared. Nothing did, but then at this extreme range it was very unlikely anything would. Gamble wasn't terribly interested, one way or another. He wasn't particularly scared, either; he'd seen buddies get it, and he'd seen the whole team pull through without a scratch. If he thought about anything he thought to wonder about whether the other teams up and down the line would do their job, and whether MacReady, who was a brand-new replacement, really knew what he was doing with his instruments and detectors, but mostly he just sat. As soon as it was dark enough to move Halversen went through the team, passing out joints and kicking at the sleeping bags. "Light up, people," he whispered. "We move out in ten."

Little Mikros jerked awake and straight upright before he remembered where he was. "Oh, crap," he said, getting it all into focus. "Hey! Anything happening with the creeps?"

"They're just waiting for us," said Halversen, "and keep your effing voice down."

Mikros wasn't the only one blinking and looking stupid. That was one of the reasons Gamble didn't sleep before an action. He didn't really want the dope, either, but Halversen was watching him. Gamble lit up and took a deep drag. The warm, grassy smoke filled his lungs and scratched his throat, but it felt

good. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea after all, because if you were going to get some creep's bullet in you, it was probably better to get it stoned.

The new dork, MacReady, was buzzing around Halversen with more questions. "Is it going to rain? Are the other teams in place? Should we take the sleeping bags?"

Halversen was patient with him, for Halversen. "Shut your effing mouth," he whispered, and then relented enough to add, gathering the whole team close enough to hear, "Satellite reconnaissance says nobody's moving up there, so let's just keep it down and maybe we'll be all right. And, yeah, they say the rain'll start in the next half hour. Go!"

He thumbed Gamble to cap off the fiber-optics while the rest of the team was grunting its various items of equipment onto its shoulders. They'd be proceeding without contact until the firefight began, at least. And Assault Team Bravo moved off through the lightless woods.

For two hundred yards they marched in column, route step, silent. Then the woods thickened and Halversen waved them into open ranks with his gloves. There wasn't enough light to see anybody, but the luminous palms of the gauntlets were just will-o-the-wispy light enough to be visible to the men. Gamble moved up first, a dozen yards, then paused to listen and look. It wasn't likely to help. Human ears and human eyes weren't much good compared to Mikros's headphones and Halversen's night goggles, but there was always the chance he might catch something they missed. Ears and eyes were all he had — ears and eyes and firepower, sure, but what was the use of eighteen hundred rounds a minute if you didn't know where to point your piece?

Nobody really stopped when you were moving up this way. Gamble hardly got set before he saw the other members of the team slip noiselessly past him, nothing but the tiny phosphorescent glow at the back of the helmets to tell him that this was Mikros, humping his shoulder pack with the amplifier and sweeping the woods ahead with his parabolic mike; then Corfield and Turtleman, Corfield with his grenade-bus launcher and Turtleman sweating with the buses and the grenades; then MacReady with the seek-and-find

IR and seismic gear. MacReady wasn't silent, though. Twice in that first half mile Gamble heard MacReady before he saw him, stomp of off-balance boots when he tripped over a bush, mutter of *Shit!* when he pushed a branch aside and it slapped back in his face. One dipshit like MacReady could really spoil your day. Gamble hoped he'd learned more about using his detection gear than he had about silent advance on an enemy position. The creeps ahead weren't playing games. They were just a bunch of farmers, sure, but they'd had a lot of practice in fighting for their farms. And they had as much gear as the assault team, pretty nearly. There was no doubt in Gamble's mind that somewhere not not very far ahead, on top of the farmhouse maybe, maybe in a tree, there was a microphone six times the size of Mikros's that was nodding back and forth twenty-four hours a day, listening for somebody just like MacReady.

They told you when you signed up for search-and-destroy missions that it was a place where your ass was on the line. Then they told you how important it was to the U. S. of A., and then they told you all about the combat bonuses you got. They didn't lie. You got the bonus, all right, but when you were out in the field you knew for sure it really wasn't enough.

*** **

Doris was always saying that. She would be sweet as any woman knew how to be when he was home on leave, make him happy, make him know he was loved, and then when it was time to go back she'd cling to him and cry. And they'd play out the old refrains:

"This one's going to be easy, they told me already."

"They're never easy! People get killed!"

"Well, sure, honey, but — well, what about when we start a family? We'll need the money."

"What I need is a live husband." And then if her old man had come with her to the bus stop he'd chime in to cheer her up:

"Hell, Doris, this is nothing. Why, when we were in the Ardennes — " And then the old man would be off on another of those big-belly old veterans' stories about how it was against the Krauts, and the tanks, and the 155-millimeters, and the snow. What a different kind of war the old man had been in! He'd lugged a heavy machine-gun through a forest that must have been a lot like this one, in something called "The Battle of the Bulge." In the eyes of Doris's father it was definitely the most important battle anybody in the world had ever fought. To hear him talk, you'd think every last Nazi sniper was Superman and every last dogface was a genuine American hero, and it was a certified miracle that any one of them was still alive.

Put him out here for ten minutes, Gamble thought, and you wouldn't hear anything about the *Wehrmacht* any more.

Gamble heard the rain before he felt it, a sudden spattering in the leaves of the trees overhead. It almost made him feel good. So the brass had been right about that, anyway. But like everything else in Gamble's line of work, that was both good and bad. Bad because nobody liked slipping and sliding through the underbrush in the wet, good because that meant no

moon to help the creeps with their optics.

They crossed a farm road on the double, looking all around and delighted they found nothing to look at.

Then they were at the edge of the first of the creeps' fields. The crop was tall all around them, almost over their heads, it was so near to harvesting, but except for slipping in the muddy furrows the moving was easier now. They crossed the field in another rush, and Halversen halted them in a strip of woods no more than a hundred feet through.

They all took their positions. Riflemen like Gamble dropped on their bellies at the edge of the next field. Mikros stepped cautiously up to join them, his big carbon-fiber electronic ear flapping in every direction. MacReady handed out spikes to Burton and Coglio, who moved a few steps off, right and left, and planted them in the muddy ground. That was another way rain helped, too. The spikes slid in with only a little grunting; they didn't have to take the risk of pounding them in.

From where he lay Gamble could see the picture building up on MacReady's screen, blue figures and yellow. The blue was what the infrared detectors picked up: heat. The yellow was what the tiny, unfelt trembling of the ground told the seismics. Because the seismic detectors were twenty feet apart, parallax gave you range. IR was better at telling you something was there; but the seismics told you where you could hit it.

According to both seismics and IR something big was shaking the ground no more than a hundred yards away. The picture was only a scribble of lines, but Gamble knew what it had to be. A Jeep, almost certainly kept there with its engine running to give power to the arms and detectors of an outpost of the creeps. The infrared told more. There were half a dozen blue blobs on the screen, much tinier than the bright blotch of the Jeep. Farmers.

The question was, what were they doing?

Gamble hoped, and almost convinced himself, that they were simply a listening post. They didn't seem to be moving around, and their disposition didn't look threatening — two or three of them were actually behind the Jeep, because their images merged with its.

Halversen, back from sweeping the terrain with his night glasses, started toward Gamble, caught a glimpse of the screen, bounded over to MacReady. "Motherfucker, turn it around!" he grated. MacReady had incautiously set up the screen so that it was edge on to the open field. Anybody on the other side might easily pick up its glow.

Maybe they had.

Something plopped among the tall stalks in the middle of the field, and the vast noise and eye-searing light of a flashbang grenade told everyone that the battle had started.

That was one noise and one light. In a moment the whole forest section was noise and light. It was like the biggest damnedest Fourth of July in the history of the Republic, only Gamble wasn't looking at it across a river. He was in the middle of it.

It hadn't been MacReady. It had been somebody

from Assault Team Dog, off a few hundred yards to the right, incautiously hitting a tripwire or firing at a shadow. That was where the action started, but in a moment it was everywhere.

Halversen was pounding Gamble's shoulder and pointing to the spot indicated on MacReady's screen, where the big something was chugging away.

Gamble nodded, wriggled himself comfortable beside the trunk of a tall pine and fired one burst. A short one. He wasn't hoping to do the Jeep much hurt, only to keep the men around it busy. It was up to Coglio and his compound rifle to do the job.

As soon as he had fired, Gamble rolled over rapidly three times to his left before he lifted his head a quarter of an inch to see what was happening.

Coglio had just pulled the trigger. There was no more noise than an airgun — well, it was an airgun — until the little bus-carrying pencil rocket was well clear of the muzzle. It was going no more than 500 feet a second then. Then, a yard out, its little rocket cut in. Half a second later came the sharp *krik* it made when it went supersonic.

In that moment, return fire from across the field dug a hole where Gamble's head had been before he rolled.

He winced anyway, because he couldn't help it, but that was what he had rolled away for. He wasn't hurt. But Coglio had got his round off and was probably thrashing away himself as fast as he could, while the fire-trail of the rocket lanced into the woods across the field. It must have bashed a few branches on the way. That didn't matter. The little piezo-activated fins bent just enough to keep it on course; the smart fuze would not let itself be set off by contact. The minibus reached the exact range Coglio had set it for. Then, exactly on target, it fired. Fifty grams of high-density powder drove a score of flechettes down on what lay below, Jeep and men. Gamble thought he heard a yell of agony — hoped he heard it — but there was noise from all over now, and no way to be sure.

Someone somewhere had once said what the human ear was like in battle: A cup. It could fill with noise, more noise than its owner had ever heard before, but it could hold just so much noise and the rest just ran out and spent itself. Gamble's ears were full. Muttering crumps from here, sharp rapid-fire clatter from there, the fart sounds of automatic serial grenades on their parachutes — there was no kind of noise that wasn't blasting at him. He did not even distinguish the flash-crack of the round that got Coglio, but he saw the muzzle flare. He aimed at the source of the counterfire and sprayed it, rolling back to his first position. He had time to note that there was a hole where his head had lain that smelled of hot dirt and burnt powder while he got off another burst and rolled away again.

There was fire from both sides and in front, and stray bursts behind the team's position. Parachute flares lighted up the open field. Flashbangs exploded every few seconds. They gave more light than anyone on the team wanted, but a lot less than could do them any good. The trees and the tall crop plants were visible as hell, but whatever was hidden behind them

stayed hidden.

Another burst and another roll put Gamble next to MacReady, juggling his filters and his gain to try to keep the noise of exploding ordnance from swamping his seismics and the flare of HE from drowning the IR traces. Gamble couldn't fire from there. No one in his right mind would draw counterfire on his eyes and ears. But he took a quick look before he rolled away. The seismics showed that, at least, the Jeep engine wasn't running any more, and the moving shapes on the IR weren't moving. The flechettes from the minibus had done their job.

It really had been a yell he'd heard, Gamble decided as he rolled to a new firing position. The creeps were tough fighters, but even they got upset enough to scream when a flechette the size of a tenpenny nail came down through helmet or body armor and spent itself in their soft parts.

Down the line, Team Zebra opened up with its automatic mortars. You couldn't hide the signature of a mortar once it began to fire. Once the gunlayers had punched in azimuth, elevation and fuze setting they were gone, as far as they could get before the counterfire came in. Surprisingly, the farmers were slow. The four mortars got off more than a dozen rounds among them before mortars from the other side punched their clock — and then mortars from Team Poppa returned the favor on the mortars of the creeps.

It was going well, Gamble thought, rolling and firing, rolling and firing. Incoming fire was slower than it should have been. Either the farmers had been caught with their pants down or they simply weren't as well prepared as usual. In the fan of fire just ahead of Team Bravo, MacReady's sensors showed very little activity. Any moment, Gamble decided, Halversen would give a yell and it would be time for the final rush.

The yell didn't come.

A flashbang went off not a dozen yards from Gamble. His eardrums felt as though they had been spiked; his eyes were totally blinded for the moment. But in that split second of violent flare he had caught a glimmer of something overhead.

It was a parafoil.

Gamble froze.

He rubbed his ruined eyes, blinking furiously, trying with as little movement as possible to get back the sight he had lost. It came back slowly, only outlines at first, and flashes of light from the fire zone —

Then he saw the dimmer, scarier flicker from the parafoil overhead, spinning gently down toward them like the seedpod from an elm.

It was a big one. From Mylar wingtip to wingtip it had to be a dozen yards across. Big ones held big hurts. You couldn't tell from looking at it what kind of gifts its bus contained. You couldn't tell how it was fused — proximity, time, motion, IFF, whatever. You could only be sure that it had sensors that were looking for something to hurt, and that it was bad news. This was no minibus with a couple dozen flechettes. This could ruin your day seriously.

Hawkes's countermeasures were already busy. Little jumping-jack firecrackers sputtered around the

woods, far out on the perimeter, trying to catch the parafoil's attention with heat, light, sound or motion.

It didn't seem to be looking for any of those things. It whirled steadily, slowly downward. Good old God, Gamble prayed, for the sake of my dear wife Doris, let the God-damned thing be an IFF sniffer ...

Perhaps it was.

It took forever to settle on its filmy wings, but it had no propulsion source of its own. It could only fall, slow or fast, from where the parafoil launcher had dropped it; and at last it had squeezed out the last moment of flight it could manage, aimlessly, seeking and not finding.

It touched ground in the middle of the field.

It went off with a hell of a blast, as its last-resort fuze did the only thing left to it to do and set it off. Dirt, stalks and spiky green leaves flew in all directions, but no member of Assault Team Bravo was within the damage sphere.

Belatedly Gamble realized the battle had changed character; there was less heavy stuff, more small-arms fire and yelling, all up and down the line.

Halversen's yell came then, too, and all that was left of Assault Team Bravo got up and moved in, fast and dirty, spraying everything ahead of them with everything they had.

There did not seem to be anybody firing back any more.

In the dimming light from fires and flares Gamble saw, as he ran, dead creeps staring vacantly up at him and wounded creeps cursing hopelessly at him, but of alive and well creeps pointing weapons at him there weren't any anymore.

The last of the creep farmers were gathered well outside of the ruin of their farmhouse, silhouetted in the light as it burned from a dozen mortar rounds. Their hands were up. Their weapons were on the ground. And it was all over.

*** **

The morning sun rose on a living Gamble, and one who was not even scratched. It occurred to him to say, "Thanks, God." Then it occurred to him it would maybe make more sense to say, "Thanks, Halversen, for the dope," and that made him grin until he forgot it.

It was easy to grin that morning. Just being alive was reason enough.

It was the assault teams who took the position and rounded up the prisoners, but it was the big-bellied senior agents from the rear who came in to handcuff the survivors, load the wounded into ambulance helicopters and read all of them their rights.

Not everybody on Bravo had come off as well as Gamble. Coglio was dead. MacReady had fallen almost onto a flashbang; he was unconscious, and that was probably a good thing, because his whole face was burned to blisters. Hawkes, the counter-measures man, had run as fast as he could from his jumping-jack firecrackers, but he hadn't run far enough, or maybe had just been unlucky. Gamble helped lift him into an ambulance, and he had no uniform blouse at all on his right side any more. He almost had no right side, because it had been eaten away by some creep's

rapid-fire weapon.

But except for things like that, it was a peaceful morning in the Oregon woods.

There was smoke from a hundred little fires in the forest, but companies of Forest Rangers were already putting them out. There was noise from the helicopter rotors churning away, and deeper, more businesslike noises from the John Deeres that were grunting through the job of plowing under the marijuana fields.

That was bad news. Gamble hadn't expected them there quite so fast. He had spent time helping with the wounded that he could have been using for himself.

Like everyone else on the teams, his first objective now was to beat the plows to the crop. The plows were already working on one end of the biggest, ripest field, and at others assault-team members were emptying their ammunition pouches, looking for the biggest, healthiest stalks, stripping off the leaves, cramming them into the pouches. Rounds of every known kind of ammunition were strewn all over the field, until Halversen came roaring by and made them stop. "Stupid effers," he bawled, "you want to blow up some civilians? If one of those effing plows hits a effing live round with a contact fuze we're all in the deep crap forever!"

Grudgingly the teams began to retrace their steps to collect the ammunition and dump it in safe stacks under trees. When Gamble had done what he thought was enough to be his share, he too walked into the forest, sat with his back leaning against a tree and lighted up a joint from his private stock.

Halversen came slowly by.

You weren't supposed to smoke dope once the action was over. Halversen glared. Then he shrugged. He didn't say anything, but he slumped down on the next tree to Gamble and lit a joint of his own.

They sat silent for a moment, waiting for some reason to do anything else. None came.

At last Gamble offered, "That was good about the dope. I guess that parafoil was sniffing for it, right, identification friend-or-foe? And we must have smelled just like one of its own people."

"It worked for them that did it," said Halversen wearily. "You know Teasdale, the straight-arrow from Dog?"

"Team leader. Sure. He used to be a running back at Cornell before he joined up."

"Well, he didn't run fast enough. Parafoil came in and aced the whole team."

"Way it goes," said Gamble philosophically. "Well, the creeps'll figure that out next time, anyway. It won't work twice."

Halversen took a deep hit. He said, his voice strained and squeaky as he let the smoke out, "It won't matter to you and me, anyway."

Gamble felt a quick uneasy shudder. He sat up. "Oh? Why's that, Halversen?"

"Because good old Bravo's going to good old Colorado."

"Colorado?" Gamble screamed. "What the eff do you mean, Colorado? You told me yourself we were

(Continued to page 39)

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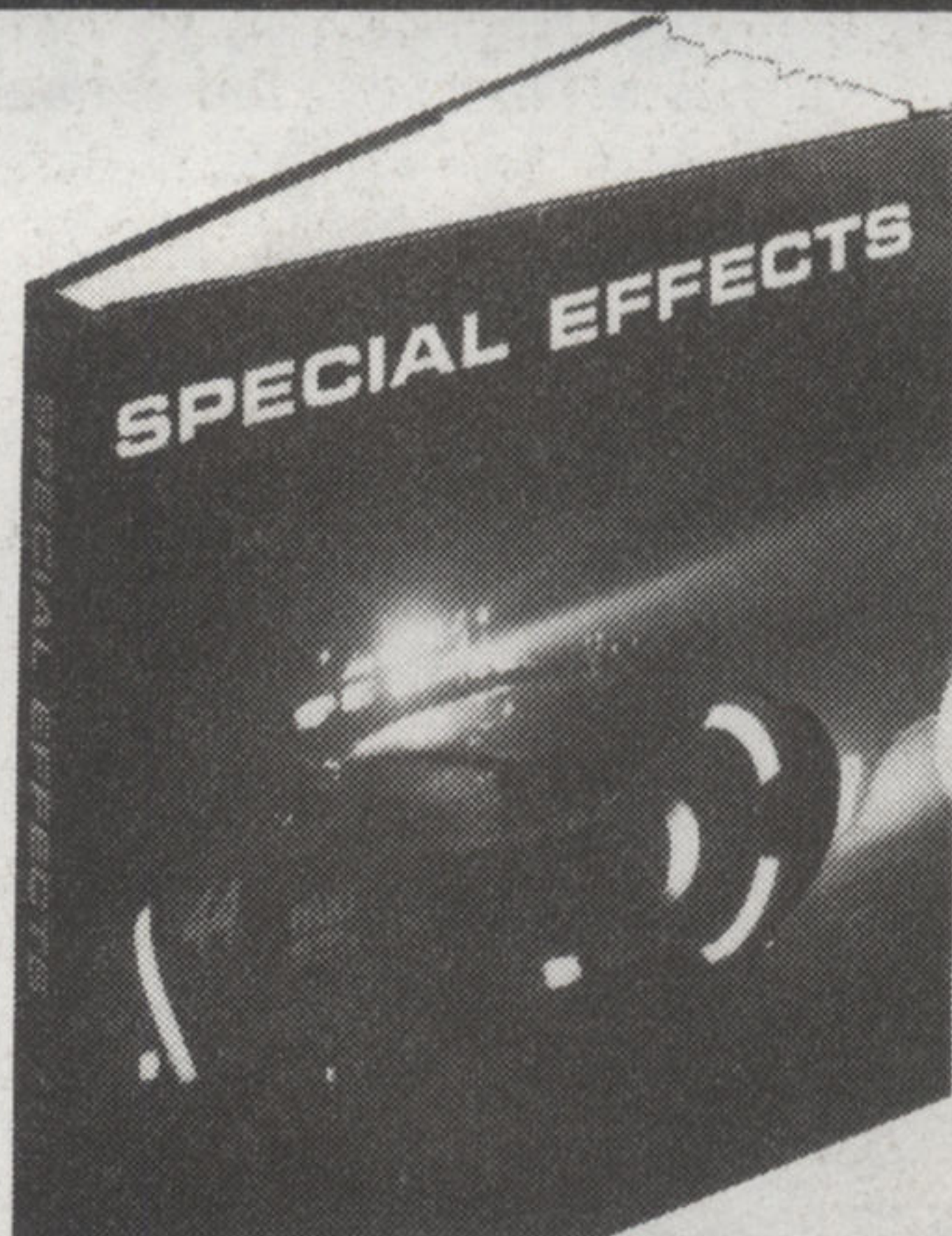
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BOOKS

By Darrell Schweitzer

A Historical Perspective

One of the by-products of genre-awareness in science fiction is that we have a sense of history. Before the field existed as a *field*, nobody could write such history, regardless of how many isolated works were published. There has to be a label for that. Sometimes an academician will slap a label on after the fact (as in "medieval romance" or even, I sometimes suspect, "the Novel"), but with living literature, it's usually a matter of commercial publishing categories. I am reminded of Borges's essay on the precursors of Kafka, none of whom, he points out, had anything in common until Kafka came along.

And so with SF. The first major history seems to have been J.O. Bailey's *Pilgrims Through Space and Time* (1947), which, much to the frustration of the fans of the time (who yearned for Legitimacy in those days, even as the fox yearned for the grapes), gave short shrift to anything published after about 1915. The earliest scholarship in the field was mostly the work of fans: articles in such literate publications of the 1940s as *The Acolyte* and *Fantasy Commentator*, the first bibliographies and indexes, etc. Next came the work of writer-critics like James Gunn, whose master's thesis was serialized in *Dynamic Science Fiction* in 1953-54, and Damon Knight, whose *In Search of Wonder* (1956) was something of a watershed. The academics arrived later, the "awakening" of academe being a phenomenon of the 1970s and an odd mixture of genuine enthusiasm

and the publish-or-perish syndrome.

SF histories, author-studies, and reference books which contain historical material now number well into the hundreds, if not thousands — a quite incredible situation by the standards of even fifteen years ago. I remember receiving a catalogue of them from L.W. Currey a few years ago which was a good-sized book in itself. We can make some generalizations about SF historians: the fan-scholars tend to be insular and often uncritical, giving one the impression that the history of science fiction is a sacred litany of American pulp-magazine titles; the academics are sometimes weirdly skewed by ideological or theoretical considerations or just plain ignorance; the writer-critics tend to shoot from the hip, calling things as they see them. Sometimes they are wildly biased, but usually, of the three categories, they are the most sensible and interesting.

Which brings us to the work of one of the world's leading writer-critics:

Trillion Year Spree

By Brian Aldiss (with David Wingrove)

Atheneum, 1986

511 pp., \$24.95

This is a revision and updating of Aldiss's earlier *Billion Year Spree* (1973), which was heralded by some as the best single history of the field ever written. I wouldn't go so far as to agree, but I would recommend it as a lucidly written,

generally (but not entirely) balanced account informed with the characteristic Aldissian wit. For the new edition, I suspect, Aldiss hired Wingrove to write chapters on developments since 1973, which Aldiss then ran through the typewriter once. I don't *know* who wrote what, but I base my suspicions on the text: the new chapters aren't as interesting as the old ones. They're a perfectly competent survey, but we are clearly in the hands of a less penetrating writer. After all, if Aldiss spent the intervening years working on his mammoth *Helliconia* project, how could he have found the time to do all that reading?

The chief fault of both versions is that Aldiss can be quite gullible when presented with misinformation that fits his purpose. The errors change between the two editions, but there are still some howlers.

I noted with some relief that the pernicious nonsense about Paul Linebarger (a.k.a. Cordwainer Smith) being the "real" psychiatric patient described in Robert Lindner's "The Jet-Propelled Couch" has been dropped. This has been thoroughly refuted since 1973, and the "evidence" Aldiss claimed to have seems to have evaporated. But in place of this is an even more serious distortion.

The two really arresting ideas in both versions of this book are these:

Mary Shelley is the first science-fiction writer, since

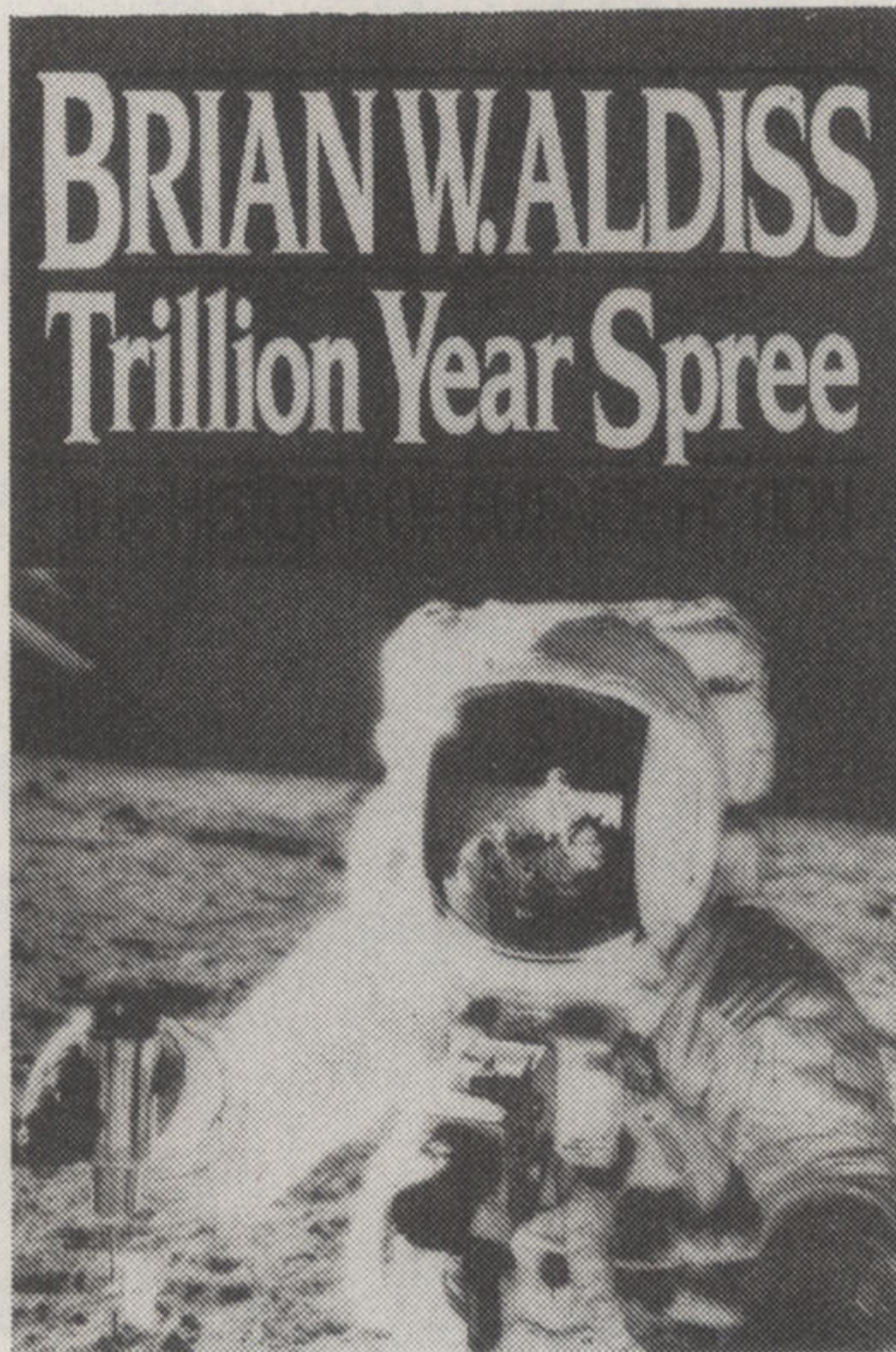
Frankenstein is the first novel based on the idea of scientific change. The earlier moon-flights and the like may be relegated to the status of "Honorable Ancestors" because they took place in a changeless world. (And like the predecessors of Kafka, I might add, had little in common until SF came into existence and they became its ancestors.) This has apparently caused controversy, but Aldiss makes a good case. His chapter on Shelley is his best, thoroughly exploring both the meaning of her novel and what it brought into literature.

The second idea is that Hugo Gernsback, like Milton's Satan, shall be cast down from heaven. This is where the trouble starts. Certainly Aldiss is grappling with one of the chief problems facing the SF historian: the contents of the earliest SF pulps, especially the Gernsback titles, were bloody awful by any standards. Very few stories from that period are reprinted. Few contemporary commentators have much first-hand knowledge of them. But, if the field, or even the field as a clear *publishing category*, stems from Gernsback and the sacred date of April 1926, when the first issue of *Amazing Stories* appeared, how are we to account for these, ah, *humble* origins? One technique is to deny that the stories were that terrible. Nostalgia makes even the most tawdry effusions golden. Another, used by Aldiss, is to deny that they were important. Gernsback was not the "Father of Science Fiction," says Aldiss. Instead he was "a midwife disguised as the Young Pretender."

Some of this perspective is necessary. After all, the *important* SF of the 1920s and '30s was not what was appearing in *Amazing* or *Wonder Stories*. Most of that was semi-literate rubbish, sub-professional even by the standards of the other pulps of the time. The important SF was in book form: Huxley, Zamyatin, Stapledon, and the later Wells. The importance of John Campbell's revolution in *Astounding*, circa 1940, was that he made magazine science fiction good enough to be worthy of some attention. The pulp-stream of SF merg-

ed with the book-stream sometime in the 1950s. But before Campbell, magazine SF was of only secondary importance.

Sure enough, rather than go through the sacred litany (as James Gunn does in his *Alternate Worlds*), Aldiss barely touches on magazine SF at the end of his chapter on the 1930s. He spends most of that space squashing the "myth" of Hugo Gernsback's alleged fatherhood of the field.



