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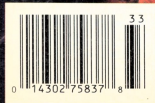
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Joe Haldeman
Patricia Anthony
And a new
Riverworld story

SPECIAL
DOUBLE ISSUE
12 stories



Rejection, Part 2



I wear a human form these days, but people still cross the street when they see me coming. They are afraid I might try to sell them a book.

Because I am too widely recognized locally, I decided to take my novel on tour.

If you are an unknown writer who has exhausted his inventory of friends in the quest for sales, arranging a book tour means getting on the telephone and calling various bookstores and begging them to let you come to give public readings. I was to discover there's a reason they make you beg.

I managed to set up readings to take place over the course of a couple of days in Rockville, Maryland; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Vienna, Virginia. I scheduled the readings in Lancaster and Vienna for the same day, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. It's a two-and-a-half hour drive from one of these places to the other, but having them on the same day was a good way to save on travel expenses. In the tradeoff between travel expenses and wear and tear on the author, I always choose the wear and tear. I am, after all, a novelist. I have already proved I have more stamina than money.

I had decided this would be a driving tour. It seemed an inexpensive way to get around, and I was able to bring along an extra carton of books in the trunk in case the bookstores didn't have enough to meet the demand. It's about a seven-hour drive from Boston to Rockville. To active creatures like ourselves, sitting behind a steering wheel for seven hours might sound unpleasant, but I discovered that driving a car alone is the secret pleasure of humanity. These creatures don't talk about it, but there are few experiences comparable to popping open the sun roof, setting the cruise control on 65, slipping *Queen's Greatest Hits* into the tape player, and screaming "We Will Rock You" at the top of your lungs while you barrel down the Interstate daring other drivers to give you a hard time. You

wouldn't understand that, of course, lacking lungs as you do, but believe me, it's exhilarating. I arrived in Rockville hoarse from the screaming.

The Rockville reading had an audience of five people. This is the reason the bookstore makes you beg for a reading date. The people running the store know you are only going to get five people. They know that no amount of direct mail, no amount of publicity, no amount of advertising is going to get an unknown writer an audience larger than five people. They make you beg for the date in order to humiliate you. They know you are

... screaming "We Will
Rock You" at the
top of your lungs ...

going to be humiliated at the reading, and they want to give you the chance to practice it beforehand.

I had chosen to read a scene in which a character gets mugged at a banking machine. It is my belief that robbery is a pretty reliable comic device, sure to get a lot of laughs. One or two of the five people smiled. The best thing to be said for that evening was that it ended eventually.

The next day, I drove two hours northward to Lancaster, Pennsylvania for an early afternoon reading. I didn't open the sun roof all the way, and the tape player and I sang "Under Pressure" at a moderate volume. The reading was scheduled for 1:30 p.m. on a Saturday, which is apparently when much of Lancaster brings its children to the bookstore to run yelling up and down the aisles. I projected my voice over the children and tried to sound friendly for the benefit of the people who wandered in and out of the reading area, holding loud conversations and looking, apparently, for the car repair section. The stationary

audience was five people. I was beginning to discern a pattern.

The third reading was to take place that evening, two and a half hours' drive away, in a place called Tysons Corner, Virginia. I left the sunroof closed as I drove southward, murmuring "Stone Cold Crazy."

You would recognize *Tysons Corner* if you've read Dante's *Inferno*. It is the level of Hell with the eight lanes of roaring BMWs and no pedestrian walkway. I got my car parked and explored the bookstore. I couldn't find my book for sale anywhere, until I got back to the Art & Architecture section, where a dozen copies or so were piled up on a table near a lectern. For this reading, I had the same screaming children, who had apparently followed me south from Lancaster, and the occasional artist or architect browsing the books around me as I read my material to the five people who had showed up to see me. The five of them stared at me as I read, with expressions I can only call horrified, although the artists and architects seemed indifferent.

When I finished reading the scene about the character who was mugged, and asked for questions, one man raised his hand and said, "Have you ever been robbed?"

"No," I said.

"Well, I have. It's a horrible experience."

Apparently, the robbery was recent, because he didn't appear to have the money to spring for a copy of the book.

A week later, the evening ended. When I climbed into the car and headed northward again, I switched on the tape player. It played "Another One Bites the Dust," but I turned it off. I didn't feel like singing, and I wanted to work out a scene in my next novel. □

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A crazy alien

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If I Should Die Before I Wake

By Doug Franklin

Art by Alan Gutierrez

The landing was bad, and by all rights they should have died when the two-man scout ship cartwheeled over the surface of the world's ocean. But they didn't. The ship suffered massive structural damage and would never fly again, but they were still alive.

The main computer is shut down, Earhart's implant reported. All systems are inoperative.

Earhart unfastened her safety harness and stood up shakily. The flight cabin's deck pitched gently underfoot. The view out the forward windows was not encouraging; sea-green waves marched endlessly towards the distant horizon.

"Will this thing float?" her navigator asked.

"I wouldn't bet on it," she said. "Not after that landing."

Noonan closed the front of his survival suit. "The air's breathable. I'm going topside." He reached up for the emergency exit's release lever.

Earhart grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute. The emergency exit isn't an airlock; it's just a door. If the hull has been breached and we open it up, we may start taking on water."

She could tell by his expression that he did not believe her. He was badly frightened, more concerned with getting out of the ship than anything else. She kept her grip on his arm. "Remember taking a cup and turning it upside down, and sticking it into a bowl of water? The air stayed inside."

A rivulet of sweat ran down the side of his nose. "If the hull isn't breached, it won't make any difference. We'll still float."

Earhart relaxed her grip. He understood.

It did not take long to check the hull. Back in the scout ship's spartan living quarters, water covered the floor. It was not very deep yet; Earhart stepped into it and scratched a waterline mark on the bulkhead. Noonan splashed by her to get their field gear. She watched the mark. By the time he came back with the gear, it was a centimeter under water.

"I found the raft," he said.

"Good," Earhart said. "We're still taking on water. Not fast; the rising water might be acting like a piston, compressing the air inside the ship. It could reach equilibrium."

"Or we could be sinking," he said.

She nodded. If the upper hull was breached, the air inside would simply leak out under pressure.

"We were only a few kilometers from an island

when we crashed," he said. "The raft has a motor. We could reach it."

"And then what?" Earhart asked, her eyes steady on his. "This was supposed to be a short exploratory mission; we've only got food for a few weeks."

His gaze dropped to the water. "There might be something edible in this ocean, something that will keep us going until a rescue ship comes."

She stared at him silently. There would not be a rescue ship, at least not for many years. She had sent a light-speed distress call before they headed down into the atmosphere, but it would not reach their home for nearly half a century. A ship could travel faster than light, but it was not yet possible to send a tachyonic message.

"If they followed our departure vector" Noonan started weakly.

She shook her head. "Once we went tachyonic, all bets were off. So far as they're concerned, we could be in any of a thousand different star systems."

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "So what do you suggest? Stay here and die?"

She looked down into the slowly rising water. She didn't want to die either. But they were going to die, eventually. It was inevitable. She sighed. "Let's get going."

They gathered up all the food they could carry and packed it into a pair of duffel bags. By the time they had finished their preparations, the water had risen to their knees. The small eye-level porthole in the main airlock's outer door showed a deep green murk, full of air bubbles. The ship was riding low in the water.

"I guess we'll have to use the topside emergency exit after all," Earhart said with a grim smile. They hauled the gear forward to the flight cabin. Earhart tried to shut the hatch between the cabin and the rest of the ship, but it would not seal.

"The frame must have twisted," she said. "We may have to move fast after we open the top hatch."

"Hand me the raft first," Noonan said. He pulled the emergency exit's release lever. The hatch dropped downwards a centimeter, and the ship's air whistled through the narrow opening.

Earhart's ears popped. She reached up and added her weight to his. The hatch opened reluctantly. The whistle of escaping air turned into a gale, and water



surged into the flight cabin from the aft compartments.

Noonan hauled himself out through the hatchway. When he had gained his feet on the hull, Earhart handed the deflated raft out to him. The compact package was heavier than she had thought it would be. He pulled a pin on the side of the package, and with a hiss of compressed gas it unfolded into an open boat.

The angle of the cabin's deck increased as the ship began to sink, stern first. Earhart passed the first food bag out to Noonan. When the second one rolled off the pile into the rising water, she picked up the gear bag instead and handed it out. The aft bulkhead was almost entirely under water. She hesitated, and then climbed down and carefully reached for the errant duffel bag full of food.

The ship shifted again and the movement caught her off-balance. She fell head-first into the cold water. For a terrifying moment she was totally submerged. All she could think of was that the ship was sinking, carrying her down with it. She broke surface with a gasp, full of panic. Her flailing hands hit one of the seat backs. She seized it and pulled herself out of the water.

Noonan's head appeared in the hatch. "Where's the other bag?" he shouted.

It was still afloat, on the far side of the cabin. What had been the floor now was nearly the wall. She shook her head. "I can't get it. I'm coming out."

Noonan swore. "Amelia, it's right over there. Just go get it."

"The water's over my head!"

"You know how to swim," he said, blocking her way. She glimpsed a wave over his shoulder and realized that he was kneeling in the raft. The water was almost up to the lip of the hatch.

She caught hold of the edge of the hatch with one hand and shoved Noonan backwards with the other. Then she vaulted through the hatch and into the raft, landing in a tangle on top of him.

"God damn it!" he shouted.

She rolled off him and linked her implant to the raft's controller. The raft's motor started with an electric whine and she spun them away from the ship, tumbling Noonan over again.

"What the hell are you doing?" he railed at her as he struggled to his knees. "We need that food!"

She motored away from the ship. Water broke over the edge of the hatch and rushed down into the flight cabin. The ship's nose rocked upwards until it towered over them. Then it slid straight down into the water. For a few unnerving moments they spun slowly within the whirlpool left in the wake of the sinking ship. Then it was gone, and they were alone under the alien sky.

The island rose a few meters above sea level, a semicircular atoll of volcanic rock. It did not take them long to explore it thoroughly; it was only a couple of kilometers long and totally barren. Amelia sat down on the edge of the raft, her back to the relentless sun. The afternoon air was hot and held a vaguely chemical odor.

Ammonia, her implant identified it. *This is a young world.*

"There's not much to it, is there?" Noonan said.

Amelia shook her head in weary disgust. "How long will our food last?"

Noonan's gaze turned inwards as he consulted his implant. "We should be able to stretch it out for a couple of months, one meal every other day."

"What about the ocean?" she asked. "Can we get anything out of it?"

He shook his head. "The green color comes from an algae analog. Very primitive, very toxic. I don't think we can do much with it. We're about a million years too early; life here hasn't come along far enough to support us. We're lucky to have oxygen."

Amelia looked out over the ocean. She had been in bad spots before, but there had always been hope. If she kept her head together and did not give up, she had always believed she would come through somehow. And she always had. But now she was not so sure. She wanted to live — her body was desperate to live — but there was nothing she could do, nowhere she could go that would make any difference. Her fate was in the hands of others, and the chance of rescue was so small that she could not take it seriously. It was ironic to have come so far, to have conquered the barriers of space and time, only to fall prey to the oldest of problems: starvation.

She realized Noonan had said something and was waiting for a reply.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was thinking about something else."

"We can use the raft to make a shelter," he repeated. "I don't think we'll need it for anything else."

"No, I suppose not." She sighed and with an effort brought herself back to the task at hand. "We should put it on high ground, though. We're so close to the water here, if a storm came up ..."

He nodded. "Near the top of the ridge, on the leeward side."

The days passed slowly as their hunger mounted. Amelia spent most of her time in the shelter they had cut into the rock with their hand lasers. It was little more than a dugout covered by the raft, but it was better than being out in the open. It was hot under the fabric roof, an unrelenting muggy heat that drained what little energy she had. The accident that had stranded them played through her mind over and over again, the memory

mercilessly augmented by her cybernetic implant.

The first jump took them across the light barrier, velocity mirrored into the faster-than-light realm. Unfortunately, Noonan had not tuned the tachyonic drive properly, and the jump consumed far more fuel than they had anticipated. They were heading into unknown territory at several hundred times the speed of light, and they were going to have to activate the drive again just to return to the sub-light side of the universe.

Amelia cut it fine; she came out of the second jump on a vector that slung them around the target world's moon. The gravity whip killed most of their speed relative to the primary; the rest she burned off in an aerobraking maneuver. The ship's fusion reactor shut down as they crossed the terminator into daylight; her tanks were empty. But there was still hope. The world had water, more water than land. If she could just bring them down safely, they could refuel for the trip back home.

She had gone through the drill before on other planetary exploration missions. Land on a convenient ocean, extract hydrogen from the seawater, and fill up the tanks that fueled the reactor. They could be home in a week, bragging about their latest adventure.

She came in on a dead-stick landing, balancing the massive starship on its articulated wings, skimming the wave tops like a seagull. A crosswind caught her just before she touched down. She remembered the thin line of spray as her left wing tip grazed the water and then the sickening lurch as the tip caught and they cartwheeled up into the air. They slammed back down into the water going backwards at a hundred meters per second. Metal screamed as the right wing tore off. It felt as if someone had wrenched her own arm from its socket. They looped again and lost the other wing before coming to a rest in the water.

Looking at it with the implant's cool precision, she could see every move that went wrong, every bad decision that had led them to this dreary end. She turned her head, and the sweat that had pooled on her cheeks ran down the side of her neck. Noonan was staring listlessly out through the open end of the shelter.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His brows drew together, the only indication that he had heard her.

She looked down at the floor and wished she had not said anything.

"Don't torture yourself," he said. She looked up again. He was still staring outside.

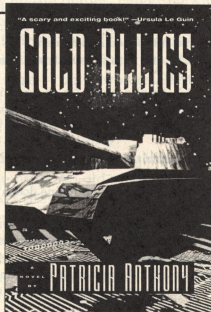
"It could have happened to anyone," he said after a moment. "It was a chance we had to take, and it didn't pan out. If I hadn't screwed up the drive in the first place, we would have had plenty of fuel when we got here."

If I Should Die ...

He was silent again. Then he shook his head, looking at the sloping floor. She was surprised to see tears on his cheeks. "I never thought it would end like this."

He laughed, a short bitter sound. "I always thought I'd go out in a blaze of glory, with my boots on and a gun in my hand."

"You always have," she said. On Ross 128 Amelia had managed to kill the creature that took him, but she would have lost her own life if she had tried to recover his body. On Wolf 359 there was not enough left for recovery to be an issue. Both times, they had had to restore him from a backup they had made



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before the mission.

Noonan shrugged. "So they say. For me, it's like I never left the station. I just went to sleep in one room and woke up in another a few months later. Except ... it wasn't really me anymore."

Amelia looked up questioningly.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "The memories I have, I know they aren't really mine. When this body dies," he put his hand on his chest, "I will die too. When my backup is put into a new body, it won't be me. It will look like me and act like me, but it will be something new. Whatever it is that I am will be gone."

"Maybe if I'd been able to bring your implant back, you wouldn't feel that way," she said. "You'd remember what happened in between."

"I don't want to remember dying," he said. "What's the point?"

"The point," Amelia said, "is to preserve the thread of experience that constitutes identity. When we lose a piece of our experience, we lose a piece of ourselves."

"You always could toe the company line," Noonan observed.

"Just because it's the company line doesn't mean it's a lie," Amelia said hotly.

"I've died before," Noonan said. "You haven't. You don't know what it's like, looking in the mirror and seeing somebody else."

There was nothing Amelia could say to that. She listened to the slow sound of her heartbeat, and the waves breaking on the distant shore. It was not the first time they had argued about backups. She wondered if it would be the last.

When I die ... Amelia said.

Noonan looked at her from across the dugout. "If you die, you mean."

Amelia smiled to herself. Noonan always held on to life until the last possible moment. But she knew when to admit defeat and cut her losses.

"If I die *first*," she said, "I want you to do something for me."

"What?" he asked tiredly.

"I don't care if you use my body for food," she began. She held up her hand to stop his protest. "No, really. I don't. I've lost a lot of weight, but there's still some good protein here."

He grimaced and shook his head.

"What I want is for you to bury whatever is left," she continued. "So when they finally receive our distress signal and come looking for us, they'll find my implant. That way I'll be more ... complete. When I wake up. They'll put the memories recorded in my implant into my new body."

"You really want to remember this?" he asked, gesturing at the interior of the dugout.

"More than just this," she said. "The flight out,

and the mistakes I made. Remembering those experiences will help me do better next time."

"There's not going to be a next time, Amelia! Don't you understand? This is all we've got, right here, right now. There isn't going to be anything else."

"There will be if you bury me," she said softly.

"Damn it, the way you talk, I might as well kill you now. Then there would be more food left for me."

It made sense, in the delirium of Amelia's hunger. There really was not much point in going on. The only thing she would learn is what it felt like to starve to death, and she doubted that would be much help to her in the future. Better to end it now, and let Noonan have what he wanted: every last moment of life, of this life, no matter how grim it was.

"You're right," she said.

"Well, I can't," he said. "I won't. It's sick to even talk about it."

"While I'm asleep," she said. "With one of the lasers. I'd never feel it. I'd just wake up someplace else, right? That's what you said."

"Stop it, Amelia!"

"Will you bury me? Or at least my implant?"

"Yes, I'll bury you, if you'll just shut up."

She turned over on her side. The rocky floor made a hard bed, but she didn't even notice it any more. She shut her eyes and went to sleep.

I don't remember anything after that," Amelia said. She looked down at the skull she held in her hands. It was smaller than she had thought it would be, and oddly delicate. The implant starred its forehead, its ceramic case nearly the same color as the weathered bone.

The reincarnation tech's eyebrows rose slightly. "I'm pretty sure I got all of your memories out of the implant. Those things are built to last."

"What about Noonan?" she asked. "Any trace?"

"We found a transponder anchored in the rock beside your cairn." He glanced at the wall screen and it activated on his unspoken command. The planet it portrayed was almost all ocean. She looked closer and realized with a chill that it was footage taken from her own memory.

"The rescue ship's meteorologist said the island was located in a storm belt," the tech continued. "It had probably been washed clean a hundred times in the half-century it took for them to reach you."

"That's why I wanted to be buried," Amelia said softly. She set the skull down on the table between them. "What about this cairn? Was there anything else in it besides ..."

"Your skull?" The tech finished with a morbid smile. "Just one thing."

He opened his bag and removed a badly-corroded laser pistol. She took it reluctantly. Its cold weight in her hand made her throat tighten.

"Does Noonan have to know what happened on the planet?" Amelia asked.

"Actually ..." the tech began.

"I'd rather he didn't," Amelia interrupted. "I don't think he'd be comfortable working with me, if he knew."

"I don't think it's going to be an issue," the tech said.

Something in his voice made Amelia turn away from the screen's seductive image. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "You're one of the company's best models, Amelia. You always come through, one way or another. But Noonan had such a high failure rate ..."

"If it weren't for him," Amelia said flatly, "I wouldn't be here now. He saved my life twice, once on Ross 128, and again on Wolf 359."

"I know that," the tech said. "And he killed you once."

Amelia glanced involuntarily at the pistol in her hand. "The whole mission would have been a loss if he hadn't buried me. Both of us would have died and our bodies would have been washed away."

"That may be true," the tech said. "But the company wants the whole team to come back, one way or another. This is the third time we've lost his memories."

"It's been as much my fault as his," Amelia said. "It isn't fair that I should live and he should die."

"The company doesn't care who is at fault," the tech said. "The numbers tell the story. You made it. He didn't."

"Noonan's a good man," Amelia said, trying to stay calm. "He deserves another chance."

"He has already gotten all he deserves. We aren't going to purge his backup, but we aren't going to waste any more money incarnating him, either."

"But —"

"I'm sorry," he said. "It wasn't my decision. The company has discontinued his model. You'll fly with Yeager next time."

He turned off the wall screen. Its glassy surface became a dark mirror on the room. Amelia caught a glimpse of her reflection and quickly looked away.

"The survivor always experiences some guilt," the tech said. "That's normal. Just don't let it get in the way of your next job. Our business is information, and we need your memories. That's why we reincarnated you."

Amelia nodded slowly. There really wasn't anything she could do about it now. The time had come and passed, and whatever Noonan had been was gone forever. She stood up to go, and after a moment's thought, reached down and turned her skull so that its empty eyes looked squarely into the darkened screen. □

Market Day

By Joe Haldeman

It was the largest market in the largest city on the planet. Haggling was theatrical, since the natives have four arms and long snouts full of teeth. They roared and stank and danced and laughed; laughing often at me, I'm sure — only two arms and no teeth to speak of, about half the size of their males, who themselves were smaller than the females, and less hairy.

A pair of merchants caught my eye. They sold love-nuts. An old male and female: arm-rings said they were married; dull scales, not glittering, said they were old. They each had two buckets: one to put the shells in, and one to hold the wriggling creatures that they sold, embryos of some sea thing. (Eating one makes you friendly; two make you fuck.)

The male holds a pail between his knees; cracks the nuts like eggs. He throws the empties into the other pail. His mate is doing the opposite. She plucks the embryo out, gently, and drops the shell into the pail between her knees, then sets the wiggling delicacy in with its brothers.

This makes hubby mad; he roars and snorts at her, and rattles the bucket of shells while pointing. She's not impressed. She offers for inspection her pail of things. Dear old Dad peers in and shrugs, admitting something. He grabs a handful from her pail and devours them, his loud snaps and slurps not drowning out their tiny screams. She takes two and swallows them demurely.

They trade a hideous smile, dripping gore; grab their buckets and waddle home, roaring, laughing, arms in arms. □

Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit

A Tale of the Riverworld

By John Gregory Betancourt

Art by Jon Foster

Author's note:

Very few books excite science fiction writers; when you work within the genre, it becomes harder and harder to evoke that sense of wonder which brought you into the field in the first place. Today, I read very little science fiction that thrills me the way the books and stories I read when I was twelve or thirteen did. When I was asked to write a story for an anthology of new stories set in Philip José Farmer's Riverworld, at first I was thrilled and excited. And then I was scared.

The books in the Riverworld series — *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, *The Fabulous Riverboat*, *The Dark Design*, *The Magic Labyrinth*, and *The Gods of Riverworld* — had been filled with that magic, that sense of wonder, that draws children like moths to a flame. I was eleven when I read *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, and at the time I thought it was one of the greatest novels ever written. I'd have to go back and reread it and the rest of the series, I knew, to write a story for the anthology. What if it didn't hold up? What if I hated it? I'd really be stuck. I needn't have worried. *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* still reads as well today as the first time I encountered it. It's a classic in the field and will stay that way long after most other books are dust. So I wrote the best story I could, full of swashbuckling action and heroic escapes and favorite historical characters. My story "The Merry Men of Riverworld" features as its hero a British actor who's decided to make up for all the fun he missed in life by playing Robin Hood, and along the way he recruits Abraham Lincoln to play Little John (John Cleese didn't work out — he tried to introduce the Merry Men to something he called "The Ministry of Silly Walks"). How Robin and his band of merry men try to save Jules Verne from Al Capone is the core of the story, and appears in *Tales of Riverworld* (Questar Books, \$4.99).

You may notice that the story below is not the story mentioned above. Right and true. It seems critics and fans alike thought "The Merry Men of Riverworld" among the best non-Farmer Riverworld stories, and when the publisher decided to do a second collection, I was asked to contribute another Riverworld tale. I agreed since I'd had so much fun the first time. However, the story just

wouldn't come. It's one thing to play in a famous writer's universe when it's new and fun. It's quite another when you've already done it once and that initial flush of excitement is gone. Can you top your first story? Should you even try? Without inspiration it's hack work, and I would sooner back out than try to foist a bad story off on Philip José Farmer! Eventually, as the deadline drew near, I decided to hell with it — rather than follow the conventions, I'd do something entirely new* in the series that interested me. That's why there are no famous figures from history in "Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit," no treks down the River in search of adventure and answers, no heroic swashbuckling bigger-than-life characters. Instead, my story picks up with a primitive tribe on Resurrection Day, when billions of humans from all times and places on Earth have just awakened along the banks of the River. It's an alternate take on the series, told from a viewpoint that's pretty alien to any used so far: primitive tribesmen who are convinced magic is responsible for everything around them. "Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit" will appear in *Quest to Riverworld*, out this fall from Questar Books. If you enjoy the series, you might want to pick it up. Purists please note: I've borrowed bits and pieces from several different aboriginal cultures for dramatic effect. Allow me this one conceit as you read the story.

When I awoke by the water's edge, I was naked as an animal. A polished stick as big around as my leg and made of wood — though from what tree it came I could not say — hung from my wrist by a thin cord. I threw the stick off, leaped to my feet, and gave a cry of alarm: "Ai-ai-ai!"

The sound echoed up and down the river's bank. Silence followed, then a hundred other throats picked it up and echoed it back in a thundering roar. "Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai —"

The sound swelled like a chant to fill the air, and as I stood there, I could smell my own sweat pouring forth like an animal's musk.

"Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai —"

I had to be in the spirit-world, since I remembered



my own death clearly. I could still hear our tribe's spirit-man chanting over me, trying to drive the sickness from my body. I remembered pain in my gut like a knife, and I remembered a fever that made the world seem to shake like a tree in a storm.

"Ngosoc," I had whispered with my dying breath, naming the man who had bewitched me.

Why was I here? What spirit or god was punishing me? Had I named the wrong man — had Ngosoc been innocent? I pressed my eyes shut and bit my lip until I tasted the warm sweetness of blood.

Spirits go away go away go away!

The cries of fear slowly died. I opened my eyes, but nothing had changed. Everyone on the bank of the river was looking around with fearful, panicked expressions. A few took tentative steps this way or that; far off, I heard a woman screaming on and on and on. Of all those around me, I stood nearest the river's edge. I ran down to the water, squatted, and stared at my reflection. It was a nightmare. You can tell man from animal by his decorations, I knew: tattoos for cheeks and eyelids, paint for chests and arms. All those who had awakened with me looked human enough in form — dark brown skin like mine, broad cheeks, flat noses — but they were completely hairless from head to crotch. Now, staring at my reflection, I touched my own bald scalp, felt the emptiness under my arms, gazed down at my naked male sex. I was hairless as a newborn, and my foreskin had been cut away, leaving my penis pink and exposed. Worse still, the hundreds of tattoos with which I had so carefully covered my body over the fifty-eight years of my life had vanished.

I found I barely knew myself. What game was being played on me? What spirit would do such a thing?

It must be Glasha the Snake, I thought, standing: he was the trickster. Who else would wake me in the spirit-world in such a manner? Or perhaps it was a test. Cocoti the Beetle had always tested us, trying to prove man no better than the monkeys in the trees.

Scowling, I strode up the river and tried to understand where I was, my bare feet splashing through shallows, small silvery fishes darting away before me. A clear area perhaps twenty paces wide extended between the river and a vast field of waist-high grass. We had all awakened on the river's bank. Far across the grass I could see hills dotted with trees. Ahead I spotted a grove of thick old reeds that came down almost to the water's edge.

If this were some spirit's test, I would master it, I decided. I had led the two hundred men, women, and children of my village through thirty-three rainy seasons, and I knew the ways of the spirits almost as well as our tribe's elders. I had walked with the spirits of plants and animals more than a hundred times. They were sly, the spirits: some

playful, some serious; some helpful, some not ... but they never did anything without cause. It would be my task to discover that cause if I could. Whether I helped that cause along or resisted it would depend on how it suited my own desires.

Here, in the spirit-world, only one thing was certain: I could rely on little but my own wits.

Several branches as big around as a man's thumb had washed onto the river's bank. I picked them up one by one and tried their strength. The first two snapped like twigs. The third felt strong as fire-hardened mahogany, and its edge came to a point suitable for digging. I quickly stripped it of leaves.

If man is not animal, he must prove it with his decorations. That must be my first goal, I thought: decorating myself. Paint would do, since I had neither ink nor bone needles for tattoos. Twenty paces from the reeds I reached a place where the river had cut more deeply into its bank. I waded out cautiously until the water came to my knees. My toes curled deep in the warm, soft muck of the river's bottom, feeling for sinkholes and stones, finding neither. It seemed a likely spot, so I dug into it with the pointy end of my stick until, a few handspans down, I reached clay. When I dug out a handful and held it up to the light, it was a pale gray, almost white. I fingered it skeptically. It was coarse and crumbled easily, but it would have to do.

I spat into it, working my mucus into the clay until it had the right consistency, and dabbed circles and lines across my cheeks and nose. Then I painted four straight lines — warrior's lines — across my chest and arms.

Clothed in my decorations, no longer looking like an animal, I started to wade to shore — and came to an abrupt stop. A whole village worth of brown, hairless men and women were standing at the edge of the water, watching me.

"Where are we?" one of them asked. His accent was strange, twisting the words so they were barely understandable, but I could figure them out. He was tall and broad of shoulder, with a warrior's wary look in his eye, and I took an instant liking to him: this is a good man, something inside me said.

"It is the spirit-world, of course," I told him. "We are being tested."

Several of the women shrieked. I glared and they fell silent. "I am Hiwyan, son of Yagna," I called to all of them, "headman of the Moboasi."

"You lie!" one woman called, coming to the front. She put her hands on her hips. "I knew Hiwyan. He was an old man!"

I looked her up and down, and though she was thin as an eel and twenty years younger than when I'd last seen her, suddenly I knew who she was: "Maraga," I told her, "your brother Kianano was my best friend when we were boys. Your husband Kotabi and I raided the Onomi a dozen times

together. I am Hiwyan. Do you not recognize me?"

She squinted, then said, "You are too young, too handsome. Hiwyan was old and scarred when he died."

"My body has been made new," I said. "The spirits have done this to us all — even to you."

The warrior who had spoken to me had been nodding his hairless head all the while. "I have heard of the Moboasi," he said slowly. "They are said to be fierce as enemies and generous as friends."

"This is true," I told him.

"I am Eona of the Avai, forty years a hunter."

"Forty?" I scoffed. "You are a stripling, barely a man."

"It seems the spirits have changed us all," he said. He spread his arms to the heavens. "I thank you, spirits, for making me young again!"

Someone called, "It is true. I had seen forty-five years when I died!"

Someone else called, "And I had seen fifty-two!"

"If we are all here," I said, "it must be for a reason."

There were murmurs of agreement from everyone present. "We must make a village," I continued, "and learn what that reason is. Only then will the spirits be content."

Maraga continued to study me. "You speak as Hiwyan spoke," she admitted. "His soul burns within you. I see it in your eyes."

"Come help me, Maraga," I told her. Bending, I scooped out a handful of clay and offered it to her. "We are men, not animals. We must paint ourselves, and then we must build a village."

Maraga waded out beside me, took the clay from my hand, and like a headwife, began calling orders to the women and girls watching from the riverbank. To my surprise nobody argued: they were all looking for someone to lead them, I realized. Several girls ran to fetch leaves from the trees, and still others fanned out into the waist-high grass, looking for maggots and berries to mix with the clay to make colored paints.

Eona waded out beside me and began digging for clay with his bare hands. When a dozen more men waded out to help, I handed my stick to Eona so he could dig for them all.

"You will be my right hand," I whispered in his ear. "Gather enough clay to paint every man, woman, and child, then join me by the trees. We must select a place for our village."

He nodded and bent to the work, the muscles in his back rippling like wind in the grass. As I watched, sweat began to bead on his forehead and upper lip. He was very strong.

I waded ashore, motioning to the men who had hung back. There were twenty or thirty of them, some as young as eight or ten, a few as old as I now looked. Reluctantly, it seemed, they approached. I

Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit

saw fear and confusion in their eyes and knew these were people who needed a strong leader to guide them.

"You will be our hunters and warriors," I told them. I still had a little clay left on my hands, and I used it to dab circles under their eyes and draw lines down the bridge of their noses.

Eona sent a boy to bring me more clay when I needed it, and I managed to paint every man there before it ran out. The marks weren't much, but they would show these men as human for now.

"You must make spears from the reeds," I told them. "The life of the village depends on you and what game you can catch. We will set up our village while you hunt. Be back before dark. Now go!"

They slapped their chests and took off for the reeds at a run. My gaze lingered on the last to leave, a lanky young man of perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three, hairless as the rest, but with an angry cast to his dark brown eyes. There was something familiar about the way he moved, I thought, something that made me distinctly uneasy.

Had I known him back in the real world? I frowned. If so, we must have been enemies — truly, I thought, I would have to watch my back around that one.

As headman of my village for thirty-three years I had learned well the dangers of treachery. Many had spoken against me over the years, but I talked with a monkey's limber tongue. I could out-speak any man in the village, so crafty and convincing were my arguments.

Strong of arm and sharp of eye, I had assumed the feathered mantle of the headman in my twenty-fifth year and brought my people their greatest power. Fearless were the Moboasi under me, and well feared by their enemies. It was my leadership that helped us seize new hunting grounds from the Gonaci and the Acoloas. It was my leadership that stole canoes and women from the despised Mowando and drove them from their shit-stinking village forever. The spirits had smiled over my leadership, and by the time I died the name Hiwyan already lived on in many songs and stories.

As I paused at the top of the river's bank, I noticed another cluster of hairless men and women gathered far to my left. They weren't brown-skinned, but white as a coconut's meat.

Are they ghosts? I wondered. Could they be the spirits who brought us here?

They all stood around a strange tree like none I had ever seen before. The tree's surface was the silver color of a fish's scales, but not so shiny. It was low but broad — its top covered the space a whole village would take up — and it had holes cut deep into its silver surface. Its trunk was small and scarcely seemed strong enough to hold it up.

Several of the white-skinned men were climbing

across its lightly sloped surface, sticking their hands in the holes. Like my own people, they seemed to have strange wooden sticks attached to their arms by ropes. As I watched, first one then another of them fitted their sticks into the tree. The sticks seemed to slide into place naturally.

Ah, I said to myself, that must be what the sticks are for. But why bother to fit them into holes? It made no sense to me. Perhaps the spirits who had brought us here would make the tree's purpose clear later. For an instant I regretting casting my own stick away, but then I realized it would still be where I had thrown it ... after all, who would take it?

Swallowing, I got up my courage to speak to the white-skinned ghosts or spirits or whatever they were. As I walked toward them, several noticed me and pointed, jabbering in a harsh, flat language I did not understand. They seemed excited to see me, and not unfriendly.

Halting twenty paces away, I studied them. Although their skins were white, they did not look like ghosts: their faces had a strange sharpness to them, and their noses stuck out too far. They also seemed just as confused as my own people had been. Perhaps they were from a distant tribe?

I moved closer very slowly, opening my hands with the palms up to show I meant no harm. The white-skins had no spears or knives that I could see, but they could throw rocks and use their hands against me ... or even those sticks attached to their wrists.

Perhaps a few of them spoke my language, I thought. Perhaps they could explain what the spirits meant by bringing us all here. Their headman and what must have been two of his spear carriers, though they had no spears, came forward to talk with me. The headman had a huge nose — I tried not to stare, but it stuck out at me like a pointing finger — and his eyes were the blue of a shallow pool of water. Pale reddish-brown speckles covered his shoulders. Truly I had never seen his like before.

"*Haithey*," he said to me in a low, soothing voice. He stuck out his hand cautiously, and when I looked at it, he slowly reached out, took my right hand in his, and moved them both up and down a moment before letting go.

"I am Hiwyan of the Moboasi," I told him. He shook his head and touched his chest. "William Byrd," he said. "Byrd. *Sahvie*? Byrd."

"Burd," I said, nodding solemnly; I could follow that much. I pointed to myself. "Hiwyan."

"Hi-wee-an," he said.

I smiled and he smiled back. I pointed to the strange tree.