The problem is that he departs from the facts. His credulity gets the better of him as he quotes at some length an article by Sam Lundwall published in the British journal *Foundation*, in which Lundwall (a Swede) attempts to prove that the *first* SF magazine appeared in 1916, in Sweden, of course, followed by another in Germany and Austria in 1919. Unfortunately *Trillion Year Spree* isn't quite up-to-date, because Sam Moskowitz blew Lundwall away in a subsequent issue of *Foundation*. The Swedish magazine, *Hugin*, turns out to have been a science magazine. There is no proof that it contained any fiction at all. The German-Austrian *Die Orchideengarten* was a horror-fantasy magazine rather like *Weird Tales*. It had one science-fiction issue, which contained five stories. Another alleged science-fictional "supplement," *Stella*, remains extremely suspect, considering

Lundwall's credibility.

This error is going to prove hard to kill. Aldiss speaks with such authority that countless academics who don't know any better are going to repeat it. The whole history of SF may become seriously distorted.

Klono knows, I am not a Gernsback defender. As editor of *Amazing* and *Wonder* he did a shoddy job and lowered the standards of SF as far as they could possibly go. Certainly he had no literary talent himself or anything that might be called literary understanding. He knew what an idea was, but hadn't the vaguest idea of what a *story* was. But he was a successful publisher. He founded the first *five* science fiction magazines (six, if you count *Amazing Annual*). He may be the black sheep of the family, but he named our tribe. Had he not done so, books like *Trillion Year Spree* would not have been possible.

So, yes, we need perspective, but let us not throw out the bathwater and say, "Baby? What baby?"

Other factual errors are relatively minor. I doubt either author has read more than the dustjacket flap for Hubbard's *Typewriter in the Sky*, and that not recently, to judge from the summary of that story. At one point we're given the impression that Ted White remained editor of *Amazing* into the 1980s. At another, Aldiss seems to claim that Asimov's robots (first story, 1940) are derived from Williamson's humanoids (first story, 1947). He seems unaware that Roger Zelazny's first stories appeared in 1962, the same year as Delaney's. And Aldiss's misapprehension of Lovecraft's life, works, and thought is total. He treats Lovecraft as a minor, bad horror writer, quoting "Herbert West: Reanimator" while ignoring the sweeping vision of "The Shadow Out of Time," which might have more fruitfully been discussed alongside Stapledon. This is like citing H.G. Wells as the author of "The Man with the Nose" without mentioning *The Time Machine*.

But the book has many ex-

(Continued to page 55)



Larry Blamire

Blamire 85

Tiger's Heart

By John S. Tumlin

The amber light was on. I checked it when I entered as I always do. They're supposed to fix on the mode at least twelve hours in advance, but I've known them to change it between the time your agent dispatches you and you arrive at the studio.

The dressing rooms were small and mean and poorly lighted. And damp. You can always tell a cheap production studio. All the climate control goes for the electronics. But actors and other beggars can't be choosers.

As usual, the costume gave me my first clue about the show. It was nondescript barbarian warrior, something out of a medieval never-never land. After make-up, I slipped on the fabric parts, sprayed them with Quik-Shrink, and let them pull around me not quite snug before hitting them with the fix spray. The fake leather breastplate and arm guards were adjustable stock-issue, but of course I had to spray the boots and hit them just right with the fix. Too large or too small, and you'll be laid up for a week with blisters. The program doesn't stop because your feet hurt.

There was a script in the dressing room. There always is, although it isn't really necessary. Some actors don't bother with it, but I always like to have some idea what to expect. Maybe it's my father's training. He was an actor of the old school where actors learned lines and rehearsed for hours or sometimes even days. Often they'd have to do a scene several times before they got a good tape. That meant no live subscribers, of course, but their work was their own.

I lifted my pigtail, plugged in my warm-up module, and let it take me through my vocal exercises while I looked at the script. By the time I got to the bottom of the third page, I knew the writer didn't have any feel for dialogue. As for the plot, it was little more than a love triangle with enough politics thrown in to excuse a battle or two, undoubtedly some stock footage from one of the classics. I was playing somebody called Tharn, who was in love with Thalia. Thalia loved me, but her father favored my rival, Menga. Sad stuff, but probably enough to hang the action on. It was called "The Heart of the Tiger" after an enormous ruby that played some part in the action.

The script was slow going. I was only a third of the way through when I heard myself going through scales. "Physical warm-up in forty-five seconds," my

voice told me. I cleared the floor and placed myself.

My warm-up module was a personal, and I had had it done for a circle eight feet in diameter. That had been in flusher times when I could afford such things, and it had saved me from a lot of bruises — as long as I was careful about clearing the floor space.

The best thing about a warm-up module is that it gives you time to get your concentration going. My father never believed this. He had retired before the nerve-link implants were cheap enough for an actor to afford. Dad always considered them a kind of artistic prostitution, I think, because the actor turns his body over to the programmer. But by the time I was twenty-two, you either had one or you didn't work. And a warm-up module, even a standard, can keep you in good shape even if you have the willpower of a potato.

The physical part of my personal starts out with loosening up exercises. Very relaxing, and I always do some mental free-wheeling while it runs. Today I found myself wandering back to the night before. After work I had gone to the Pits to unwind. "Croc" Croce was there, looking pretty drawn.

"Hard show?" I ventured, sitting down in the other side of the booth.

Croc nodded. "Another red-lighter."

That explained his looks. Killing a man always seems to take it out of an artist, even if the victim is willing.

"Terminal?"

Croc shook his head. "Three-time loser. The guy was scared, too. You can tell from the eyes. If it hadn't been for the continence controls, he'd have wet all over his costumes."

"I don't see how you do it. This is your second this month, isn't it?"

"Third." I could see Croc was drunker than I had thought at first. "But the money's good. Besides, it's hard times. You, of all people, ought to know that."

I suppressed a nasty crack. He had hit a nerve. I didn't do red-lighters. I had refused one that had been sprung on me, the producers had sued, and I was just coming back from a long involuntary hiatus.

"Maybe I'm a damn fool," I admitted.

"You're a damn fool all right. Maybe a prig, too, Chris. Or maybe you're just squeamish."

"I'm squeamish about doing porn, too. And so are you."

Comparing red-lighters and porn was a mistake.

It just made Croc defensive. "Forgive us our sins, Milord. We poorer players who strut and fret cannot always choose our scripts."

"Maybe I'm just jealous," I said by way of apology. "Or maybe I'm just not cut out for those roles."

One thing about Croc: he was as easy to mollify as to anger. "Don't believe it, kid. We're all murderers under the skin. Every man's a Macbeth at heart. But I don't kill, except on camera and as programmed. That doesn't make me a murderer. If anybody's responsible, it's the programmer." He looked at me paternally. "What about you? Got anything going?"

"I just did a bedroom farce. It's a pilot and may wind up on the fall schedule."

Croc grunted. "Some would call that prostitution, too. But if the money is good, kid, take it. In a few years you can buy your own studio and do Beckett and Pirandello. Of course, you may not find a market for the tapes, but you could juice 'em up a little. Didi could actually hang Gogo at the end of *Godot*. Dolly in for a close-up and freeze-frame as the face turns black. The live subscribers would eat it up."

"They do love accidents, don't they?"

"Damn right. About all they get for their money is an occasional fall, but there have been those one or two biggies. So they hang on, hoping for another case like poor old Isaacson. Did you see that?"

"No."

"He slipped in a puddle of blood and went down right under the charge's blade. Show never got on the public air, of course, but a lot of the live subscribers were making tapes. It was a hot item for awhile. Some ghoul brought a copy to a party one night. That's how I happened to see it. The camera zoomed in for a close-up on the severed head."

"Jesus!"

Croc shrugged. "Hazard of the profession," he said philosophically. "Hollywood kept its cameras grinding no matter what. And who knows how many of the old Greeks went splat on the orchestra pavement when the crane rope broke?"

Croc was one of theater's history buffs. I remembered a picture he'd shown me once of an ancient Greek actor contemplating his mask, getting into character. "I wonder what they would have thought of us, Sophocles and the others."

"Probably tried to date us," said Croc. "They were all as queer as Edward II. But why should they put on airs? They had to toady to the sponsors and the judges. How are we any worse?"

I left off. In his cups, Croc was always a cynic. But he had lent me fifty when I first hit the skids and had never mentioned it during the four years it took me to get a leading part again and pay him back. Who was I to call him dirty? Had I asked where he'd gotten the fifty?

I left him there, his burly, bearlike head nodding over another drink, fighting, I suspected, a disgust with himself.

My own voice running through some supplementary exercises pulled me out of my reverie. While it finished, I strapped on the broadsword and adjusted

it. Better work out some with this baby, I thought, or you won't be able to move tomorrow.

A dressing room even in a first-rate studio, which this wasn't, is no place to swing a four-foot-plus broadsword. I unplugged my module, put it away in its case, and went out into the stand-by area.

Someone was already there — my leading lady apparently. She was dressed in a green gown of some sort, but all I could see of her were legs, buttocks, and the small of her back: she was rolled up into the yoga plow and bouncing her toes to loosen up.

I took the sword over to a corner and went through the basic parries. My father had taught me stage fighting, starting when I was about twelve. Since the basic fight is pre-programmed, I suppose you don't really have to know the moves, but if you don't know and don't practice, you can wind up with a pulled muscle or, worse, your body just won't be able to handle the signals, and the live subscribers will have a treat seeing you lose an arm or a leg. The broadsword is a two-handed weapon and serves as both sword and shield; you strike with it and block with it. It's heavy, and even in the days when actors used an unedged version it could break bones.

After a few minutes of basic moves, I looked around for whoever was playing Menga, but there was no sign of him. That bothered me. A real professional always wants to get a sense of what his antagonist is like, even in these days. There are all sorts of things you can work on. For instance, there's a nice spectacular move — a lot of programmers use it — in which you slide off your opponent's blade, swing around full circle, and deliver a slicing blow to his unguarded side. With a well-placed blood-pack, it's a really startling effect.

I was tossing my weapon from hand to hand when a door at the side opened. But it was only a wispy guy with an adolescent's idea of a beard trying to hide a weak chin. He looked at me peevishly. "Too loose," he said. "The costume's supposed to be skintight. Somebody should have told you. I have enough to worry about with script revisions."

A real third-rater, I thought as he wandered off. Wait until it's too late, then call attention to a problem. Gets you off the hook for a bad script, you little simp.

"Chris, what the devil are you doing in this?" It was Judith Gold. So she was my leading lady. The yoga should have told me. I began to feel better about the whole thing. Judy was a real pro.

"I've been unable to conquer the vice of eating," I answered. "What about you?"

She shrugged. "I prefer schlock to porn. Times are tough. At least the costumes are decent."

"Well, almost decent," I said, eyeing her low-cut, almost transparent gown.

She did a model's sweep, which showed more Judy than gown. "You know what I mean. They spend all the money on the finery."

"They sure didn't spend it on the script. Did you look at it?"

"No. I prefer to go in with a clear head — and a clear conscience. Is it really bad?"

"Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck.' But I can tell you that Shakespeare hasn't met his match in this, and neither has anyone else."

She dropped the banter suddenly and looked at me seriously. "Chris, I thought you didn't do these."

"Just another long hill on the comeback trail," I sighed. Underneath, I was irked. I had paid a high price, and I was having to scrounge to pay off the debt. I didn't like being reminded.

Judy's finely penciled eyebrows came together quizzically. "But wasn't that what it was all about?"

"No," I said, a little angry now. "It was that red-lighter they sprung on me. You know that."

"But this is!"

"Is what?"

Some programmers think all actors are stupid. Maybe they're right about me. Judy had to take me by the arm and lead me out to the stage entrance.

The light was red.

Actresses don't lead sheltered lives, but I don't think Judy knew all the words I used. I left her there and stormed into the programming center. At the top of my lungs I explained that I didn't do red-lighters and that the light had been amber and that they could get themselves another boy.

A rotund man with a tiny face set in the middle of a lot of baby fat separated himself from the rest and waddled over as though I were being perfectly reasonable. He smiled and nodded as he came, a sure sign of a slick PR man. He explained that the light had been red when he came in that morning and that my agent had been informed that it was a red-light show and that if I wished I could nullify the contract by paying the forfeit — "You do have forfeit insurance, don't you, Mr. Masters?"

That cut my signal. I did have insurance against forfeit because of illness or accident, of course, but since the previous incident, which had cost my insurers plenty in legal fees, the rates offered me on contractual misunderstandings were prohibitive.

"I want to call my agent," I said sullenly.

The PR man produced a phone from his coat pocket, and I punched in Si's number. Si himself answered. I explained the situation colorfully.

"You can't back out now, Chris. I really don't understand your attitude."

"Attitude, my ass. You didn't tell me this was a red-lighter. You know I wouldn't have taken it."

"Of course I told you. You said it was all right. You said you'd learned your lesson that last time."

I was stunned. Si isn't the most ethical agent in a business that has never run long on that quality anyway, but this treachery went beyond anything I had thought him capable of.

"Dammit, Si, I won't do it."

"Of course you will, Chris. You need this job. You won't climb out of the pits after a second balk, I promise you. I'm sure I can count on you to be a trouper."

Suddenly it all fell into place. The light had been amber when I had come in. But it had been red for Judy, and I suspected the babyfaced PR man was as innocent as he pretended to be. I glanced around, wondering which of the techies Si had bribed. An

agent's fifteen percent on a red-light actor is a big temptation; they're the only ones in constant demand. He'd made it a nice choice for me — do a red-lighter or go back to waiting tables or selling shoes. I didn't have any illusions. Si could finish me if he wanted to with a few well-placed rumors and a couple of half-truths. Not that he was all that influential, but I was vulnerable.

"You'll do it, Chris baby," came Si's voice over the phone. It wasn't a question.

I felt my energy drain. How much artistic integrity does a man have if he withdraws from the profession altogether, commits professional suicide rather than compromise? I had sacrificed once. It wasn't fair to ask me to do it again.

"All right, you bastard," I said limply. "But I want to buy back my contract."

"Sure, fellow, but of course you're going to be working a lot more after this. I can't let you go cheap."

"I may just break my arm, Si. You want to try casting a cast for six weeks?"

"Six weeks is a long time in show biz. You might lose your touch. And who'd want to handle an accident-prone?"

"Go to hell!" I cut him off and handed the phone to Babyface. "Where's the adjusting room?"

He smiled that greasy smile and pointed down the hall.

Judy caught up with me at the door.

"Slow down, Chris."

"I've got to get through the adjusting room stuff."

She grabbed my arm and stopped me. She was always direct. "You're doing it, then?"

"I don't seem to have any choice, do I? Do it or get blackballed. I guess my principles aren't what they used to be."

The lash in my voice didn't faze her.

"Chris, I'm sorry. We all do things these days...Never mind. How about a drink after the show?"

"Okay." I should have apologized for snapping at her, but I just left her standing in the hall and went on to the adjusting room.

They gave me a muscle scan first. I wasn't expecting that, but it turned out to be standard practice for every red-light show. Usually they just take your last one from you if it isn't too far out of date. I had just finished the balance weigh-in when a lean young man carrying a script and a performance module pulled me aside.

"You're Chris Masters, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm Bill Hamler, the fight programmer. I understand this is your first red-lighter."

"First and last. I was tricked into it."

He looked puzzled. "I don't know about that. You're doing it, aren't you?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Do you know who your charge is?"

"No, I haven't met the gentleman."

"Gentleman, hah! This guy is a three-time loser. Murderer-rapist."

"Maybe so. I still don't want to be the one to kill him."

"Do you have objections to capital punishment?"

"Not really. No, in cases like this, I suppose, but..."

"But you want somebody else to do it."

"Yes, I guess that's it."

"Well, I could point out that you sound like a man who eats meat and snubs the butcher, but let that pass." He obviously didn't think much of me. "Fact is," he continued, "you don't do it. I do. I programmed this death fight. That's my job."

"I am only an instrument," I quoted sarcastically. That had been the Equity Credo for years. My father had resigned his emeritus status over it, and I respected him for it. He believed that actors should act, not be controlled by a plug-in box. But the tide of technology was against that. I don't apologize for what we are. It's a fact of life. And the profession still makes demands, even though looks and physical condition are far and away the most important things now. But there was enough of my father in me to resent it.

Hamler sighed. "You know, I'm really no more the executioner than you are. Or no less, if you like. This guy was convicted and sentenced by the court. The studio contracted the job of carrying out the sentence. That's all."

"Yeah, sure. And what about the terminals?"

"You really don't know much about these shows, do you? A terminal gets to sit in on the programming of his own death. Most of them take an active part. More than one of them has claimed that being able to give artistic shape to what was inevitable anyway made the whole thing easier."

It was an opening I couldn't resist. "Did you talk to them after they died or before?"

Hamler scowled and looked at his watch. "Let's just drop it," he said. "We haven't got that much time, and there are some things you should know."

"Like how to live with it afterwards?"

"I should just let you go out there and get hurt. It's no skin off my nose."

"Sorry, I know it's not your fault I let myself get stuck in a contractual dispute. I gather this kind of thing doesn't work like an illusion fight. I've done plenty of those — including some of John Morton's programs."

Hamler looked at me skeptically but went on. "You know the basics then. Have you worked with a two-handed broadsword?"

"And rapier and foil and sabre and falchion — you name it."

"If that's true, you've got nothing to worry about. The main thing is to relax. Don't fight the program. That's how most first-time guys get hurt. It's similar to an illusion fight, but you're going to really feel frightened and angry. We started picking up feedback from the first real death fights and recording them. Some of what we'll be feeding through you will even be what some of the earlier charges felt. Don't try anything volitional, but let your body make the minor balance adjustments and such like you always do in

regular performance. Above all, trust the program. The surrogates have been through it in slow motion, right up to the *coup de grace*. And the computer double-matches the program to your physical profile. We run a simulation after the profiles are matched just to be sure."

I looked around at the seedy studio. "They really go to that much trouble? Sounds pretty expensive."

"It is," said Hamler. "But they don't have any choice. The Dramatic Programmers' Guild lays down the guidelines. By the way, if it's any comfort, I'm not a studio man. I'm an independent. The studio just supplies the equipment."

"I see."

"You have another question?"

I hesitated. "The...uh...charge, he...What I mean to say, is it painful for long?"

"We have the feedback from that down to almost zero. We can anesthetize most of the pain for him at the final moment." A grim look passed across his face. "The ones back in the early years of programming weren't so lucky."

He started to get up, then sat back down. "Oh, one more thing you'd better know. You'll probably feel a little pain yourself. But don't panic. It'll be slight, and the blood you see will all be from blood-packs in your costume just like always. We just haven't been able to separate the pain out entirely from the other things we push through you."

"Wonderful," I said.

I won't say much about "The Heart of the Tiger." I'm trying to forget it. There wasn't so much a plot as a collection of incidents. The very beginning was lifted from, of all things, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Judy was the Hermia-character Thalia, and my Tharn was a sort of barbarous Lysander. The regular dramatic programmer (not Hamler) made Judy smirk instead of smile. I suppose I must have looked as bad. It doesn't matter in the long run. The show aired and was forgotten. I wish I could forget it. But I still wake up sometimes with the cold sweats.

I didn't see the guy who was programmed for Menga until after we went on. Even then I didn't get to look directly at him until halfway through the opening. I had been aware of him hulking off to my left, but when I was turned to face him I was glad the program was in charge of my facial expression. Sixteen cameras don't miss much.

David must have felt as I felt when he faced Goliath. Menga was over six and a half feet tall, and he was heavysset even for that height. He was dressed in fake black bearskins the same color as his hair and beard. His eyes, under ferociously bushy eyebrows, were cunning and feral, and I suspected the programmer wasn't skillful enough to give them that look. When he spoke, his voice seemed to slaver. Whoever he was, he was an animal caged in a none-too-skillfully-programmed character.

And he was looking for a way to break out.

We had an exchange of insults and did a little swaggering standoff. I didn't see him again until the final battle.

Just before the fight, Judy and I had a tepid love

scene in which our characters were reunited. (Tharn had been in exile.) When it was over, they filled in with stock footage while my module was changed.

Judy came over and reminded me of our date.

"First drink's on me," she said, then whispered, "It's godawful, isn't it? We both deserve a good drunk. Come by my dressing room after the show."

When she was gone, Hamler gave me a few more words of advice. "Remember to relax. It's best just to let the program be your instincts. Don't think. Just act. The program will handle it all."

I started to ask him why he was sweating, but they connected the fight module just then, and I couldn't say anything more.

It was never clear to me whether we were supposed to be fighting over Judy or the big ruby. I suppose the writer didn't care, and I know most of the audience didn't. The whole script was just an excuse for bloodletting anyway.

The fight took place in an arena that looked like a druid's version of the Coliseum, though smaller, of course. The cameras weren't very well hidden. I spotted three of them when I entered. I didn't have time to look for more, but I did get a glimpse of Hamler in the control room fussing over the fight tape.

The first thing I thought when I squared off with Menga was that Hamler was a damned good fight programmer. The first blows were butter-smooth, but with plenty of variation. Hamler started us out with head cuts, of course, but after that he used all six positions and mixed them well.

Menga — I never did find out his real name — had the offensive in the first part. He moved fast. A head cut. A feint at the shoulder. Then a sudden swipe at my left leg. Then back to a shoulder cut.

I went down, sprang up, went down again, and rolled away from a blow that came down close enough to set my ears ringing.

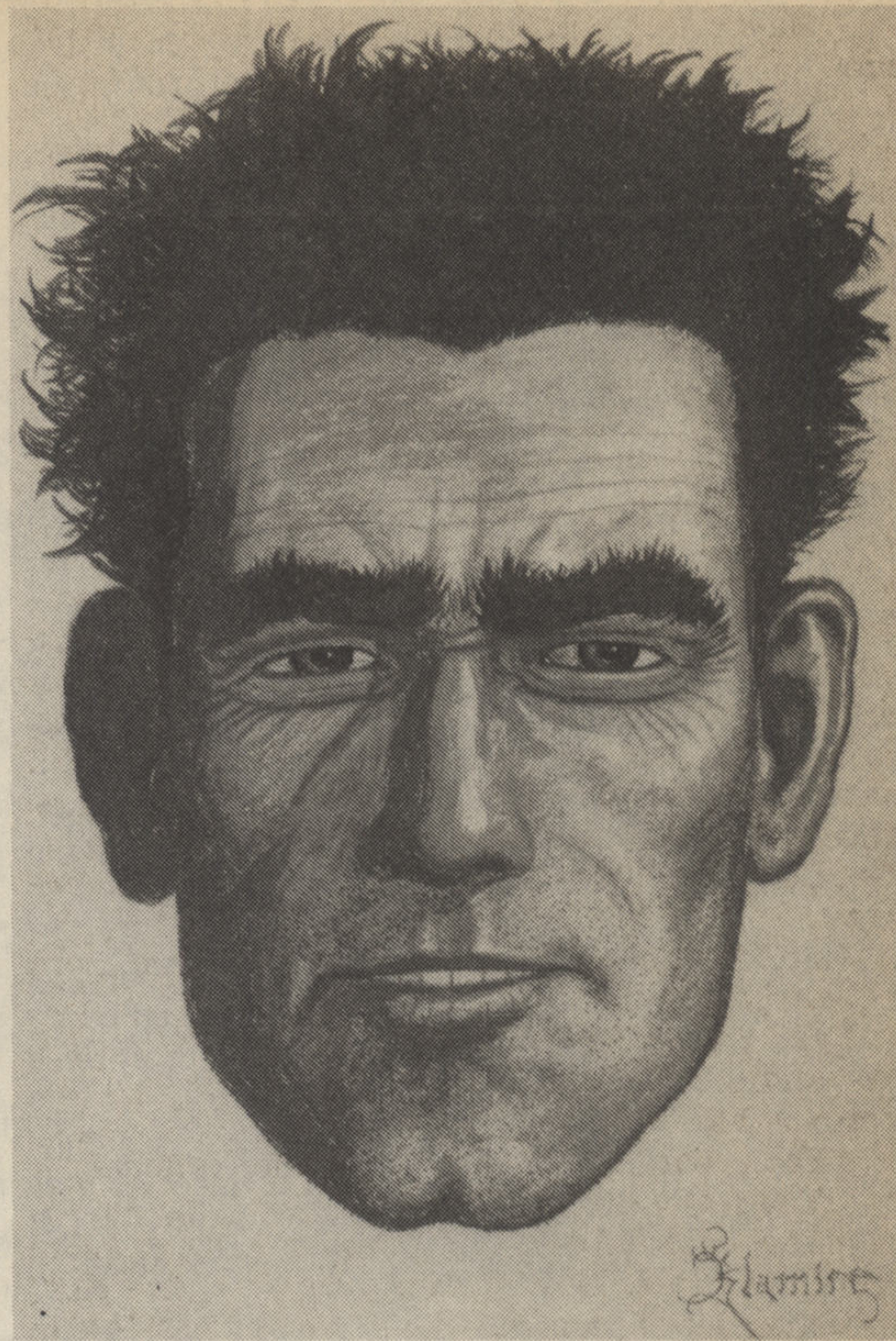
What surprised me was how right it felt. In my illusion fights, there had always been things that felt wrong. Not just pulling the blows, but other things that ran counter to the killer instinct, things nobody would do in a life-or-death struggle.

I relaxed and let the program have its way. It was like instinct. I felt two of my blood-packs blow even though I scarcely felt the edge of the blade. I still wasn't noticing any of the emotions or pain Hamler had mentioned, though.

Then suddenly I was eyeball to eyeball with my opponent in one of those crossed blade clinches that are an obligatory cliché of theatrical fights.

I found myself staring into those tiny feral eyes, bottomless pools of hate, and a jolt of fear shot through me. It had to be just the program, of course, but it suddenly came home to me that the man I was fighting was a real killer, not an actor. Maybe that's how one of these programs works, I thought. It didn't matter. I felt fear, and the fear felt real. I could see the malevolence staring out of those eyes at me. And I found myself thinking, he'll kill me if he can.

My knee came up into his groin. (I think he was protected.) And my body shoved him back. He went down heavily, and his head snapped against the



Larry Blamire

ground convincingly. His sword went flying. He looked at me groggily. My sword point touched his throat, then swung to point at his own weapon, lying a few feet away. Inwardly I sighed. The hero's gesture. The audience eats it up every time.

Those tiny, savage eyes looked at me fearfully, then followed the line of my sword. He rolled over quickly and scrambled for the weapon crab-fashion, his eyes still on me. He grabbed it and slowly got to his feet, holding it in front of him at an odd angle.

My body advanced one pace, my sword in the *en garde* position.

Menga swung his sword back in a terrible, stupid telegraphed blow, easy to parry. But my hands stung when I caught it on my blade.

Dammit, Hamler, I thought, you should have warned me about that sort of thing.

I didn't try to think any more. Menga was swinging wildly now, without any kind of pattern. They were unskillful blows, but they came thick and fast, and they felt heavy. My sword flashed to the parry positions automatically, then started landing blows of its own.

The very first one drew blood. Menga didn't even try to parry it. He was just retreating now, his sword up to protect his face. My blows restricted themselves to the head and shoulders, giving him a chance. Even so, more than half of them landed. It didn't even occur to me that Menga's blood might not be from blood-

packs. Unfamiliar emotions surged through me — battlelust and righteous triumph. I felt gloriously free, all the shackles of inhibition broken.

Then one of my really heavy blows — I thought it was going to be the killer — missed when he danced out of the way. I was thrown off balance, and he recovered and struck at me, murder in his eyes. It was a wild swing, but the tip of his blade nicked my left arm. I felt a slight flicker of pain, not nearly as bad as Hamler had led me to expect.

But even before his swing was complete, Menga's foot struck me in the stomach and I was down. I gasped for breath. It had felt like a real blow, but I managed to roll away as he threw himself at me. He landed in a heap where I had been. By the time I regained my feet, he was on his knees and was swinging his sword in a wide horizontal arc toward my legs. I was in the air at once. His blade flashed beneath me. My sword came down with all my weight behind it, slicing at an angle through his neck and into his chest. My hands came loose from the hilt, and my body fell beside his.

I rose to my knees only half conscious. My left hand felt warm and wet. Somebody grabbed me and yanked me upright. Then the sword was placed in my right hand. A moment later my arm came up in a salute of triumph.

There was a short scene with Judy and a final clinch. Through it all, I was in a sort of daze. As soon as we broke, she hurried away to her dressing room. It registered with me vaguely that there was blood all over her costume.

I tried not to look down into the arena set as I left. They were dragging something away, I think. I got the impression there was a large dog following them, but it must have been a Robo-Mop.

On the way back to my dressing room, I stopped by the can and threw up.

While I was changing, I discovered that Menga actually had nicked my left arm. I fumbled through the bloody costume. There had been no blood-pack there, and worse, no shield. Stupid SOBs. Just like a two-bit outfit. The wound wasn't deep, but I was tempted to make trouble anyway. Not worth it though. My stomach wasn't giving me any more problems, and although I was still dazed, there was a euphoric hangover of excitement and elation I had never felt before. I washed up, put a patch on the arm, and got dressed.

I knocked on Judy's dressing room door, but there was no answer. The door was locked. I knocked again.

"She left already." It was a techie passing by.

"Did she say anything?"

"Don't think so. She was in kind of a hurry."

That depressed me more than it ought to have. I headed for the door, intent on finding the nearest bar.

Bill Hamler caught up with me on the street outside.

"Look, man, I've got to talk to you."

"Later. I have a date with a bottle."

He followed me into a little walk-down bar and invited himself to sit down while I ordered a deadly mixture of rums called a Moon Trip. Hamler looked at

me anxiously, not saying anything until the drink came. The first swallow steadied me. I stared across the glass at him, guessing what was on his mind.

"You son of a bitch," I said. "You cut my signal, didn't you?"

"You won't tell anybody, will you?"

"I ought to report you to your guild. Somebody had to haul me up like a side of beef and put my sword back in my hand. How do you think that looks?"

"We aren't amateurs," he said stiffly. "That didn't even go out to the live subscribers. When you started to fall, we cut to the girl."

"Thanks a heap. I'll mention you in my will. I won't say anything good, of course." The rum was working fine. I slammed the glass down on the table. "Why the hell did you do it, anyway?"

"He would have killed you. Some jerk didn't secure his module. The fall jarred it loose."

"Killed me? Hell, he was already dead!"

Hamler stared at me. Then he got up slowly and started to leave.

Even through the haze of rum, I knew I had it all wrong. Almost of its own accord, my hand flashed out and grabbed his wrist. I staggered to my feet and pulled him around to face me. There was no volume in my voice when I found it.