"Did the spirits send it here?" I asked.

He shook his head and said something incomprehensible. I shook my head back. We were going

to have to teach him our language if we were going to get anywhere. Still, he was clearly headman of these strange white-skinned people, since he had come to talk with me, so I decided to show him all the courtesies his position called for. He might prove to be a valuable ally if another tribe or wild animals attacked, I thought. If his people proved dangerous, we could always drive them away.

He pointed to the man to my left, who was equally pale-skinned and with an equally big nose, though his eyes were the brown of over-ripe bananas. "Carver." Then he pointed to the man to my right, who was smaller and thinner, with eyes as brown as my own. "Shay," Burd said.

"Carvar. Shay." I repeated, nodding, and the two white-skins nodded back.

"Come," I told Burd. I pointed to part of the river where Eona was still digging out clay for the women to mix. I took a step toward it. "Come, Burd."

He seemed to understand what I wanted; he turned and spoke quickly to Carvar, and Carvar turned and trotted back to stand by the strange silver tree.

Burd took three steps toward Eona and looked at me inquiringly.

I caught up and from there we walked side by side like equals, with his spear-carrier named Shay trailing. As we went, I pointed first to the sky and spoke its name, then to the river, then to the grass and trees. Each time Burd dutifully repeated what I had said. His willingness to learn was a good sign, I decided, and boded well for the future of both our villages. He'd speak my language like a civilized man in a few moons.

As we neared, Eona and the other men stopped their work and stared at us warily. There was recognition in Eona's eyes, I thought; he had seen Burd's kind before.

Burd and I stopped at the river's edge.

"This is my friend Burd," I said in a loud voice. "He is headman of the white-skinned people up the river." I pointed toward their strange tree. "The other man is called Shay, and he is Burd's spear-carrier."

Eona approached, wading out of the river. "We don't want anything to do with the white-skinned men," he said in a low but serious voice. "They are dangerous."

"Why?" I asked, my voice low also.

"I have seen white-skins like Burd before. They came to live in the forest not far from my village. All the time they talk-talk-talk of their white goddess, *Virgin Mary*, and make us worship her as chief of all the spirits." He spat. "They gave presents to make us worship *Virgin Mary* — knives with blades that shine like the sun, bright beads, cloths like they wear, and bowls and cups that do not break."

"Do you speak their language?" I asked.

"A few words, no more. Others here may speak it, though. A great many people went to worship *Virgin Mary* and live among the white-skins as their slaves."

I frowned. This was bad news indeed; instead of friends and allies perhaps I had brought spiders into our midst. From the corner of my eye I studied Burd, who was staring at the men digging clay with an unreadable expression on his face. What did he see in us ... slaves? Allies? Something else entirely?

"You must keep away from them," I decided.

Eona nodded. "That is wise."

"Unless," I continued, "they choose to join us and live among us as people."

"They will not," he said.

"We shall see."

The other clay-diggers had gone back to piling clay on the riverbank while we spoke, and Maraga and most of the other women were coming back from their scout-work with colored berries and leaves. The women sat and began working with the clay. Some chewed berries and leaves, spitting them out when they were pulped; others ground up maggots and other insects with little reed sticks. Maraga herself mixed berries, leaves, insects, and clay together with well-practiced fingers, producing first red and blue, then also green and yellow paints, which she spread out on more broad green leaves.

I brought Burd and his spear-carrier over to the women, squatted, and gestured for Burd to do the same. After a moment's hesitation, he did so, and his spear-carrier followed suit.

Using the first two fingers of each hand, I took dabs of red and blue and began painting circles and lines on Burd's cheeks, arms, and chest. He made no movement until I was done, and then just nodded once.

When I moved toward his spear-carrier, though, Shay leaped to his feet, making fists of his hands. A burst of angry words came from him. I stared, puzzled. Did he not want to be human again? I looked at Burd, and Burd spoke sharply to his spear-carrier.

The spear-carrier shook his own head, took a step back, and set his feet defiantly.

One of the women — little more than a girl, really, with small budding breasts and narrow hips, perhaps a year into the bleeding that marked entry into the female mysteries — leaned forward and caught my eye.

"Pardon for interrupting, Headman," she said, eyes down as was proper. "The white man says, 'Keep your filthy hands off me, you savage.'"

"You understand their talk?" I said.

"Yes, Headman."

"What is your name?"

"Nonu, Headman."

"Come sit beside me." I patted the ground to my

right. She moved up and crouched there, still staring at the ground. "How did you learn the white-skin's language?"

"I was born in their *hospital*."

The word meant nothing to me. That must be what they call their village, I thought.

"You tell him this," I said. "If he is not an animal, he must paint himself to prove it. If he is an animal, he must leave."

She spoke the words, and I watched Shay's face turn red as the sun at sunset. He snarled something to Burd, turned, and stalked off toward the strange silver tree. I grunted at his back, then spat after him: "Animal." What kind of spear-carriers did Burd choose? They would be useless in a fight, with so little discipline.

Burd said something to me, which Nonu translated as: "Do you know what has happened to us?"

"We are in the spirit-world," I said, and from then on, with Nonu translating, we managed to have a conversation of sorts.

Burd and most of the other white-skins, it turned out, were from a village far to the east of ours, a place called *New Zealand*. The name meant nothing to me. He, too, thought the gods had brought us here — one named *Jeezuz* in particular — but for what purpose he did not know.

Our thoughts were much in agreement, it seemed. When I told him my plans for building a walled village, he agreed it was a good idea: neither of us knew what animals prowled the nearby forests.

He offered help from the white-skins, and I accepted. Any of the white-skins could share our village, I promised, as long as they learned our language, decorated themselves as people, and accepted me as headman. He agreed quickly.

"I will tell my people," he told me. Rising, he backed away, then turned and walked toward the strange silver tree.

"Follow after him," I whispered to Nonu. "Listen to all they say, then come back and tell me."

"Yes, Headman," she said, and she crawled into the waist-high grass on her hands and knees. I saw a few stalks move, and then she was gone.

Maraga knelt beside me. She had used berries to stain several stalks of grass red and blue, and as I watched, she braided the strands together around my upper arm. I had been the first to paint myself, now I was the first to wear a badge of bravery.

"You have made it well," I said, studying her work.

"My husband is not here," she said. "I need a man to look after who can protect me. I work hard, Hiwyan, as you know."

"I do know that," I said, puzzled.

"Make me your wife," she said. "We are both old enough not to play games with ceremony. We need

each other."

"What about your husband Kotabi, who is my best friend?" I asked. "How can I steal my best friend's wife?"

"Kotabi died a year after you died. He has not been reborn in the spirit-world; I have looked. Therefore why should you not make me your wife?"

"What she said made sense. "It shall be so," I said. "Henceforth you are my woman."

"And you are my man."

I nodded, and that was our marriage. We spent the next hour decorating ourselves. Maraga painted my head and back; I painted hers. Around us, the one hundred and twenty-two members of my new village did the same.

Nonu returned as quietly as she had left and came at once to report to me. She had done exactly as instructed, she said, creeping through the grass until she was within spitting distance of Burd and the other white men. None of them had so much as looked in her direction. As she sat before me to tell me what she'd overhead, Maraga began to paint blue and red circles on the girl's face, neck, and head.

"Byrd told them of your offer," Nonu said, "and they argued much about it. The women and men do not want to paint themselves — truly, Headman, it is not their way! — but Byrd argued that they needed our protection from animals. 'What animals?' some wanted to know. They have seen nothing but a few rats scurrying in the grass, and one of the men caught a fish. Most of them have decided not to come. Byrd and a few of the men want to join you. They say our people know how to survive in the wilderness and they need to learn what we know."

Eona had also been listening. "They are a danger," he said. "We should accept none of their kind!" Several others echoed his words: many here had heard of the white-skins and their spirit *Virgin Mary*, it seemed, but only Nonu spoke their language.

"I am headman here," I said. "It is my decision. We can use more strong arms to help build our village. If they do not become people like us, we will drive them out."

On that, they agreed. Even so, I felt an undercurrent of resentment toward the white-skins, and anger toward my decision. Still, I was headman, and my decision would stand.

Burd and five other white-skins — three men and two women — showed up not long after that. Two of the men held poorly made red spears and shifted nervously from foot to foot as everyone gathered around to look them over. They all wore mats of woven grass to cover their genitals, which made Maraga and the other women giggle in amusement. I was not so amused.

"Tell them to remove their mats," I told Nonu. "If they are to join us, they must dress as we do. They cannot be better than us and hide behind grass."

When Nonu repeated my message, Burd immediately removed his mat. The other three men did so more slowly, almost reluctantly. The women did not.

"Maraga," I said softly, "take the women and decorate them." She called to the other women of our new village, and as one they moved forward, taking the two white-skinned women by the arms and leading them away from us men. Maraga would get rid of their mats, I knew: she was already making a good headwife. Nonu hesitated, looking at me, but I shooed her after the rest. She should stay with the women; if I needed her to translate for Burd and the others, I would call her.

The white men looked very uneasy. One of them was half-aroused and trying to hide it behind his hands without much success. I snorted; they were like children, I thought, ignorant of the world around them and how it worked. We would make people of them.

"Do not frighten them," I called to the men around me. "Move slowly. They are animals now, but we can make them into people with time and patience. First we must paint them. Who will help me?"

"It is a mistake, but I will help," Eona said. He picked up a leaf covered with blue paint and came to stand at my side, and together we began to paint the rest of Burd's body. More slowly, the rest of my village took up leaves of paint and began to decorate the three remaining white-skins.

When we finished and stood back to admire our handiwork, I had to admit it helped: Burd looked almost civilized with a pattern of black dots running down his arms and cheeks, set off by bold red and blue lines. His scalp was painted blue, like mine. Later, after the village walls were up, I knew we would have time to make penis sheaths and braid more grass and animal-hair into decorative ropes for arms, legs, and necks; then we would be truly civilized again.

For now, though, we had to concentrate on the basics of survival.

Next I led all the men into the reeds. There I could see signs of my hunters' passage: using stones, they had cut down reeds, then sharpened them to make spears. Eona picked up stones from where the hunters had left them, passed them out, and we began breaking down the tallest and heaviest old-growth reeds for our village's walls. Every so often I glanced out toward the grassy field, where most of the women — including the two decorated and now matless white-skins — were busily gathering grass and knotting it into rope. Others were searching the field for edible plants and insects to supplement whatever the hunters brought back. Still others were gathering up the wooden sticks that had been

attached to our wrists when we woke, which I decided was a good idea, since we might yet find a use for them.

It would take half a day to put up a wall around our village site, I knew, and several months to get everything else comfortably arranged. We had a lot of work before us. Still, it had to be done, and the sooner we started the sooner we would finish.

I began hauling hard, heavy old reeds as big around as my arm and twice my height from the grove, piling them not far from where the women worked. Our village would circle the place where the women now sat, I decided.

Pausing, I squinted up at the sky. The sun was beginning to settle to the west; soon it would paint the skies with bright reds and yellows and oranges. With a start I realized there were *two* suns in the sky, the bright one lighting the land and a smaller, paler one beside it. The smaller sun was too tiny and too bright to be the moon. We truly were in the land of spirits, I thought, awed.

Eona carried more reed poles out and threw them down with mine, and suddenly there was a small army hauling reeds out. As Eona headed back for more, I joined him. It was good to work, to stretch strong young muscles in arms grown used to being old and weak. The white-skins worked alongside us, and though they said nothing to anyone, their work was as good as any other's. When I pointed that out to Eona, he merely frowned.

We had just begun to set up the stockade walls when a huge noise like thunder came. I looked back toward the white-skins' camp and saw blue lightning flicker around the huge silver tree where the white-skins gathered, but then it vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

Everyone else had paused, too, and in the distance I could hear the white-skins shouting — though whether they were joyful or angry, I couldn't tell. I glanced around, spotted Nonu, and told her to take Burd and Eona to see what had happened. She translated quickly, and the three of them ran toward the tree.

"Back to work!" I ordered, and everyone resumed their duties, the men raising huge reed poles while the women tied them in place with grass rope. The women still worked in the field, gathering armfuls of grass for beds and roofs, weaving more rope, making hammocks and sleeping mats.

We had just finished the outer wall and were tying the village's gate in place when Burd and Eona returned. Nonu was carrying one of the strange wooden sticks that had been attached to everyone's wrist when we awoke, only this one's end had been removed, revealing a hollow interior. It was full of colorful objects. Nonu set the container upright in the center of the village, and everyone gathered around to see. "This one was Byrd's," Nonu told me.

"He set it into the giant stone tree before coming to stay with us, and after the lightning came, it filled itself with food and treasures!"

"They aren't sticks, but spirit-boxes," Eona said. "All of the white-skins' spirit-boxes were filled!"

Everyone murmured with excitement.

Burd was talking to the other white-skins, and they all turned and ran toward the silver tree. I didn't blame them; if my spirit-box had filled up with food, too, I would also want it ... but was it wise to eat food given by spirits?

I thought of our own spirit-boxes then, but Maraga had already thought to check them. "They are empty," she reported, showing me one she had managed to open. "The spirits did not fill ours."

At that there were grumbles around me, but when I glared they stopped.

Byrd sat cross-legged before his spirit-box and began pulling out object after object. He seemed to recognize many of them, though I did not. One was a small stick with a silver tip on one end. When he flipped his thumb across it, a little flame appeared.

I took a step back. "What magic is this?" I demanded.

"It is not magic," Nonu said. "The white-skins call them *lighters* and use them to make fire. A little stone rubs sparks, which catch fire on a bit of oil-soaked cloth."

"It has been sent by the spirits," I said with a confidence I did not feel. A little stick that made fire! A miracle! "We will dine well when our hunters return!"

That seemed to cheer everyone up. Then Burd pulled a strange-looking brown food from the spirit-box, smelled it, smiled, and offered it to everyone near him. Nobody would take it.

Shrugging, Burd bit into it himself. The spirits had also filled a cup inside his spirit-box with a steaming dark-brown liquid. He sipped cautiously. When I leaned forward to smell it, he offered it to me, but the bitterness of its scent made my eyes water. I waved it away.

The other white-skins were returning with unhappy expressions and empty spirit-boxes. They muttered something to Burd, who shrugged, then passed them some of the food from his own spirit-box. They divided it and devoured it within the space of a few heartbeats.

"They say the other white-skins stole their food and treasures," Nonu told me.

Maraga bent to whisper in my ear, "Must we tolerate thieves, who steal food and treasures from our villagers?"

"The food was not in our village," I said. "How were the white-skins to know these white-skins would return? We would have taken their food and treasures ourselves, too, if we had the chance."

She had to admit I was right.

Burd had finished his meal and begun pulling objects from his spirit-box again. At the bottom he found large squares of red and green cloth. Maraga moved forward, fingered the cloth wonderingly, and looked at Burd.

"Mine?" she asked. Nonu translated.

Byrd smiled and handed it to her, and then everyone in the village rushed forward, grabbing and saying, "Mine! Mine!" in loud voices.

When one of the youngest boys emerged from the scramble with Burd's fire-stick, I pulled it from his hand. "Only the headman can make fires," I told him. He looked like he was going to cry, but instead dove back in and soon emerged with another treasure, Burd's cup, which was now empty. He ran off with it, shouting happily.

Maraga was already cutting Burd's red cloth into strips with a reed she had sharpened on a stone. The first strip she wrapped around my left arm. It made a striking contrast to the deep brown of my skin, and I strutted proudly this way and that, letting her admire it.

Burd touched my arm. I looked at him warily.

With Nonu translating, Burd said: "You must have your people put their spirit-boxes in the stone tree."

"We cannot take gifts from the spirits until we know why we have been brought here. If we accept their food, we must serve them and their purposes."

"How will you find out what their purposes are?" Burd asked.

"I must walk with them and talk with them," I told him. "They will tell me which spirit brought us here, and why. Only then can we decide what to do next."

"How will you find these spirits?"

"They are everywhere," I said impatiently, waving at the grass, at the reeds, and at the river itself. "They fill the world. Every object, living or not, has its own spirit."

He nodded, understanding at last.

Maraga touched my elbow. "The hunters," she said.

"We will talk again later," I told Burd. "If you have any questions, ask Nonu. She will be your teacher among us."

"Thank you," he said, but I was already following Maraga to where the hunters stood, in the center of our little walled village.

The oldest came forward and threw the day's game before me: two small, ratlike creatures and a snake hung on a reed pole. "The hunting is bad here," he said. "There is no game to be found larger than these."

I frowned; they had found hardly enough to feed an entire village.

"A few of the boys went down to the river to spear-fish," the oldest hunter went on, "and they

had better luck." He motioned, and two boys ran forward. They carried about twenty fish strung through the gills on a wooden stick. Some of the fish were small and thin, but a couple were fully as large as small dogs. Most were in between in size. That made me smile. It would not be a feast, but we certainly would not go hungry tonight.

The women had gathered enough wood for a fire, and after he had instructed me in its use, I lit the fire with Burd's lighter. Since the spirits had given it to Burd, and Burd had given himself to us, I thought it was safe to use.

As flames rose, snapping and crackling through the wood, the women began to prepare the evening meal. I looked up at the sky and saw stars appearing: they were strange, not in the familiar patterns I had seen all my life, and I wondered what that foretold. The spirit-world is now our own, I reminded myself.

With darkness, we began hearing strange noises from the direction of the white-skins' camp. I picked up a spear, motioned for Burd to do the same, and we went out together to see what was causing the commotion.

It was a strange scene at the spirit-tree: most of the white-skins had shed their grass mats and spirit-box-given cloths and were rolling around on the ground, screwing like dogs in heat.

It is natural to turn one's gaze away and pretend not to notice when men and women join together, but there was something wrong about it here, something both terrible and frightening. It was as though the white-skins' souls were possessed by evil spirits. These were not the acts of men and women, but of beasts.