"When did you cut the signal, dammit?"

"Let go!" He twisted in my grip, but I held on, instinctively keeping an eye out for the bartender.

"When?!"

He collapsed into the chair. It was hard to believe this was the same man who had been so confident three hours earlier.

"Let's just forget it," he pleaded. "If this gets out, I'll be blackballed. It wasn't even my fault."

"When?" My voice, far away, unimaginably steady, the voice of a stranger asking a question I already knew the answer to.

"When...when you knocked him down...the first time. His head hit the floor, and the module came loose. That's why he dropped his sword." He didn't look at me. "All I could do was shut yours off too. Anybody would have done the same thing."

I sat down heavily. Half-formed thoughts flickered like heat lightning in the back of my mind. "Did you tell anybody else?"

"Are you crazy? It would ruin me."

"What about the surrogates?"

"If they ask, I guess I can tell them I reprogrammed the second half with somebody else."

I drank the rest of the rum, but I felt cold sober. "Will they buy that?"

"I think so. We do it all the time." He looked at me at last, still frantic. "You won't tell anybody, will you?"

"No, I won't tell anybody."

"I can pay you."

"Go to hell," I said.

That was four years ago. I've done nearly two hundred red-lighters since then. I've even worked with Judy, though we don't see each other socially. If she suspects what happened that day — and maybe

(Continued to page 39)

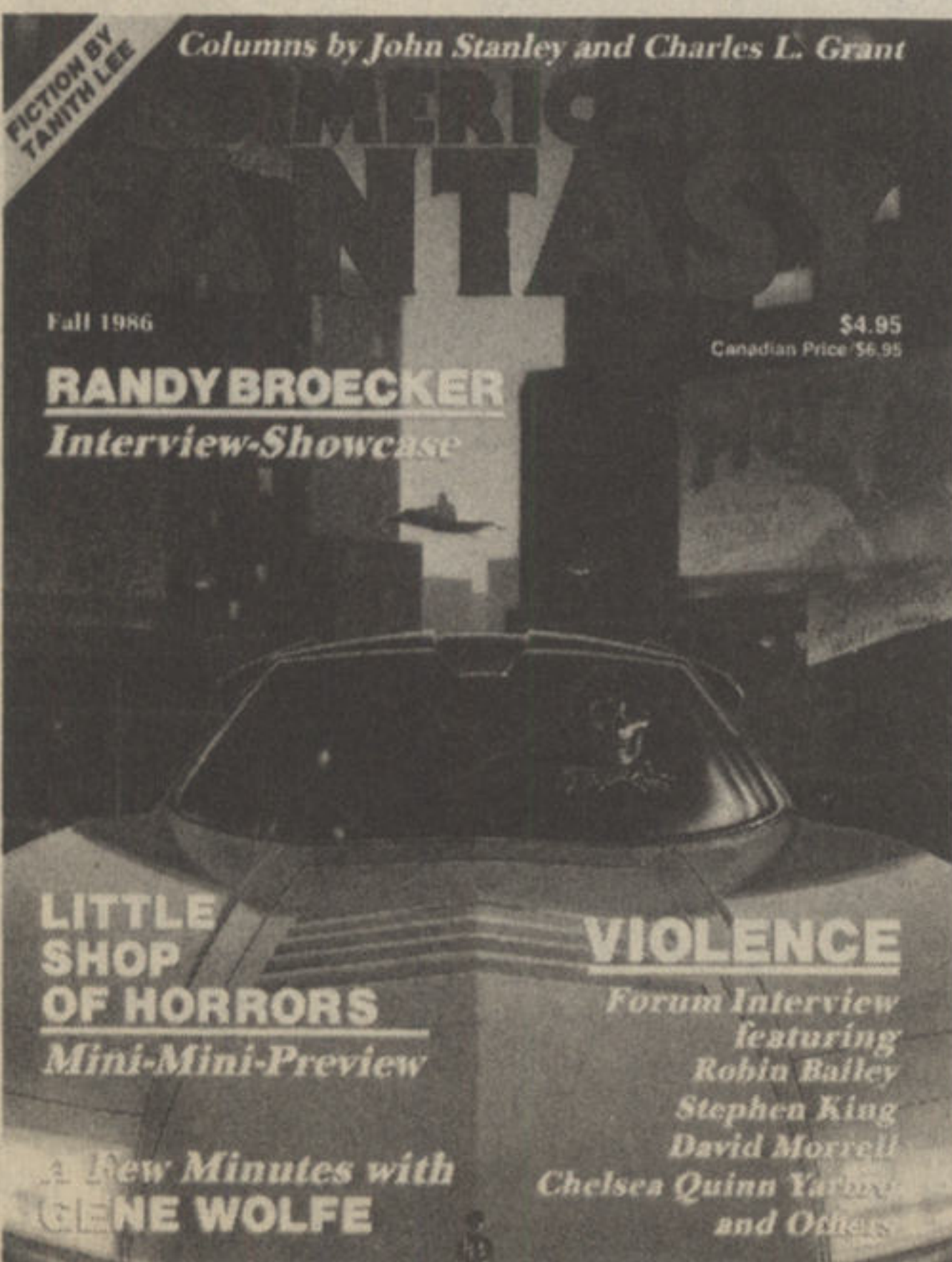


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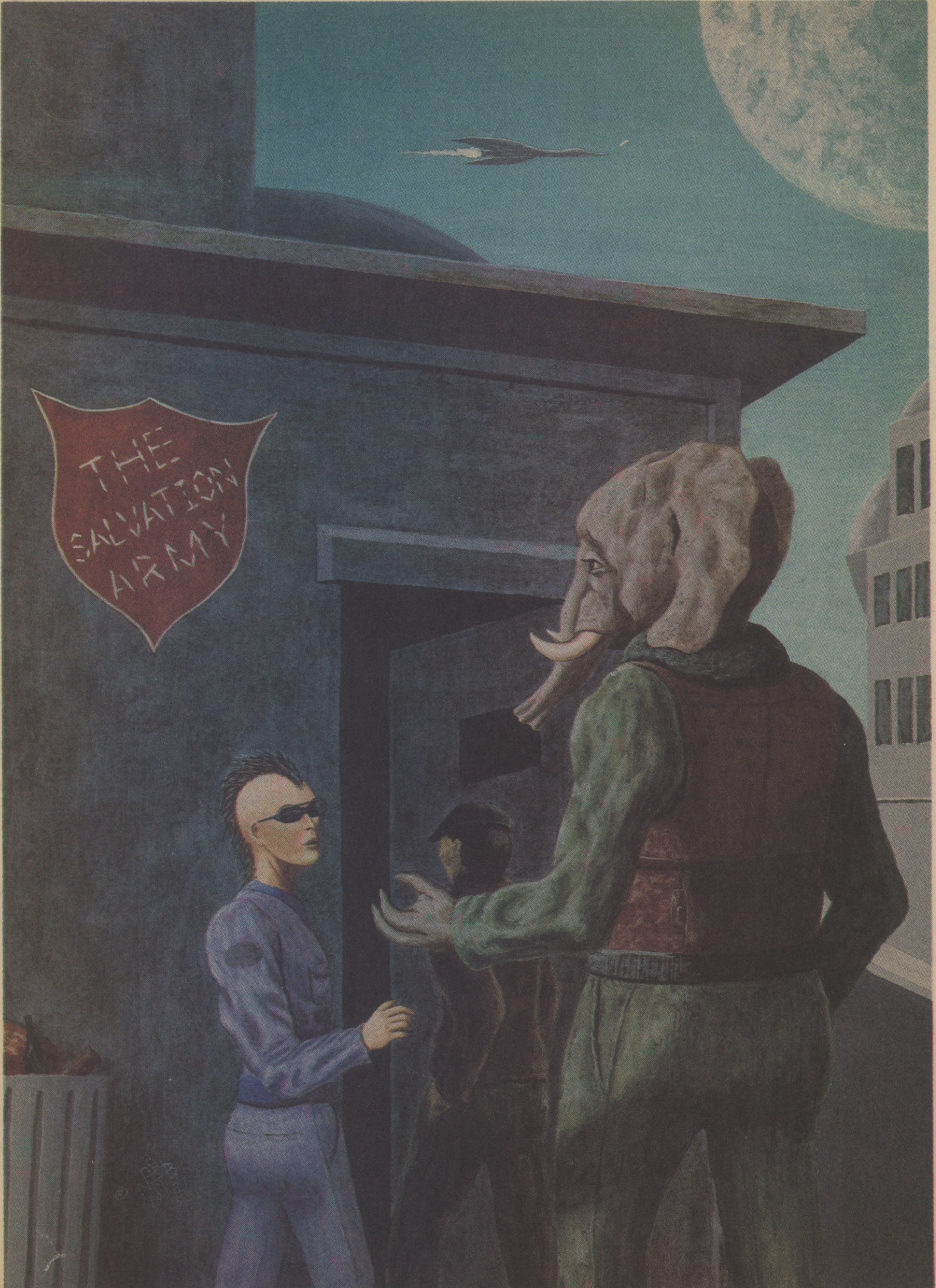
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N. Taylor Blanchard

Shade and the Elephant Man

By Emily Devenport

I was brushing the freshly shaved snips of hair off the back of my head and on to the sidewalk when I looked up and saw the Lyrri-dog watching me. I didn't like the way he was smiling, and I got my shades back in place as fast as I could. I moved off casually. I'd had my share of crap that day already; I didn't need any more.

As I walked my back itched with more than the hair that had fallen inside my collar. I wondered if he thought he was on the trail of a boy for sale — that happens to me a lot. With all the human-looking aliens around here it's hard to tell what anyone's sexual tastes might be. Dogs get mean when they are disappointed, like they believe they are police officers instead of just hired mercenaries.

The mood I was in I might give this Lyrri-dog something to cry about. I'd been trying all day to find Knossos, but the elephant man did not want to be found.

I worked harder at losing the Lyrri-dog. I used to be good at that, but things weren't going so well anymore. I was wasting time. I could've been hunting for food. Around lunch time I'd made a half-hearted attempt at scrounging the fast food stalls; and I almost scored half a submarine, but the tinker who had been about to leave it saw me coming and ditched it in an open sewer. I had to cut him to save my self-respect, and that just wore me down more. I needed to score at the games badly, and I couldn't do it without Knossos.

I wasn't losing the dog so I headed for Deadtown, right in the heart of the spacer sector. I doubled behind him once I got to familiar ground, and scoped him thoroughly. He was a pretty specimen, and I was sure he was a "he," though it's difficult to tell with his kind. Lyrri males and females look almost alike — animated porcelain figures, slender as whips — and the two sexes dress alike.

This Lyrri wore knives and throwing discs as well as his blaster. I decided to avoid him at all costs.

I would've headed for the Salvation Army, but the

babies had been ribbing me about it too much lately. I made for the baby school instead, to prove to myself and them that I was still Shade. They could damn well share their food with me. Loki too, if they had any.

The Lyrri-dog got there ahead of me. He knew me, where I hung out and who my friends were. And I had a feeling he probably knew Knossos was not around anymore.

I wondered how he had found out about my talent.

He was talking to two scarbabies, Lilo and Stone. He wasn't buying pain from them — that left information. I hid in a doorway and watched. He paid them and walked toward me. I pressed myself against the wall until he passed.

I slipped around the baby school and went in through one of the bolt holes. I know the building as well as any piece; that's the reason I am willing to sleep there sometimes. But I wouldn't want to make a habit of it. The pimps might think I was trying to take advantage of the facilities without paying my dues.

When Stone and Lilo came into the dorm I was waiting for them. I didn't say anything, just smoked the loki joint someone had passed me. Lilo went all wiggly, pulled this way and that by the whims of everyone around him. But Stone only wears one expression on his Lyrri face, no matter what's happening to him.

The regular babies tried to make them comfortable, fussing over them like mother hens. I think they do this because scarbabies sell a commodity that regular babies would rather not even think about.

I watched Lilo and Stone until I figured out what they had told the Lyrri-dog. I decided to sleep at the Salvation Army after all. The baby school wasn't going to be safe for a while.

I wondered why Knossos was avoiding me. The two of us could really clean up if we wanted. Maybe we could get off Z'taruh and go for bigger things. If we didn't it would kill us for sure.

**** **

I found the Salvation Army about a month after I

got here. I was too fresh back then to have learned how to keep a full belly or where the safe crash places were; too fresh to understand my own scoping ability.

I had wondered how the skids survived. During the day they haunt the spacers, hoping to bum enough money to buy booze. But they didn't look like they were starving to death. I decided to follow them and see where they were getting fed. I couldn't believe it when I saw the Salvation Army sign. Halfway across the galaxy from Earth I was standing in a chow line with a bunch of derelicts.

I was busy sniffing the odors drifting from the kitchen when I felt a presence behind me. I turned and looked up into an elephant's face.

This being had a trunk, and ears, and tusks — the whole nine yards. But he was a biped, about ten feet tall and four feet wide. Brown eyes stared back at me from nests of gray elephant skin.

He said, "The line is moving."

I hurried to keep my place. I wanted to turn and stare again, but I didn't have the nerve. So I waited until we were inside, and I sat down with my tray at his table.

He was eating his soup with a spoon. He had gigantic three fingered hands which he used with amazing delicacy. I was in love with those hands.

"My name is Shade," I said.

He stared at me, and I felt stupid for crossing the line. No one gets friendly with strangers on Z'taruh. But finally he said, "I am Knossos."

After that I ate at the Salvation Army a lot, and I always sat with Knossos. For a long time I didn't know why I was doing this, except that I was hungry for something other than food or loki, for conversation that was more than skin deep.

If anyone had told me then that I loved the elephant man, I would've laughed.

*** **

I decided to stop looking so hard for Knossos. I don't think I've ever found him by looking for him. I'd been running too long, broadcasting my fear to anyone with half an eye. I had become one of those people I used to laugh at, the ones who are always looking over their shoulders.

I cruised fast-food city with respectable results. The crowd was heavier than usual with the inflow of tinkers working on the new port sector and the armed dogs protecting the interests of their respective governments. At least that's what I think they're doing. Racial tensions have been heating up lately.

After breakfast I went to the gaming fields. I just wandered the perimeter. The fields are Q'rin territory, and Q'rin are a very aggressive race. They're always making raids on Deadtown under the guise of civil "law enforcement."

I slipped around them like the shade I was named for, and got a pretty good look at the fighters I saw wandering outside. But I got so caught up with scoping them I forgot where I was. A couple of Q'rin-dogs noticed me. I stayed cool as they came over to check me out.

"What do you want with this one?" one was saying to the other in Q'rin. "She's too skinny."

Q'rin are never fooled by baggy clothing. They can smell what you are.

"You are a fan of the games?" the other one asked me in Standard.

I said, "Yes."

"Why don't you go inside?" He smiled so I could get a look at his sharp teeth. I admired the sight. Q'rin are big humanoids, with ridges across their brows like Neanderthals.

"I'm broke," I said. He knew this. The one who thought I was skinny ran his hands over my shaggy head and laughed.

"She shaves the sides of her head like the pit fighters," he said in Q'rin. "What an oddball."

"You have not been here long enough," the other one said. "You will learn to recognize the Deadtowners." He said this with the least contempt I've ever heard from a Q'rin. "Do you want to make some money?" he asked me in Standard.

"I'm not selling," I said.

"I'd like to see what's under those sunglasses," he said to the other guy.

I froze. Those glasses are there for a good reason. My eyes are sculpted. They were a gift from my mother on my fourteenth birthday. The process only involved some minor surgery, electrolysis, and some glorified tattooing to apply the tints; but it cost her a small fortune. My eyes look like they were stolen from an Italian Madonna and plastered on my poor face. They used to tickle my sense of humor, but I wasn't laughing my first night on Z'taruh. Those eyes branded me RUNAWAY like a neon sign.

"I think I hear my mother calling," I said.

"She'll have to wait," said the curious one, and he yanked off my glasses.

He liked the eyes. He especially liked them on the face of a street urchin. Great, I thought, this guy's a treasure hunter. He flashed his teeth again, white ghosts against dark skin. "Fifty credits," he said.

I laughed. Most pieces go for twenty-five. I was beginning to like him.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Donnokh."

I smiled at him. "Maybe I'll see you at the games," I said, trying to make it sound like a promise. I took my glasses back and walked away with as much charm as I could muster.

The rest of the afternoon I felt inordinately pleased with myself. I had scoped out the fields. I knew I could win big once I found my partner. I had no trouble scaring up lunch, and by nightfall I was feeling like hot stuff.

I went to the Salvation Army for dinner. I was hoping to find the elephant man; sooner or later he would get hungry. But he wasn't there. I sat with Mira and Snag, and listened to Snag complain while I got down as much of the stew as I could.

Mira was watching me. "I thought you should know," she said. "Last night some Q'rin-dogs raided the baby school. Anyone who didn't make it out the bolt holes is meat. I hear Stone finally got his."

Maybe they killed him because he was Lyrri. Probably they did. And since Lilo stuck next to Stone

he was dead too. I didn't like to think about what they must have done to that little guy.

I decided that the Lyrri-dog was probably frantic thinking I was killed with the other pieces caught sleeping. I hoped he was sweating.

As for Stone, I'm glad he didn't die in some snuff vid.

I stayed another night at the Salvation Army. I didn't want to be alone.

That night I dreamed I was back on the Aguirre, the freighter that brought me here. I was hauling garbage, as usual. Captain Connors was hassling me, and I took it because we both knew I didn't have a choice. I didn't have I.D. papers. If I had, I wouldn't be working. Janitorial unions make a big dent in net income at the end of the year, but runaways like me work for nothing.

Connors was a big man, the kind you see as the hero in old western vids. He had the hots for me. He didn't like it when I laughed in his face.

When I woke up, I was lying in some trash. I had no I.D. and no money. The Aguirre logo had been stripped off the front of my coveralls. I was an illegal immigrant to Z'taruh, and I was truly scared for the first time in my life.

Suddenly Knossos was there, staring down at me in my pile of trash. "Why are you afraid?" he asked me. "You are here because you want to be."

That thought woke me up for real. I sat up in my bunk at the Salvation Army dorm and thought about it until morning.

*** **

The babies thought I was crazy for eating with the skids. Babies and skids can't stand each other. But I like the old-timers, and not just because of Knossos. Eating with them is like having dinner with your grandparents. They ask you why you cut your hair so funny and talk about the old days. Since most of them are veterans they have something to talk about. I learned what I know about the Ragnir war from them.

"In school they told us the Ragnir war was a *conflict*," I said to Knossos one night. That got me some interesting looks around the table. Even Snag was quiet.

Knossos said, "It was a war."

"You humans call it conflict because you lose face," Snag put in. "You supposed to be peacemongers, not financing one side in foreign war."

I watched Knossos. He was staring over our heads with more hate than I'd known he could feel. I almost wanted to look around to see who he was looking at, but I knew it wasn't someone in the room with us. The people in my home town might think the war had ended ten years ago, but Knossos was still on the battlefield.

"How brave and noble their words were at the start," he said, "until we no longer suited their purposes."

"You should have gotten it in writing," I said.

When he glared at me I had to look away from the pain in his eyes. "If an oath has no meaning," he said, "scribbles on paper have even less."

I was ashamed of myself then, and I don't like to

feel that way, so I pretended to be busy with my supper.

"Shade," he said, "I have a little money. I am in a betting mood."

I almost nodded my head off. We'd been to the fields together only once, and won bigger than I'd dreamed possible. I'd only used my talent alone before that, but with Knossos along I seemed to be able to focus it better. I'd been trying to get him to take me back for months.

Snag chattered at us for the rest of the meal about who was popular and who we should bet on. I ignored him.

Knossos and I walked down to the Q'rin fields and no one gave us any trouble. It was amazing how differently people treated me when I was with him. I was so excited I could hardly keep my face on straight, and after we were seated I gave up trying. Knossos and I had to sit in the back of the Q'rin section because they're the only ones who have chairs big enough for him to sit in. Fortunately they have the best view of the pit.

The Q'rin nearby pointedly ignored us, but other people stared. Some were laughing. It burned me to imagine what they were thinking. In all the time I have lived in Deadtown I've never been propositioned by an alien whose race I didn't closely resemble. I've never even thought of sleeping with Knossos. I don't think it's physically possible. The idea was embarrassing.

"Shade," Knossos said, "let others think what they will."

I must have turned bright red, because he laughed. It was the first time I ever heard a sound like that from him. "I would like to think that we are partners," he said.

"I'm glad," I said. "I want that too."

Everyone got quiet when the announcer walked to the center of the astroturf. He was an old Q'rin whose face was a mask of battle scars. He turned a full circle, regarding the crowd with one good eye. "First fight," he said, "Krell and Timmy, lectrowhips." There was a cheer from the Lyrri side of the audience as the fighters came out from opposite doors in the pit walls. Lyrri love the elegant kills.

"Place your bets," said the announcer. "You have ten units."

I scoped Timmy and Krell. Timmy was a Lyrri, and she kept pulling my eyes back. But Krell looked like he was hiding some danger.

I got as clear a picture as I could on my own, then turned to my partner. "Timmy is current champion," he said. "She is faster, and she has a powerful overcut. But she is weak with left-handed opponents, and Krell is left-handed. He is new, but very talented." I watched him while he watched them and made my decision.

"Timmy," I said.

Knossos hailed the recorder. He entered our names and our bet into the central computer and collected our money. I squirmed in my seat and wished for a bag of peanuts.

"Time," the announcer said. He walked through

his own door, leaving Timmy and Krell alone in the pit. They circled each other lazily, their lectrowhips humming. Krell's whip licked out and touched the left side of Timmy's face in a wicked undercut. She grinned with the side of her mouth that wasn't burned, and things suddenly got fast and furious.

Lectrowhip isn't what you call a street weapon. It takes years to learn to use one without lashing yourself to death. Now I was watching two masters. It was so beautiful I forgot how painful it must be.

Timmy reminded me when she caught Krell around the neck and flipped him backward onto the fire rods that line the sides of the pit. The rods are there to discourage people from running up the incline. They burned him to a crisp in seconds. I was glad I hadn't eaten any peanuts. I don't think the Q'rin who sat in front of me would have enjoyed cleaning them off his head.

Our credits had doubled. If we could continue to win we could make a tidy sum. I scoped the next two contestants; this time it was easier. They were Deadtown knife fighters.

I don't know when the Q'rin sitting next to me started to catch on. Maybe he was the one who tipped off the Lyrri-dog. Most Lyrri and Q'rin cordially hate each other, but some associations transcend politics. By the third fight this Q'rin was betting on the same people. Knossos ignored him, and I took his lead. As far as I know there's no rule against my particular talent because no one else has it. I was more worried about Knossos. His brown eyes had turned red.

The last fight was announced. We'd won the previous seven, and I thought we ought to withdraw. The last fight is always wrestling; and because it's not to the death some of the crowd usually leaves. But Knossos sat like a rock. And for some reason everyone else did the same.

"Ousa and Rorra," the announcer called, "wrestling. Last fight of the evening, fifteen units to place your bets."

Fifteen units seemed a bit excessive. But as I tried to scope the fighters I became confused for the first time that night.

Ousa and Rorra had the same height, weight, and reach. They both reminded me of someone, though they were different beings. Ousa was a lion man and Rorra was a bear man. I looked sideways at the elephant man. Somehow they were kin. And the expression on Knossos's face told me that this wasn't quite the time to ask about it.

"Ousa is stronger," he was saying, "but Rorra is Slippery and more tenacious

"Rorra," I said.

We bet the whole bundle. And we won.

**** * * * * *

I shouldn't have spent so much time at the Salvation Army. I made it too easy for the Lyrri-dog to find me. When he sat down across from me I almost choked on my soup.

"You are a hard woman to track," he said. "Thank you for a good game."

"You're welcome," I said. My head was telling me to get up, but my legs wouldn't cooperate.

"I searched through the bodies at the baby school." He folded his arms and leaned across the table. "You had me worried for a while."

Like every Deadtown I have my knives. But pulling one on this man would be like challenging Timmy with a lectrowhip. "What do you want?" I asked.

"I want to be your partner."

"I've already got one."

"You're not listening," he said. "I want you. The two of us will go far together."

I considered it. I'd been thinking about my position on this planet. I'd been here two years. Stone was a lot tougher than me and he only lasted three. Knossos made me care about him. Now he was gone and I was stuck with a lot of useless feelings.

"I could use the money," I said. "You want to start tonight?"

"As far as I am concerned," he said, "we've already started. We'll get you a shower and some new clothes. And you won't be needing these anymore." He took my dark glasses and tossed them away.

"What should I call you?" I asked, feeling naked.

"Call me Chaz."

**** * * * * *

The last time Knossos and I'd bet together we went for a drink afterwards. My head was full of schemes, mostly involving Knossos and other games, on other worlds. If I could talk him into betting some more of our winnings, I could buy some I.D. papers. After that we could go anywhere.

"You ever think of leaving Z'taruh?" I asked him. He looked at me as if I had just pulled him back from another galaxy. Now that I thought of it, Knossos had been looking that way a lot lately. It made my throat feel a little tight.

"What would you do with your life if you were not here?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Go to school."

"And after that?"

The question made me very uncomfortable. I hadn't thought about it since before I left home. "Space out I guess," I said. "With one of the exploration missions or..." I broke off, knowing that wasn't right. I never paid any attention to science in school. Too lazy.

"Space," he said. "Is that why you left home?" I wondered what he was getting at. Knossos never talks just to hear his own voice.

"Yes," I said, "and no. I needed to make my own way."

"From what I have learned of humans, you were young to be striking out on your own."

"My mother went to Europe and never came back," I blurted out. "She's a concert pianist. She was never very good at managing her money, especially after Dad died. I guess she just couldn't handle the responsibility."

He nodded without a trace of sympathy or moral outrage. That was a relief.

"I left home at a very young age too," he said. "I became a soldier. I was a younger son, and the mili-



N. Taylor Blanchard

tary was my only chance to forge a dynasty of my own.”

And now he was a derelict on a filthy backwater planet. I took a couple of healthy pulls on my drink before I looked at him again.

“If I gave you my word,” I said, “I would mean it.”

He gazed at me for a long time, but I knew he understood me. “I believe you,” he said.

We drank together and shared the silence.

*** **

Chaz took me to a sharp little apartment in the spacer sector. While I was in the shower I thought about how good showers felt. And shampoo. And toothpaste. He gave me a tunic that was so black I thought it would absorb all the light in the room. Then he made me look in the mirror.

I guess I’m not so bad to look at after all.

“How did you know what size to get?” He was almost the same size as me, and I wanted to see how far he could be pushed. He just smiled.

They were playing the Triad that night, three games with three rounds each. Chaz and I made our way to seats in the Lyrri section, which has almost as good a view as the Q’rin section. I should’ve been ex-

cited, but I was nervous. I’d been trying to use my talent all evening, and it was making me sick. The announcer came out and introduced the first players. The survivor of this round would go on to play in the next one. The only rule is to kill your opponent.

“Janni and Ket,” said the announcer, “manglers, fifteen units to make your bets.”

I scoped the fighters. It looked like Janni had a definite edge. I turned to Chaz.

“Ket is the favorite,” he was saying, “but Janni is more detached. Ket tends to go crazy at the smell of blood.”

I scoped through him and my stomach turned another knot. “Janni,” I said. Chaz placed our bet.

By the time we’d won the first two triples I was ready to lose my supper. I tried to relax, but every time I scoped through Chaz I got sicker. I began to understand why I needed to be with Knossos. Knossos had the body of an animal and the soul of a king. This man was an animal on the *inside*.

As we placed our bets for the first round of the last triple I glanced across the pit and caught the eye of a Q’rin. It was Donnokh. He nodded to me and glanced at Chaz. When he looked back again his eyes said *Do you want me to get rid of that one for you?* I was

relieved. He wasn't Knossos, but...

Then I scoped him. Donnokh was twice as big as Chaz, but Chaz would kill him for sure. There was no way I could go through with it. I avoided his eyes for the rest of the evening. I even leaned against Chaz, who stroked my hair possessively.

We won the last triple. Chaz had to help me to my feet; and I leaned on him as we collected our money and exited through the front gate. Four of Chaz's Lyrri friends met us outside. They stared at me like I was a species they'd never seen before.

"We should celebrate," Chaz whispered to me. "My friends are having a party." He was getting hot from the way I was leaning against him. I tried to pull back without looking too nauseated.

"Chaz, I don't feel good."

"You need a drink," he said. "Maybe some loki. I hear you like that." He was smiling, but his tone was too light.

"I'm sick," I said, and I didn't have to fake it. I could barely stay on my feet. Chaz and his friends were standing so close I couldn't breathe. I forced a smile, but even I wasn't buying it.

Chaz hooked an arm around my neck and started to walk, forcing me to stumble along with him. His friends laughed at me. Their Lyrri bodies were so lithe, they moved like cats. We went into an alley, and I prayed that Chaz did not believe that damaged merchandise worked as well as undamaged.

"You said you had some loki?" I asked, snuggling closer.

"Too late," he said. "Next time you'll know better." His arm tightened around my neck until I saw sparks. I tried to jam my eyes shut; but they were wide open, and I started to scope without thinking about it.

The Lyrri looked like real cats now. They were panthers with sharp claws at the end of their fingers. They danced around me, barely nicking me as they passed. They pushed me through an alley that was a jungle and I cried until Chaz smothered me in black fur.

"Shut up!" he hissed in my ear. But I was not the one who was screaming. Or trumpeting. A sound like rage, like a herd of elephants. One of the panthers fell to the ground with an enormous boot in the middle of

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his back, a boot that was made for an elephant's foot.

My face grew an ugly smile.

"Stand away from her, Lyrri," Knossos said. Just beyond him I could see another elephant man, and Rorra and Ousa.

"She is my partner," said Chaz.

"Then pay her," said Knossos, "and go your own way."

Chaz narrowed his eyes. I could feel how much he and his friends wanted to draw their blasters.

"You better not," I said. "I already scoped you. I haven't been wrong all evening."

Chaz laughed. He drew my money from inside his tunic and tossed it to me. "Maybe another time," he promised. He and his buddies strolled away without a second glance at their fallen comrade.

Knossos and I gazed at each other. I ran to him and threw my arms around him as far as they would go. "Where the hell have you been?" I said. And I was crying the way I should have cried when I lost my job on the freighter and got stranded on this sleazy planet. He patted my head carefully.