Then I found a dead white-skinned woman — strangled, it looked like. A few feet beyond her, a man had been stabbed to death dozens or hundreds of times with a bit of reed sharpened into a knife. It was still buried in his chest.

"Stay ready," I told Burd, hefting my spear to show him what I meant. He lifted his own spear and took a stronger grip on it.

We circled around the spirit-tree, finding a couple more dead bodies. Then, among the joined couples, I spotted Shay and pointed him out to Burd. Burd ran to his friend, spoke to him, but Shay only snarled murderously and swung a fist.

When Burd backed away, Shay rose and charged at him, screaming, flailing his arms. I rushed to Burd's side to defend him. When Shay turned on me, his eyes wild and senseless, I drove my spear into his belly.

Gasping, he stopped and just looked at me, then slowly sank to his knees. I jerked my spear free and hit him in the face with its butt. He collapsed and did not move, either dead or dying.

Face pale, Burd stared at me. He jabbered something, then turned away, fell to his knees, and vomited. Had he never seen blood or death before? I wondered. He was acting like a boy on his first village raid.

The woman Shay had been screwing leaped to her feet and padded silently off into the darkness. I picked up a couple of pieces of red cloth she had left lying in the dirt. The spirits would not mind my taking them, I thought.

Now I had seen enough to confirm my suspicions. Whatever had happened to the other white-skins hadn't affected Burd: the decorations on his face and chest had marked him as human, and the evil spirits had left him alone.

"Let's go back," I told him, and when I started for our village he picked himself up and followed.

As we neared the village gate, a small brown figure suddenly hurtled out of the grass at me, screaming like a monkey. I dropped my spear, caught slim arms, and heaved a childish body up into the air.

It was Joqua, one of our village's youngest boys. He was only eight or nine years old, thin as a reed,

but still strong and wiry. He kicked until Burd grabbed his feet, and together we wrestled him to the ground and sat on him to keep him from biting and kicking us.

He was chewing something. Burd reached out, pried Joqua's jaws open, and pulled it out, nearly losing his fingers to Joqua's teeth in the process.

It looked like a white slug in the dimness. Burd smelled it suspiciously, then passed it to me.

It was soft, sticky, and warm to the touch. It had a sweet, spicy scent.

"*Gum*," Burd said. He mimed pulling something out of a container — and I realized he meant this strange *gum* had come from his spirit-box. I had been right; the spirits had tried to trick us with their presents. If we'd put our spirit-boxes into the spirit-stone, we would have fared no better than the white-skins.

I looked back at the spirit-tree, listening to the cries and sobs and moans of white-skinned men and women in the power of evil spirits. Perhaps, I thought, this *gum* was like the *javara* we made and snorted to bring us closer to the spirit-world. That seemed likely.

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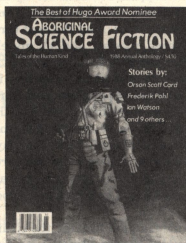
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Little Joqua had quieted. He let me pick him up, and I carried him the rest of the way into the village. I kept the *gum* in my hand the whole way.

We pulled the village's gates shut. While the women saw to Joqua, I called all the men together. They gathered around me and I told them all I had seen at the white-skins' spirit-tree.

"The spirits tricked them," I said, holding out the *gum*. "This *gum* is like *javara*. It opened their souls to the spirits."

"Then they are possessed now," Eona said.

"That is true," I said. "They did not protect themselves as we did. None of them had painted their bodies to mark themselves as human."

"We must drive them away from here," Eona said firmly. "There will only be more trouble if they remain." A number of others echoed his words.

I shook my head, though. "We must not do anything until I have walked with the spirits," I said. "I have the *gum* now. I will chew it, and I will see who has brought us to this place, and for what purpose. Only then may we act."

Eona thought for a minute, then nodded. "That is wise," he admitted.

I sat by the fire, stared into the flames for a heartbeat, then put the *gum* into my mouth and chewed slowly. The taste was odd, sweet and bitter at once, like nothing I had ever eaten before.

Little happened at first. Slowly the flames began to turn green, then blue, rising before me like a mountain of color. I felt the heat through my whole body, closed my eyes, and felt myself soar over the land like a bird.

I came to ground in a clearing in a place very much like the forest in the real world where I had lived. There were bright birds in the surrounding trees, and monkeys chattered down at me, as gold and red butterflies flitted about my head. I could smell the rich moistness of the earth and feel the warm breeze on my skin. I looked at my arms and found my tattoos had returned; I looked as human as I ever had.

A wide trail led through the clearing. I followed it. Tree branches wove together over my head, and it grew darker. I came to an old stone ruin, and seated on top of the ruin was an enormous black beetle.

"Are you Cocoti?" I said to the beetle. I felt myself tremble with fear. Never before had I come face to face with this great spirit.

"I am Cocoti," said the beetle. Its voice was sharp and strong. "Why have you come to the spirit-world, manling?"

"I have come seeking answers."

"What answers do you seek?"

"Why have we been born into the spirit-world?"

"You are no better than monkeys," the beetle said,

"no matter how you decorate yourselves."

"Answer my question, Cocoti," I said, bolder.

"Do you raise your hand against me?"

"No," I said. "You are the greatest of all the spirits, Cocoti, and all men fear you. But answer my question, and perhaps I can help you in return."

"There will be a high price to pay."

"I will pay it."

The beetle paused, its six huge black arms waving in the air.

"You are not in the spirit-world," it said at last. "You are not dead, manling, but neither are you alive yet. You who are the dung of a wild dog must know that."

"Then what are we?"

"You are the future," it said. "You are all the future." And then it leaned forward and bit off my head with its shiny black jaws.

I woke cold and stiff, gasping in pain. A thin light was bleeding into the village through the walls to the east; the sky looked gray. I felt a drop of rain strike my forehead, then another.

The fire had gone out. I rose and looked around.

Eona and Maraga were both watching me. Their eyes were puffy; they hadn't slept all night, it seemed. Eona's spear lay at his feet. He had been guarding me.

"Are you well?" Maraga asked.

"Yes," I said.

"The spirits — ?"

"I saw Cocoti," I said. "He says this is not the spirit world. It is another test."

"We already knew that," Eona said.

"Yes," I said.

Men, women, and children were sprawled here and there throughout the village, one head pillowed on another's stomach or thigh, arms intertwined. Men and women were already pairing off. Only the white-skins all slept singly, off in one corner. There was also one man lying behind Eona and Maraga. He wasn't breathing, I saw.

"What happened to that one?" I asked.

"Burd killed him," Eona said simply.

"What?" I cried.

Maraga said, "He tried to murder you when you were in the spirit-world."

I shuddered at the thought. A man who died while his soul was in the spirit-world would have his soul trapped there forever. It was a horrible fate.

"Why would he do such a thing?" I asked. "It makes no sense."

"Look at his face," Maraga said.

I went to the man, knelt, turned him over. Blood had pooled in his right cheek, turning it black where it had touched the ground, and the paint on his face had all smudged. It was the hunter I'd worried about the day before. I'd thought I'd known him then.

Today, in the morning light, I knew I did.

"Ngosoc," I whispered.

"You named him as your murderer before you died," Maraga said. "Then men of our village killed him that night."

It was true: he had bewitched me in the real world, sending evil spirits into my stomach to kill me. He was forty years younger now, and I did not know how I had failed to recognize him. It must have been more of his witchery.

"Burd killed him?" I asked.

Eona nodded. "The white-skins set the grass on fire by the spirit-tree. We were all at the gate, watching the flames, when we heard a warrior's cry behind us. It was this one—" he nudged Ngosoc with his toe—"running at you with a spear. He would have driven it through your back. Burd grabbed a spear, threw it, and killed Ngosoc."

"Was it a clean blow?" I asked.

"Straight through the heart," Maraga said. "The spirits must have helped him."

I thought back to how I'd saved Burd from Shay the night before. Now Burd had saved me in turn. If throwing away the spirit-boxes had been our first test, letting Burd and the other white-skins join us must have been the second.

I told Eona and Maraga as much.

"It is true," Eona admitted. "The spirits have been guiding you. Though I still do not like or trust white-skins, Burd is different."

"He will become a human being," I said.

I walked slowly to the gate, untied it, pushed it open. Eona and I stood shoulder to shoulder looking out toward the spirit-tree.

The grass-fire still smoldered a bit, sending smudgy gray pillars of smoke toward the sky, but a heavier rain began to patter down around us. I knew it would put out the last of the flames.

You are the future. How many more tests would Cocoti pose for me before he was satisfied?

"They must become human beings," I said, realizing the truth at last. It had been before me all the time. It was the greatest test ever posed by Cocoti. "You said the white-skins came to your people in the old world, making them worship *Virgin Mary*. The white-skins were wrong. There is no *Virgin Mary*. There is only Cocoti here, and he is still testing us."

"What must we do?" Eona asked.

"First we must decorate the white-skins," I said, "to protect them from evil spirits. Then we must take their spirit-boxes and destroy them, for they are the source of the evil. The white-skins must join our village and live as people among us."

"All of us together?" Eona asked, brows creasing.

"Yes," I said, and I could see it in my mind: white and brown, all working together, building the greatest village the spirits had ever seen. It could happen. It would happen.

Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit

You are all the future.

All of us. That included the white-skins, I knew.

I leaned on Eona's shoulder and told him of my vision, told him all Cocoti had revealed to me. He agreed with my interpretation.

"But what if the white-skins will not join us?" he asked. "They have never lived among us as people." "You have your spear," I said, "and I have mine. If they will not become people, we must treat them as dangerous animals and kill them. When their souls are reborn, they will know the truth."

"The truth," he echoed. Then he smiled. "It is a good plan. Cocoti is right. When will we start?"

"Now," I said. "Wake the other men—and Nonu. She must speak to the white-skins for us. It is early; the white-skins will be sleepy and disorganized. Perhaps some will still be possessed by evil spirits."

"Yes, Headman."

That was the first time he'd ever called me that, I realized. He had accepted me fully. *That was another test, I thought. Will you never stop, Cocoti?*

As Eona woke the others, I looked out across the grassy field and dreamed. We would all come together, I thought, every man and every woman in the world, all of us serving Cocoti and the spirits. White or brown, the color of our skin would not matter. Our rebirth was only the beginning.

You are the future. You are all the future.

I would make sure of that. □

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Literacy begins with you.

Gingerbread Man

By Patricia Anthony

Art by Pamela Blotner

Three drops of blood on her pillow. Perfectly round. Aspirin-sized. She runs her hand along the indentation her head has left on the white percale: a bas-relief of Anna sunken in sleep.

Downstairs she hears her husband fumbling from room to room, surrounded by his aura of noise. Jim makes little-boy sounds, look-at-me sounds, all thumps and rattles and bangs. A moment later she hears the radio come on. Music storms up the polished oak stairs.

I'm fa-alling. I'm fa-a-alling, a male voice sings in a tight falsetto. *I'm fa-alling in love with you.*

Something about the song, the words, makes her shudder. She walks to the blue and white wicker bathroom and stands in front of the mirror, checking each nostril for a drying rim of blood, each ear for a blackening reddish crust. She checks her scalp for scratches and finds nothing.

She stares at her unblemished face in the mirror and feels anticipatory fear brush past.

When her black cat pads into the bathroom, she reaches down and picks him up, running exploratory fingers along his unmarked body. The stroking ignites a parted-mouth, heavy-lidded purr. He meets her gaze with an adoring one of his own.

Oh, his eyes.

His eyes are strange, overly huge, nearly all dark pupil. With a shiver, she flings the cat out of her arms. Jingo lands awkwardly on the carpet, then turns to regard her with twitch-tailed, feline reproach.

She looks at the cat, all soft, clotted shadow and huge, questioning yellow eyes. There are no apologies, no excuses, for her baffling terror.

I must be crazy, she thinks.

Three weeks ago she had come home from the store to find the ice cream melted and sweet Neapolitan mud clinging to the unfrozen packages of peas, of spinach. The pastrami had lost its deli counter cool, as though she had been gone for hours.

The Kroger receipt had marked the checkout time at 13:42, and she had parked her car under the gathering of East Texas loblolly pines near her door at 4:15. It was a twenty-minute drive from the store to the house on the lake, and somewhere, from parking lot to driveway, she had fallen down a rabbit-hole of time.

It wasn't the first rabbit hole. Her childhood had

been Swiss-cheesed with forgotten moments.

She snaps her gaze from the mirror to study the empty bathroom. Her breath catches, a hard lump, in her chest. *Something's coming for me*, she thinks.

Clangings from the kitchen, the rifle-fire bang of a cabinet door slamming shut: the bellicose noises of Jim cooking. Since her marriage she has come to hate Sundays. Saturdays Jim spends running to the hardware store, the nursery, the cleaners. She imagines him visiting those quiet places, spawning noise.

Sundays he has no place to go.

She walks back into the bedroom, darting an uneasy glance toward the window. Freon horror pumps its chill through the capillaries in her back, down the large arteries in her arms.

The first of her childhood delusions, shattered at age sixteen, was that it was normal to misplace time; the second fallacy, splintered years later, was that it was natural to be afraid.

Someone's watching me, she thinks.

Quickly she puts the finishing touches on the bed, changes her pillowcase, and, with Jingo weaving adroitly between her moving feet, goes into her studio.

The studio is safe with familiar smells of gesso and acrylic paint. Five stretched canvasses lie against a wall, awaiting colors. The sixth sits atop its easel. She stands back to admire Saturday's changes, the way the yellow thrusts up from the surrounding blue.

Picking up the smaller of the pallet knives, she squirts carmine directly onto the rubbery folds of drying yellow and executes three round dots.

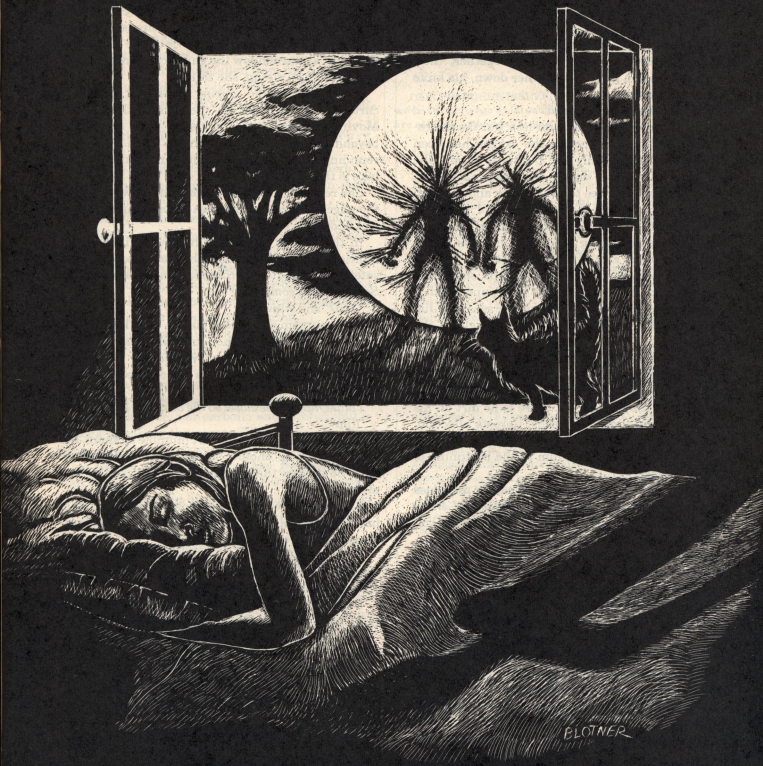
Her arm muscles stretch and bunch to the rhythm of creation. Furiously she paints until the three carmine circles have been filled in. No longer aspirin-sized, but red butter dishes. Larger than life.

When she is finished she wonders at the dread trembling of her fingers. She steps back from the painting and sees that the red dots she created have ruined the balance of the work.

That wasn't the picture she had in her mind at all. At all.

I must be crazy, she thinks.

She ventures downstairs a while later to find the kitchen emptied of all but clutter. Near the stove sits a rack of gingerbread men with pink



frosting smiles and somber raisin eyes.

Outside Jim is puttering in the garden. They follow each other, she thinks — Anna and Jim — keeping a careful room's length. Together, their wordless tension grinds each other down, his knife to her whetstone.

Her all-abrasable husband.

The kitchen is safe now, Jim-less; but the atmosphere is fatigued as though the oxygen has been consumed. Methodically she begins to clean. She soaps the bowl free of dough, the cookie pans clean of oil. Then she glances to the counter and is seized by the watchful gazes of the gingerbread men.

She flees their eyes. Going to the living room, she begins to clean, folding the paper Jim has left in little tents to the side of the Laz-E-Boy.

At the unexpected sound of footsteps, she gasps. Her startled fingers drop the newspaper and it flutters to the carpet. Glancing up, she sees that Jim — merely Jim — stands in the rectangle of the doorway.

He seems absurd in his Polo-shirted and starched-jean tidiness: a button-down gingerbread man with a button-down, humorless mind. For hours he has been in the garden, yet there is no dirt on his hands. Careful Jim kills weeds, uproots affection, and leaves no evidence.

I love you, she had told him at the beginning of their marriage.

Prove it, he had said in his accusatory, wordless way ever since. *If you loved me you would share things with me. You'd be there when I needed you instead of hiding in your studio. If you loved me, you'd put your goddamned paintbrush down and go to a movie once in a while.*

They stare at each other, her fright settling into guilt. It seems that she should make the effort to say something, but the air in the living room is weighty, all the oxygen gone. If she speaks, the friction between them will produce a cold pressure without light, absent of heat. After a moment he stalks away and she hears the screen door slam.

In the garage the lawn mower starts with a loud, rebuking roar, a noise to make her tremble. It is a bullying sound: her husband giving tongue to his fury.

Had she not suffered from fear since childhood she would think that her stalker, her nightmare, is Jim.

She awakens that night with a jolt of alarm to see bright moonlight flooding the bedroom. The house holds a bell-jar hush. Next to her Jim sleeps like the dead.