"I have paid my debts and redeemed my ship," he said. "It is repaired, and ready for space. Mira told me what happened to you."

"Why didn't you tell me you had a ship in hock?" I cried. "I would have helped you pay for it!"

"My debts are not yours," he said. "My crew and I have been stranded here five years. We are pledged together..."

I pulled away and wiped my face. "So you bailed me out," I said. "Thanks. I have my money now, so I guess you can stop worrying."

"Then you wish to terminate our partnership?" he said.

"I do if you do," I said.

He said, "A man must choose his allies well. My choices on Ragnir were not so wise. I and those who follow me have been little better than mercenaries since the war. Do not think that it is a glamorous path I am offering."

The other elephant man cleared his throat. He looked like Knossos, except that his skin was smoother and his eyes were green.

"Forgive me," Knossos said. "Shade, this one is Azrin. He is a member of my clan. These are Ousa and Rorra, of clan Ashra and clan Borrin. We are world-kin."

"You should not speak of that here, Lord Knossos," said Ousa. "Too many ears."

Lord Knossos! "He's right," I said. "We'd better get back to your ship."

Knossos smiled with his eyes and extended his hand. "Partners?" he said.

My hand was lost in his. "Deal," I said. I would be crazy to turn down an offer like that. I had scoped the situation.

And who knows — if I hung around with Knossos long enough, maybe people would start calling me *Lady Shade*.

— ABO —

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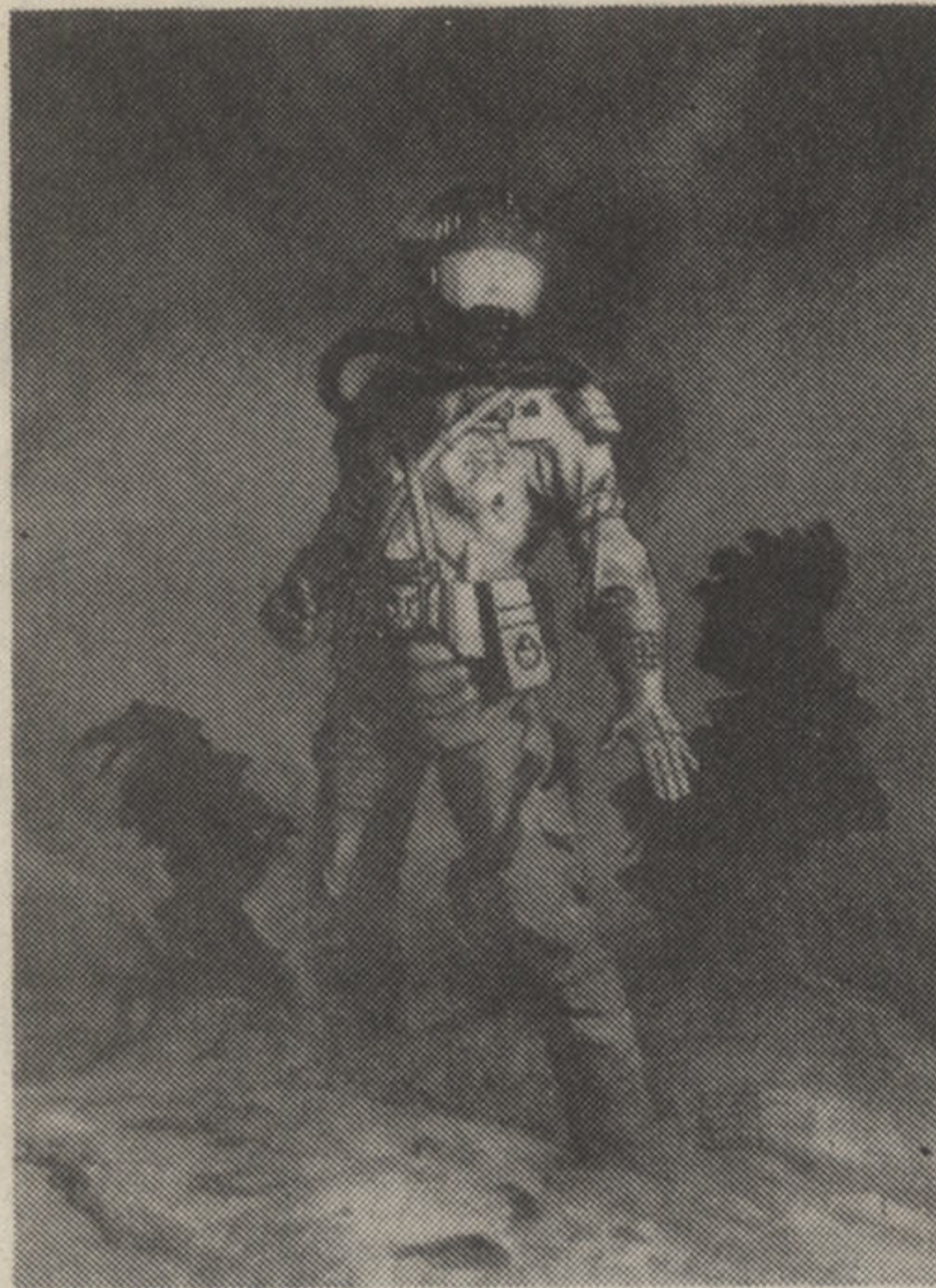
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THE REEL STUFF

By Jessie Horsting

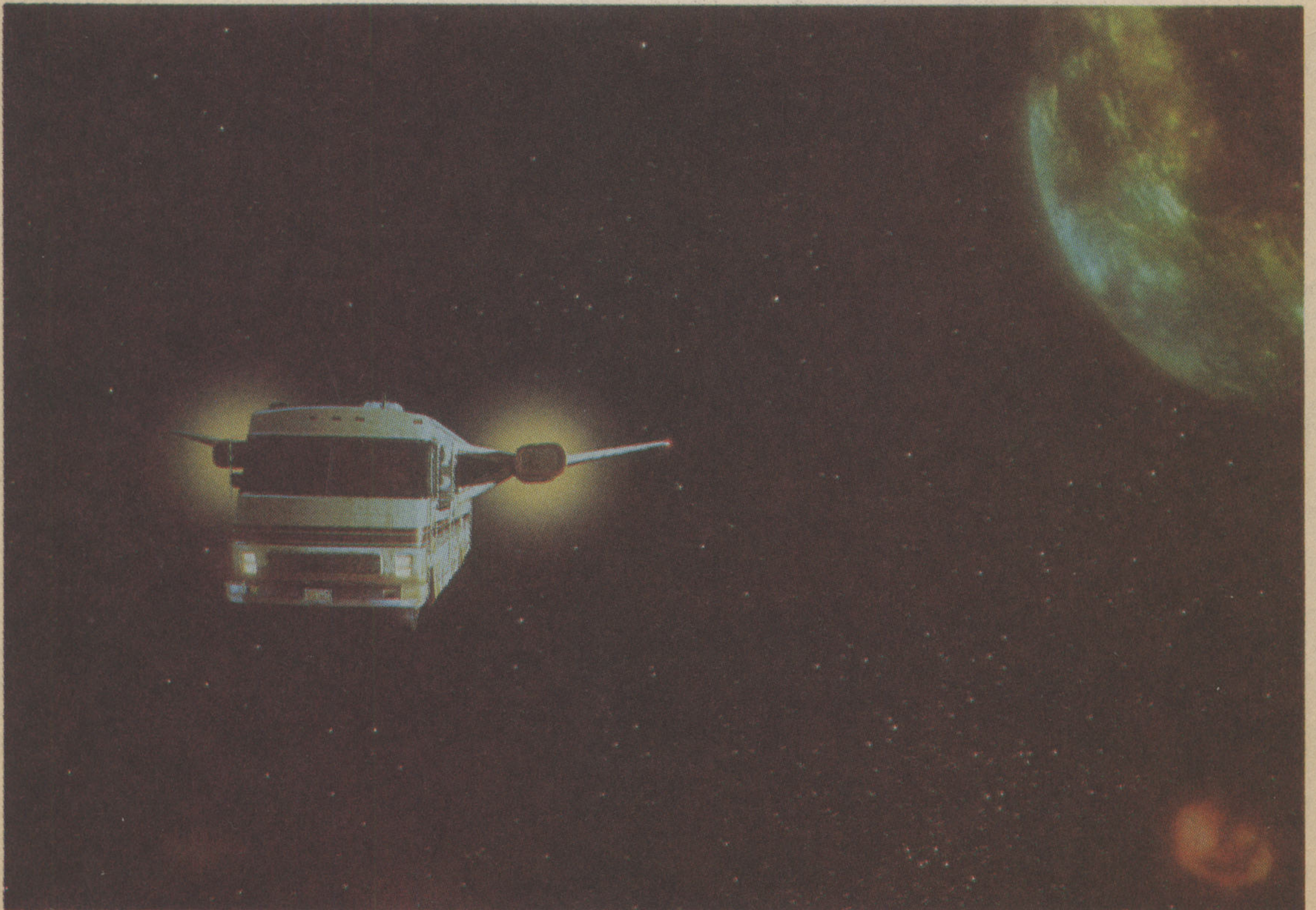
A Witchin' Summer

O.K., kids — wax up your boards, put on your shades and let's hit the beach. We'll toss a few brews and check out the groovy chicks and cabana boys, then blast over to the drive-in and lock our peepers on a double feature. Then

we'll hit Genessee Street and cruise around the Big Boy and talk about the gross parts and the size of Rosanna Arquette's tits until our parents make us come home.

Ah, summer — you can tell it's summer in Los Angeles by the size

and content of the billboards on Sunset Boulevard. Pasted on the billboard near Spagos is an ad for *Superman IV*, just down the street from the *Space Balls* ad and kitty-corner from *Lost Boys*. No art films, no social commentary, no



Space Balls away!



Wicked Witches

film noir about the human condition — just sex, drugs and rock and roll, vampires, werewolves, and outer space, the things today's teens are ready for after a grueling school year. They're out there, with five bucks clenched in their little fists, itching to spend it on two hours of entertainment. Hollywood does its best to predict the desires of a fifteen-year-old mind and make sure it's at a local theater by June. We breathlessly await films like *I Was A Teenage Vampire*, *Teen Wolf Too*, *Retaliator*, *Date With An Angel*, *The Caller*, and *Return of the Living Dead, Part II*. (*Jaws '87* apparently will not make its release date of July 4 and will have to wait for September when the water is cold.)

However — I don't mean to make it sound so dismal. There is fun to be had and there are some very special films out there ... somewhere.

I Need My Space

We're going to talk about space. No, not parking space. Not personal space, though Lord knows, we all need some. Not even space, the final frontier — let's face it, that's been done. We're talking *Innerspace*, the movie of diminutive concerns. This film is one of three this summer presented by Steven Spielberg's Amblin productions along with *Batteries Not Included* and *Harry and the*

Hendersons, neither of which I can talk about because nobody at Amblin will talk about them.

Innerspace stars SCTV's Martin Short and *Enemy Mine*'s Dennis Quaid, who may prove to be the Martin and Lewis of science fiction. But I think I've told you all this, as well as mentioning the story concerns the exploits of Short as a neurotic supermarket clerk

who inadvertently becomes involved in an international terrorism plot when he becomes the receptacle for miniaturized explorer Quaid.

Quaid is part of a top-secret experiment in miniaturization conducted by US (the Good Guy Americans), and Quaid and Short have to keep the secret from THEM (the Bad Guys with accents), led by the vivacious Fiona Lewis as Dr. Canker. (Dr. Canker? No editorial slant here, no siree.)

Innerspace was a project developed by Jon Peters and Peter Guber, one of the most high-powered production teams working in Hollywood. They are the team behind *Flashdance*, *Caddyshack*, *The Color Purple* and *The Witches of Eastwick* (which we'll discuss a little later in the column.) They offered the property to director Joe Dante and his partner, Mike Finell. Spielberg became involved later when Warners suggested that *Innerspace* would make a good project for Spielberg to "present."

It's interesting that Spielberg has slipped into a role similar to that of Walt Disney — a name



Look! Up in the sky ...

brand. Universal and Warners are among the major studios that seek the auspices of Spielberg's production company in the hope that his name on a property will tempt that core of customers which made *E.T.* such a phenomenal success. For good or bad, the name Spielberg has become product identification, although the downside is it may handcuff the movie ventures Amblin undertakes. Spielberg could raise a lot of ire by lending his name to a controversial project — imagine the outrage if Walt Disney had presented *Blue Velvet*.

However, Spielberg agreed that *Innerspace* would be a good project and prepping began last summer for the June '87 release.



Yogurt

Director Dante reported no difficulties with the shoot and remarked that the cast was particularly *sympatico*.

"I got a chance to work with some new people — I've had a tendency to use the same faces because I know what to expect," he says.

Dante refers to his penchant for casting notable character actors Dick Miller, Kevin McCarthy, Kenneth Tobey, William Shalert and others in most of his features, a tradition begun in his first major feature, *The Howling*.

Dante worked closely with Spielberg, who served in a supervisory capacity as he does on films bearing his name, and the only difficulty on the project has been co-star Quaid's reluctance to be interviewed concerning this, his

third genre epic. He is apparently a little chagrined about public indifference to *Enemy Mine* and is trying to cultivate a more mainstream profile by declining interviews to genre mags such as *Cinefantastique*, *Starlog* and *StarFax*.

Dante is also slipping into the mainstream after this effort with a project he describes as a small film with no fantasy elements whatsoever.

But What Does 'Space Balls' Mean?

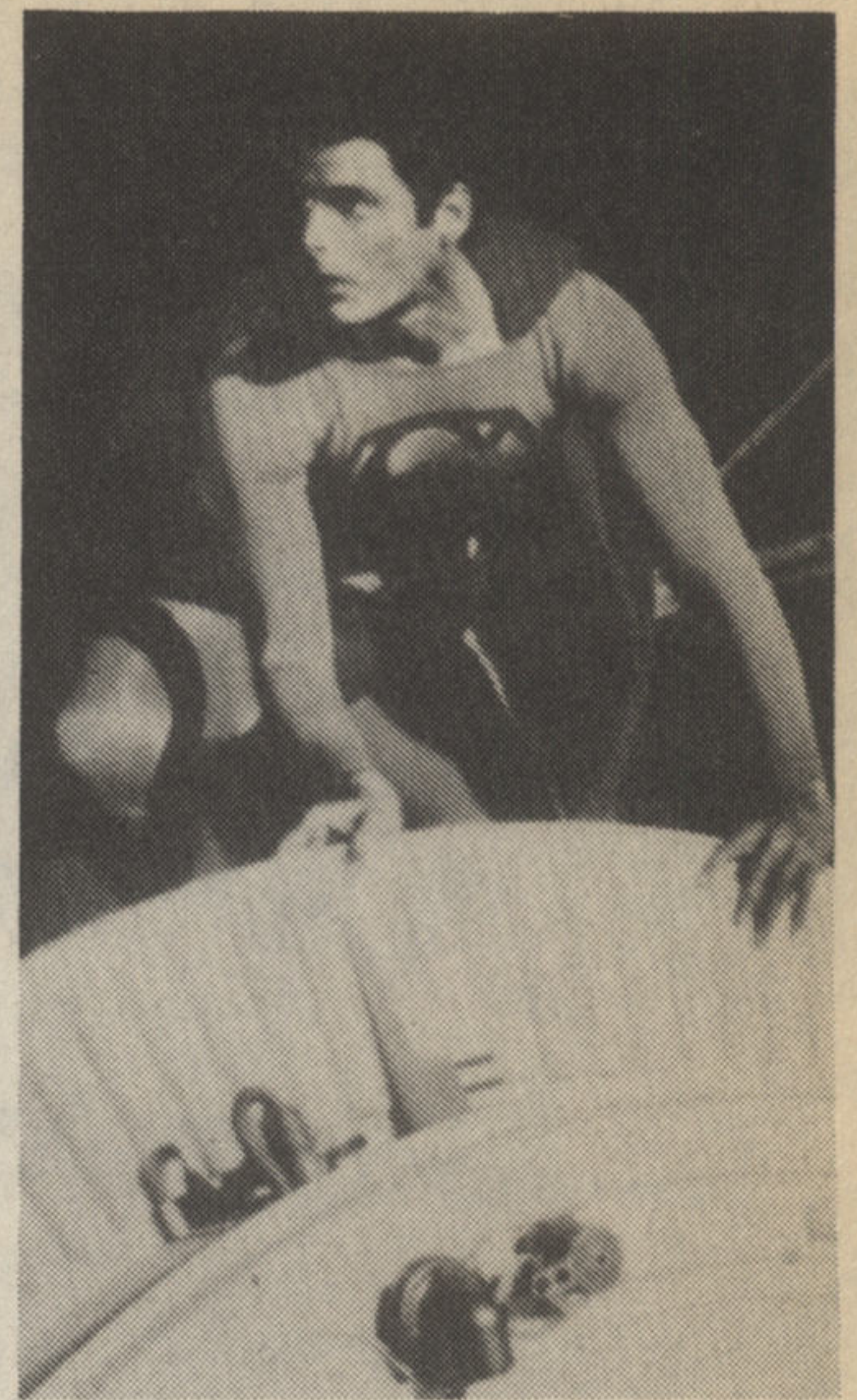
The other space film coming out this June is again a comedy — but strangely enough it is meeting some resistance from genre fans. With a name like *Space Balls*, I can't imagine why.

From the mind of Mel Brooks and co-writers Thomas Meehan and Ronny Graham, *Space Balls* is likely to do for science fiction what *Blazing Saddles* did for westerns. You got your basic villains like Dark Helmet (Rick Moranis) and intergalactic thug Pizza the Hut (Richard Karron) and your basic good guys like Prince Valium and Princess Vespa, wise little Yogurt and Dot Matrix — a golden robot companion with the voice of Joan Rivers who has already been christened She Three Pee Oh.

In typical Brooks fashion — he is the director and star as well — there is nothing subtle about the humor or the target: Princess Vespa is the daughter of the King of the Druids (Dick Van Patten), making her a Drewish Princess; little know-it-all Yogurt (Mel Brooks) dispenses wisdom with fruit at the bottom; Mawg (John Candy), half-man, half-dog, says, "I'm my own best friend," and let's not forget the mysterious Colonel Sandurz. (Hey, I don't make this stuff up, I just pass it along.)

But there are rumblings in the science fiction community. Fans are receiving this parody in much the same way Pharoah did when he got the news that Moses was going to take his labor force for a desert tour.

An MGM publicist reported that a scheduled presentation of



Superman gets a real satellite dish

Space Balls at a recent California science fiction convention was systematically dropped from the schedule despite several promises the event would be strategically placed on the program. The publicist felt that it was not just a repeated oversight and suspected deliberate sabotage. Ultimately, the presentation was made — from a closet next to the third floor men's room at 9 a.m. on a Sunday.

Now, in the big scheme of public acceptance, this programming slight is insignificant — but it indicates a distinct lack of humor when it comes to the sacred cows of science fiction. There's no denying *Space Balls* goes right for *Star Wars*' jugular, and it seems to be making fans bristle.

It may be that fans sense a certain lack of respect in the Brooksfilm parody. The reverential parody of *Star Wars* by the *Saturday Night Live* crowd — known Friends of Science Fiction — has been widely accepted, but evidently people are angered when an "outsider" like Brooks takes a scattergun to the much-revered *Star Wars*. It is a sad reflection on the science fiction community that our sense of humor is so much more limited than our sense of wonder.

The Bitches ... uh ... Witches of Eastwick

You may remember that Aussie director George Miller capsulized a myth with his *Road Warrior* series, then flew to the states to lend his eye to a segment of the *Twilight Zone* movie, the remake of "Nightmare at Twenty-Thousand Feet" featuring John Lithgow. George made a big splash in his American debut, and after finishing *Beyond Thunderdome*, he was called back to helm the Warners release of the John Updike novel, *The Witches of Eastwick*.

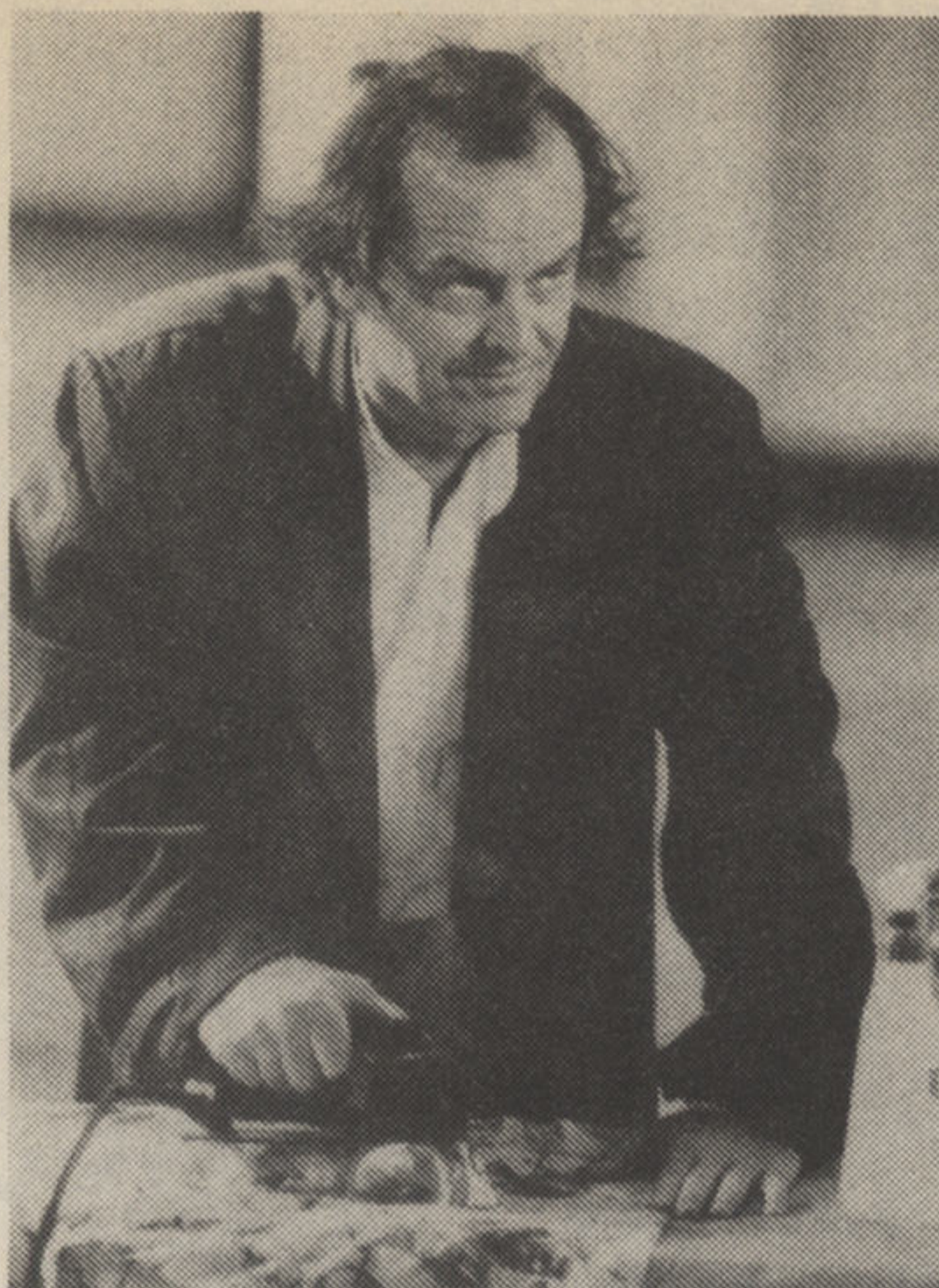
You may remember that Neil Canton first emerged as the producer of *Buckaroo Banzai* and then landed similar chores on *Back to the Future*, the megasuccess that led to production duties on the abovementioned *Witches of Eastwick*.

You may remember that earlier in this column I mentioned the production team of Jon Peters and Peter Guber and their string of hit films that gave them the muscle to attract a top flight cast and big bucks to their current project, the aforementioned *Witches of Eastwick*.

This is a big movie, folks.

Updike's novel was optioned in manuscript by Peters and Guber, who quickly cut a deal with the folks at Warners. The novel told the story of three small-town women — Alex, Jane and Sukie — who discuss their fantasies of the ideal man. Someone was listening because soon after, their dreamboat arrives in town in the form of the charismatic Daryl Van Horne, and he soon has them in his spell. The women enter a Faustian triangle with the devilish Van Horne and are lead in a downward spiral of wickedness — ending, of course, with the devil getting his due. Peters and Guber hired Pulitzer-prize winner Michael Cristofer to pen the screenplay, replete with ILM special effects and Rob Bottin's make-up.

Cast as earthy Alexandra Medford is Cher, who is joined by Susan Sarandon as plain Jane and Michelle Pfeiffer as the fecund Sukie. Veronica Cartwright joins the cast as the snoopy publisher of



The Devil
(a.k.a. *The Devil*)

the *Eastwick Word*, Felicia Gabriel. But stealing the show is Jack Nicholson as Van Horne. Nicholson is a reluctant interviewee, but says of his character, "A lot of people think I've been preparing for this role all my life. When I played *Carnal Knowledge*, I knew that women weren't going to like me for a while, that was a given. Now I play the devil, and I don't want to play him safely. I want people to think Jack Nicholson is the devil. I want them to be worried."

Pricey Vilmo Zsigmond is the cinematographer. He shot *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* for Steven Spielberg and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. The film has been scored by John Williams, of *Star* you-know-whats fame.

The line-up of talent for *Witches* is, to say the least, impressive and represents only one of the big-buck entries from Warners this summer: Warners is also distributing *Superman IV* for Cannon Films, *The Lost Boys*, and *Innerspace*. But clearly, it's pinned its hopes — and a lot of dough — on *The Witches of Eastwick*, which seems like the smart money to me.

Short Takes

With the demise of *Twilight Zone* and *Amazing Stories* on network television, the gap for SFTV

junkies is currently being filled by the British import *Max Headroom*. *Twilight Zone*'s executive staff — Phil Deguere and James Crocker — jumped on the train as American production executives, but critics are distressed at the follow-up episodes after the series' stunning premiere. The second airing, an episode written by Crocker, was a fairly silly outing that is best summed up as an episode of *Miami Vice* shot on the set of *Brazil*. Characterization was weak, the plot was woefully predictable and the satire that so distinguished the premiere was reduced to non sequiturs by the ubiquitous Max. The look is sensational, but if the writing continues to be as derivative and unimaginative as in recent weeks, there won't be enough *Newsweek* covers in the world to rescue Max from ratings oblivion: the only thing worse than being trapped in a television is being trapped in a television that nobody watches.

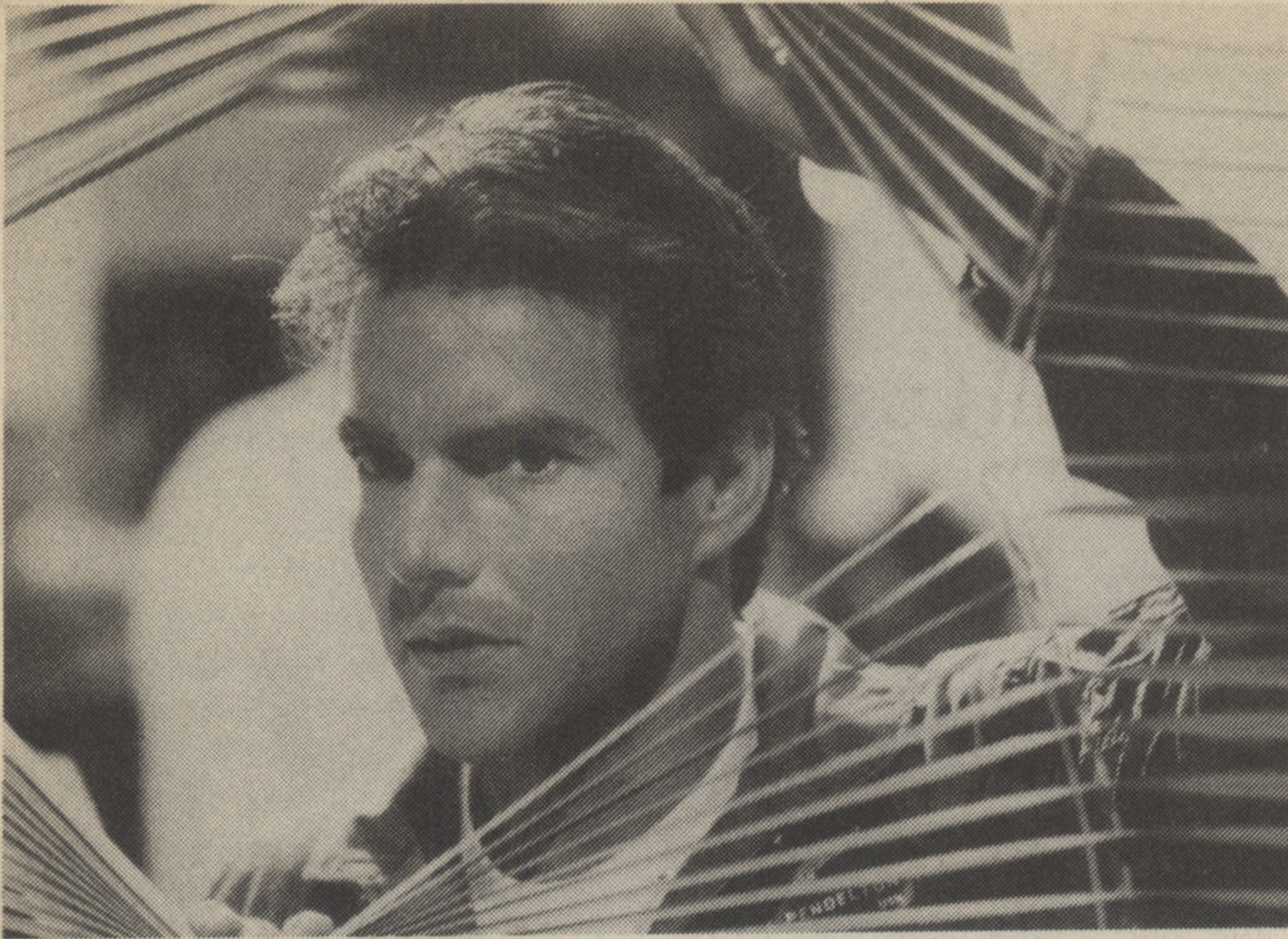
Despite the cheers and ballyhoo that accompanied the announcement of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the series may already be in trouble before the cameras have even started rolling. Promised to air in the fall, casting has not been completed and scripts for the first 13 episodes have stalled while Gene Roddenberry and Dorothy Fontana confer on the pilot episode. If this series gets on the air at all, it's not likely to premiere until next year.