A burglar, she thinks for no apparent reason. She gathers the sheet into her fists. *A burglar is in the house.*

The bedroom has an eerie quality to it, a prickly

what's-next feel. She slips out of bed and rounds the foot of it. The shadows of the magnolia leaves play a trembling black-and-white movie on the hardwood floor, but at the window the gauze curtains lie lank.

Something's wrong, she thinks.

She stares at the glaring moonlight, the still curtains, the shuddering shadows of the leaves. Moving forward into the pallid glow she looks beyond the patch of moon on the lawn. The surrounding pines are sketched in dark charcoal. The lake is tar-pit black.

She reaches the window and peers upward to see the edge of a great, craterless moon hanging a few feet above the eaves.

In the base of her throat her pulse flutters, an imprisoned moth. Quickly she backs toward the safety of the bed. *Something is coming*, she thinks. *Something is coming for me.*

"Jim?" she whispers.

An aneurysm of memory bursts. Cold knowledge gorges cavities in her thoughts. She realizes that this exact same terror has visited her childhood nights; it attended her in the car on the way back from Kroger.

I must hide in the closet so the burglars can't come.
"Jim?"

He doesn't move. He doesn't mumble or snore. So strange that he should be silent, this clamoring man. So strange that she should be panicked by the moon.

She backs through the bedroom doorway into the hall and can feel, like a sudden assault, the tickle of someone's stare.

Turning. Turning now, her eyes wide to meet the trespasser. She remembers herself at eight years old in her mother's old kitchen.

Uh oh, uh oh, uh oh, she thinks as she thought then, her brain in a scratched-record loop.

Turning. Out of the corner of her eye she can see him, backlit by his own moonlight.

Face-to-mask-like-face now. Their gazes meet with a silent little click. In her throat her scream balls itself up into something tiny enough to be swallowed.

"Hello, Anna," he says. "I hope you won't be frightened."

He has always said those same words, and always in the same way, this improbable gray gingerbread man with his huge licorice eyes.

"Do you remember me now?" he asks gently.

"Yes," she whispers. It is her father standing there. A brother. A lover of great long standing.

He holds out his hand, a chubby little hand for a willowy little creature. Three fat fingers and a claw.

"Would you like to come with me for a while?" he asks, his hand begging.

She wants that more than anything in the world; she is terrified more than life. "Yes," she replies, and

walks toward him.

The bus is waiting," he says as they walk across the nighttime lawn.

The careless moon has fallen from the eaves and it sits, a round, silvery-white shape, by the pines. "Not a bus," she says. His hand in hers is cool and spongy, like something dredged from the lake.

He chuckles, a fond, indulgent sound. "No. You're right. Not a bus."

They are waiting outside for her, the others. A gathering of slender gray gingerbread men with black jelly-bean eyes.

"I'm sorry, Anna," her own gingerbread man says beside her. "Sometimes I forget you're grown. When you were a child you used to think buses. It was easier for you, I suppose. Are you afraid?"

He has noticed, perhaps, how her hand trembles in his own. Perhaps, as he senses her thoughts, he has suspected the screams in her mind.

"I can make you think buses," he offers. "I can make you think anything you like."

"No," she says.

A door in the moon opens and she walks inside. The walls are a glowing, uniform gray. The smell of the place hits her, not carboic and alcohol, but a doctor's smell all the same. The odor is his odor: strange and peppery sweet.

He pauses and stares up at her. So small. Less than shoulder-high. Once they were the same size; once she had thought him her best playmate. He has not aged, she notices. He is newly-minted, supernaturally so, like dreams.

"I can make you sleep," he says kindly.

"No." Her fingers, stronger than his, close in a warm cage over his hand.

He wakes her to what she once thought of as The Hurting Place. She remembers being eighteen, remembers her tonsillectomy, how she had been wheeled screaming and struggling into the OR. The doctors hadn't understood her panic. And because the taste of the gingerbread man was one of almost perfect forgetfulness, she hadn't quite known what the matter was, either.

"You must take your nightgown off now," he tells her. "Would you prefer I help?"

"I'll do it," she says, timidly avoiding his gaze. Lifting the gown up from the hem, she pulls it over her head.

The table is cold as she remembered. The gray machinery above her just as institutional, just as real. The others crowd around, making adjustments, talking to each other in clicks and reedy moans.

Panic fizzes in her stomach; it sizzles down her naked, cold limbs. The forgetfulness they have made for her is a faulty one. It leaks horror out its seams.

"Close your eyes," her own gingerbread man

Gingerbread Man

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whispers.

Over her lids he places his hand.

If she could move, she would. Now, too late, she wants to run away. While she is frozen immobile, the gingerbread men take small, dripping pieces of her, totemic bits of flesh. They invade places not even her husband has known.

"Sleep," he says.

The world loosens. Her stranglehold on consciousness slips. She is falling.

It's over now, Anna," he says.

She wakes up. He is standing beside the table, and she is sitting, her nightgown hanging demurely over her breasts, her legs. Not skilled in such things, he has put it on her inside out.

"Would you like to talk for a while?" he asks.

"Yes," she says. Talking to him is the candy a nurse gives after an injection; it is the gift of hospital flowers.

But for a long moment they don't speak. She sips his peppery, comfortable silence.

"I finished a painting last week," she finally tells him. "I think it's the best I've ever done. The gallery thinks so, too. They're very excited."

Unlike Jim, he seems interested. He leans forward and asks, "Tell me about the painting."

"It's aggressive. All belligerent blues, quarrel-some greens, with slashes of contentious purple. Quiet tones made noisy. A portrait of my husband."

Then she remembers other conversations. She remembers why the room is gray. "That's right," she says sadly. "You don't see colors."

The gingerbread man reaches out and touches her on the forehead. Reflexively, she closes her eyes. "I see your colors," he says. "You show me your colors." His finger drops to give a gentle benediction to one eyelid and then the other, with a touch as cold as rain. "I see them here," he says. "And here. They pour out of you like light."

Suddenly he cups her face in his hands. There is a frigid thrill as his claws slide across her skin, drawing back her hair. When she opens her eyes she sees in his gaze the same languid, mute affection her cat has favored her with.

"You are every color," he says.

She knows she is experiment to him. She is career. She is somehow lover and child. He lets his hands fall.

"You have to go now."

"I don't want to forget you again," she tells him.

"You have to go," he says.

She whispers, "If you love me, prove it."

For a moment that mask-face looks startled, then he strokes her arm absently as she often strokes Jingo, until she becomes cat-content. "I'll be back," he tells her. "You know that, don't you? You believe what I say."

He will come again for her, she knows. He will come to bestow a tablespoon of pain, a rounded teaspoon of love. She can't help fearing him; can't help adoring him. In his careful measure, he has been fairer than her husband.

They walk out of the glowing moon and across the lighted grass. At the steps he tugs on her wrist, his fingers a tender handcuff.

"Paint a picture of me," he says. "Make it all colors."

"I have painted a portrait of you," she tells him. She thinks, *It sits upstairs on its easel, three bright red dots of confusion.*

"Is it pretty?" he asks.

He reaches up to touch her hair, his claw snagging in its tangles. She knows that he finds her hair wondrous, magical. He has told her so before. He has told her how talented he thinks she is and how much he cares for her. The gingerbread man has been the most constant, the most chaste of lovers.

"Walk me upstairs," she asks.

"I can't."

"Let me remember you."

He puts his finger to his lipless mouth, a human gesture, one copied from her own pantomime book. "It will be our little secret," he tells her.

She misunderstands. For a giddy instant she thinks that she will wake up the next morning and be able to put a name to the thing that is coming for her.

"Our little secret," he says.

But he touches her eyes and she falls.

She awakens the next morning and is bewildered to find she has put her nightgown on inside out. When Jim has left for work and the house is quiet, she goes to the hamper. Inside, with the towels and Jim's gardening clothes, she finds the blood-stained pillowcase. With broad, strong strokes, painting strokes, she brushes stain-remover on the drops until her hand starts to tremble.

Something is coming for me, her mind whispers.

Hurriedly, she puts the laundry in the washer and goes to the kitchen. The gingerbread men are still lying on the rack, forgotten by all but the ants. The insects have dug holes in the crust. They have stolen the frosting smiles.

She wipes the ants away and tumbles the cookies into the trash bin. She stares at the broken legs, the shattered arms. With abrupt, felling remorse, she drops to her knees and picks one up, dusty with cigarette ash, smeared with tomato sauce. Hot tears in her eyes, she cradles it fiercely, terrified of it, afraid to let it go.

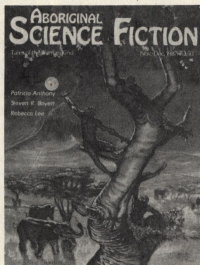
Oh, God. I must be crazy, she thinks. □

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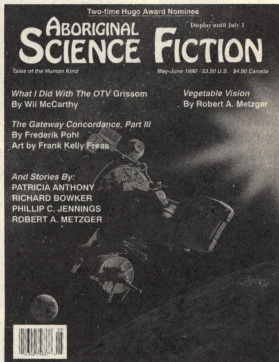


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The Fermi Paradox Explained on a City Street Corner

By Graham P. Collins

Art by Robert Pasternak

I made the mistake of looking at the wild-eyed vagrant for a tad longer than a nanosecond, and he had me. I was sure he was going to ask me for a quarter, or a cigarette.

"I used to be a heretical physicist," he declared, daring me to contradict him.

I looked around for Laura, but she was later than me. The soft autumn twilight had already hardened into night.

"I helped design bombs, and Star Wars."

I tried my best to ignore him, but couldn't help thinking his wind-splayed hair and ragged beard sure looked like that of the few physicists I had ever met. They hadn't worn shirts ripped from neck to navel, though, and most of them seemed to have bathed within the previous week.

"But they wouldn't let me count on my fingers. That would've been silly. I was a physicist but I couldn't count on my fingers. One, two, twenty neutrons —" He indicated the numbers with one, two, a handful of fingers, and shook his head and laughed.

He was too spindly and fragile to seem like a threat, but I strolled away from the corner, down to the next shop. I studied the book display in the window and wished the store were still open or that Laura would get there.

"Oh yes, I worked on Star Wars." I could see his reflection in the window. He watched the few passersby with suspicion as they hurried along, all of them studiously ignoring him, some with painfully obvious not-noticing expressions. "Course I can't talk about it. A lot of it's still very hush-hush," he said quietly. "Know what they used to call me? Know what they used to call me? I'll tell you. They used to call me Obi-Wan." He roared with laughter. "Obi-Wan!" His reflection was staring back at me from two steps behind my own translucent image in the glass.

I looked at my watch for the third time in less than a minute. I caught his reflection nodding a scornful appraisal of that phenomenon, and I quickly returned my gaze to the book display. A soft breath of night air was marred by his urinous odor.

"Ah, Star Wars, there was a project. We were going to defend the world from annihilation, but

then the Russians had to go and get soft on us. Who would have thought it, eh? Some peace dividend. Where were you when that happened? That's what I want to know."

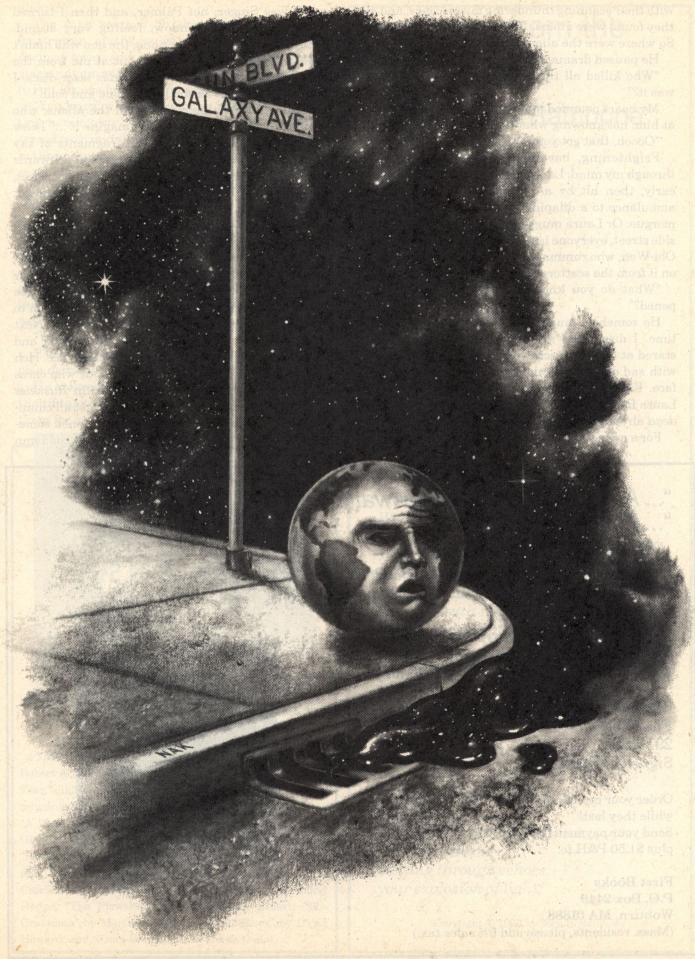
I walked back to the corner and around it, hoping he would give up on me. The corner store displayed a bank of TVs behind a metal grill. Three showed an ad for starving children in the Third World; others showed an astonishing promo for the latest special effects extravaganza out of Hollywood.

"You know why they called me Obi-Wan?" I jumped as if a puppeteer had tweaked all my strings at once. "I used to say we were the force — the Force — you get it? — Star Wars was the force that was going to subvert the vermin paradox. You ever wonder about the vermin paradox?" He spat a vile gob of yellow phlegm onto the pavement. I tensed but didn't move, knowing he wanted me to react.

"You don't even know what I'm talking about! Oh, Mister Big Shot, dressed in a fancy suit and tie and looking at your watch every ten seconds. No, you don't know what I'm talking about, do you? Well, I'll tell you. You think there's intelligent life in the universe? Eh? Eh? Heh, present company excluded, of course. Do you think we're so special? Of course we're not. I worked it out on my fingers one day — Drake's equation, circumcising the galaxy. You couldn't count the number of aliens out there on the fingers of a pinhead angel! So why aren't there intelligent aliens all over the goddamned place? Answer me that!"

Some of the TVs showed the start of a news broadcast: tanks, jet fighters, and snipers in the remnants of the Balkans, the trial of the latest gun-wielding psychopath. Nothing new. Another group of TVs had a game show. I headed back to the bookstore. Still no sign of Laura.

"I mean, it stands to reason. If we're not special, there should be as many aliens around this pint-sized galaxy — like angels dancing through the eye of a camel." I saw his reflection in the glass nod sagely. "And *that's* another good argument, too. But what about the aliens, eh? What about them? They weren't hiding on pinheads. No, IBM looked there



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with their scanning thundering microscopes, and all they found were atoms. Atoms, angels, and camels. So where were the aliens?"

He paused dramatically.

"Who killed all the aliens? Sure wasn't Laura, was it?"

My heart pounded and I turned to stare straight at him, not knowing what to say or think.

"Ooooh, that got you interested, didn't it?"

Frightening, barely logical images tumbled through my mind: Laura arriving at our rendezvous early, then hit by a car and taken away in an ambulance to a dilapidated emergency room — or morgue. Or Laura mugged and dragged into a dark side street, everyone ignoring the incident but crazy Obi-Wan, who rummaged something with her name on it from the scattered contents of her pocketbook.

"What do you know about Laura? What happened?"

He somehow laughed and sneered at the same time. I discovered my hands were clenched as I stared at his dirty, scrawny neck. He looked at me with sad disgust practically oozing from his grimy face. Finally he answered. "It couldn't have been Laura Palmer who killed the aliens: she was fuckin' dead already!"

For a moment I thought dumbly that Laura's last

name was Singer, not Palmer, and then I turned back to the store window, feeling very stupid. Laura's corpse — the other one, the one who hadn't killed all the aliens — looked out at me from the shrink-wrapped boxes of *Twin Peaks* laser discs. I felt as red and hot as she looked blue and cold.

"So if Laura Palmer didn't kill the aliens, who did? Nuclear war, we thought. Imagine it ..." I saw his reflection staring up at the fragments of sky between all the buildings; he staggered backwards in a rough circle. "All those stars, all those creatures, and they all killed themselves before they could get off their planet and go exploring."

I looked up. Of course the sky was featureless, somewhere between black and hazy city-lit limbo.

"Well, we weren't going to get caught by that trap, oh no, we were going to defend ourselves with Star Wars, and be the first intelligent species in the universe to survive. Fuckin' Russkies. Trust 'em to cave in just when we were getting somewhere. Next thing you know, our budget's shot to pieces and fuckin' peace is breaking out all over the place. Heh heh, except for Europe and Detroit, but who cares about them anymore? Welllll, if the fuckin' *Russkies* can become born-again capitalists and get all chummy-wummy you *know* it's gotta've happened somewhere else in the universe, so where're the goddamn

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The White Mists of Power

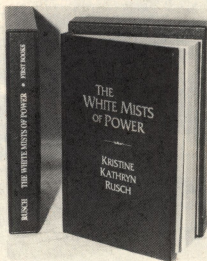
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aliens?"

The man seemed on the verge of tears with frustration at the question. Then that emotion drained away and he looked suddenly dangerous, glaring at me with a bitter expression. I stood poised to run in case he lunged at me.

"You know what we look like to the aliens? Shitting in our own backyards. Shambling around obsessed with mindless drivel." His sweeping arm took in the bookstore, the home electronics shop, and the rest of the avenue. "Gibbering our TV programs out at the sky like raving lunatics." He took mincing steps and spoke in a rough falsetto: "I'll buy a vowel for a hundred."

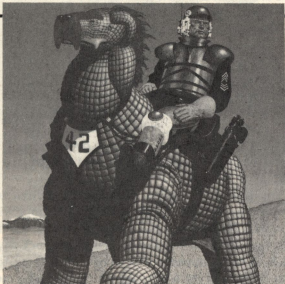
I saw Laura turn a corner a block away. I hurried toward her and tried to ignore Obi-Wan's shouts.

"Our civilization is one of the goddamned street people of the universe! The aliens are out there, they're just hurrying by, not looking at us, hoping we'll keep babbling to ourselves."

"Who's that man?" Laura asked.

"No one," I said, taking her arm and guiding her on a detour to avoid going back past Obi-Wan.

He bellowed his last line after us: "They're afraid that if they stop and look at us — we're going to ask them for a quarter! Or a cigarette!" □



Our next issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal SF* will feature a return of Robert A. Metzger's short fiction to our pages with "A Tin Tear," illustrated by Alan Gutierrez. Joining our science columnist will be an interesting line-up of stories, including "A Word to the New Recruits" by Pete Manison, "Slurp-Glop" by Greg Jones, "Fence of Palms" by B. J. Thrower, "Rosebush" by Anthony Ellis, "Trophy" by Wendy A. Conner, "Earth Kwaatsi" by Ann K. Schwader, "Sturm Clusters" by John Farrell, "Deepcity Midnights" by Robert Hodge, "The Plowshares" by Richard J. Stuart, "The Grassman" by Martin McMullen, "Shell-Shock" by David Howard, and "From the Beach" by Derek Godat.

Poem from the Stars

By Wendy Rathbone

*My words
are the refrains
of the ages,
gentle microwaves
to lull you.*

*As I compose this
I fear
the stars are racing
beyond view, repelled forever
by closeness.
If you like me
you'll understand my need
to breach that law
and send this note.*

*But the void is deeper
than need, and harsh.
We may theorize.
We may wrap messages
in the radio whispers of suns,
learn to climb the long
ladders of dimensions
that web our dreams
but still truth remains:
We are not meant to meet.*

*I am eons dead
now that you hear me,
but for this micro-span
of all spacetime
I live
within the translated equations
that rustle
a stargazer's thoughts.
I live
within your listening silence,
a future traveler
visiting through echoes
your explosion of light.*

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Indigenes

By Greg Abraham

Art by Clyde Duensing, III

Ehbenzo chose not to return to the mountain's summit until evening. Glaciers pressed each side of the spur where he stood, and farther ahead they fused at the base of a long chimney, ascending as an immense sheet. Flying up had proven hard.

The mountain's vast beauty distracted him from pondering his future. So did the riddle of the indigenes. Great Uncle Skuttem had often discussed this world and its people, who'd extinguished themselves long ago, body and soul. Ehbenzo chilled at thoughts of a species lost, souls improperly dispersed into continuum after bodily death. Yet Skuttem had requested that his memorial be observed here. The chill acquired a more tantalizing edge.

Gusts of wind raked the spur. Ehbenzo wouldn't mind an apprenticeship that took him to enigmatic worlds like this one. Letting go of the basalt with his forelimbs, he raised his wings and jumped. As he tacked into the high wind and wrestled the potent gravity, his mood billowed. He gained some ground before grasping an outcropping of rock with all fours. Turquoise and aquamarine plunged into icy crevasses. Summer's late sunset barely lit the crystalline world below. He leapt.

"Benzo," Roki whispered, slipping her talons beneath his pack and mooring him down. When he glanced over his left wing, she flicked her noseplate at a wry angle. The plate was rosy-hued — after all, she'd barely gotten her growth — and Ehbenzo felt as much excitement as annoyance.

"Where'd you come from?" he protested, glaring at the fully extended wings of the priestess. "It's easy. And I can get back up without climbing!" He clutched the outcropping with all twenty-eight digits until Roki let go. Pirouetting on his left forelimb, he let his back end drape over the abyss.

"Your father ordered you to stay near me, remember? Skuttem's Feast could be any time." Her take-off was as brisk as the words.

He followed, admiring her grasp of the wind while his own wings tensed against the lifting current. He and the priestess glided low along the downward slope of the eastern glacier, soon overflying rough scree. Landing as one, they continued the journey on foot.

"What've you been up to?" Roki asked on the way. Ever since she'd become the family's priestess, she'd been snooping, trying to decide whether he might be suitable for her guild, taking it for granted that he

was even interested in becoming one of the compassionate.

He was silent, speculating again about last night's discoveries, knowing that if he tried to explain about the indigenes, he'd catch hell for disobeying. For desecrating the tabernacle. Or for flying alone.

Surging ahead, he spun and pleaded, "The indigenes, tell me some more!" He grabbed a breeze and sailed too near her head for comfort. She took a swipe at him, nabbed a hindlimb, and reeled him in. Then she began to chant:

*According to their learned studies,
The anthropologists say
The techno-species of this world
Was foolish in a fatal way.
For as they left their gravity-well
Seeking glory and the stars,
They poisoned their genetic code
In swift, malicious wars.*

*They are gone. The stars prevail.
Their world remains. Its scars now heal.
Holy wisdom was shrewder than they;
For just as cosmic law demands,
A race too brutal to travel space
Will always perish by its own hands!*

Delighted, Ehbenzo clicked his talons and lowered his head to show respect for her improvisation. His talons were still chittering as he and the priestess entered the forest. Roki's urgency to get back to camp appeared to have lessened, as they diverted to survey a canyon, which cradled a melt-off stream far below. Ehbenzo's vision shifted into lower frequencies. The ground brightened while the cold water and snow dimmed. He tossed a stone deep into the canyon, anchoring himself to its rim with his hindlimbs.

"Careful, boy. Ground's unstable there." Grinning, Roki tugged the thin hide of a wing. Ehbenzo scowled at her and, without comment, led the way to the camper.

Resting in a small meadow, its hull was bright warm in the dusk. Not far away a brook pulsed in darkness, its melody crackling like cold fire. The



smell of damp earth and mountain fern drew Ehbenzo in a wide arc away from the camper. He felt attuned to the forest that seemed to yearn — just as he did — for both the playful warmth of the sun and the night with its stars arrayed in conjecture. Finally he eyed Roki and gauged how long it would take her to lose her patience. Splashing his wings in the water, he ran back across the meadow and joined her at the hatch. They returned to the camper's ample three-space, oriented tangentially to the world's own three dimensions. His eyes shifted out of the infrared.

When the pair entered the galley, Ehbenzo bobbed his noseplate and went to his place at the table while Father frowned and Aunt Ortvá smiled with excess indulgence. His older brother Ygan and three cousins let smirks fissure from beneath their lowered noseplates. Settling onto a pillow next to his brother, Ehbenzo filled his bowls.

The oldest of the cousins, Ahshari, began bragging about the indigene bones she'd found.

"Too big," Ygan insisted. "Besides, it had hooves. Some domesticated herbivore, that's all."

"Ygan knows his exo-zoology," Ehbenzo sided, proud that Ygan would soon complete an apprenticeship under one of the greatest shepherds among all the clans. But with his pride came envy, the too-familiar worry over what his own future held.

Mother, pretending to joke, told Ahshari, "As long as it's their bones you find, and no souls —"

"But —" Ehbenzo interrupted, looking to the priestess for help. "Roki," he asked, pausing until she acknowledged him with a twitch of the ears, "indigenes had souls, didn't they? They had to!"

Ehbenzo's wings arched as Ygan mimicked the sympathetic squeak of his voice.

Roki hushed Ygan with an impatient glance. "Your little brother deserves some credit for considering this. The nature of the evidence differs from, say, your cow's hooves." She paused, continued in a more diplomatic tone: "But your mother's right, Benzo. Not even a prophet has ever found one of their souls. Many believe that their spirits were lost in the continuum because they had improper rites surrounding physical death. But given their penchant for holocide, at the end there wouldn't have been much chance for observing any rites at all."

A learned discussion, it held Ehbenzo's attention, though he was glad not to hear it again in Feast catechism, which followed supper and was mandatory for the young members of Family Hremat. There Ehbenzo teased the priestess about boring him, but his questions showed his fascination with the subjects. Ygan remained just long enough to demonstrate his regard for spiritual matters.

After dismissing Ortvá's children, Roki asked Ehbenzo to come along as she left the camper's

chapel. They passed Father sitting alone at the bridge, tinkering with controls to stabilize the various fields. He looked over, nodded at the two, and, with an expression full of concern, warned Ehbenzo to behave himself. Nipped by guilt, he wondered if Father's mood was solely due to Skuttem.

Arriving at the hatch, Roki gave Ehbenzo time to catch up.

Their forms brightened outside as eyes adjusted to the dark. He felt Roki's attention focused on him. "You're sleeping outside again tonight?" she asked.

He nodded. "When d'you think it'll be Feast?"

"Anytime ... the next two or three days."

Benzo said nothing.

"Why do you act so disappointed?" She said it like a dare. "Aren't you glad about Skuttem's memorial?"

"After Feast we'll leave, and I don't want to go. Not yet. There's —" but he broke off, still hesitating to describe his discoveries, afraid she might tell Father about his antics. The tips of his wings made small, swishing motions, and he looked toward the stars. "How many worlds are like this?" Then, laughing to hide the same emotion that had overcome him at dusk, he pulled his wings to his sides, sprang toward a nearby tree, and clambered up.

"A few. A few even more beautiful," Roki said. "The prophets know where they are and have shared them with me. A few." She surprised him by scaling the fir, coming to a halt farther down.

Ehbenzo tried to imagine those worlds and dimensions. "Skuttem talked about places like that ... Why didn't he enter your guild and become one of the compassionate?"

"He had many abilities, and that doesn't always help." Her silence was deep, like her words, like the sky overhead. "Why are the indigenes such a riddle for you? They were for him, too."

He reached high with a hindlimb, and his wings spread into the night. Floating like a kite at the top of the tree, anchored by one foot, he bobbed his head as he counted stars.

When he didn't answer, Roki said, "Your father's good to welcome me with such esteem into the family."

"He knew we'd have the best priestess in all the clans. Once he's a lord you'll have almost as many responsibilities as he does."

"I hope that's not for a while."

"Father wants to be a lord tomorrow!"

"You know what I mean." As if to herself she added, "You're so much like him."

Ehbenzo laid back his ears. "And you know what I mean."

Roki descended, and courtesy demanded that Ehbenzo follow. He let go and glided down, landing beside her with no more than a hop. "Like Father? How? And what'd you mean when you told Ygan

off?"

Unusually tender, Roki stroked the hide between his ears. "I meant that you're always disappearing."

For a moment he felt from her tone that she knew him better than he did. Was it a mistake not to present her with what he'd learned?

Roki walked in stately fashion, made quite a point now of studying his stars, then smacked his back end, just enough talon to sting. "Get some sleep. Your tent field is still north of here, past the tabernacle?"

He answered with a shrug of shoulders and wings that settled into a nod.

"See you at morning prayer. If Ygan has to fetch you, we'll listen to it all through breakfast. Please be on time."

Ehbenzo bounded into the woods once Roki departed. He found the stream and followed it north, maneuvered deftly toward the tabernacle. They'd established it in the center of a smaller meadow, where the snow had hardly melted.

A large tripod lifted the tabernacle's disk and dome well above his head. The opalescent glow was soft enough to keep his vision from modulating. As he had the night before, he reached high and took a perceptor, which scanned the continuum and was presenting a review of Skuttem's life. Ehbenzo cavorted up the mountain, the gibbous moon rising at his back. He considered his uncle, who'd found adventure but little renown; the memorial here was an obscure affair. Then again, it would be celebrated by the chief of Family Hremat, a man destined to be lord of many clans, and who one day might be lord of all the Kachetra.

Currents of night air, confused by glacier and forest, offered Ehbenzo little help getting up the ice chimney. He climbed as necessary but stayed airborne after crossing the firm line, where the crevasses became hazardous. And reaching the gaping bergschrund, he couldn't spot a route that would let him go on his limbs. He hovered, waited for a strong upward draft, and caught it while the low moon hid the chasm in shadow.

Elated, breathing hard, Ehbenzo took the summit. Seeking a site out of the wind, he pleaded himself against a boulder, bracing himself low on his hindlimbs with talons extended to keep him above the snow. He gazed west, where bright ridges against colder sky led his eyes to the northern reach of a long valley. Lifting the perceptor to his chest, he aimed at the ruins and concentrated.

Last night he had realized that during their final epoch, the indigenes must have developed broadcast technology. At times millions of them had undergone identical programming. How else could their collective perceptions have been etched into continuum so deeply that they were still retrievable? He searched again for those deteriorated memories indigenes

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that helped explain why no indigene souls had ever been found.

Indigene anatomy fascinated Ehenzo. They had been mammalian, like the Kachetra, more massive but not much bigger, wingless and exclusively bipedal. Most helpful to his study were the documentaries called *adulseenama* in the local language. Watching again the repetitive portrayals of bonding behaviors made him grin with an abashed sort of pity. When the wingless indigenes bonded, the sole thing that flared was the male insertive organ. Unusual. Only their males had insertive organs.

Ehenzo's real discovery had come in learning how indigene mockery of their holy guild had doomed them. He'd stumbled onto faint bits of a broadcast repeating a phrase that translated into one from the Kachetra's own Feast Liturgy:

These works are not done until the priestess has sung.

The broadcast was a *cohmeydee hauer*, a show full of bipedal slapstick. Several times a priestess started to sing. Even though an indigene, she was lovely. The darkness of her skin reminded Ehenzo of the carbon-black patches far back on Roki's cheeks that were like nebulae warmed by the rosy glow of her noseplate. The indigene wore robes that spread full as wings, colorful as a prismatic storm in ten-space. But every time the priestess began to sing, offensive things befell her. Crusty bowls of mucous were hurled into her face, sullyng her vestments and almost knocking her over. A pack of howling quadrupeds encircled her. And after each attack, a commentator recited in a local language the holy words:

Ihtsnat overtill thuh fahltleydee seengz.

Lost in concentration, Ehenzo didn't sense warmth until a hand grasped his shoulder. Squaling, he peeked upward as another limb reached down and took the perceiver away.

"The priestess and I have been looking for you. It will be a morning Feast. When I noticed this was missing I stopped worrying, but I should have a piece of your hide." Father dropped the perceiver back into Ehenzo's hands and jumped from the boulder down to the ice, crouched to wrap a forelimb around him. "You've defied me. And you could get killed flying up here. What've you found that's so interesting? I see from your spoor this isn't your first night on the summit."

Ehenzo tried to sound as mature as possible. "They had holies, the indigenes did. I found a few memories about a priestess!" He rested the perceiver in Father's free hand, keeping his own fingers on

it — talons deferentially retracted — so it still responded to his concentration. He'd brought the images out of continuum enough times that it was easy.

Father's noseplate rose in curiosity as he took the perceiver in both hands. Benzo interrupted, "There's one last sequence, where they let the *fahltleydee* sing. It's beautiful, Father. A few of them must have understood continuum. The priestess, their *fahltleydee* — a prophet, or maybe even Roki might be able to find her soul. Track it from the memories before they all fade away. D'you think?"

But Father was lost to the indigene song. They both listened to the exotic syllables and melody, studied the perceiver's translation:

*Rich and rare were the gems she wore,
And a bright gold ring on her wand she bore ...*

Father flexed his wings. "Why'd they abuse her? Demons."

"Not all of them," Ehenzo pointed out.

Again Father returned the perceiver to Ehenzo. "I don't recall anybody finding impressions like these before. They're weakening, but they're still clear. You've looked back a long way and should be proud of yourself ... maybe. What does the priestess say?"

Ehenzo turned his head and raised slightly the wing closest to Father. "I haven't told her. She doesn't like it when I wander off."

"I don't either. That doesn't stop you. But wouldn't she like to know about your indigene priestess? Wouldn't you like to —" With his knuckle he silently rubbed the base of Ehenzo's wing. "Should I talk to her?"

Benzo nodded.

The chief of Family Hremat moved away from the boulder and exposed his back. "Let's go. Hop on."

"I'm not a baby!" Ehenzo couldn't hide his dismay.

"I want you close." In a milder tone he added, "Your indigene has made me sad."

Ehenzo sighed, jumping on between the huge, unfurled wings and gripping with all his muscle but none of his talon. Soon airborne, they rose high above the summit, plummeted west, banked around the mountain's northern face.

Roki had opened the tabernacle and retracted its legs. Standing so she faced sunrise, formidable with her diamond staff that symbolized cosmic law, splendor in her indigo robes that represented the continuum enfolding ten-space, she bowed her head low. Ehenzo, Ygan, and Orta's three children stood along the tabernacle's rim to the right of the priestess, while Father and Mother were ranked to her left, with Orta at the

tabernacle's foot. Her weeping embarrassed Ehbenzo, so he focused on Skuttem's serene face or gazed at dew that shimmered on pines at the meadow's margin, his day vision full of alpine green and blue. A distant bird trilled slowly, measured the stillness and trilled again.

The priestess commenced by praising a departure from the body well-timed and wisely marshalled. "From your final sleep, Skuttem, brother of Family Hremat, son of Clan Uhir, treasured of the Kachetra, awaken!" Roki called out.

All heads bowed and eyes closed, except for one of Ehbenzo's. He watched both of Skuttem's eyes open. The ancient man remained motionless apart from a smile that shifted his noseplate.

"Awaken!" Roki intoned. She now observed Skuttem rather clinically, Ehbenzo thought. The rest of the family raised their heads. "Farewell, beloved of the People!"

"Farewell," everyone sang, Father's voice most resonant, Ygan's reedier but equally low, and Ehbenzo's not much higher. The cousins blended a second web of serene harmony.

Sun had cleared the treetops by the time the Great Prayers and Guidances came to an end. First warmth filled the brisk air with new scents. Roki cried ecstatically, "Depart!"

Skuttem's smile broadened then relaxed. His eyes changed, and were no longer truly eyes.

Father stepped forward, placed a finger at the base of the ancient's noseplate, and subsequently raised his wings to affirm death. Then he chanted:

These works are not done until the priestess has sung.