And, as long as we're on the subject...

Andy Rooney in Outer Space

Didja ever wonder what happened to serious science fiction? Didja ever notice we don't see movies with the thoughtful conjecture of *2001* and *Blade Runner*? Didja notice that science fiction seems to have turned into sitcom? I don't know whether the future's been exhausted or what, but in the last few years, there has been a sameness to science fiction films that dulls the senses and has filmmakers dipping into the gag bag.

The groundbreaking claustrophobic tech of *Alien* has been cloned and re-cloned so that



Looking for *Innerspace*

now we have films like *Predator* — Arnold Schwarzenegger doing his version of *Rambo* meets the *Aliens*.

The conceptual elegance of Stanley Kubrick's *2001* has found its lowest ebb in *E.T.s-meet-man* efforts like *Life Force* and *Howard The Duck*.

The middle of the pack — and I think *Star Wars* has got to be considered the Godfather — consists of a gaudy, confused lot of films with the themes of science fiction and the soul of Laurel and Hardy: *Back to the Future*, *Explorers*, *Invaders from Mars*, *Gremlins*, *Buckaroo Banzai*, *Return of the Jedi* and, of course, *Star Trek*.

This is a new kind of science fiction, shot in day-glo colors, where ideas are paid off in punch lines and the fate of the world rests on the shoulders of a hero who can't control his acne. I have to confess some nostalgia for the time when the rumor of a new science fiction film would make our hearts go pitapat with anticipation, and we were rewarded with the likes of *Close Encounters*, *Alien*, *E.T.*, and

Blade Runner.

But, what the heck — better a few yucks than to have to sit and think for two hours. I hope there's a science fiction movie playing someplace.

— ABO —



A lost boy

Our Next Issue

Our next issue will feature another story set in The Home System. This one, by John Betancourt, is titled "The Darkfishers," and isn't what you might think. In deference to my editorial remarks in *ABO's* second issue and Ellen Datlow's response, we'll present, with great facetiousness, "It Came from the Slush Pile" by Bruce Bethke. There is really only one way to gain immortality and Paul Gilster gives us a peek at how in "Merchant Dying."

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ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

A NATO Alliance?

In this issue, *Aboriginal SF* goes international, with contributions from a British author and a West German artist, as well as from a regionally diverse group of Americans.

Okay, so it's not the United Nations, but it's a good part of the NATO alliance. And that's appropriate, since the theme of this issue is warfare and violent confrontation.

Science fiction giant Frederik Pohl, author of *Gateway* and *Space Merchants*, shows us hauntingly realistic warfare of the near future in the tale "Search and Destroy."

Pohl went on to four decades of editing and writing acclaim after a brief creative stint of a different kind. More details on Pohl's early talents can be found in a message from our alien publisher (see page 3), which our stealthy editor managed to intercept.

Pohl is married to Elizabeth



John S. Tumlin

Anne Hull, who wrote "Second Best Friend" for *ABO*'s December issue. The two recently co-edited *Tales from the Planet Earth* (Tor Books), which came out in December 1986. His latest novel, *Annals of the Heechee* (Del Ray), a sequel to *Gateway*, is just out.



Val Lakey Lindahn

Val Lakey Lindahn did the illustration for "Search and Destroy." Lindahn does many more black-and-white illustrations than color, but two of her color efforts have won her Hugo nominations. This is her third assignment for *ABO*.

She lives on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Georgia with her husband, artist Ron Lindahn.

The area is so rustic, it was picked for the filming of the movie *Deliverance*. Lindahn likes it because she can get a lot of work done, there's no lawn to mow, and the people are real neighborly.

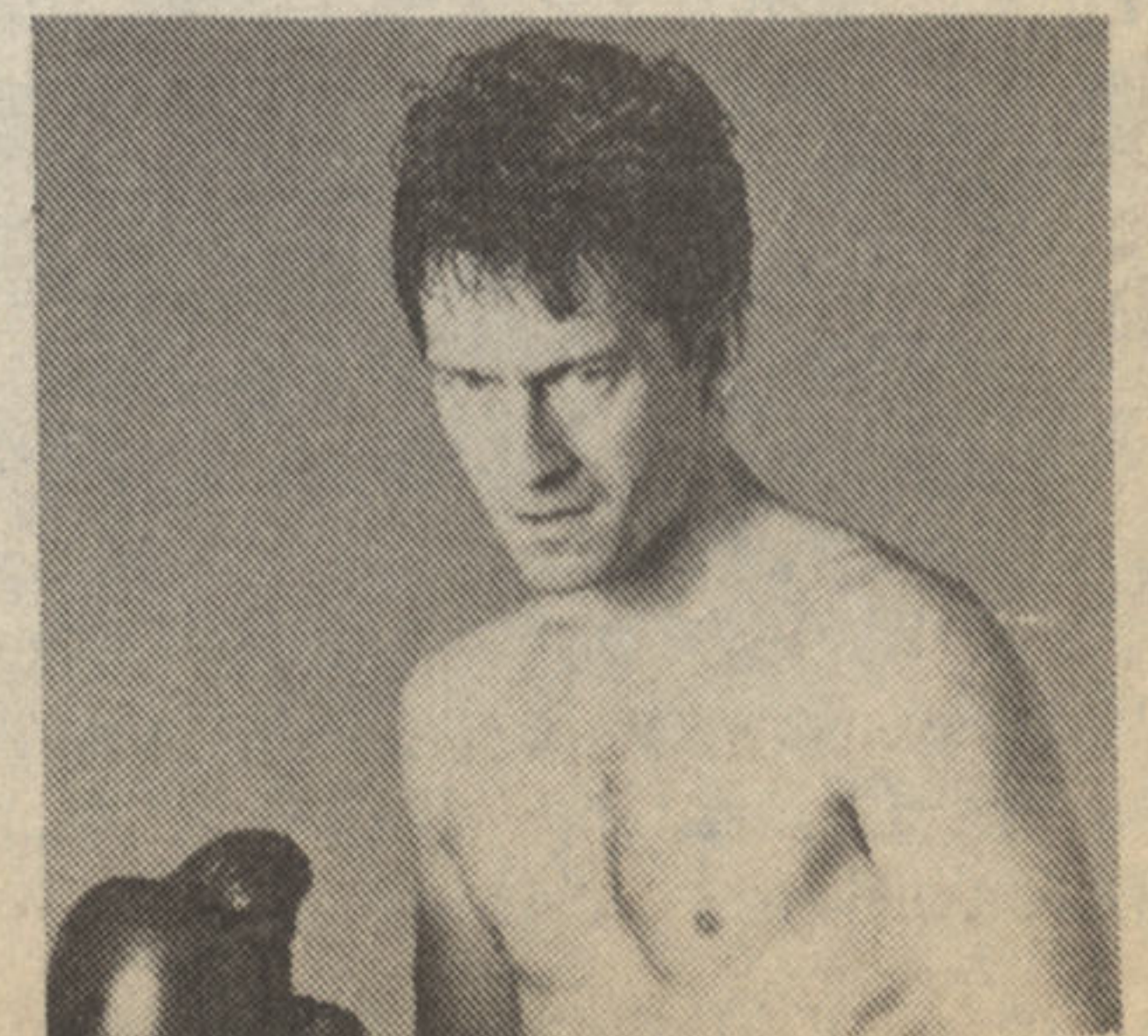


Swen Papenbrock

Brian Aldiss's new book, *Trillion Year Spree*, a history of science fiction, inspired an essay in this issue entitled "SF: From Secret Movement to Big Business."

By the way, when he writes "here," he means England. The highly acclaimed British editor, critic and author of such fiction as *The Saliva Tree* and the *Helliconia* trilogy lives in Oxford with his wife, Margaret.

He is presently working on *The Spirit Level: A Dream Autobiography* for Atheneum, due



Larry Blamire

out next year. Among his pet loves are obscure books, apple trees and the films of Tarkovsky, but he claims to have only one pet peeve, and that's taxes.

In "IMAGO," Mary Kittredge comes up with a machine-made cure for human loneliness.

Kittredge, who lives in a "creepy old town" in Connecticut, has just received the Robert L. Fish award from the Mystery



Elaine Radford

Writers of America. Her first mystery story, "Father to the Man," which appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, was judged best first mystery short of 1986.

Her first mystery novel is entitled *Murder in Mendocino* (Walker), and she's just finished a collaboration with Kevin O'Donnell Jr. on a horror novel, *The Shelter*, due out from Tor in August.

Kittredge is the former editor of a magazine for science fiction writers called *Empire*. She has also written biographies on historical figures for older children. She says her fantasy is to create horror and science fiction films.

What about creating a science fiction play about making a science fiction film? That's what Larry Blamire is up to these days, besides illustrating "IMAGO," and "Tiger's Heart" in this issue.

The actor/director/playwright/illustrator has written a comedy

called *Bride of the Mutant's Tomb*, a two-act play opening at Boston's Open Door Theatre for a six-week run June 11.

It's loosely based on the career of Ed Wood Jr., who Blamire says is "widely considered to have made the worst movies of all time." Who can forget, for example, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*?

Blamire says his comedy is somewhat more sympathetic to Woods's efforts. The outdoor theater is well suited to the play, he says, because much of the action is supposed to take place in California's Bronson Canyon. That's where many science-fiction movies and even a television series, *Lost in Space*, were filmed, Blamire says.

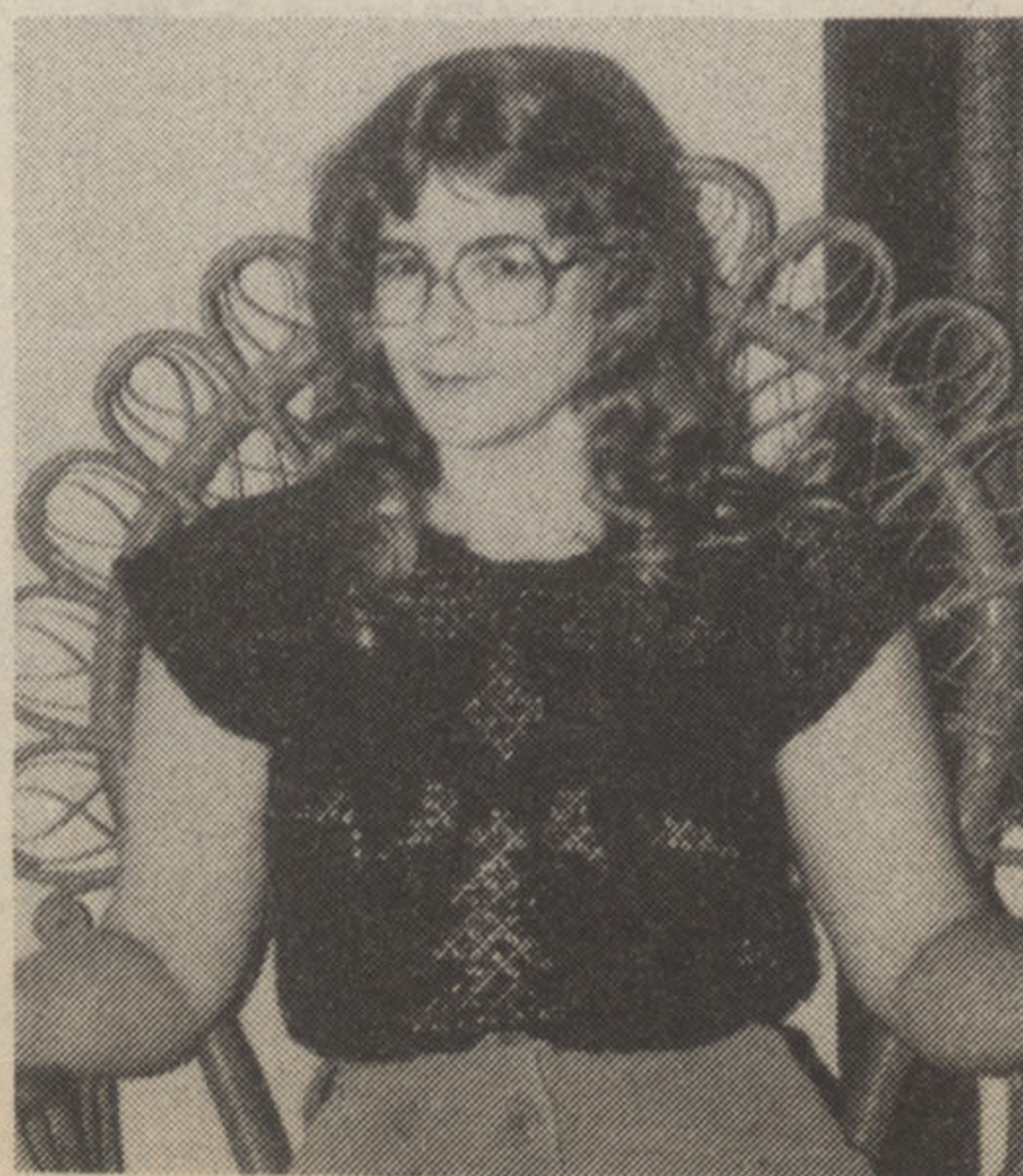
He's getting some help on the project from Cortney Skinner, the illustrator for "Cowboys and Engines" in this issue. Skinner is building a "monster movie vegetable" out of plastic, foam, chicken wire and assorted other materials.

Blamire says it looks something like a "walking carrot" and makes "a climactic appearance in the movie." Jeepers!

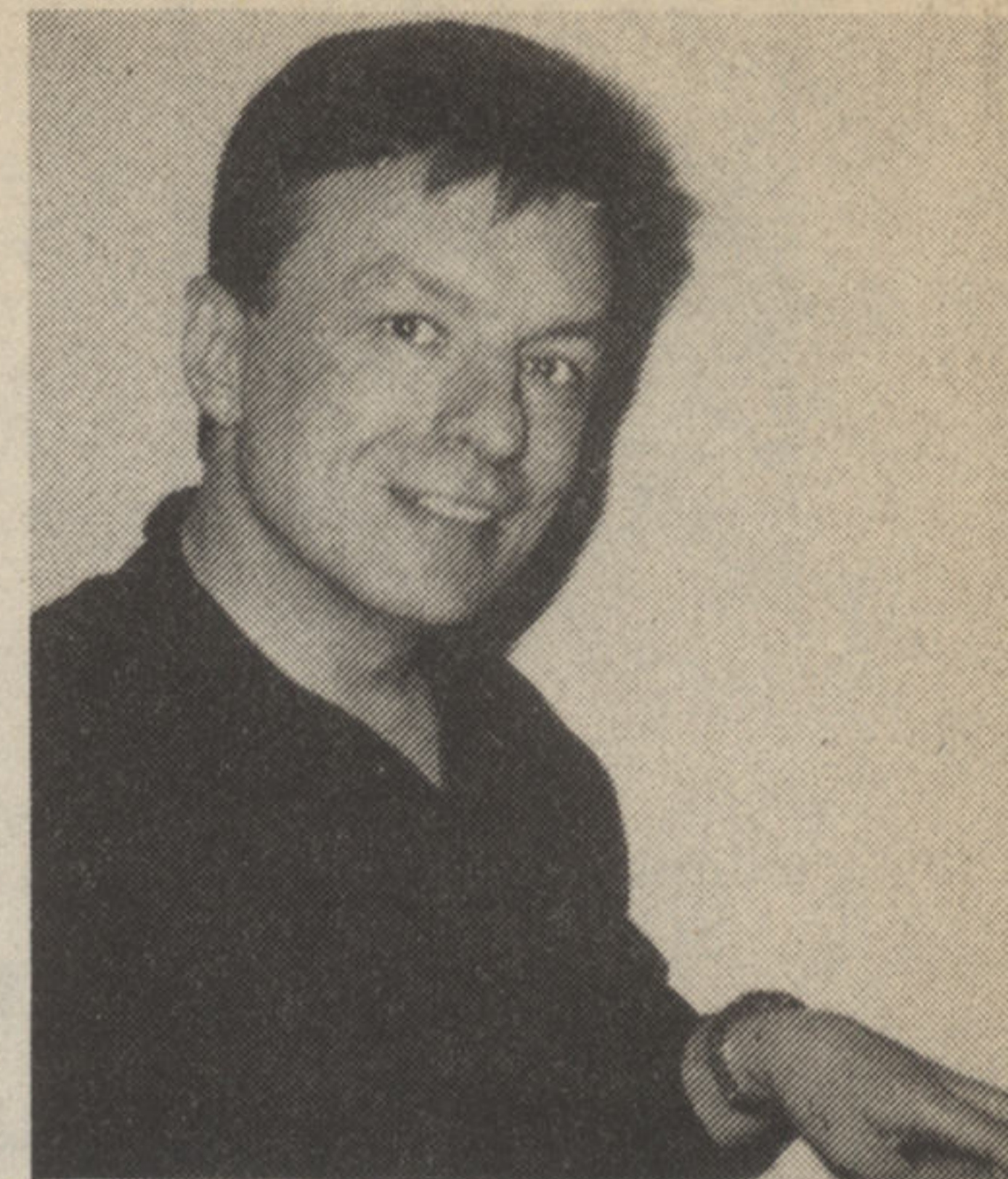
The main character in William T. Quick's "Cowboys and Engines" is hooked on John Wayne movies, and this adventure tale is as action-packed as a shoot-'em-up Western.

Let me make the wild speculation that Quick might not fare too poorly if he were suddenly transported back to the Old West.

For one thing, he has some handy skills. He says he likes to



Emily Devenport



W.T. Quick

"shoot pool for money with people who don't know how to shoot pool," and as the manager of the largest Marriott Hotel lounge in the country, he once served 10,000 frozen strawberry pina coladas at one time.

Besides, with a name like Quick, would you challenge him to a draw?

He's presently working on the second and third books of a technofantasy trilogy after just completing the first book, *Dreams of Flesh & Sand*.

Into a violent world of alien gladiators comes one young girl with a talent for trouble in Emily Devenport's "Shade and the Elephant Man."

"Shade" is Devenport's first short story sale. Up until now she has attended community college and been a housepainter and maid, but earned "zilchmo" from writing, she says.

She lives in Phoenix, and says the worst thing she ever did was burn out the engine in her 1963 Dodge Dart by forgetting to put oil in it.

Maybe she can get some comfort from knowing that somebody else I know killed a Dodge Dart also, by not changing the oil for 30,000 or so miles.

I won't say it's the worst thing I've ever done, just the worst thing I've ever done to a machine.

N. Taylor Blanchard is the illustrator for "Shade." Blanchard was schooled in both astronomy

(Continued to next page)

Tiger's Heart

(Continued from page 22)

she does; she is sharp — she is keeping her mouth shut. But when I try to talk with her, she is too polite and always has somewhere to go.

I am much in demand, the foremost red-light performer of the decade, and I only take three-time losers. No terminals. Live subscriptions to my shows break records. I can pick and choose my producers, my studios, my scripts, my programmers. I have money enough to do almost anything I want.

Almost.

I stay in shape. I work out every day. I have practice modules now for virtually every hand weapon known, each programmed by the best in that field. I train with them regularly, in rotation. And I rehearse every fight thoroughly. I have to. My fight module is always a dummy.

Someday, some way, I know it will happen again. A technical slip-up, an equipment failure, something. And on that day I'll be face to face with a real killer again.

God help me. I can hardly wait.

— ABO —

Search and Destroy

(Continued from page 12)

going to get occupation duty right here in Oregon, guarding the fields until the marijuana rots in the earth and the farmers can't come back and scavenge it!"

"They told me myself it's going to be Colorado. We're assigned to the cocaine business, bro. Up and down the mountains, looking for the high-altitude coca farms and the paste factories."

"Oh, crap," Gamble moaned, hugging his knees. He rocked back and forth in misery. "They never told me drug enforcement was going to be like this. My Goddamned father-in-law's right, I might just as well have joined the effing Army!"

Halversen flicked the coal off the tiny stump of his joint, peeled the paper off, chewed and swallowed the contents. He grinned at Gamble. "What are you, a pacifist?" he asked.

— ABO —

Aborigines

(Continued from previous page)

and the theater design, but now considers himself a professional artist. One of his latest illustrations is the cover for a young adult book, *Barbary*, by Vonda McIntyre (Houghton Mifflin).

John S. Tumlin's *Tiger's Heart* deals with an actor's anguish. Tumlin himself is an actor and writer, when he isn't earning a living, as he says, "trying to teach illiterate high-school graduates to read and write."

His alter ego, Higginbotham P. Worthmire, has an equally prestigious career as the Elizabeth Borden Professor of Mental Health and Film Therapy at the University of California at San Quentin/Tamal.

Worthmire's long list of esteemed publications includes "Humor in the Films of Fritz Lang," and "Existential Angst in the Recent Cinema of Carl Reiner."

The characters in Elaine Radford's "Passing" are the type who would be good candidates for Dr. Worthmire's therapy.

Radford is a former

geophysicist who is now a freelance writer. She and several beloved parrots live in Metairie, Louisiana.

She says she pays the bills by writing such things as "How to Exercise Your Parrot" and "How to Brush Your Cat's Gums."

Leslie Pardew, who did the artwork for "Passing," was born and raised in Idaho and once did missionary work for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Japan.

He now lives with his wife and kids in Philadelphia, where he is animation director for the film company, Animation Arts Assoc. Inc.

Pardew is friends with Carl Lundgren, who illustrated the award-winning cover for *ABO's* December issue. The two of them are part of a group of four artists called the Visionary Realists, who are interested in elevating fantasy art to the level of gallery quality art.

Pardew says they believe fantasy art "can transcend simple illustrations and have real meaning."

Cartoonist Tom Mason works as the creative director for Malibu Graphics designing comic books, and edits a bimonthly humor mag-

azine, called *Splat!*, out of Hollywood, California.

His cartoons have appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and in the *British Punch*.

Being amusing is hard work. Mason says he gets his inspiration from drinking a lot and eating spicy Mexican food.

The cover of this issue is the work of West German artist Swen Papenbrock. Papenbrock was born in Kassel, West Germany. As a teenager in the 1970s, he discovered science fiction, in particular the "Perry Rhodan" series.

He started doing drawings for fanzines, then studied the techniques of well-known artists, and found that photo-realism suited him best.

He has illustrated the covers of comic books and catalogues, and through his agent Uwe Luserke, has started doing science fiction artwork for paperbacks and videotapes in Germany, Sweden, and now the U.S. He is presently working on an illustrated novel.

Papenbrock is setting his sights high, and that's easy to understand. He is nearly seven feet tall.

— ABO —

IMAGO

By Mary Kittredge

He might have been an old Maine codger, home from a day of clamming, except there were no clams here, and no codgers, either. There was only the station, a braced and anchored permadome with me and Carroll in it. Outside, the endless dunes of Vera marched away in all directions, under a pale green sky.

Still he came straight at us down a slope of shifting grit. The red cap jammed down over his ears was bright as a warning flag; ghostly billows of dust rose up behind him. Here and there stray gusts of wind spun tiny sand-twisters that skittered in his trail like playful pets.

I watched through the port. In a moment any one of those small funnels might dig in and whip a ton of quartzite particles to scouring fury. No point, if it struck, to cover your face with your hands. The sand took your hands, then your face and the rest of you, each razor-grain snatching away a bit of flesh or bone. Long ago I'd told a claim-jumper that, but he didn't believe me. Sand-pups, he called the little cones, and said they were good luck. His ship was still out there somewhere, and so, in a way, was he.

But one by one these funnels blew apart, and still the old guy trudged on. Clearly not from out there: no goggles, no suit. He made for the airlock, slogging knee-deep through a sink-powder bowl. Not breathing hard, though. Intent on the lock, he passed within feet of the port. Not breathing at all. Clearly, he was from in here.

I kicked IMAGO hard in her polished-steel side; she clucked a reproach, then settled back to her steady hum-and-flicker, unperturbed.

"Oh, stop fussing," Carroll complained, frowning pettishly up from his log-book. His pale round face hung over the pages like one of Vera's moons. Since the last big twister he spent his time scribbling his memoirs, when he wasn't staring at films from the tape-cache. He seemed especially fond of the very old ones called "gangster movies."

I neither write nor watch films; IMAGO records my log, and once I had absorbed the data in them the tapes were no longer of interest to me.

"Your guest," I informed Carroll coldly.

He bounced from his chair and fairly danced to the port, pressing his face to the triple-diamond-glazing, medals jouncing on his pale-blue uniform front as he hopped with excitement. He was large and round, his baby face pink with delight; heating up, he reeked

of djinnet-rum. If they'd left off the weight of Carroll's medals and toiletries, they might have sent another human here.

The compressors clanked reluctantly, then groaned to wheezing life as the outer hatch cranked down. Carroll's plump fingers twitched greedily near the quick-pressors.

"You'll blow it wide open," I warned him. That last storm had taken his dune-beetle, loaded with assays, maps, equipment, and slammed it against the hatch before sweeping it off. Now the seal barely held. Pouting, he drew back his hands. For one more day the seal had to guard his air.

Or what passed for air. Scrubbers can only do so much, and he'd been breathing it five years, exuding sweat and djinnet; weeping, cursing, raving in it too. Ripping tides of sand had devoured his science along with his dreams, buried them all with the priceless rare metals he'd come to find. Tomorrow a shuttle like the one that had dropped him would return to take him home.

The inner hatch reeled open and the old guy stepped in, scowling and wrinkling his purple-veined bulb of a nose. His eye lit first on me.

"Hey, girlie, c'mere and give an old man a squeeze." Then he turned to Carroll. "What's this, your union suit? Wear your medals on your pj's?"

Carroll backed away, soundlessly working his little pink mouth. I wondered what the hell he'd been expecting.

I knew what he'd done, of course — fiddled IMAGO somehow and made a new playmate. I felt like kicking IMAGO again, or taking a pipe wrench to her. She's good, but she's dumb.

IMAGO is a psychobioid generator. In other words: a computer. A collector. A rearranger. A projector. Standard equipment on any long solitaire hitch. She looks like a cross between an old-fashioned switchboard and a pinball machine, and she generates me from (1) a packaged program tailored to Carroll's psychsupport profile, (2) the DNA/RNA codes of a single stasis-frozen diploid human cell, (3) energy from the station power packs, and (4) any matter that happens to be available. Sand, for instance.

I am to keep Carroll sane. The solitaire spacejack will mount a standoff inside his own head, then tear his skull apart trying to win both sides. Hyperdrive's too expensive for social visits; radio's too slow, and



Larry Blamire

since it's massless it can't be boosted. So:

Inside and out, Carroll is studded with sensor-transmitters. IMAGO picks him clean of fears and needs. The receiver is me: Madam of the mens sana. When they programmed me into IMAGO, they named me Psyche. Cute.

The point is though, I was programmed. This old guy, by contrast, was just some random excretion of Carroll's, a hash of old movies, genetic memories, dreams — mental shit, to put it bluntly. Now he gimped around the cabin snorting general disapproval.

"What in hell is this joint?" he demanded suspiciously.

"You're on Vera," piped Carroll.

"A mining station, very remote," I put in quickly. "You'd never find it on a map." Unless you read star-maps, I added silently. "Now, wherever you came from, you'd better go back right away. You

could get stranded."

An understatement. From the first moment of his existence, he was set like concrete. There were only two straightforward ways to get rid of him now: take him out beyond IMAGO's transponder range — three kilometers — or shut her down. And if she goes, I go.

"Not on your tintage, sister," he snapped. "Who's in charge here, anyway?"

He squinted hard at IMAGO, and I began to think two things: one, he was no fool, and two, I was in bad trouble.

Carroll must have been thinking the same; plainly, this grouchy old geezer was not what he'd bargained for. He never had any respect for gnarled wisdom, preferring smooth stupidity like his own.

"I am in charge," he said, stepping up to IMAGO. "And I must inform you that I am about to terminate your existence."

There was nothing I could do. Briskly, Carroll

keyed open the power pullbacks, grasped a lever in each pink fist. A horrible shrieking screamed along my neurons: never, never...

"Hold it, sonny." For an aging human, the geezer had a steady hand. I relaxed slightly. In the hand was a .38 snub-nosed revolver. Although antique, it looked in excellent working order; probably loaded; too. I supposed I had Carroll's old gangster films to thank. IMAGO is thorough.

Carroll stared. "You can't shoot me, you're a..."

"Want to bet?" A toothy grin opened wide as a trap in the old guy's face as he calmly adjusted his aim. He was one confident codger, all right, I thought — too confident.

"Wait a minute," I said.

He turned to me, looking disgusted. "Suppose that's your boyfriend, hey? Well, I guess it ain't like you had a big selection." Grudgingly, he lowered the gun; I pushed in front of Carroll, who was quivering near to collapse, and slammed the dustcover down on the power panels.

"Damn bossy women wherever you go," the old guy muttered. "Shoot. Don't shoot. Stand up. Sit down." He settled himself on a couch, still griping. "Wake up in crazy desert, sleep in a tin loony bin..."

Meanwhile, he kept a sharp eye on IMAGO.

"I should have let him shoot you," I said, jabbing an elbow into Carroll's meaty ribs. My own narrow escape I kept silent on; just the memory of Carroll's hands on the panels sent a surge of panic through me. To whirl away into nothing, the ghost of a thought...

"What were you expecting, Jamie," I said, "a teeny-girl to wiggle on your lap?" I speared him again and he yelped, creeping away to the edge of the bunk.

"Nothing," he wailed. "I wasn't expecting..."

Colonel James Carroll, officer and engineer of TerraVerse Mining Company, buried his face in his pillow. "I just wanted to try it." A hiccupping sob escaped him. For a moment I felt sorry for him; he was no prize, but five years of Vera hadn't helped him any, either.

There was sobbing and snuffling down there, then a handkerchief-rummage and a long, honking blow. Finally his face emerged, sorry and tear-streaked.

"It was just an experiment. I've got nothing else to show. All my maps, charts, assays — gone. What am I going to tell them, tomorrow? They're going to want something."