With great reverence he lifted Skuttem's right hand, still supple. He brought it to his lips, kissed it, and bit off the central finger, chewing and swallowing with reserve. Ehbenzo started to cry along with Ortva.

In her best voice, as clear and austere as the mountain sky, Roki began to sing a hymn passed down from the earliest days of the Kachetra, the elaborate Feast Song. It praised the body as the most precious token of life, as inestimable food not to be wasted, tying each generation to those preceding it, and strengthening each soul for its own departure.

But Ehbenzo, remembering the *fahitleydee* and her song, couldn't move as the rest of the family engaged in the funerary feast. Father stoically bit off two more fingers while Ortva circled the tabernacle before stopping near Skuttem's head. She bent over and bit into an ear. Mother edged down toward the feet to supervise Ortva's younger children. Ygan nudged Ehbenzo twice before giving up, stepping forward, raising a wing in his talons, and feasting Indigenes

in a rakish, manly fashion.

It was Father who came around to put a hand on Ehbenzo's shoulder, urging him forward with comforting words. Certain that Father didn't understand why he cried, Benzo moved toward the wing, where he prepared to feast alongside his brother — just as Roki's song came to a stop. The celebrants halted.

Ehbenzo hung his head in humiliation until a delicate touch soothed his shoulder. A fine, warm hand, with talons retracted, met his chin as Roki leaned over and moved him toward Skuttem's head. "He's not the only one I'm here to guide. Your father and I have conferred. If you're willing to begin as my apprentice, then help me. Sight is best commemorated by those — like the prophets — with vision." And in a manner that was solely Roki's, she gave Ehbenzo a push before returning to her place at the tabernacle.

Stunned by her words, he watched as the talons of her right hand extended to take one of Skuttem's eyes. She feasted. She raised her wings high, glanced down at Ehbenzo, then signaled for him to come to her side. Indicating Skuttem's remaining eye, she resumed the Feast Song.

Mother consoled Ortva. Ygan glanced at the new apprentice and tried to hide a surprised grin behind his lowered noseplate. Father, nodding, raised his wings respectfully. Ehbenzo approached to honor Skuttem's departure. And feasting, he also paid homage to the *fahitleydee*, ready to search for her soul himself. □

Guidelines Are Available

If, while reading *Aboriginal*, you get a hankering to try your own hand at writing a science fiction yarn, please send for our guidelines. Just mail a SASE (self-addressed, stamped [29¢] envelope) to our editorial address:

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The Recyclers

By Anthony J. Howard
Art by Cortney Skinner

The blood-red sky hurled abuse at the barren earth. Figures made their way slowly down the winding draw; the light from their helmets stabbed through the swirling darkness and played across the wind-blasted rock and through the whirling sand. The lights lingered on each outcropping, paused briefly, then moved on.

The figures carefully picked their way, their silver suits and padded features out of place in the world of stone and darkness and ever-present howling winds. The lead figure turned. He played his light across the others and waved his arm, pointing at the sides of the ravine. One by one they disappeared between two pillars of pitted stone.

The passage was narrow. The suited figures turned and sidestepped toward the dead end. Their helmet lamps reflected off steel walls. The lead figure knelt and fumbled with his gloves. A small panel separated from the wall and was placed carefully on the ground.

"The seal is intact."

"Power?"

"Negative."

The kneeling figure took a tool from a pouch at his waist and began to manipulate unseen components in the wall.

From somewhere a low hum began, barely audible. The end of the passage made a popping sound as it swung away.

"Got it."

The lights of the conference room continually dimmed and brightened as the demands on the generators changed.

"Martin, give us your reports on the latest ops."

The man addressed glanced up from his notes.

"Standard tag and bag. We located the site using some supply records from the last salvage operation. Had a little trouble getting in, but nothing serious. I'd guess it's a grade six operation, not including the fifteen capsules, eight of which were already flat-lined."

"Any occupancy records?"

"No, just the ID tags. We picked one at random for rejuvenation."

"Any problems?"

"No, Bishop is in the recovery room now."

"All right." The man at the head of the table turned to his left. "Stef, what's the prognosis on the

waste recyclers?"

The first thing she saw was his face. He was smiling slightly, and his green eyes seemed kind and gentle. His hair was messy, in contrast to the neatly pressed white jumpsuit. The circular lights over the examination table ringed his head like a halo.

"Can you hear me?" he asked softly.

She licked her dry lips.

"You look like an angel," she said at last. "But you need a comb."

His smile grew larger as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Thanks. Would you like some water?"

She tried to rise and managed to say, "Please," before the room began to swim. He eased her back down.

"You rest for a little while. You've been asleep for a very long time, so I don't think we'll begrudge you a few more hours. Besides, I have to find a mirror."

She smiled despite herself, and fell asleep.

She stood at the observation window, looking out. The sun had risen a few hours before, painting the sky a brighter red. The sand blew constantly against the window, like raindrops in a thunderstorm. The earth was barren as far as the eye could see. He cleared his throat softly.

She didn't turn.

"Janice?"

She waited before answering.

"Is it like this everywhere?"

He stepped closer, until his reflection surrounded hers.

"No. Some places it's worse."

A silence fell between them.

"Janice, I need to talk to you about the other people who were with you. The others in the capsules."

She turned to face him.

"I didn't know them very well. We were all students, I think, first or second year. They were supposed to wake us in a few months, but I guess they forgot."

She tried to smile, but it faded, and she looked away.



"Things got very bad very quickly, I understand." His tone was reassuring. "You were lucky. A lot of the early experiments were pretty shoddy."

"Professor Sullivan promised us all scholarships for participating. Pretty silly, huh?"

He smiled. "Not at all."

She turned back to the window.

"It's so hard to believe."

"Janice, I know this is a lot to deal with, but are you sure there weren't any professionals included with your group? No doctors, or engineers? Maybe a mad scientist or two?"

She laughed. "No, just students. Mostly sociology." She turned to face him. "I don't suppose there's much demand for those anymore."

His smile was smaller now.

"No, not really."

She looked at the floor for a moment.

"So, you going to show me around?"

"Sure."

They walked through the complex. He showed her the waste reclamation vats, and the atmosphere recyclers. In another room they watched as parts of the station in which she had slept for so long were melted down and recast. They ate the noon meal together, and she found it bland, if filling. She was amazed how much was reused, how nothing was wasted.

"We can't afford to," he replied when she remarked upon it. "We live in a totally closed system. There's no room for waste."

"Not totally closed," she said. "You brought me in from the outside."

"Yes, that's true. But your presence requires us to make adjustments to our system. Did you notice how the hydroponics were sectioned?"

She had.

"Well, each one of those sections represents approximately one person. Before you were revived, we had to increase the amount of breathable atmosphere to accommodate the greater demand. In order to do that we had to permit the oxygen producers to increase, which in turn required more fuel for the plants, which means more production of waste, et cetera, et cetera. Any change in one aspect of the system requires adjustment throughout the rest."

She digested the information.

"What about the dead?" She asked after a few minutes. "What do you do with them?"

"We recycle everything." He turned to see her reaction. "Everything."

They walked on in silence.

They sat on a couch in the observation room and watched the sky darken.

"Can I be there when the others come out?" She

asked suddenly. "I mean, I think it might help the others adjust, having someone there they recognize."

"Not that you didn't do a good job," she went on, "But it just might ..."

He looked down at his hands.

Realization dawned on her.

"You're not going to wake them, are you?"

"No."

"But they're no good to you in stasis. And you said ..." Her voice trailed away. "I see."

He searched for words, but did not find any.

"I guess there really isn't any use for second year sociology students."

"Please understand, adding them to our system would create a tremendous drain, with no counterbalancing increase in productivity. From the information you've given us, it's unlikely that they possess any needed skills or knowledge. They're just no use to us."

"Does everything have to have a use?"

"Yes. Everything."

Finally she asked, "So what will you do with them?"

"The circuitry will be used for spare parts, and the rest will be melted down." Once again he searched for the words. "The organics will be placed into the system."

She didn't look at him.

"Please understand."

She swallowed and asked the question.

"What about me?"

He took her hand. "We're not murderers." He looked away.

"It's unlikely that your productivity will ever justify the drain you place on our resources, but we'll find something for you to do."

They sat in silence. The world outside was dark, and the lights in the observation room were dim.

"I don't like this place," she said at last.

The room grew darker.

"I don't think I want to live in it."

"That's your decision," he said softly.

They sat in the darkness and listened. Soon he led her away to a tiny room, much like the one she had awakened in. A little while later he returned, alone, and stood before the glass of the observation window. Nothing had changed.

The wind still howled in the darkness and sand beat upon the glass, while the black sky rained abuse down upon the barren earth. □

Mr. Ryan,

Just received Patricia Anthony's *Cold Allies*, absolutely super, signed 1st edition. Thank you and *Aboriginal* for making it available. Timing perfect, just read "The Last Flight From Llano" in May's *Asimov's Magazine*, went through the pile and re-read "Blue Woofers" in the July '92 issue. Judging from the 1st two chapters *Allies* is gonna be good. Also keep up good work on *Aboriginal*, I really enjoy the magazine, especially the features: Metzger, Ellison, etc. Sometimes disagree with "Alien Publisher" but still like it.

John F. Rodewolt
Sanford, FL

P.S. Am lifetime subscriber and contribute to 2nd Found.

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Another excellent Patricia Anthony story was "Born To Be Wild," a nostalgic reminiscence of that idealistic era when an entire generation dreamt of building Utopia. Ms. Anthony has recently become a successful and acclaimed novelist. Perhaps one day she will also be listed in the SF encyclopedias between Poul Anderson and Piers Anthony. Long-time *Aboriginal* readers can raise an index finger and proudly proclaim, "I knew her when."

Congratulations to *Aboriginal Science Fiction* for attaining not-for-profit status with the taxman and (hopefully) the postman. My vision of a non-profit magazine is far from one of "accessible only by dried-out English professors." I envision a forum for experimental and unconventional science fiction and speculative literature; a literary magazine a bit outside of the mainstream; an alternative publication encouraging creative freedom; a genre unfettered by the confining restraints of crass commercialism and the thirst for profit. I hope these rather optimistic visions will come true. (Amen.)

— Ed.)

Timothy M. Walters
Muskoage, OK

Dear Alien Publisher,

Indeed humans are amazingly confusing especially when confronted with "Who am I" and therefore drive themselves usually insane or worse trying to explain it.

To get home. Try like we do — enclosed in box with sufficient postage and correct zip code. Generally works with most postal systems. Remember "First Class" always.

An Alien Reader

P.S. Was at Magicon. Did remember those great Aardvark Burgers sold there. Very tasty with the subtle taste of fur.

Dear Mr. Ryan,

The charge is sometimes leveled at science fiction writers that they do not develop convincing aliens. But not to portray convincing humans? That is the case with John Gregory Betancourt, who in an otherwise creative and interesting story ("Hunter's Pink") has gotten into deeper water than he can manage. His protagonists are identical twins, save that one is a certifiable sociopath who will stop at nothing, up to and including murder, to get what he wants, completely lacks remorse or conscience, and is deterred only by immediate threat of exposure and/or punishment. At the end of the story we are asked to believe that this evil twin has given up inheritance rights to a vast fortune to spite his father and shown solidarity with his "good" twin, who lost the rights to the fortune. We are led to believe that the evil twin is on the road to reform.

The true story of sociopaths, as any psychology text will show, is

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far different. In reality, the evil twin would readily accept being his father's heir, maybe express pro forma regrets to his brother, and plot the murder of his father to attain quick access to the fortune. He would feel under no obligation to collaborate with his brother to spite their father. He would certainly not jeopardize the fortune out of some sense of brotherhood. This type of psychotic does not "improve" clinically and will forever need to be restrained to suppress his criminality. To suggest otherwise is to evince considerable ignorance of human personality.

"I Love You For Seventy Mental Reasons," by Amy Benesch, was a fine story, but one aspect of it dismayed me: technological therapeutic innovations take place at the Institute for *Psychoanalytic and Robotic Studies* [emphasis added]. It is unfortunate that Ms. Benesch gives any standing to psychoanalysis inasmuch as the fields of psychiatry and psychology have been distancing themselves for some decades from Freud's unscientific theories and formulations, no matter how metaphorical. It's sad that the Twentieth Century's canons of art and literature have been so greatly influenced, if not dominated, by such a deeply flawed perspective of humanity. While Freud was important, though hardly alone as his disciples are wont to promote, in emphasizing the role of sexual motivations and contributing to therapeutic techniques, his views have enormous shortcomings, especially regarding the psychology of women. Hence, the irony and disappointment of Ms. Benesch's reference to psychoanalysis.

Sincerely,
Allen Meyer
Phoenix, AZ

The Salesman

By Michael P. Belfiore

Art by Charles Lang

I was a traveler. I traveled the roads across this great continent and did pretty well for myself until one day I got bitten by a woman. Things haven't been quite the same for me since.

It happened in a little Midwestern road town. I pulled in with my rickety Chevy pickup, and the kids and dogs came out to meet me as they always did. I pulled up in front of the general store on the main drag. I got out and the dust kicked up under my feet like under my wheels all the way there; like landing on the Moon.

It was summer and it was hot, dry, and dusty, like I said. I set up my folding table and put out my wares.

And all those Midwest hicksters just stood there gawking like, hey, here's this weird road man, what's he going to do?

And there were the dogs, as I said before, two or three of them. They sat or plopped themselves right down in the dust. Couldn't hear anything but the wind in the trees. Most amazing trees they've got out there, all full and fresh, blowing and rustling, the sun just beginning to ease himself down behind, sending out his rays. That was the best time of the day for me to do my thing, when the sun was sending out his low-key power.

I wiped the sweat off my brow, carefully adjusted my little toys on their black cloth. I looked up, briefly, like I always did to size up the crowd one last time before I began — and then, I suddenly found myself swimming in the midst of the most amazing hazel eyes I'd ever seen, framed by strands of red-brown hair and long, long, dark lashes.

The woman threw me, so that my concentration was lost for the barest instant. The first trinket was already in the air. I couldn't stop it, merely retard its progress. The result was a small implosion that marred the surface of the cloth with a "pop."

I was shaky. It was the first bit that always set the tone of the act, and here it was a bomb. I was going to have to work hard to get things back on course. I looked up, and there was the woman. Was that a smile playing with her lips? She was small, lean, and young. Looked like she had the fight in her.

I smiled. Wiped sweat. A fly buzzed. The gathering shuffled, murmured.

I swallowed and carefully hefted another pretty. I wet my lips. This one had to be timed just right. A

crow called from the other side of those setting-sun trees, and up went the sphere.

It sailed high and wide, real nice trajectory, all glittery and silvery gold. I *knew* the sun was my friend today. I had enough time to catch a glimpse of the upturned faces of the hicksters before my baby exploded.

It is difficult to describe exactly what it was that happened when I let loose one of my trinkets, because it was mostly psychological, but I could see it on the faces of those people. It caught them full on, full force. It washed over them, waves of glory. Red, gold, and yellow flower blossoms bloomed out at them from the sky, rained down on them, and they drank it in.

I sent another one in right after it. Now that I had them off balance, I had to keep them.

The next one was small and green and it flew straight and true, straight into the heart of the subsiding explosion. The green of the Earth bloomed out above them and eased down around them. I kept this one going as long as I dared, kept the green singing through it. It was the green of the jungle, the green of fresh grass with dew on it in the morning when Mister Sun's just stretching out his sleepy limbs.

Then I let it fade. I let the green fade out and I let the dust creep back in until there was nothing left but the dust and the dwindling rays of my man the sun.

They were left there staring. I could tell they wanted more. Their eyes were hungry. Their work-enebbled brains were just beginning to awaken to the pins and needles of the soul.

I picked up one last shining ball and hefted it lightly. It was sparkly and jittery. I tossed it to the other hand, spun it on a finger. It sparked and jumped back to the other hand.

They could not take their eyes off it: they shone like the sparks on the sphere. All of them. Little flints in the pupils. Even the woman's.

But she was not looking at the sphere. Her eyes were shining directly into mine.

I gripped the ball tightly in my hand and went into my spiel.

"It's like this. You want something more to your life. You can see that there's more, but you can't



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quite put your finger on it. You keep hearing vague rumors of some kind of brave new technology keeping people alive out East."

I hefted the toy.

"This is it, friends. I've brought you a gift of light.

"You say you're happy here, scraping in the dirt, raising the stuff of your life from the unforgiving earth? Sure, maybe you are, but, like I said, something more. Wouldn't you like to share some of this strange new world? Why *shouldn't* you have a share in it? Why *should* it belong to an elite few in the Eastern cities?"

"From them to you. That's the way it should be, and that's what I'm offering."

Spin, glitter, spin, glitter. Their eyes followed every movement. Every pair but hers. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of my neck.

"I'm offering you a different view of the world. I'm offering you a glimpse of the technology that's been kept hidden from you for all these years. You know what I'm talking about."

Several of the older people present shuffled their feet.

"Sure you do. And you wouldn't mind having some of it back."

I put the ball down on the table and spread my hands. An offering.

"All I need from you is a good clean warm place to stay tonight, a few nice hot meals, some traveling goods, and a sack of plain old pig shit to power the methane converter in my truck. What say?"

I rocked back on my heels. My bit was over. Not bad, considering the bad start, and that daunting woman. I shot a glance her way and got back an after-image of her shape in the fading light.

The sun was sending out his long, long bedtime shadows. I was tired to the bone.

The crowd broke apart, and some came forward to meet me. There was a babble of voices, now that the flint was out of their eyes. They were very curious.

I stuffed my toys into their satchel, wrapped carefully in their cloths. I zipped it up just as the first of them reached me.

"Say, Mister," said a red-headed boy with marmalade smears around his mouth, "are you really from out East?"

"Yeah," said another boy, "is that where you got those strange balls?"

That child was swept up by a woman in overalls. "Don't bother the man. I'm sure he's very tired." There were stern lines around her mouth. A life of hardship.