Did you ever have a day when you hated your job? "Come on, Jamie," I coaxed. "You were here to find out, and you did. No one knew a twister could stop the whole project." The backwash of his lonely fear threatened to flood me, but I functioned; I absorbed.

"Maybe you're right."

I gathered the blankets around us. "If we don't get your little buddy under control, you might not live to find out. What's he getting from you, anyway? Why is he so aggressive?"

Silence; his lower lip threatened. I had an unpleasant suspicion, but no; that was too foolish even

for Jamie.

"Come on, what was the experiment? Tell me what sensors are tied to his crystal — I'll go in and short them."

"All of them," Jamie said. "Except the feedbacks."

No feedbacks; I'd underestimated him. He was foolish enough, all right: foolish enough to summon up a completely unprogrammed entity, plenty of id and no superego. No one had ever done it before, simply because no one but Jamie was dumb enough to do it.

Then a new thought occurred to me. "What about his lifeline? How long is he on for?"

Lifelines are time-activated personality-termination subroutines: basic curbs to keep images from attaining independent existence, or even much self-awareness. Because of the lifelines, standard image life-spans run one Earth-day, week, or month; after that, IMAGO reabsorbs the image and issues a new one.

Jamie, of course, had loop-disabled my lifeline almost at once. He said it was because he didn't have time to retrain me every week, but that was a lie; IMAGO stores needed skills. What I did have to relearn every time I got re-issued, though, was just what a poor dumb loser I was marooned with, and Jamie's shaky self-esteem couldn't stand my coming to that conclusion again and again. Result: I was immortal — as long as I behaved, and as long as I had a power source.

"He doesn't have a lifeline," Jamie mumbled.

I stared. Even loop-disabled, lifelines run a lot of bells and whistles. For one thing, they're tied to the three-klick limit, beyond which IMAGO won't pick up an image's mandatory transponder signal.

"Well, I was going to give him one," Jamie began defensively, "but then I accidentally erased yours, trying to copy it, and by the time I got that looped back in..."

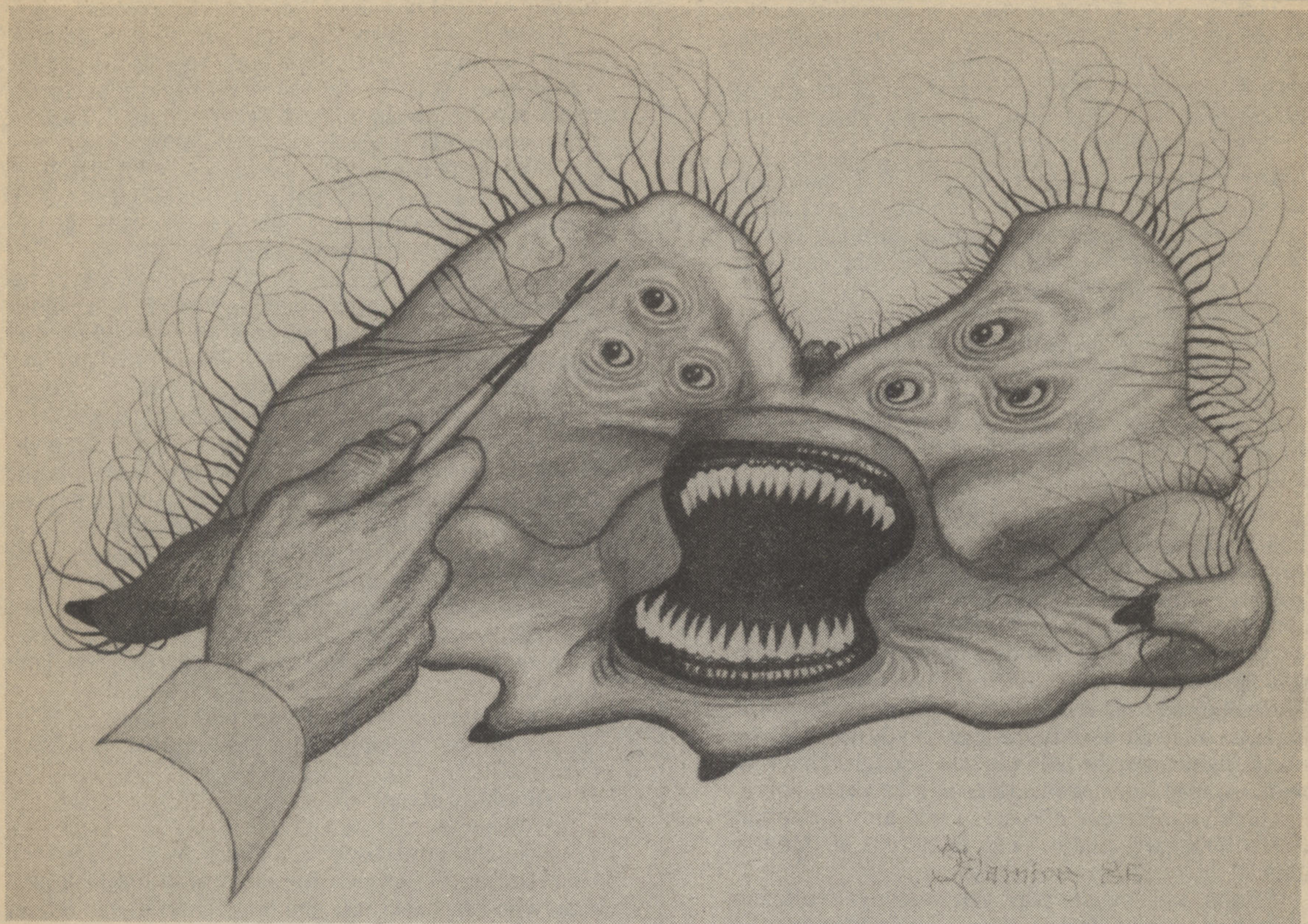
Any other curbs are tied to the lifeline, too, through the transponder circuitry in IMAGO's chassis. Loop-disabled or not, just try something naughty and next time you have to answer IMAGO's hourly roll-call, all you'll be able to do is smile pretty while the loop straightens, the self-destruct codes kick in, and the tetrodotoxins bloom. For you, not the spacejack; you self-seal while it happens — or rather, I do.

Not the old guy, though: no feedbacks, no lifeline at all.

"...by that time, I was afraid to mess with it any more. It's not my fault the system's so confusing," Jamie finished.

"You could have pulled my feedbacks," I told him. "Then I'd be free."

"I didn't think of that," he said, avoiding my eyes. The truth was, though, he knew I'd better not be free when tomorrow came. He was such a pitiful liar, I wondered why he bothered after all this time. I decided it must be a "habit."



Larry Blamire

Like his habit of having me for a slave. No one else took his orders, even on Earth. Most of his medals were bribes, payments for taking the falls in place of higher-up officers. He only made colonel because it was minimum station-chief rank, so they could drop him here to stake their claims. They had told him he would be master of all he — literally — surveyed.

Which turned out to be sand, and me. And tomorrow it ended. So this was Carroll's last move in his sad little game of god, his pointless way of putting off reality: a maverick image with a loaded gun.

Not that it really mattered why, or what the old guy was like. Free or slave, armed or not, to me he meant only one thing.

Now I had both of them to get rid of, and one day to do it in.

Chop me in four and I'll grow back four Psyches, each only slightly blurred: the ultimate starfish, as long as the current flows. That's because IMAGO generates BioGen-licensed hybridclone wetware — good stuff, real flesh right down to the last organelle, and safe in emergencies. A direct nuclear hit might vaporize me, but anything less would just turn me into a repair crew.

Which meant I had to be careful now. Jamie slept. I plucked the final screw from IMAGO's back panel — her insides are all on a chip in my sealed vital-skills

section. Some Company comedian dropped an old porno chip in there, too; thinking of that, I nearly jabbed the screwdriver into IMAGO's gleaming guts. But I held back; I'd only have to fix her.

It's funny what they programmed in, and what they left out. I couldn't crack Carroll's skull, for instance, but I didn't have to stop anyone else, and even that curb was only tacked on after a shipment of flawed crystals started the porno-feelie massacres back on Earth. Images can't eat flesh or anything else, but before the recalls they could fake it very convincingly.

Still, curbs cost extra. I pulled the inner backplate, laid it with the panel, and slid the simple functions board aside. Then I began deactivating the deep-structure locks. Carroll, of course, had the key.

The locks were alive, from an outback system called Fondulac. Foolproof and reliable, they inspired nothing but confidence — unless you had the unpleasant chore of trying to pick one. Then they were the voidest little monsters, like Fiberglass jellyfish only faster and meaner, with ten thousand Fiberglass filaments all searching for something warm and juicy to slice up and feed to the mouth underneath.

I ignored an impulse to grab a fistful and yank; the microthreads would mince off my fingers and a minute later I'd have five more Psyches in a cabin that was already three times too crowded.

The old guy, still a creature of Carroll's habits, was asleep, too. If I had my way now, he was dreaming his last. A little spurt from the pen-laser in my repair kit should topple his crystal out of its matrix without doing too much other damage. Then I could mirror his power back onto myself.

The Fondulan twitched uneasily as I cautiously probed its core. I was cooler than its natural prey; nevertheless, excited waves rippled through it as I neared the blue-white pulsing heart and the cartilage pin that held its nervous system.

I wondered if Fondulans thought or felt, if they cared about being used. But mostly I wondered if those searching fronds would flash the next instant and razor my forearms to shreds. Then I found the cartilage pin, yanked it out and away. The filaments jerked once, their gleam suddenly drained, and fell in a grayish heap.

"Nice job," said foxy grandpa, right at my elbow. "What happens next?" He still had the gun, and I didn't want to be cloned. I aimed the cartilage pin like a dart back into IMAGO; as it struck home, the Fondulan boiled to life again.

"Nothing," I said. "Thanks to you, we're both going to die here."

He chewed the stub of an ancient cigar, considering, then allowed as how he was ready to meet his maker. By the way he held the gun, though, I knew he meant to put off the introductions as long as possible.

"You've met your maker," I told him, slamming in IMAGO's back plate. "You came out of this machine."

He shook his head. "Girl, you're loony. Fruitcake, get it? And your boyfriend, there — he's even worse." He stood a moment, watching me tighten down the plate.

"Anyway, who says we're going to die?"

I went around giving each screw a final turn, and thinking. There was still one possibility. "Shhh — Carroll says. But we're not supposed to know, so keep your voice down." The Company programmer, so zealous to wire me for amorous antics, had neglected to edit my station shut-down procedures chip.

Of course, if my life-line had been intact, that wouldn't have mattered. Ordinary images expect to die every so often; they're simply expendable, even to themselves. It comes with the territory.

Only now it didn't — not for me. Not if I could help it. "He leaves tomorrow," I told the old guy, "and he's taking the power-pack with him."

"He goes and we stay? No power?" The old guy looked mutinous.

"He's the human," I said, "in case you hadn't noticed."

"Wait just a — what d'you think I am, green cheese?"

Right then I'd had about enough of old tough-and-twinkle, a million miles from nowhere with a gun that would knock him diode over data-bit if he fired it, and him not even knowing what he was. "All right," I said, "where are you from?"

"Omaha," he snapped. "I know where I'm from.

What I want to know is —"

Carroll was from Omaha, not by coincidence. "Big beef town, Omaha," I said, hoping I'd got the time-frame right. In the old guy's illusory memory, there ought to be something called a "steak house." "Eat much steak, back there in Omaha?"

He rolled his eyes, "remembering." "Lord, lord. The smell of that charcoal grill. Made your mouth water so, you had to keep lickin' your chops just to save yourself from drownin'. Only..."

He stopped, puzzlement digging grooves in his forehead. "Funny. Ain't had any steak in a while. Ain't had any anything. Seems like I ought to be hungry, only..."

I got him a biscuit from Carroll's stock. "Sometimes a trip will do that," I said. "Here, try this."

"Yeah, maybe. How long a trip, that's my big question." He tried to chew the biscuit, jaws working and frown digging deeper, until at last he spat a dry spray of crumbs. "Pthhh! What the hell was *that*?"

Images metabolize broadcast energy, not biscuits. "The question is, what the hell are *you*?"

"I'm a man, goddammit..."

"Sssh, all right, you're a man. But a pretty strange one, don't you think? You don't eat, you don't breathe —"

He glanced down at his chest with a frown.

"...and by the way, have you emptied your bladder lately?"

He stared at me.

"Me neither," I said.

The old guy stuck the cigar in his face and chomped down. Around the cigar was the look of a man who has been well and truly shafted and is just realizing what a thorough job was done on him.

Outside the ports, Vera was hunkering down for a storm. Fireballs, racing electric blue and yellow, lighted the sky; gusts of sand hissed on the dome's outer hull. It was going to be a big one.

"Gave up women," the old guy said. "Gave up booze when my hands got to shaking so's I couldn't cheat at cards anymore. Gave up a lotta things, but I did believe I was gonna eat an' piss an' breathe until I died."

His voice was low: fury mingled with fear. "That's all fake? All I remember, what I think — *thought* — I was?"

I nodded.

Something still and cold sparked in his pale blue eyes then, something more suited to his nature, now that he knew it. "Who did it?" he said. "Who made me like this?"

A peevish voice rose from the bunk alcove. "Hey! What's going on out there?"

Around the old guy's chewed cigar, a wolfish smile formed.

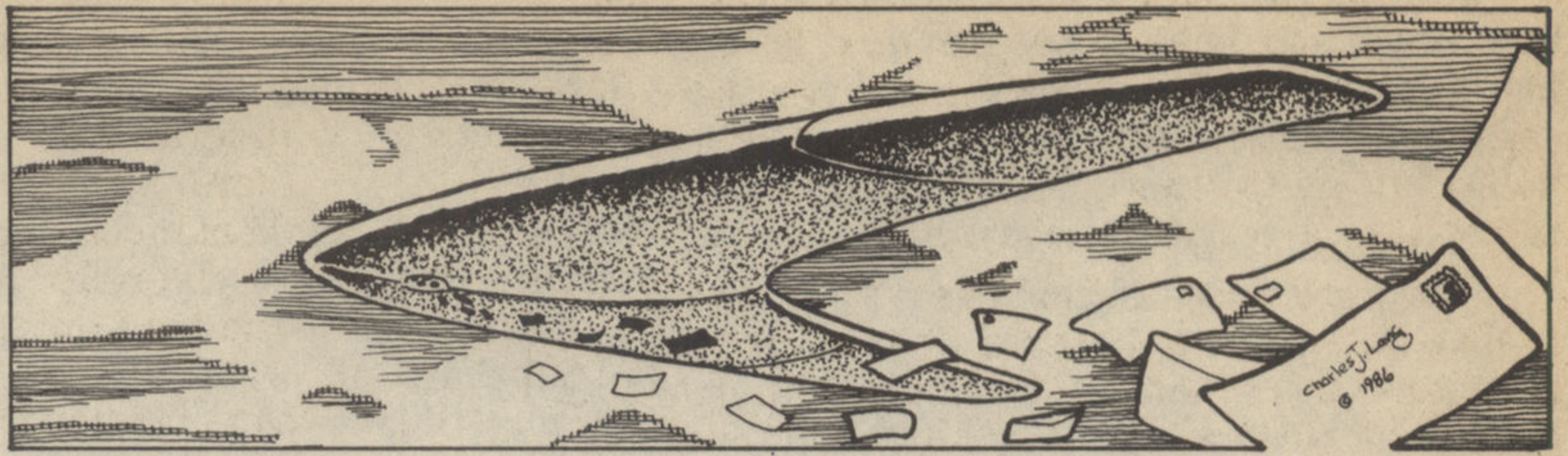
Outside, a deepening thrum began: the dunes, marching.

"Listen," I said. "There isn't much time."

"Vera Station, this is cargo boxcar oh-nine oh-five Alpha Charlie shuttle, do you read? Shuttle oh-nine..."

(Continued to page 63)

Boom- erangs



Comments From Our Readers

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Congratulations on the third issue of *Aboriginal SF*. So far I have followed the magazine's progress with much enthusiasm, and in particular would like to register my own avid support of the tabloid format you've chosen. As an artist, I view it as superior in many ways over the smaller format mags that dominate the market. Its showcase potential for rising artists is ideal and fills a real need in the genre today. And as a reader, I'd just like to say that I find it quite manageable, thank you very much. I think it's a rather interesting and innovative approach, and I hope you will continue with it in the future.

And if all this sounds like faint praise, enclosed is a money order for a year's subscription. I'm looking forward to some of the things you've planned for future issues. So far I've also been in agreement with your choice of covers, and am looking forward to the publication of the cover art advertised for #3 and later bumped at the last minute in deference to the fine painting by Bob Eggleton. Each issue seems to be better than the last. Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,

Daniel Stedronsky
Lakewood, Ohio

Dear Charlie,

I've enjoyed reading *Aboriginal SF*.

Now — a word or two on your format, in answer to your call for input. I'm likely a minority voice, but color reproduction is not a high

priority with me (I can admire a Rembrandt pencil sketch as much as many of his oils; I prefer Durer to Degas); in short, I'm more than content with a strong line drawing. I'll go further: the essence of reading to me is forming one's own mind pictures (analogously, I preferred the old radio *Batman* to the paunchy and later camp versions of movie/TV).

So — if that's what's keeping you from going to an *Omni* format, I say do it. The main problem with the current size *Aboriginal* is that it doesn't lend itself to collecting — I'm not even talking about serious collecting, just wanting to keep a favorite issue around (maybe for years) without adding geometrically to what others in the household call clutter.

Whatever the format, keep providing good reading. You're off to a strong start.

Best of Luck,

Joel Richard Fruchtman
Kentfield, California

Dear Mr. Ryan:

I would like first to compliment you on your terrific sci-fi magazine. I have been a fan since the first issue was sent to me. I enjoy the book and movie reviews as well as the stories and art. I used to subscribe to *F&SF* but was unsatisfied as I could not send in any of my writing attempts.

This brings me to my point (not very sneaky. I'll admit): I am writing to request your writer's guidelines. I have included a SASE as required. I hope to send you all

some of my efforts by summer.

Sincerely,

Lonnie Yates
Houston, Texas

DONE: Anyone wanting our writers' or artists' guidelines need only send a self-addressed stamped envelope with the request. —Ed.

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I had the pleasure of meeting you at the past Boskone, and was glad of the chance to renew my subscription to your fine magazine (hint to all you reading this, why don't you do the same?).

You've produced another fine issue of *ABO* with number three. Each of the stories was memorable for one reason or another (and I believe that's the highest compliment a writer can be paid, so I don't say it lightly). I was particularly glad to see Connie Willis coming home, so to speak, both to "The Home System" and to you, her first editor. Ms. Willis is one of the finest new writers of SF around, and "Circus Story" only enhances her reputation.

The art was again superb, especially Bob Eggleton's cover. Put me firmly in the camp of those favoring the larger size; I don't want that great art to shrink one inch.

I'm sorry to see that you missed catching up with your alien publisher, but I can't say I don't envy your job; being snowbound here in the northeast makes one long to be in places like Miami. I

look forward to the next issue, and wish you continued good luck.

Regards,

Tim Fitzgibbons
Bridgewater, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Do keep *Aboriginal SF*'s large format! The artwork is something we just don't get elsewhere. The book reviews, too, are a service this reader appreciates (though I'd prefer shorter reviews of more books).

"Second Best Friend" by Elizabeth Anne Hull with its unusual and believable point of view is my favorite *ABO* story so far. Keep 'em coming!

Sincerely,

R. Rayson Deike
Fayetteville, Arkansas

P.S. How do you feel about tallying a readers' vote for favorite story in each issue and publishing the results in a subsequent issue?

That may be possible, if enough readers are interested — Ed.

Hey You *Aboriginal*-type guys...

I look, I read, I enjoy...Stories, Artwork, Features...the whole shmeer. College students are not known to have free time. I, being one of that dubiously fortunate breed, have as little or less than most. But I find it excruciatingly easy to ignore Hemingway, O'Flaherty, and Joyce when you drop the newest issue of *Aboriginal* into my lap...My poppa happened upon your premier issue; but since he was otherwise occupied with job, wife, and life, he thought himself too busy to subscribe...He passed it on to *moi*, and I fell in love. So I (counting my pennies left from my being bled dry at the college "book" store) subscribed...Now pop reads my issues be-

fore I do...Some busy guy! Anyway thanx for the new magazine and the new market.

A loving subscriber of distinctly *Aboriginal* sorts,

Tim Capehart
Kettering, Ohio

We have some Aboriginal-type gals here too — Ed.

Dear Charlie,

I'm not sure that the panel you refer to in your February Editor's Notes is one in which I participated but I do know we've been on a couple of "editor's panels" together. I feel you misunderstand completely what was said by me and other editors with regard to hopeful writers approaching editors at conventions. Yes, I encourage it. If a stranger introduces himself and his story didn't make an impression on me in the first place, meeting that person won't help. But if I've already noticed that person's writing and we've never met, it's useful and pleasant for both of us. I can encourage that person in her writing and show her I'm human, not just THE EDITOR, and also I can have a face to fit the name on the manuscripts I receive.

What I disagree with vehemently in your editorial is the implication (and I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt when I call it that) that I or any other editor buys material out of friendship. I have made many friends in the business while Fiction Editor at *Omni*. Some of those friends have never had a story bought by me, even though they often submit stories to me first (a question of economics, not friendship). Conversely, I often buy stories from writers I've never met. Or even from people I've met and don't like personally. The feelings I have towards writers are irrelevant to my job and most of them realize this.

By the way, I maintain that the slush pile by and large is indeed "an odorous mound of yucky stuff which has to be waded through," with an occasional nugget thrown

in (basically, I think, as a taunt to editors or to keep us on our toes). And I challenge any reader out there to sit and read our slush pile for a week and prove me wrong.

Sincerely,

Ellen Datlow
Fiction Editor
Omni Publications International Ltd.
New York, New York

To a struggling, unpublished writer, still mystified at why his or her story hasn't sold, a word spoken in jest by an editor (it wasn't you — and I'm fairly sure he was jesting), might just be taken literally. That was my concern. — Ed.

Dear Charlie,

In "Trackdown: The Sequel" John Moore should give the deer the snowmobile and gun and let good ol' Rex and Avery run for their damn lives.

Next thing you know, the cow from *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* will show up and say "You can shoot me here...or maybe you would prefer to shoot me here."

This is the first story I've read in a long while that made me want to talk back to the author.

The rest of your 'zine was swell. Keep up the good work (as usual).

Regards,

Lillian McManus
Westwood, New Jersey

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Okay, no fooling around: the first three issues of *ABO* are flat-out wonderful. The stories are uniformly superb (the ones in the first issue a little less so — "Fixing Larx" was the only real standout there), the artwork is first rate, and the tabloid size is crazy enough to make the thing fun to read on the subway (you should see those over-the-shoulder readers trying to figure out why *The New York Times* is suddenly featuring huge drawings of wrecked spaceships).

There are two things I can think of to make the magazine even better: putting in some more stories (keep pushing those ads!), and publishing some work by Rebecca Brown Ore — she's had some writing in *Amazing*, and I'm dying to see more.

Thanks for the fantastic magazine.

Sincerely yours,

Dan Persons
New York, New York

Dear Editors,

I read your premier issue recently. Is that a magazine or a newspaper? (*Magazine — Ed.*) I've never seen an SF newspaper before. I haven't met your publisher, but if he has doubts about the intelligence of automobiles, he should talk to my Ford pickup truck rather than that stupid Mustang. I submit as evidence of its intelligence that, like people, it hates to go to the doctor. When I start it up at home it sounds awful, but when I get it to the shop it's in great shape.

Good luck to you and your whatever-it-is.

I find Darrell Schweitzer's expressed intentions as a reviewer to be very interesting and I thoroughly approve, meanwhile retaining the right to disagree with his comments on any particular piece. I suspect he will not find it as easy to accomplish as he anticipates. No disrespect intended; I think anyone would find it difficult to do without reverting to their biases and cultural conditioning.

I have no more sales to tell you about, but I recently won honorable mention from L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest. They sent me a very beautiful certificate.

Sincerely,

Kent Martens
Ferndale, Washington

Congrats —Ed.

Dear ABO,

Did you know this is the first

literary magazine I've actually subscribed to? My only other subscriptions, past and present, include *Starlog*, *Science Digest* and *Cinemagic*. Once in a while I'll pick up an *Omni* from the store, but generally I don't read their short stories, only their science articles. I've read a story or two out of *Isaac Asimov's*, but the digest size of the thing drives me bananas. So I really don't have much background in reading short stories. However, when I received your first issue in the mail there was something about it that made me want to read the stories. It has size, it has color, it does not take itself quite as seriously as other magazines, and it has a certain psychological quality which sells. I didn't care much for the cover of that first issue, (I'm extremely impressed by the covers of 2, 3 and the future 4) so it was something beyond even the magnificently colored cover that sold it to me.

My point is, I think you should leave *ABO SF* with exactly the same size and style that it has. It's different. And like a newspaper, it gets attention. I seriously hope you don't switch to a small digest size. Digest-size magazines somehow give me the impression that they don't have anything grand to say. But we're talking about science fiction here! Science fiction is big and colorful, like the universe. For a big, colorful subject you need a big, colorful magazine, not something that you can drop into a coin slot.

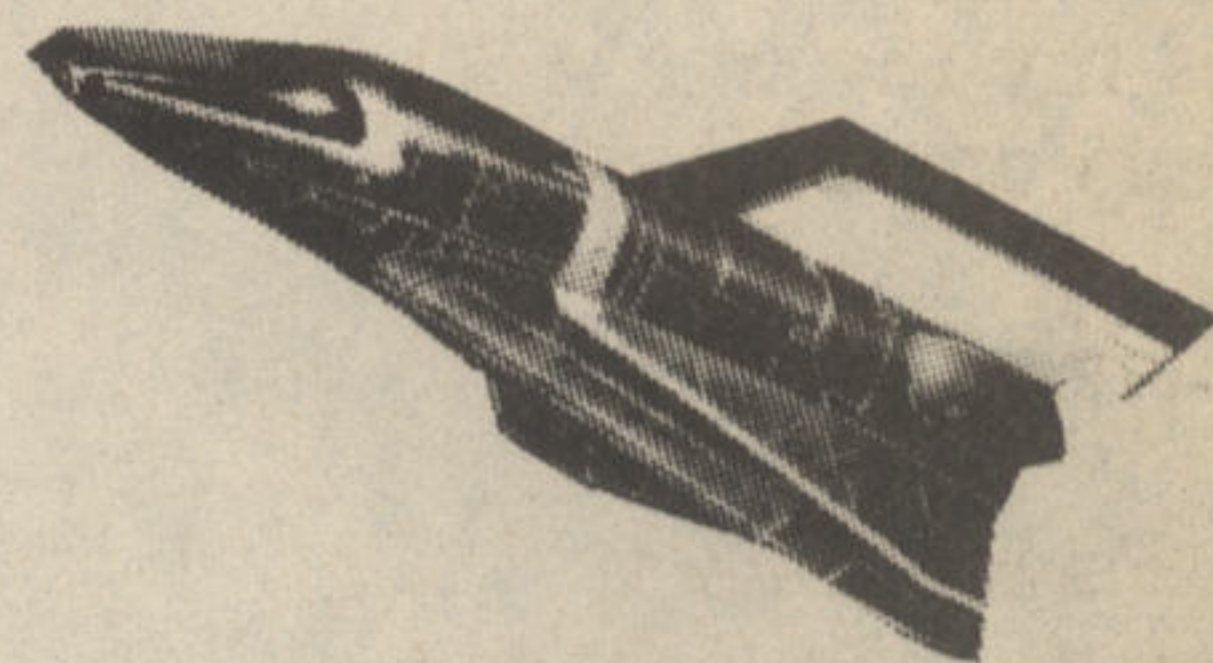
You're probably wondering why there's a \$4.00 check included with this letter. I need to reorder issue #2. Some bozo had smashed through the window of my car one evening on a dark neighborhood street at my girlfriend's house (don't ask why I was there) and swiped it. I am tempted to say nothing more, but for all fairness I should add that the magazine was inside my \$60 briefcase, and it was the briefcase which was taken. Well, that's one way to get your magazine around. (It suddenly occurred to me that the thief now has my home address. With my luck he'll like issue #2 so much that he'll come around here and try to steal the rest of them.)

Congratulations on your issues so far, and good luck with the rest of them. I am, and always shall be, your subscriber.

Christopher Haviland
Fort Worth, Texas

Actually, we're sure the thief took the briefcase because he knew the magazine was inside. If he does come by for the rest of the issues tell him to get his own subscription.
—Ed.

— ABO —



Moving?

Don't lose your issues

We expect our subscribers to move every once in a while — after all, look how much our alien publisher moves about. So move all you want, but if you don't write to tell us where you've gone, we won't be able to send you the next issue. That's because the post office does not forward second-class magazines, it destroys the copies when you move, and charges us for notification of your change of address. That means we won't replace copies lost because you moved and forgot to tell us in time because we've already done our part. So when you move, please write and tell us and enclose your current address label.



CORTNEY SKINNER
CORTNEY SKINNER

Cowboys and Engines

By W. T. Quick

"You stop to think about it," Casper said, "that science fiction stuff didn't matter in the first place." He rubbed his palms together and grinned gleefully. You'd have thought we were someplace calm and restful, instead of waiting for Boogs to shoot our heads off. Casper always kept his shit together. Talking philosophy was as good a way as any, if you're probably gonna die no matter what.

"Yeah," Casper went on, "they said telepathy was impossible, and maybe it is. Who cares, what with the neurocyber relay systems and remote implants they got now? Different stuff, same effect. And we don't go faster than light, but between freeze-drying and relativity it doesn't make a dime's worth of difference. Psychokinetics? Give me a gravmolator with implant control, and I'll show you PK."

He shook his head as the rock above our little cave heated up suddenly. The low, belly-punch static of a wide-band ripper overrode his voice for a moment. Dust sifted down in gritty white waves.

"Hey, Casper," I said. "you think we made a goof here? I mean, this situation doesn't look all that good, you know?"

He shrugged — not easy, weighted down with equipment. "Junior, we're still alive. PFC says they know where we are and help's on the way. Would we question Pax Force Central?"

I sighed. "What you're trying to tell me is we're dead, right?"

He grinned, white teeth in camoblack face. "Not exactly, but I suggest we think of something fairly soon. God knows, any one of us is supposed to be a match for a dozen Boogs, but I think there's about three hundred out there."

It wasn't the first time I'd been in a tight spot, not even the first time with Casper, but this one squeezed a little harder than most. I mean, tight spots were our business. Midas Mercenaries made a lot of money renting us out to the Expansion colonies, although our response time, what with the C-limit factor, was fairly slow. So people tended to use us only when they really couldn't handle something. Those kind of somethings tended to be Boogs. The real problem was the Boogs were already there. They were expanding in our direction before we started to get a good foothold, and they came loaded for bear. Boogs weren't natural

pacifists — but then, neither were we.

Usual scenario: a colony would get going good; then a roving Boog ship would show up. It would land on a handy asteroid and start the warrior gestation cycle. About eight years later, along would come an army. Given that much time and raw materials, any Boog rover could mount at least a hundred K warriors and enough equipment to field them indefinitely.

The big question was why they bothered at all. Earth-type planets were common as dirt. Boogs wouldn't look twice, unless we'd colonized first. Our masterstrat computers thought it was an automatic response. They claimed we'd never run into a Boog commander. MS said we were fighting meat-machines, some kind of defense system, and eventually we'd run into the real thing. Until then, mercenaries went wherever somebody was willing to pay. Given Boog habits with defeated colonies, somebody was *always* willing to pay.

"Uh, Junior, you thought of anything to save our asses yet?" Casper asked gently.

On our occasional leave times back on Midas — yeah, the Company was rich enough to afford its own planet — Casper was a legend in the bars. He ran a hundred kilos, most of it muscle. His idea of childish amusement was to walk up to half a dozen rookies and pour a pitcher of beer on the biggest guy's head. Since rookies jump touchy about that stuff, the results were always interesting. The personnel computers tended to match complementary opposites, so I guess I was the brains of the pair — although one time I'd arm-wrestled the big lug to a sixty-second draw. Anyway, Casper usually asked my advice before he went looking for something to tear apart.

"Well, I see it this way," I said. "We've got three options. We can hide, we can run, or we can fight. All we have to do is figure probabilities, and the rest is simple."

He stared at me. "You been watching those movies of yours again?"

All mercs have strange twitches. Hell, being a merc was pretty strange. Mine was classic movies, John Wayne movies in particular. My helmet had a chip that contained every Duke Wayne movie ever made. In quiet moments I played them back on my optic analyzer. It comforted me when The Duke took

apart whole tribes single-handedly.

"We are hiding," Casper pointed out. "But the Boogs have found us. Since they have us surrounded, running looks pretty low-prob. We've already discussed fighting, unless you rate the odds better than I do."

"Well, then, pard, I guess we'll just have to out-think the stupid insects," I said.

"Maybe you can use that drawl on them. Maybe they heard of John Wayne, and it'll scare them away."

"Shut up. I'm trying to think."

"About time," he grunted. "Let me know if it works." He rearranged his combat pack so he could lean back a little. For all I know, he planned a short nap. Casper was like that — once he'd abdicated responsibility, he was perfectly content to let me do the worrying.

We weren't helpless.

I had an on-board battle computer that contained every detail of every contact we'd ever had with the Boogs, along with tactical analysis and strategic guesses about same. I had the entire history of mankind's military engagements. We were protected with monomole armor. Those suits were just about impossible to breach, although enough impact could make mush of what was inside. Casper and I both had a lot of implant work — carbon fiber, microchip, biomonitor repair systems, and so on. We could fight longer, jump farther, lift more, and withstand heavier punches than any human fighter who had ever lived. One or two of us with Napoleon at Waterloo would have changed history radically. Good offense, too. Everything from Mitsubishi self-filtering lasers to a pulsed-plasma cannon and, last-resort stuff, four pocket nukes. Oh, we were a nasty pair, well equipped to fight Boogs, but we were outnumbered. Badly. Their stuff wasn't sloppy, either — particularly some hunter-seeker energy globes that resembled ball lightning, and a well-developed tactical ability to cluster their forces on human weak points. Our tac people didn't really understand how they did it, but whenever there was an opportunity to outnumber us, they did.

Like right now. Somehow the Boogs knew there were only two of us, and they were swarming in. Shortly they would pinpoint our location. Then our options would really shrink. That's what the pocket nukes were for. To take as many with us as we could.

Big picture tactics, but not so hot for the little guys.

"How do they always know where we are?"

Casper didn't move, but his bored voice boomed in my ears.

"Beats me. They just do, that's all."

"Well, they can't smell us. We're completely contained in these suits. We recycle everything. There've been several instances where there was no way they could hear us, or see us. They just know we're around, though it takes a while to pinpoint us exactly."

"Maybe they're telepathic," Casper said.

I thought about it. "That doesn't seem right," I said. "We haven't seen them break any natural limits we know about. No FTL drives, PK, ESP, like that. If

they had that kind of stuff, they would kick our asses all the time. But they don't — in fact, it's the other way around. Every time we bring enough force to bear, we destroy them. There's never been a follow-up attack."

"That we know about," Casper said.

"Yeah — but it argues against supernatural powers. If they can't bypass the C-limit, it would take a long time to bring up reinforcements. MS thinks those Rover ships are already in the neighborhood, kind of on hold, like."

"Does any of this help right now?" Casper asked pointedly.

"No. But if I can figure out why they always know where we are, then I've got an idea."

A mild note of interest entered his voice. "Yeah? Like what?"

"It's a dangerous idea."

Casper made a barking sound. "Junior, we are not safe in our beds here. If you know what I mean."

Maybe we are a good pair. He cuts through my natural caution. "Right," I said briskly. "Okay, here's my best guess. We know Boogs don't use nukes. I can't figure it, but we also know that pocket nukes are standard equipment for us grunts. What if Boogs are naturally radiation sensitive? It's the only thing I can think of that's impossible to shield completely."

There was a moment of silence. "Mm. Makes sense, I guess — I don't know how strong a field we throw — depends on how sensitive they are. If it's a general thing, it would take a while to nail down. Okay, it's a possibility. So what's your dangerous plan?"

I told him.

He whistled. "Dangerous is one thing, Junior. Crazy is another."

Natural caution? Huh. "You got anything better going?"

He sighed, began to sit up. "It beats waiting for them to melt that rock over our heads." He grunted as he started to unhook his combat pack. "But not by much."

It took a while to get it done, but eventually we were down to our suits. "What do you think?" I said. "Keep the lasers?"

"Junior, they may use radiation to sense us, but we know they can see us. If this doesn't do the trick, I'd sure like to be able to shoot back. Otherwise, suicide is suicide, you know?"

"Okay, we keep the lasers. Battery power, anyway. Not much radiation involved, and if we keep moving, they might not be able to pin us down. Who knows, we might get them all."

Casper flipped his helmet screen up and stared at me. "Right on, Duke," he said. "It's why I like playing poker with you — you believe in filling inside straights."

It felt strange to move around without all the combat stuff weighing me down. A weird kind of freedom, frightening and exhilarating at the same time. "Make like an Indian, big boy," I said.

He gingerly poked his head up above the rim of the

(Continued to page 52)

▽3X



42-1
BOOG-HEAD anterior



OCCAECAT 2

◆ -targeted

2ND PR. N.S.
clusterclaws
▽2X

MINIMUM



MIDASMERC
MASTERSTRAT
SUBJ. BOOG

FP pax force
central

LABORIS VEL



□ LATERAL □



3 2 1 0 METERS

▽4X

Cortney Skinner

(Continued from page 50)

hole. "Don't see anything," he muttered.

I slapped his butt. "Let's go," I said. Adrenalin made jagged lines in my heartbeat. He nodded once and slithered over the edge.

Nothing happened. We stayed crouched low. We'd dug our hole behind a boulder about the size of a house, a big, dark number that matched the rest of the jumbled landscape. The nameless asteroid was medium sized, a couple hundred kilometers, so the horizon was foreshortened. We started pushing rocks into the hole until we'd completely filled it.

"That should do it," I said. "You see any good hidey-holes?"

We were near a long, shallow depression, on a kind of ridge between it and another pretty much like it. Casper glanced around. "I think we ought to get as much rock behind us as we can," he said. "Although that valley over there is probably full of Boogs."

I shrugged. "Nobody promised you a rose garden, bud. Keep your ass low."

Carefully, we started to work our way across the jumbled rock, heading down. After much laborious scuttling, I began to think we might just make it.

The Boog exploded more or less from nowhere.

Boogs. About five meters fully extended. Bright purple head shading into dark red thorax and brown abdomen. Four pairs of legs, no wings. One set of *big* pincers, one set of opposed clusterclaws, two sets adapted for ground movement. Very good jumpers, which helped, because Boogs had no wings. Various kinds of equipment strapped and hung from the thorax.

This Boog had a wide-band ripper in one clusterclaw.

Fast.

Casper dodged to the right, laser spitting. Standard moves. He didn't expect to do much damage, just distract the critter. I went left and took my time. Sawed off the clusterclaw that held the ripper and started on the thorax. Boog heads were useless targets if you wanted to stop one quick. All they had up there were eyes. They fought pretty good blind.

I had its attention. It turned toward me, both fighting pincers snapping.

Casper worked on its legs.

It was only a meter away when he finally cut it down. I finished up. We chopped it into several pieces. Boog nervous systems are unpredictable. I had a mate once who didn't take precautions. Found out the hard way that those fighting pincers work just fine, even if they aren't attached to a Boog any more. Sort of lost his head over the experience. Like I said, monomole doesn't break, but it bends okay. We took two pieces of that joker home in one suit.

"Son of a bitch," Casper breathed.

"I doubt it," I said.

We left the pieces and sprinted toward our objective. Nothing got in the way. We ended up beneath a low overhang, on the far side from where we'd come.

"Cozy," Casper said.

"You'd better hope this frigger doesn't tip over on us."

"*Que sera*," he replied. We got as comfortable as we could and settled in to wait. Either I was right or I was wrong. We'd know soon enough.

When I was a little kid back on TerraHome, I lived with an aunt in the Midwest of the United States. Tornado country. One afternoon I was in a hammock strung between two oak trees. A sudden thunderstorm came up; bruised rolling clouds, sudden gusts of wind, dark noise in the distance. The works.

I pulled my blanket up to my chin and watched the sky. The rain never came. So I lay there, a part of me feeling very safe and protected, while this vast natural force roared over me. Scary. Safe and scared at the same time. I never forgot the feeling.

We heard the click-skitter first, through the rock. Hid and watched stiltlike legs march past, holding our breath. First one, then more. A lot more. After a nameless time, the parade ended.

"Jesus," Casper whispered. "Did I say three hundred?"

"I draw to inside straights," I replied. "You can't count worth a damn. Evens out."

I had a picture in my mind. This whole army of Boogs rustling and chittering over our former hideout. They aren't what you'd call bright. I could see them standing there, looking like wind through a cornfield, trying to figure out what was wrong.

"What do you think?" I asked Casper.

He inhaled. "You pays, you takes your chances," he said. "Push the damned button."

I pushed.

The world lit up. Our pocketnukes yield maybe two kilotons, but we'd buried all four of them. They made a nice bang, almost too nice. Our big comfy chunk of rock *leaned*. Groaned a little and came right over. Suddenly it got very crowded under there.

No, your life doesn't really flash before your eyes.

Groaned some more and slowly tilted back. I started breathing again.

We looked at each other. "Junior," Casper said, "maybe you should worry more about consequences."

I grinned shakily. "I can't think of everything," I told him. We waited a bit more, mostly to make sure the shakes were done with. Finally, I exhaled and said, "You wanna go look?"

He had that lazy, dangerous look. "Might as well," he said.

Big hole. Glass slick toward the center. A gratifyingly large number of Boog pieces scattered around. We poked at the pieces, looked at the hole. I had a grin on my face that probably looked manic. Casper sure did.

"Next?" I said.

We sat down to think about it. "Where the hell's the cavalry?" I said at last.

Casper was moving little bits of gravel and Boog around with his foot. "What?"

"Remember? Last word we got, they were sending a rescue team. Gonna pick us up, right? Well, where are they?"

My partner stared at the remnant of a red clusterclaw. "They think we're dead," he said finally.

I caught it. "Sure," I said. "The pocket nukes. We only use them as a last resort. They spot the explosion, they scratch two grunts. You're right. They're not looking any more."

Casper nodded. "Uh huh. You wanna know something else? I think we're rich. At least if we live to collect."

That one took a while. "You talking bonus?" I asked slowly.

"Why not? They're nuts for Boog data. If we're right about the radiation stuff, it seems to me it's something new. Stuff like that would be important. Worth big money, I'd guess."

I chuckled. "Great. So they think we're dead. We think we're rich. But all we have is our suits, about two hours of air, and a pair of hand lasers. I figure corpses don't much care about bonuses. At least I don't plan to."

"Maybe we shouldn't have ditched the radios."

I nodded. "Yeah. Maybe we should have taken a half hour to disconnect the nukes from our battle packs. Then the Boogs could have been right on top of us when the bombs went off."

"It was a thought," Casper said. "I didn't say it was a good one." He shrugged. "We could start walking."

"Where to?" I asked.

"Wherever. We're bound to run into somebody."

"That's nice. Most likely a squad of Boogs."

He glared at me. "Junior, you want to tell me your better idea?"

"The Rover base is around here somewhere. Close, from what they said. We were trying for it before our team got chopped up. I guess a lot of other teams are trying, too. You want to find players, you head for the stadium, right?"

"The stadium's full of Boogs. I don't see the advantage."

I sighed. "Casper, right now we don't have an advantage. We've got two hours of air, and no way to make a signal. Besides...you think they'd give us maybe a bigger bonus if we get that ship?"

"They'd give us our own planet, if we want," he snorted. "But we'd never get the ship. It blows up. We blow up with it."

"What if radiation triggers the blowup?" I mused.

His eyes gradually widened. "Less than two hours now," he said softly.

"What the hell," I replied, unkinking my legs.

"Yeah. What the hell."

It turned out to be easy. I think the radiation idea was what did it. We killed one Boog with no fighting pincers, probably a survivor of our nukes. For the rest we stayed out of sight, dodging, hiding, moving fast and low. PFC kicked off a bombardment, a lot of stuff coming in fast and heavy. Kept the Boog squads busy. Finally, we noticed there didn't seem to be any Boogs around at all. I crouched by a waist-high ridge that didn't look natural. Casper hunkered next to me. We touched so we could talk.

"About forty five minutes left," he said.

"Take a look over this ridge," I told him. He did, carefully.

"Hole in the ground," he reported. "Big hole in the ground."

"See any Boogs?"

He shook his head.

"Well," I said. "We've done okay with holes so far."

"This is suicide, you know," he told me.

"How many minutes left?"

He considered for a moment. "This had better be a large bonus," he said finally.

We jumped together.

Five meters inside the hole we knew it was jackpot time. It was also Boog time. The walls of the tunnel evened out. Suddenly the rock turned to metal. And the passage filled with hordes of insects.

"Wrong guess," Casper said, swinging his laser up.

I noticed something. "Hold it."

Boogs danced and crackled and popped toward us in a solid mass of chitin. And thundered right on past as we stood plastered against one wall of the tunnel.

Casper looked at me.

"They're not warriors," I said. "No weapons. I'm not sure they can even see us."

Casper watched the pack scuttling on toward the surface. "One of us is the luckiest person in the world," he said.

"It's you," I told him. "You know me. Come on."

Deeper inside, the light turned a glowing, phosphorescent purple. Shadows shifted and faded. Boogs skittered by, headed God knows where. They ignored us.

The tunnel widened. Smaller tunnels branched from it. I noticed cables coming together into larger cables along the upper part of the tunnel. "Power lines? They look kind of jury-rigged, though."

"Maybe even Boogs have problems," Casper said. "With PFC mounting the big push, they must have a lot to cope with."

We followed the cables. The tunnel widened suddenly into a space too large to estimate in the strange, dim light.

In the middle distance a brighter light glowed.

"What the hell?" Casper muttered.

"What?"

He pointed at the floor. It was hard to see, but finally I understood. The floor *writhed*.

"Ohmygod, it's baby Boogs," I said.

"And maybe that light is mama," Casper said grimly. He waved his laser. "I hope so."

It was like walking across crunchy peanut butter. As we got close the light brightened, took on form. Finally, we could see the great globe which contained it. Beneath the globe were stacks of support systems, oddly shaped structures which were the source of the cables we'd been following.

"Jeezus," Casper said.

The globe was twenty meters in diameter, a vast, shifting ball of fire shot through with sparks of red and

blue. I got the feeling of unimaginable energies barely contained, and a shiver of...something else.

"Casper," I whispered, "are you getting any, uh, strange stuff out of that thing?"

"Damn right," he said. "Weirdest sucker I ever saw."

"No, I don't mean that. Like...thoughts?"

He stared at me.

I shook my head. "I can't explain it," I said. "I think it's alive somehow. I— oh, shit, Casper, it's hungry."

"Junior," he said slowly, "get a grip. Calm down."

"It scares me," I said simply.

This was what Casper was really good at. Sometimes I *do* think too much.

"That's okay, Junior," he said softly. "I'll kill it for you." He triggered his laser and started slicing cable like carving spaghetti.

"Casper — !"

The light went out. That was all. It just went out. For one fleeting instant, a wave of sadness swept over me, a feeling of vast distance bridged, broken, then lost forever.

Gone. We stood in the dark.

"I think we should leave," Casper said.

We had less than twenty minutes of air left. Three when we reached the surface. We ran into a platoon of scared grunts who half expected the buried Rover ship

to blow up in their faces any second. Between the five grunts they had one emergency pack. It was enough.

So Casper and I were still alive to be surprised when we saw a new star bloom in the sky. Again the faint, whispery lash of death and distance brushed across my mind. We didn't find out till later the gas giant orbiting five AU out had collapsed into a new baby sun.

C-limits. Thirty minutes out, and thirty back. From the time the globe in the ship winked out.

Happy endings, I guess. Me and Casper lived, the Rover ship didn't blow, and the techs got a brand new astronomical event to play with.

I only draw to inside straights because it keeps Casper happy.

*** **

Haven is a nice little world. An anomaly system, way off the beaten track. Six planets of various size, and not a gas giant in the bunch. Casper and I took our bonuses and bought a ship. Got a few friends together and went looking. We brought some good biotech stuff. Maybe we can keep the gene pool varied enough. If we have to.

Casper trusts my hunches. After we got back to Midas, I did some more thinking. The science wallahs loved the ship we captured. They still haven't figured out the connection between it and the gas giant that collapsed into a ministar. But I remembered what we found in the Boog ship. Masterstrat says it's highprob we ran into one of their rulers, but I don't think so. I remember it was vast, powerful, and hungry. But mostly it was stupid.

There was one other thing waiting for us when we got back. New data. Humans have fought Boogs for about a hundred years. In the time Casper and I had been out, two novas suddenly appeared. One was forty lights out, the other thirty-five. If you draw a line between the two and extend it, that line intersects human space. Or Boog space, depending how you look at it. You figure. Forty years to get there. Forty years for the novalight to return. Thirty five years ago, the second star went nova. I don't know if the remaining twenty years was crossing time, or get-ready time.

Casper tells me I'm a hell of a woman, and besides, he admires my chest. But he still thinks John Wayne movies are childish.

Maybe.

But what would you do if you were one of those old-time ranchers with a spread the size of Kansas? I think you put up fences to keep the herd from straying. To keep out predators.

Think of Boogs as fences. And think of whatever it was that was connected to both the ship and the gas giant as — well, a cow. It was big and dumb and hungry. Cows are like that, aren't they?

So what happens when a predator tears down the fence and starts killing cows?

John Wayne saddles up and heads out, that's what — but this Duke uses novas to fuel his horse.

That's one hell of an engine.

Got to be one hell of a cowboy, too.

— ABO —



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(Continued from page 15)

cellent sections — the chapter on Shelley previously mentioned, a good chapter on Wells, and the chapter on the book-form SF of the 1930s. Where Aldiss's prejudices are not in the way, he is as insightful and convincing a historian as we could ever want. He writes well of the 1950s and even handles the New Wave in a balanced, non-polemical manner. One idea I particularly like is the distinction between the "Dreaming Pole" and the "Thinking Pole" of SF/fantasy — that is, the sort of story which presents or examines ideas and makes the reader think as opposed to that which makes him dream. I would agree with Aldiss that the Dreaming Pole is ascendant at present, but disagree that there are no great figures there.

This is a book you'll want to go back to again and again, and maybe argue with. It can't be taken as a definitive pronouncement, but as a milestone on the road to SF history, it is quite a worthy accomplishment.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology

Edited by Bruce Sterling

Arbor House, 1986

239 pp., \$16.95

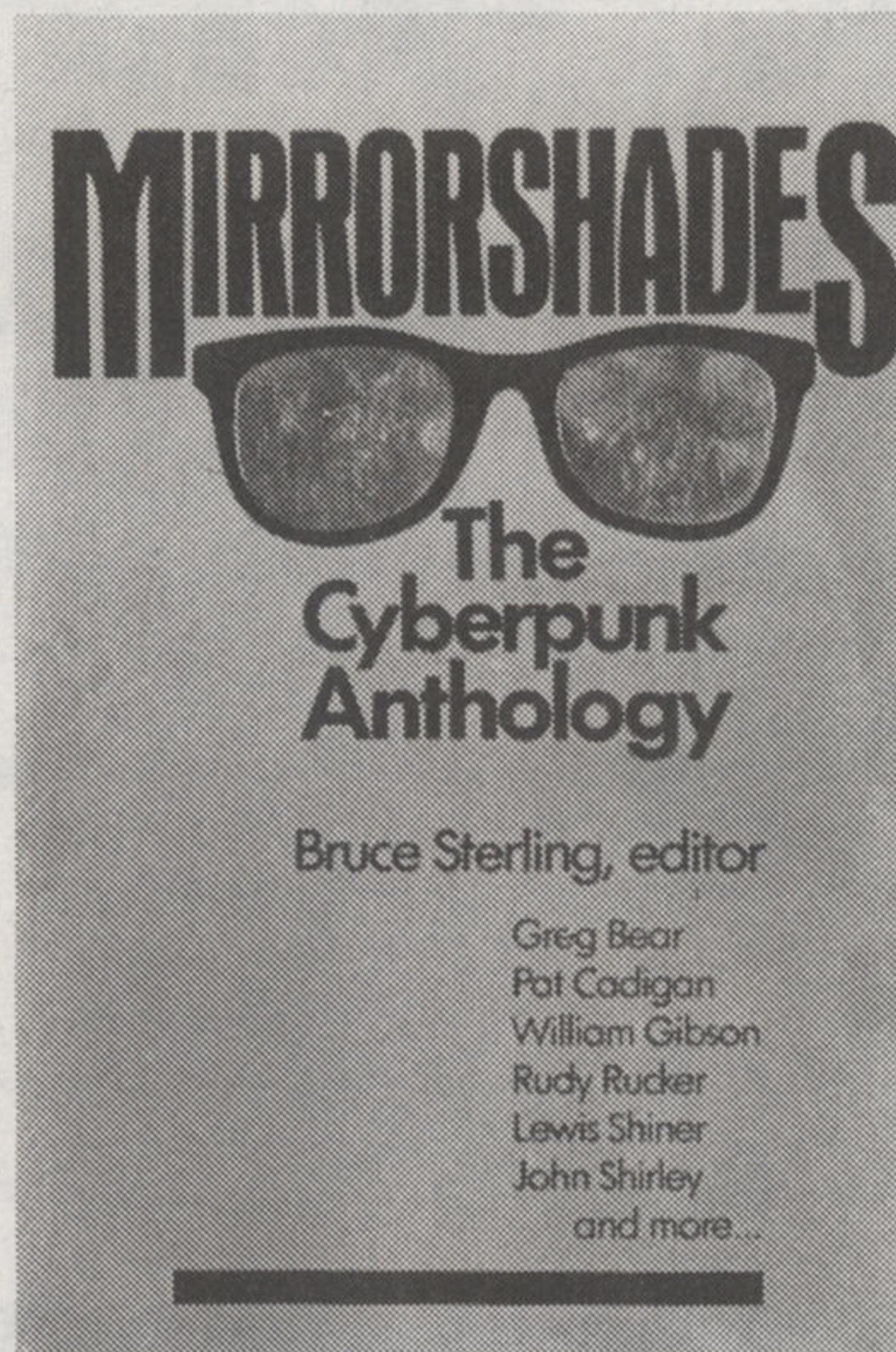
While we're on the subject of historical perspective, I can't help but wonder how much room the Cyberpunk Movement will rate in some future *Quadrillion Year Spree*. About a page, I suspect, or maybe just a lengthy footnote.

Cyberpunk, as you may have heard, is an alleged revolution which is (just as allegedly) making the whole field of SF over. Of course the writers involved can't be held responsible for the silly things said about them (such as a recent *Heavy Metal* article which proclaimed that Cyberpunk writers had just re-invented SF), but when some of them start making the pronouncements themselves, notably John Shirley in various articles and Sterling in his introduction to this book, one can't help but come away skeptical. We've seen it all happen be-

fore, and, as revolutions go, this is not a major one.

"A case of testosterone poisoning," a leading female writer/anthologist in our field has acidly quipped.

Fan reception of all this has been dubious, even hostile, as the Cyberpunk Movement is often seen as an attempted revival of the



dread New Wave (defined in this context as anything the speaker didn't like about 1960s SF). A narrow view, but this time it's the Cyberpunks who lack historical perspective. Five years from now, no one will remember what the fuss was about. I think the movement has climaxed in this one, self-defining anthology. *Mirrorshades* is a monument to something which has already happened.

Cyberpunk is supposed to represent a fusion of 1980s punk/countercultural values with high technology. It is quite different from the anti-tech, pastoral counter-culture literature (some of it SF) of the 1960s. Its roots are in the works of Samuel Delany and Philip K. Dick, who would certainly have been cyberpunks themselves if they had stuck a few more computer implants in their characters' bodies. (Altered people are very "in." *Nova* would surely have been a Cyberpunk novel if published in 1985 or so.) The term and story-type seem to have been invented independently

by Bruce Bethke ("Cyberpunk," *Amazing*, November 1983), who is not mentioned in this book, but it didn't catch on until applied to the pages of *Isaac Asimov's* and *Omni*, and, especially, the works of William Gibson. Then came the manifestos, and the Movement.

The problem is, the stories don't bear these claims out. Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum" is a witty farewell to the alternate, Art Deco future of the 1930s. The other Gibson story (in collaboration with Sterling), "Red Star, Winter Orbit," is a weakly motivated, quite conventional tale of a mutiny on a Soviet space station which wouldn't have been out of place in a Jerry Pournelle anthology. Rudy Rucker's "Tales of Houdini" is a bit of surrealistic weirdness reminiscent of Lafferty or Avram Davidson. It has nothing to do with the alleged movement. "Petra" by Greg Bear has even less to do with it and is a fantasy with a great idea (after the death of God, the gargoyles and saints on a medieval cathedral come alive and form a society of their own) and indifferent execution. Tom Maddox's "Snake Eyes" is slow-paced and dull, but otherwise a commonplace hard-SF story.

John Shirley's "Freezone," an excerpt from his novel *Eclipse*, has everything Cyberpunk is supposed to have: computer-altered people, decadence, rebellious rockers — and I think it'll hold up about as well as a story Henry Kuttner wrote circa 1938 about the Planet of the Jitterbugs. *Now-SF* becomes *Then-SF* very fast. James Patrick Kelly's "Solstice" is a moody, effective tale of a "drug artist" and his jealousies. Two stories are disastrously opaqued in jargon, "Rock On" by Pat Cadigan and "400 Boys" by Marc Laidlaw. Perhaps it should be a law of this movement that Cyberpunk-SF should not be written in the first person. The result is as if just *anybody* tried to write *A Clockwork Orange*. (Another possible antecedent to the Movement.) Neither Cadigan nor Laidlaw can handle the close-in viewpoint. "Rock On" contains what may be the dullest

(Continued to page 62)



Passing

By Elaine Radford

Sometimes Susan tries to touch the transmitter in her head, tries to work out where it is in her brain. She knows, of course, that it's in her cortex, in her (to be precise) left occipital lobe, but that isn't what she means. She's trying to *feel* it in there, as if that sliver small as a dust mote could actually impact upon her nerves. As if those famously numb brain cells could detect sensation.

Most of the time though, she concentrates on passing as a human, a not impossible chore since, after all, the body she wears was cloned from genuine Earth humanoid cells. (Her brain too, for that matter.) Biologically speaking, she's a Terran ape down to her last gene; the transmitter doesn't affect that.

The transmitter doesn't affect anything. It just sits there and watches. And sends.

Susan's duty is to be a human. She'll keep at it until she dies. Or until the transmitter does. Unlikely that: the transmitters are designed with average lifespans five times that of a human. There are no provisions for retrieving Susan if the transmitter for some reason fails while she is still alive. She will then simply become functionless.

So sometimes Susan thinks about the unfairness of the system, for it isn't inconceivable that the instrument could die for some reason beyond her control. When she catches herself worrying at the idea, she snatches herself back to the present in a hurry, so that she can concentrate once more on being human.

After all, those thoughts are being beamed home just like all her others, and she'd rather not have too many grumblings on record. Not that her people don't allow complaint or even downright dissent, you understand. Nor is it that an expensive interstellar mission is likely to swoop down to recall or brainwash a resentful agent. It's simply that she hates being perceived as whiny.

Today she sits at her desk and stares out the window at the jam-up on the bridge over the river when the Merxen comes into the room. His name is Tom; she secretly nicknamed him Merxen because that's what he looks like: an awkward conglomeration of large slabs of meat stuffed into a business suit. Like her, he's an accountant.

"A *what?*" she'd exclaimed when they proudly told her where she was going to be inserted into the culture. "I'm going to be a *what?*"

"But I don't know anything about accounting,"

she protested, staring her glossy-scaled mentor in its third eye.

"Neither do the graduates of the university you're supposed to have attended," it replied.)

"I don't have anything to do," the Merxen complained.

"Neither do I," Susan agreed, pushing her papers aside. "I was trying to look busy to keep Jack off my back. I wanna sneak out early this afternoon."

"Heavy date, huh?" He leered. Susan had noticed that men in business suits often felt obliged to leer. It was too bad about Tom, who otherwise was an agreeable enough sort, by which she meant (as she assumed humans did) that he never did anything sufficiently interesting to annoy anyone.

"Maybe," she said, smiling dutifully. (Women in business suits were obliged to smile.)

"Thought I'd mention that some of the guys are going over to the Cajun Cache after work. They're having an alligator tasting."

Women, in any dress, were obliged to wince at the very idea of consuming reptiles. Susan did so, quite realistically actually, since in her upbringing if not her genes she was akin to some rather large reptiles herself.

"Ah, don't look like that. It'll be fun."

"But thank God, I'm otherwise occupied. The date, you know. I don't think he's much for 'gator meat."

The date, whom she later met in front of her office building, was called Richard. She'd secretly nicknamed him Singerpeltn, after the slender natives of the next to innermost planet of Epsilon Eridani. He was tall and thin, all skin and angles, a Singerpeltn after a heavy molt.

"Where shall we eat tonight?" he asked.

"Dunno... We had an invite to munch 'gator..."

"Gah." He made a face. "I'll be glad when that fad's past."

"I don't think it'll be much longer."

They had nothing else to exchange about each other's day. They ended up in a fast food place that was neither fast nor a purveyor of food. Susan picked at the plastic on her plate without enthusiasm.

"You on another diet?" the Singerpeltn asked.

"One day there's gonna be a good wind and it's gonna pick you up and blow you away."

Nevertheless women were obliged to diet. Susan

seized happily on the excuse not to eat. "I was two pounds over this morning," she said.

"Two pounds. Those old scales aren't accurate to within two pounds."

"I know. That's why I don't want a new one. Get one of those digital read-outs and whatever it says, kid, that's what you weigh. With the old one, I can always say it's off or weighing too heavy or something."

That was dinner.

*** **

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and hopes that she's sending back the right kind of data. Not that she has much control over it. Whatever happens to her, whatever she feels, that's what gets sent. Nevertheless. It seems her life is too exciting sometimes. They'd wanted someone to study the everyday life of the Earth human, a distillation of the typical creature's existence. Nothing flashy, none of your rock stars and great leaders. Just something simple, humdrum. An accountant's life.

Yet her existence is nothing if not filled with danger, suspense, victory, and defeat. Last night, for instance, she and Richard were almost killed by a speeding automobile. The day before, she'd met a Wing-by — she called him that because he was little and fluttery like the sentient birds of the planet MNelli — and the Wing-by had confided that he killed people for a hobby. (Also a living, she suspected; he paid for her drinks, dinner, everything with cash instead of the little plastic cards that respectable citizens used.) Anyway, he claimed that he belonged to a whole club of men that traveled around the country killing people.

"Why?" she asked.

"So that no one will know who I am." He pushed back his plate and crossed knife and fork across it. "There isn't a soul alive who knows who I am."

"Who are you?" she asked.

He whispered in her ear. "I'm an alien from outer space."

It was the last thing she expected. "No kidding! Where are you from?"

"It's a secret," he said. "You know too much already. You'll have to die."

"But it's OK. I'm one too."

"Oh, sure. That's what they all say."

Then, later, when they were alone at the lakefront, he'd taken out his knife and drawn it up to Susan's throat. She wished heartily she possessed one of those impenetrable hides that aliens have on TV. Or maybe a B-movie laser gun.

Just then a pick-up came speeding round the bend, its lights chopping the lake like knives. The Wing-by froze, pinned like a deer by the headlights, and Susan jerked backwards and out of the car. "Help!" she cried, dashing directly into the path of the truck. "He's going to kill me!" The truck swerved dangerously, its left tires kicking dirt, before zooming around her back into the night. Susan couldn't think about her inexplicable abandonment. The Wing-by was already chasing her, calling like a concerned lover.

"What's the matter with you, you crazy? You

could get yourself squashed flat pulling that shit..."

Susan ran, her heart shrieking, over the levee and down to the near building of the little college campus on the other side. "Help me," she screamed, not knowing that she was screaming. "For God's sake, help me!" When she reached the safety of the building, the students refused to look at her.

Then, later, she'd had a fight with Richard about where she'd been. Imagine, one adult yelling at another because she hadn't told him where she was going.

Their art was like that too; their most highly regarded drama revolved about people yelling, screaming, and shrieking at one another, while their lesser efforts dealt with the physical violence of killing, raping, bombing. Their trash was about sex and love. Only their myths concerned peace and contentment, and that in such a coercive, sullen package it was obvious that the Earth humans resented the very idea.

So it wasn't unlikely that Susan's experiences might very well be typical. She shivers. If an accountant's life is what these Earth humans call dull, she's deeply grateful she wasn't assigned the role of rock star. Or great leader.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and wonders if she could manage to have it removed. After all, she's an Earth ape now, destined never to leave this planet again, and anyway her body and brain are constructed of the very stuff of this planet. Only her culture, a thin layer barely concealing the animal within (or so the Earth books tell her), differentiates her from any other suited ape.

Her culture and her transmitter. Sometimes she resents the fact that she's forced to spy upon her own people. Sometimes she doesn't know who her own people are.

At lunch the Merxen keeps glancing uneasily over her shoulder. At last he swallows some courage in his wine and says, "Do you realize there's a man following you?"

"How can anyone be following me? I'm just sitting here," Susan said sensibly.

"Well, so's he, now." The Merxen twisted his weightlifter's face nervously. "But he was waiting outside the office and then he followed us in here and now he's even ordered what you're having."

"Coincidence." But she feigned a half-turn, stopped only by the Merxen's restraining hand. "Don't look. I don't want him to know we've spotted him. Maybe you can get an unobtrusive glance at him if you make like you're going to the ladies' room."

Susan can hardly imagine how she can "make like" she's going to the ladies' room without actually going there, so she abandons her warm plate with a sigh. At the restroom door, she pauses and flicks her eyes surreptitiously to the side. She sees the watcher. It is the Wing-by. Susan sighs again and enters the ladies'.

*** **

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in

(Continued to page 60)

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our first issue
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(Continued from page 58)

her head and wonders why. Is her life any different than it would have been without it? Her childhood and adolescence differed, true, but now that they've faded into memory and her papers are in order, she can scarcely believe she spent her first twenty-some years in orbit. She seems perfectly interchangeable with any number of other accountants or even financial advisors, her secret true function an irrelevance. It hardly seems enough merely to live and to think, even if an advanced civilization is assiduously scanning your thoughts.

What's it all for, she wonders, stunned by the banality of her alien-schooled mind.

Walking down to the bus stop after work, Susan is accosted by a drunk who strongly resembles a ghost-like Ememe. He tries to grab her right breast. Susan hits him with a briefcase; she's upset. How dare he? And she in her business suit...!

(Later she is pleased, certain her outrage is as real as an Earthborn human's.)

"Lady," a stranger says, blowing a cloud of white tobacco smoke through twin nostrils strikingly like a Yanim's. "There's a man calling you, I think..."

Susan turns, annoyed. Sure enough, it's the Wing-by. He's getting to be a nuisance. She hops in whatever bus happened to be parked at the stop and rides several miles out of her way.

*** **

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and imagines it being a receiver as well. She gets so lonely, trying to pass as a human. Despite the plethora of books, movies, and TV programs she's studied on the topic, she finds herself surprisingly ill-equipped to handle the reality of being stalked by a crazed killer. She wonders how the Earth people stay so calm. They're used to it, she supposes. She can't talk to these smooth-faced aliens with their scaleless faces; she wishes her old mentor could beam some reassuring phrase into her skull, even if only a word, a fraction of a word, a sigh. Her people's sighs contained so much meaning...

She meets Richard the Singerpeltn for dinner and talks about nothing to him. They exchange stories about their jobs, about the weather. Susan sees the Wing-by sitting in a dark corner of the restaurant glaring fiercely at a plate of chow mein. No one eats chow mein any more, especially not in Chinese restaurants. The Wing-by is remarkably ill-informed for an alien spy. Susan decides not to mention his existence to Richard.

They're walking to the car together, she and the Singerpeltn, the Wing-by trailing behind. A brave star or two winks through the city haze. Probably not stars, Susan decides, but planets. She drops her gaze from heaven in time to catch the Singerpeltn wrenching a knife from the Wing-by's hand. Richard brandishes his new-won weapon fiercely; he's watched all the programs too. "Now get lost," he said. "And fast. Before I get mad and decide to sic the cops on your ass."

The Wing-by fluttered backward, spitting at the ground. "I'll git her," he said. "You can't stand guard



Leslie Pardew

over her forever."

"Lord," the Singerpeltn muttered. Then his eyes flashed at Susan. "You know that schizoid?"

She nodded, looking away from his anger.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He thinks I'm going to tell the world his big secret."

"Oh?"

"He's an alien spy from outer space. Sent down in human form for an in-depth study of life on Earth."

Richard snorted. "Aren't we all?" he said.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her brain and wonders if it's there at all. She can't seem to pinpoint its image anywhere in her skull. Maybe the whole situation is all in her head.

Well, of course. One way or another, it's certainly all in her head. Somewhere in space, from almost a light year away the ship is reading her thoughts studying them as if they were of intense importance and interest, although the ship will not return in her lifetime. There is no faster-than-light travel. There is no ship. There are no aliens from outer space. Or if there are, it makes no difference anyway.

The sun is coming up over the levee and the Singerpeltn turns restlessly in his sleep, dreaming, Susan thinks, of other worlds. But there are no other worlds. There are no suns. There are only neurons firing in a brain.

The Wing-by is climbing the fire escape, his face reckless with fury. No one who knows who he is has ever eluded him for this long. Susan watches him approach and locks the windows and doors. She dials the police. "There's a man outside my house. He's going to break in," she says.

The woman at the other end of the line sighs. "Do

you know who it is, hon? Have you ever seen this man before?"

"Of course not," Susan says, but not fast enough to fool the police officer. Even though the woman takes her address and phone number, her tone says clearly that she thinks Susan is wasting her time.

"A car will be out," the officer says, in a voice saying clearly that no car will be sent. Susan hangs up and looks around. The Wing-by is at the window, slashing at the screen with his knife.

"Richard," she says, shaking his shoulder. "Richard, wake up."

He opens an eye, then jerks up abruptly. "Call the police. I'll find a weapon."

"I already called."

"Oh, good."

"Maybe we should just leave the other way."

"Oh. OK." He sounds disappointed at not getting another opportunity to display his usefulness to Susan.

They leave by the front. Susan thinks about moving, about what a nuisance all that will be. She fantasizes briefly about killing the Wing-by; then she wouldn't have to bother. She fantasizes in more detail about Richard doing it. Then she wouldn't be inconvenienced at all.

"We're going down to the station and having something done about this loon. Obviously, he's some kind of psycho."

Susan nods. They get to the car. Behind them, footsteps. They turn and see that this time the Wing-by's got a gun. He's smiling.

"Alien asshole!" Susan screams as she and the Singerpeltn leap into the car and screech away. A bullet whizzes by the righthand mirror. "You missed!" Susan crows loudly.

"I don't know who's crazier," Richard says. "You or him. Or me, for getting mixed up with somebody who gets mixed up with people like that."

"Aliens," Susan replies unthinkingly. "Aliens like that."

"People, aliens, what's the difference?" Richard says. He looks tired. His dreams haven't been restful.

"I've been asking myself that very question," Susan says.

Behind them the Wing-by runs out of bullets and fades away. They never see him again.

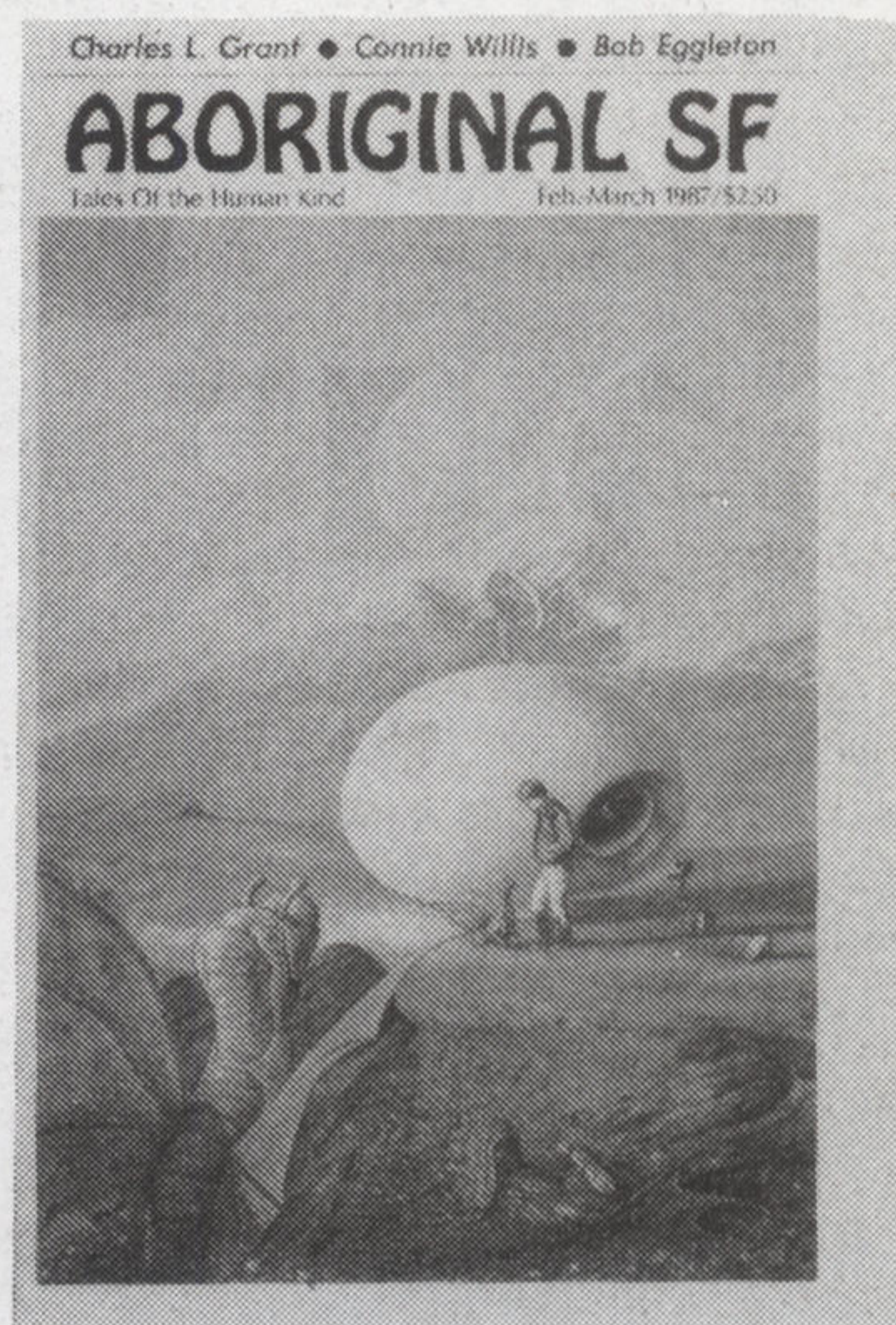
Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and tries to remember where she got such an odd idea. People would think she was crazy if they knew. In the afternoon, Richard asks her to marry him, and she agrees. They will live happily ever after and always narrowly escape the bullets from psychotic guns. In the evening, they shop for rings and eat a candlelight dinner.

In the morning, Richard tells her he has a secret, he really must share. He is an alien from outer space, sent to spy upon the people of Earth, etc.

Susan laughs. It is as she didn't dare allow herself to suspect. There are no spaceships nor Wing-bys nor transmitters in writhing skulls, but most of all there are no Earth people. "Like you said," she says. "Aren't we all?"

— ABO —

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(Continued from page 55)

rape scene in literature. (At least I think it's a rape scene.)

There's some good writing here. Gibson particularly may turn out to be a first-rater if overpraise and the burden of having spawned a whole Movement don't wreck him. But the Movement itself seems to be much flash and very little bang.

Rating: ☆☆

Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers

Second Edition

Edited by Curtis C. Smith

St. James Press, 1986

933 pp., about \$85

This is a major reference work, a revision and updating of a book first published in 1981. Many of the articles are updated with a few paragraphs tagged on, covering the subject's activities since 1981, and some new entries are added. The entries are accurate, by and large, although I am sure that I'll find errors over the years as I use this book. Encyclopedias are like software. You have to use them for a while before you can really judge them.

Unfortunately, the insane bibliographical system of the first edition has only been spottily corrected. Whoever compiled these bibliographies hasn't yet realized that for decades SF was a magazine medium and naively assumes that a writer's "uncollected short stories" are only those which appeared after the author's most recent collection.

So Ross Rocklynne is the author of two books and two stray stories, right? No, the bibliography misses a good 90 percent of his work, including several novels, all of which remains unreprinted in 1940s and '50s pulp magazines. The error occurs again and again with



other pulp writers. No one seems to have noticed that the actual essay entries make extensive references to works not in the bibliographies.

The entries themselves are often excellent and written by genuine experts. But the book itself, to be completely useful, must be supplemented by the standard magazine indexes, the Tuck Encyclopedia, and the Parnell-Ashley *Monthly Terrors*.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Adventures in the Space Trade

By Richard Wilson

Drumm Booklet No. 23, 1986

Unpaginated, \$2. (The limited edition, \$5, also contains a short story,

"A Rat for a Friend.")

Another footnote in SF history, Wilson's memoir is an additional view of the same territory covered by Fred Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* and Damon Knight's *The Futurians*. Wilson was a Futurian too, and is an entertaining writer. There are no great revelations here, but there are some amusing anecdotes. I particularly liked how he and Cyril Kornbluth helped invent the flying saucer. The story which supplements the limited, signed edition is, alas, very minor. A checklist of Wilson's work is also included.

Rating: ☆☆

Young Star Travellers

Edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Greenberg and Charles Waugh

Harper and Row, 1986

209 pp., \$13.50

This is the latest in a series of juvenile-intended volumes which aren't actually juvenile in content. The stories, by Bradbury, Clarke, Saberhagen, MacLean, etc., are all from adult SF magazines.

I'm all for this approach. If these books are put in the kids' section of the library, then young readers may be getting far richer fare than their parents and librarians suspect.

Rating: ☆☆☆

— ABO —

RATING SYSTEM

- ☆☆☆☆☆
- ☆☆☆☆
- ☆☆☆
- ☆☆
- ☆

- Outstanding
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor



(Continued from page 44)

Carroll leapt for the radio, joyfully twiddled the dials. His face was pink with pleasure, all his fears forgotten in the excitement of going home. "Hello? Hello, this is Vera Station, Alpha Charlie, do you read?"

The old guy stood at the port, staring into the boiling darkness. The storm shrieked and howled and battered, hammering the hull with its sandy fists.

Soon he would be out there, and I wondered what he thought, but his face gave no sign. He would have his wish, at last, the thing he demanded as soon as he knew: to end it. If life was to be this awful doubleness, human and inhuman, irreconcilable, he didn't want it.

I granted his request, and in return, he granted me mine: no more human voice to plague me, no more sludge of human emotion to clog my clean bright functioning. Alone, I would double my power input. The pack held energy for an eon, and soon enough I would learn to replenish it. Never again would I hear the fear-code hid in Carroll's every thought and word: Never die, never die. The lesson was learned, pounded in over more time than images were ever meant to know, until it was part of me.

Never die.

I never would.

The radio spat and crackled. "Ah, Colonel Carroll? We've got a note to pick you up, have you got a go on that? We'd like to fall right in if that's OK with you."

"Affirmative, Alpha Charlie." In imitation, Carroll's voice grew crisply confident. "But we've got some heavy weather down here, and a few last-minute chores."

I looked at the empty shielded power pack on the floor by his gear. He'd broken the "news" to me at breakfast: he would pull the power and stow it in that pack, just before he left.

"Any chance," Carroll went on to the shuttle, "you folks could make a couple of go-rounds while this thing blows over?"

"Negatron, Vera. We read fly-by grab only. Big bonus if we're first at the other end. Folks at home real anxious for our main cargo. So put a hustle on it, son." Transmission ended.

"Put a hustle on it," Carroll fumed. "Who is she to tell me..." He stopped, brought up short by a relic.

Two relics, if you counted the .38.

"It takes a while, Jamie, did you know that? It's not like standard reabsorption — you can pull the rods, but the storage coils drain for hours. First I'll go blind, and then I'll start coming apart. It's going to be very realistic, Jamie. To me, I mean."

His sudden fear was like a bad circuit, throwing wild ugly sparks.

"Are you listening to me, Jamie?"

The old guy prodded him yelping toward the hatch.

"Stop that! Psyche, I swear, there was nothing I could do..."

His voice grew fainter as they disappeared inside, but the fear-message kept on strong: never die, never

die, oh please god no no never never...

Then the hatch cranked slowly closed. When it was tight, I slammed the emergency lock pressurizer wide on. Quick-pressors, straining the damaged seals...

There was a thump, and then silence; I felt an unidentifiable tugging somewhere inside myself. Feelings, I thought. Remnants of Jamie.

In time, I would get rid of those, too.

Outside, wind shifted abruptly, dropping from wild howl to muted whining. Vera storms were viciously on-and-off. By the time the shuttle arrived, the sky had thinned enough to show her big set-down lamps, pillars of light that seemed to draw her gently down to the sand.

"Vera Station, this is Alpha Charlie...oh, hell. Look at that, his hatch blew, poor bastard."

I sat tight, in the dark. IMAGO clucked softly.

The radio crackled again. "Vera Station, come in, please. If you're there give us some kind of signal. Hey, do we have gear for a look around? Oh. Yeah, I guess. His tape-log aboard?"

It was. The high-speed transmission was the last thing Carroll had done. Once they had heard it, they wouldn't bother coming back. I waited until the billows of sand had settled, their jet-roar finally dissolved in the hiss of dust softly brushing the hull. Then I opened the hatch and stepped outside.

An ocean of pale-green sky arched over an ocean of sand: ruby, cobalt, saffron. Newly heaped waves of fine quartz-grains flowed endlessly on, out into the horizon. It was peaceful, empty, still. Carroll was dead, the old guy carried to his release by the furious tides, and I was alone.

Alone. I had it then: my moment of peace.

But only a moment, for in the next instant a speck moved on the horizon, and another speck. They gathered, more and more of them, flooding towards me.

And I knew with horrible sureness what they were, even before I could make out the blurred streaming faces, the eyes bleeding hate.

I knew what IMAGO had done.

Because she was good, wasn't she? Almost as good as me, in fact. Too good.

Cut an image in half, get two blurry ones. Cut it in quarters: four, blurrier. Behind me, IMAGO hummed efficiently. On the horizon, a dark tide moved nearer, and now I heard the sound it made with its mouth.

With all its mouths.

Razor an image to bits with knives of sand; likewise a human. Whirl them together in a fury of wind, until even IMAGO can never sort them.

Flesh is flesh: which Carroll, which codger? In such a maelstrom, IMAGO cannot tell for sure. Still she will function; she will try. She will do her efficient best.

Now the result was coming home: back to the station, back to me.

Again. And again.

Once for every shining grain of sand.

— ABO —

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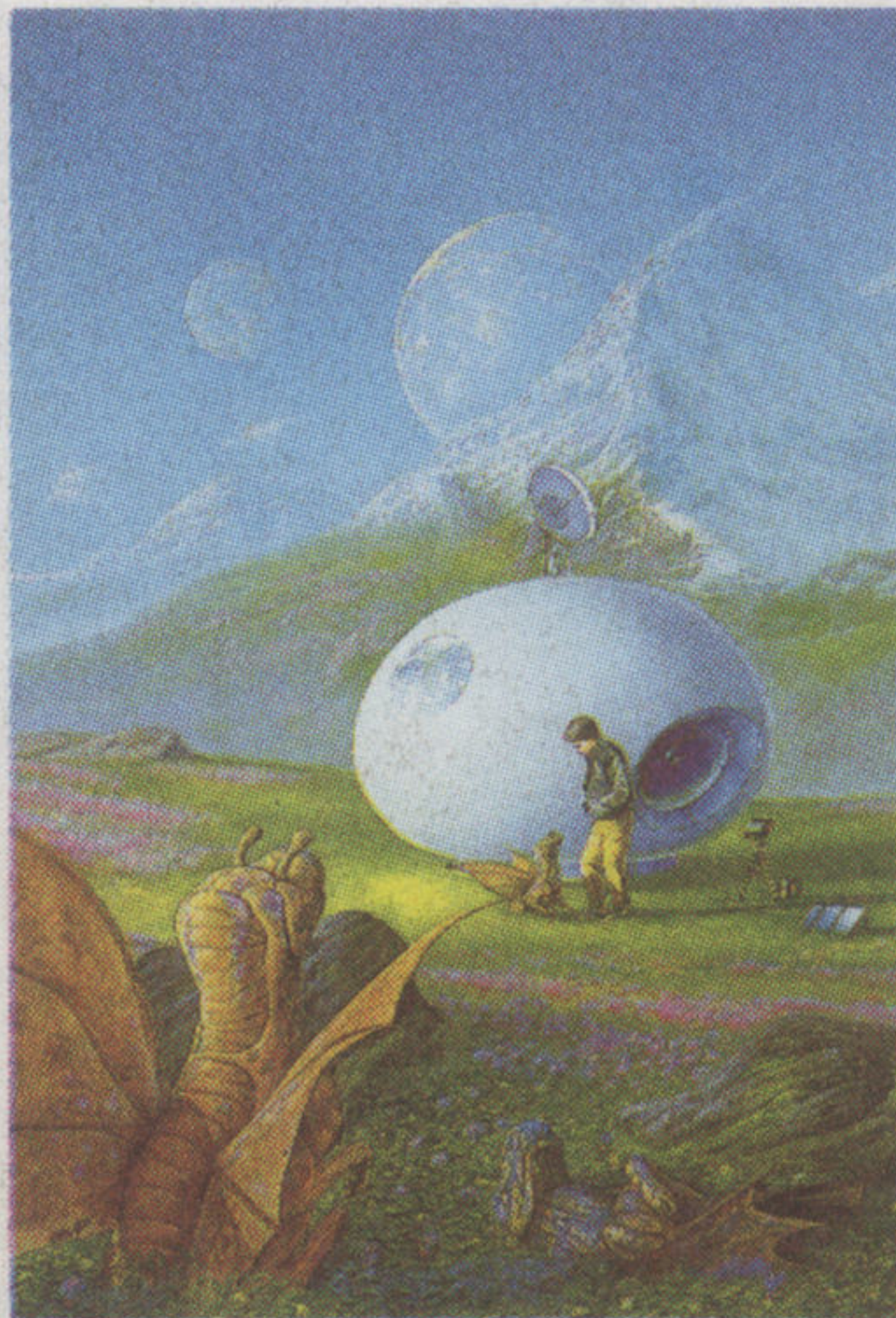
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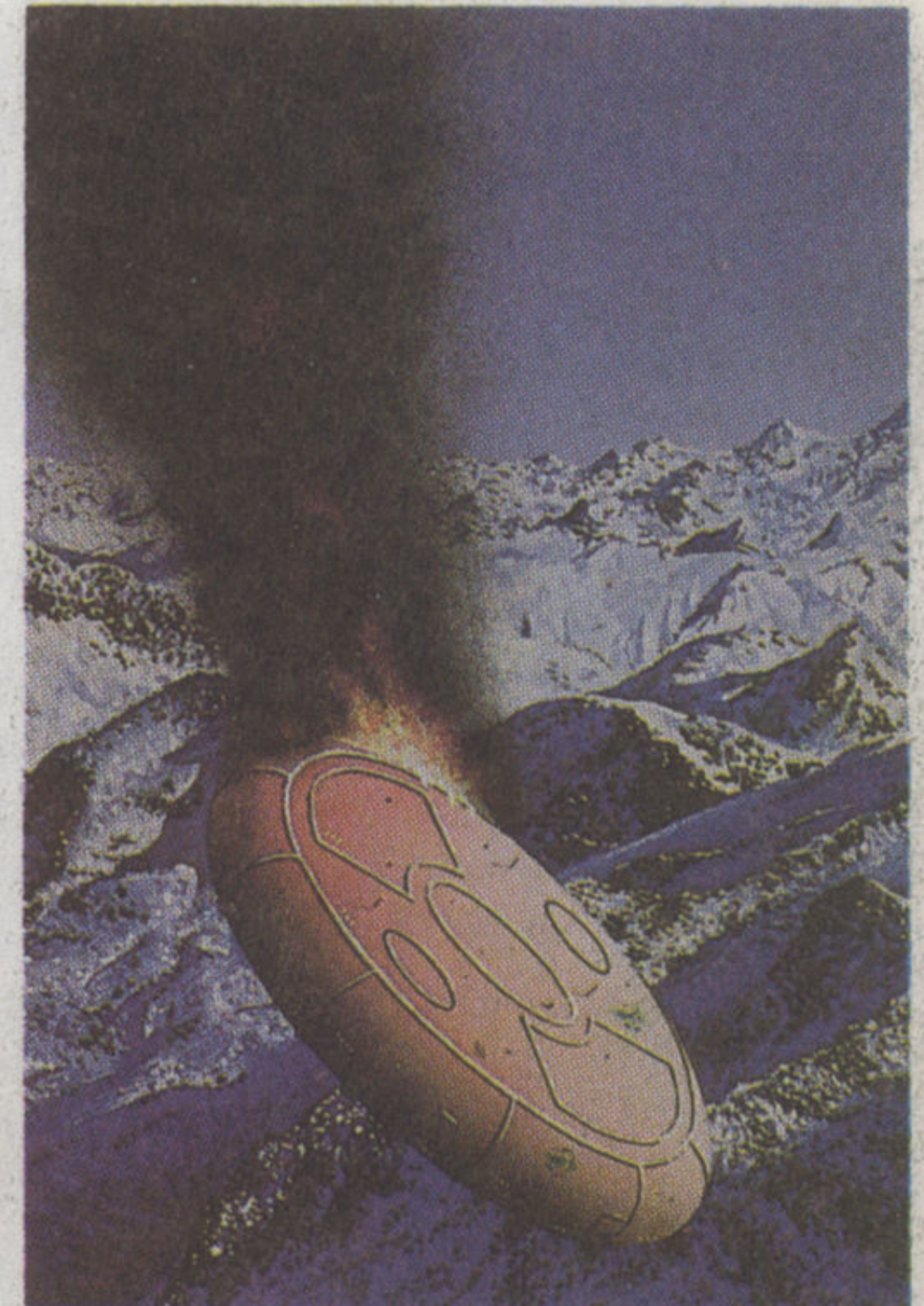
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