They were all around me now, inspecting my truck, poking through my few and sundries. One woman ventured so far as to feel the weave of my clothing.

They were a little more bold than most, but noth-

ing out of the ordinary. I tried to track that young woman, but she was lost in the press.

A man, fiftyish, came to my side and put out a hand. I took it warmly.

"Name's Earl. Come along with me, son."

"Thank you very kindly. I appreciate that."

I walked to the truck in the near-dark and exchanged the satchel for my duffel in the back. I smiled at Earl. "Let's go."

He led the way home, first down the main street, then along a side road, and finally on a narrow path between houses. The night insects were pulsing already, and the day's heat was slowly seeping away with the last of the light.

We went up the back steps of a small, wood-frame house. Earl's boots made a scraping noise on the wood as he stood back to open the screen door.

"Wait'll you meet my wife," said Earl. "She'll be mighty surprised."

Inside were light and warm food-smells. A woman about Earl's age held her hands to her mouth as we entered.

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Irene," said Earl, "This here is —"

"Roland," I said. I switched hands with my duffel and offered my right. She didn't take it.

There came an awkward silence during which I let my hand drop. Earl and I started to speak at once. I shut up.

"He came into town in a car. He's from out East. He's got gadgets and things. Like they used to have. He *showed* us."

Irene had a dazed expression and she was slowly shaking her head back and forth.

"He just needs a bed for tonight," Earl continued. "He's going to *give* us things. Things that'll be good for the collective."

"Well he ain't staying here, that's for damn sure," Irene finally managed.

"But —"

"I don't care *where* he's from, he just better spend the night someplace else."

"That's all right, Ma'am. I'll spend the night in my car."

I went back through the screen door and down the steps. Crickets and cool breezes enfolded me. I walked along the path a short distance, then sat in the dark on my duffel bag with my back to the house. I rolled a cigarette.

The sounds of argument drifted out to me. I chuckled quietly to myself and puffed. Smoke drifted across the stars.

"He's just a traveling salesman," I heard Earl say, "and he's got good stuff."

"I'm frightened, Earl," said Irene. "Did you see the way he had of staring? Right into your soul — like the Palmer girl."

"Irene, you're too skittish," countered Earl.

And on like that, with him chipping away at her resistance until a short time later, when I heard the screen door slam. I stood up and mashed out my cigarette.

"Roland!" called Earl, in a voice intended for someone farther away than I. I gave it a second. Then I picked up my duffel bag and walked away from the house.

"Roland!" he called again. "It's all right! You can stay."

I kept walking. Earl puffed down the path. He nearly ran into me in the dark.

"It's all right. You can stay. She says you can stay."

"That's very generous of her."

We walked back to the house.

"No. No trouble at all. She's a bit shy of strangers is all."

"That's quite understandable," I said charitably as we went back into the house. "You don't offer your hospitality to just anyone who happens along."

Irene was still standing pretty much where I'd left her. "Ma'am, I'm absolutely grateful to you for sharing your home with me. I realize what an imposition it must be."

She gave me a quick little nervous grimace I supposed passed for a smile. "Come on," she said tersely. "I'll show you the guest room."

And what a room it was. There was a hardwood floor all bright and polished, sparkly from the light of an oil lamp. Nice plush sheepskin rug. God, that would feel good under my toes. And a bed. It had a quilted cover and big, big fluffy pillows. I reached out a hand to feel and then sat down. It was very soft. I was ready to settle back and let the weariness seep from my bones, but Irene stopped me.

"Don't lie down yet, if you please. I'll have Earl draw you a bath, and I'll wash those filthy clothes for you."

"Much obliged, Ma'am. Really."

The bath was a large steel tub Earl dragged into the kitchen. Steam slowly curled from the top of the water. I shucked my clothes and gingerly tested the water with a big toe. It was perfect.

I stepped in, first one foot, then the other. I sank down into the water until I was sitting with my knees up. I couldn't help sighing as the warmth flowed through me, easing sore and stiff muscles. I wriggled my toes. Beautiful. Like a woman's touch. I closed my eyes and breathed the steam. Little gusts of wind chilled my wet knees, setting up a contrast that was delicious.

They fed me supper after that, a beef stew with thick broth, lumps of potato, pieces of carrot, and slabs of bread on the side with lots of butter. Irene hung around in the background and kept giving me more. Earl bugged me with questions about my toys and about life out East, but I put him off with, The Salesman

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll tell you everything." He shut up after a while.

I was so sleepy and weary after that that I mumbled some pleasantries and drifted off into the bedroom.

But I didn't sleep. I lay on that bed, hands clasped behind my head, and gazed up at the ceiling, which flickered softly with the glow of the lamp.

This was what I lived for, beds like this, towns like this, hot food in my belly. There was no heaven above, just this. This and the night.

I could hear crickets outside, under the window, the breeze rustled the leaves. I could hear Earl and Irene moving around in different parts of the house, talking, no doubt arguing quietly about me.

And after a while, I wasn't sleepy any more, only pleasantly tired. The light had become very bright, and I could see every detail of the ceiling softly outlined in flickering shades of yellow and red. Earl and Irene had ceased their movements, no doubt in bed now, so there were only night sounds to keep me company.

So I got up. Why not? Embrace the night. I dragged on my spare pants and boots, crept through the living room. The darkened shapes of furniture lurked like gnomes.

I made my way to the back porch and sat down there to smoke a cigarette and listen to the crickets.

My thoughts wandered to that haunting pair of hazel eyes. Strange that a glance could throw off my work the way it had. Of course, the glances of women had a special domain and power all their own, an unpredictability.

I looked up, and I'll be damned if I wasn't swimming in those eyes again.

There was a frozen moment during which our gazes locked. Then I said, "How long have you been sitting here?"

She shrugged. "Not long."

"Why?"

"I was curious." Her lower lip found its way between her teeth in a way that was most becoming. "My name is Ellsa."

"Roland." I smiled, shifted my cigarette to my left hand, and extended my right.

She took it for an instant, squeezed it. Her hand was indescribably soft.

"Are you really from out East?" she asked.

"Sure. New York."

"Really?" It was a challenge.

I didn't blink. "Yes," I said. "It still exists. Though not in the form you've probably heard about. There's still a lot of radiation from the war."

"Oh," she said.

I relaxed somewhat and leaned back against the side of the house, looking at stars. I could hear my heartbeat. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* It had been a very long time. Much too long, probably, but living as I

did, one did not take unwarranted chances fooling with any farmer's daughter.

"Are there ... others like you out East?" she asked after a time.

"Like me?"

"Who can do what you do."

I swallowed and my voice stayed serene. "Sure," I said. "Whoever has the technology." I started to give her my usual routine about the rebirth of technology from the ashes of the rediscovered New York Public Library and the Columbia Nuclear Reactor. But somewhere along the way I became aware of a gentle pressure on my cheek. She ran her fingertips along the side of my face and down my neck. I lost what I was saying and stayed quiet. I kept very still. And after a while, she left.

When I finally went to bed, my dreams were shot through with sparkling hazel eyes and long, long red hair.

The next morning they were still there, those eyes, that hair. She was creeping under my skin. The idea kept popping to mind, much against my better judgment, that maybe, just maybe, I could get away with a little romp into the bargain along with this house, this food.

Irene was feeding me oatmeal, steaming hot, just the way I like it, but I wasn't tasting it, not really. Now I wasn't satisfied with what I had, and that's a very dangerous frame of mind.

"I need a place to set up," I said, slowly stirring little lumps under and over each other with my spoon.

Earl chewed on a toothpick and gestured at the dilapidated barn before us.

"There she is. Seen better years, of course."

Indeed. The paint had been scoured by untold years of wind and rain and hot sun. The boards were warped and splitting.

"This is fine."

We had climbed a hill, and I looked down to see the clump of buildings that was the town.

We were on the edge of a hayfield that ran right up against a forest of rambling, twisting oaks that looked like a bunch of gnarled old men.

"Yeah, this'll do," I said again. "Do me a favor and don't let anyone come near until I give a sign, okay?"

"What kinda sign?" he asked, squinting at me through a glare from the sun.

"You'll know," I said.

I socked his arm good-naturedly and off he went, ambling down the hill all full of excited expectations. Not a bad sort, he, a bit misguided and a tad on the gullible side. He should've listened to his wife.

I had some time yet. Magical twilight was still hours off. I rolled a cigarette, kicked the ground a few times, and urinated before I entered the barn to prepare for the evening's work.

Pigeons flew out when I tugged open the big doors. There was pigeon shit everywhere. Bolts of golden sun cut a path down through swirling dust and pigeon feathers. It smelled like a dead cat. There was one. I found it later and threw it out.

A few hours later, I gave them the sign. It was spectacular. As the sun went down for the day, a city bloomed, exploded, smashed up through the ground at the edge of the town. The townspeople all came running out to see and found themselves in a canyon whose walls were made of steel and ever-so-brightly polished glass. The dying sun glanced and dazzled across and back and forth over the surfaces of mirrors three hundred feet high. A jet plane cut a contrail through the blue miles overhead.

I was heating up from the effort. I was throwing spheres like mad. Here, there, everywhere they exploded and became people racing, running across and along streets and sidewalks, darting like shadows.

The villagers could only stand and gape on a street corner, tourists. They had heard about it, in one form or another. Now they were seeing it: The City. It was alive and booming about them. They breathed heat-tainted air and stared — all except the dogs. They just flopped in the dust disinterestedly. Faintly, the jet roared.

High on the side of a building, a man's face, itself hundreds of feet high, turned slowly, smiling, blowing smoke. The face dissolved and became a beautiful, lean female body shimmering in a cascade of raindrops. Her skin was impossibly pristine and smooth. She swished and swayed and was gone, replaced by a flying machine of sparkling steel, rising to heaven on a cone of flame. Glowing letters beneath it said "Eighteen," then "Seventeen," then "Sixteen." The letters counted down, and while the villagers were drinking in the wonders, metal birds were falling from the sky. The smiling man turned again on the screen, and the letters spelled "Good-bye."

I hit them hard, with everything I could muster. A whitewash of pure energy burned their minds.

It was all gone. Towers and spires evaporated into the blackened skies. The ground underfoot fused into a polished crystal mirror. No sun — he was hiding his head in shame behind kicked-up clouds of iridescent dust.

Hot winds blew over the scorched earth and gradually cooled. The white heat faded and chilled down to a soothing green. Green. My favorite color, green, the color of life.

The villagers blinked and found themselves once again at home.

The gathering was very quiet, very still. A dog got up and ambled over to a tree to urinate.

"Hey, hey!" I called across the gathering gloom. "Don't look so down. The cities are gone. You all

know that. But what you probably don't know is that a few years after the end, some people came who had dragged themselves out of the dust, and they started scratching around in the ruins. And they found two very interesting things. One of these was a Nuclear Reactor. Another was the Public Library. With those two things, plus a few years and trial and error, they managed to patch together bits of technology you all probably thought were lost forever. And I got some of those bits right here — Graphic Imagers. Little hand-held units of fun. They can tell you about things to come or things that have been. Each of these little globes has a different story to tell. You only need release it. Of course, each can be used but once

"I am a messenger! I'm a messenger from New New York. We may not be as good as New, but we're getting there, and we'd like you to be part of it.

"I want to give each of you a chance to see what you can see with a little help from the atom, and give you some Graphic Imagers to take home with you. But first let me show you a little grocery list of things I need. You've all been more than kind and generous and I think you'll agree that my basic needs are few. What say?"

Cool winds blew. I waited, rocked back on my heels, and a warm feeling of contentment settled over me. Almost done, and without a hitch. I'd be on the road tonight, this town a cloud of dust and a fond memory. Couldn't be more perfect.

The mayor was coming toward me now. The others waited as I presented him with my grocery list. As I'd said, nothing fancy — some basic food items, pig shit, gunpowder, paper, glue, and paint. The old man looked it over, and nodded over his shoulder.

The villagers surged forward and crowded my table. Eager eyes were wide with anticipation.

I carefully selected a pretty blue globe and presented it to the mayor.

"Would you like to do the honors, sir?"

The farmer held the ball gingerly between steeped fingers. The shine in his eyes nearly matched that of the ball. His friends and associates bustled behind him excitedly, all smiles and gleaming eyes.

"It works — it really works? Can I do it?"

"Certainly," I said. "Give it a toss!" In spite of myself, I found that the farmers' enthusiasm was catching. "Give it a twirl and a toss!"

The farmer cranked his arm back. "Uh!" I grabbed his arm, firmly but gently. "Away from the crowd."

He grinned sheepishly and turned around. He looked back at me. I nodded encouragement and he wound up and let fly.

The farmers watched expectantly as the toy flew through the air and then exploded with a soft popping sound.

The Salesman

A tiny bluebird scrambled away from the explosion and took wing. It circled our heads twice and then took off in the direction of the gathering dusk.

The man was beside himself. "I did that? I really did that?"

"Sure you did. You can all do that. Take turns. One at a time. No pushing or crowding please."

They were like children. They did push and crowd in their eagerness to get their hands on my toys.

They kept asking me questions like "What does mine show?" and "What does mine do?"

"Try it and see," I told them. "Try it and see."

And I showed them. One at a time. It was easy. There were castles and automobiles and forests and swamps and sun showers and highways.

They laughed like children. Grown men and women clapped their hands with their children. They squealed with delight as each new image emerged from its cocoon of sparks.

I laughed with them and kept giving them more until at last the sun was gone and I had nothing left to give.

The villagers began to wander home. I'd given each of them a bauble to take with them. The spheres were little time bombs waiting to explode, but by the time they did, I would be well away on the road.

I packed up my things, folded my table with its black cloths. Yes. A perfect run. Only one thing I wasn't too sure about.

"How did you do that stuff?" There she was. Bathed in moonlight.

I sighed. "You know, you have a funny habit of popping up in places unannounced." She gazed at me. Those eyes ...

"No. I'm serious. I'd really like you to tell me what you did." Jesus, those eyes. I was getting lost again. Wanting things I had no business having.

"I could tell you about the technology involved, but you wouldn't understand."

"No, no! Don't give me that! Maybe that's part of it — but there's something about *you*. There's something you did to make us see those things."

I leaned against the upright table top. She had me. She definitely saw through me. *Damn* her eyes. I tore my gaze away.

"All right, I'll tell you about it." What the hell, my work here was done. "The spheres don't have anything to do with it," I said. "Those are just for show. The images are all direct from my mind to yours. Mental projection. You understand?"

She slowly nodded.

"Someone in my ancestry was genetically engineered. A Mutie, as such people were called. There were lots of us Muties back then. Anything you could think of, they had it — mental projection like me, enhanced vision, tiger stripes, six arms.

"Then the war came, and the Muties were wiped

out. The powers-that-be didn't want any freaks breeding with normal people. The only survivors were those with less obvious alterations — like my ancestor.

"So here I am, with handed-down mental projection and pyrokinesis. Lucky me, I'm the only one in my family who has them. Recessive genes, you know. I use my abilities to con people into giving me room and board, and then I get the hell out of town before anybody catches on I'm a fake. Worse than that, a freak."

"What's py— pyro—?"

"Pyrokinesis. Firestarting. I'm not very good at it. I can only do very small fires, like lighting cigarettes. But that's all I need for my act. I use it to ignite the gunpowder in my spheres. Want to see?" Not waiting, I quickly rolled a cigarette and glared at the end of it until it ignited with a faint "pop."

I looked at her intently, expecting a reaction of fear, disbelief, or revulsion, but she merely looked at me in a way that quickened my pulse. Then she smiled slowly.

"I knew it," she said.

"Oh," She was very alluring in the moonlight. Somewhere, a nighthawk was calling. I cleared my throat to say something, but she began to speak at the same time.

"Go ahead," I said.

"No, you," she said.

"I ... I forgot."

"So, is there really any special technology out East?"

"No. No, there isn't. The people there don't have much more than they do here. My truck is an exception."

"Oh," she said, sounding only mildly disappointed. She reached up to stroke my cheek. I caught my breath.

"Why did you leave your home?" she asked softly.

"Let's say people had a hard time accepting the things that make me different," I said. "So I became a traveler."

"I think you're beautiful." And she kissed me. When her lips parted from mine, she said, "Come home with me."

There it was. Bold as the sun. My opportunity. But now that it was staring me in the face, I found my courage failing me.

"I have to leave," I said quickly. "Now."

"No you don't. You can come with me. No one will know."

Yes, I did have to leave, before my little bombs exploded. But at that moment, she knew she had me. I knew it too.

So I said, "Where's home?"

"My parents' house, come on!"

"Your parents' house?"

"I have my own room. You can leave before

anyone gets up." She tugged me along. How old was this girl? Were her father and brother likely to blow me full of holes?

No matter, we were running, she leading. The smell of her was a drug in me, swiftly spreading.

The house was sleeping. She led me silently up the stairs. My hand in hers was sweating. When we reached the top, she stopped at a door. Hers. She pointed across the hall. "My parents' room — be quiet," she whispered.

I started to protest, but she kissed me then, and drew me into her chamber.

Her tongue was doing the most delicious things in my mouth and she was pressing hard against me.

Dizzily, I clutched at her. Goosebumps formed under my fingertips as my hand ascended her warm body under her clothing. I found the smooth curve of her breast. She squirmed, pressing tighter.

The loneliness of the road overwhelmed me and I gave in completely. At that moment all things home and beautiful surrounded me. *She* was home, squirming beneath me. She gasped as I entered her and clasped me to her as though her life depended on it.

My mind gently exploded into a blue sky on a sunny afternoon by a lake. Sailboats bobbed in the wind. A red fishing boat cheerfully dipped, first one way, then the other. A buoy clanged.

I exploded into the woman and she enfolded me and the blue filled my vision. I had it all. I had everything.

Then the tension eased from my body. Soothing darkness was behind my eyelids. The sheets rustled cleanly, damply. I slipped away from her.

She lay quietly, breath subsiding, and stroked my cheek. "Did you like the boats?" she murmured playfully as I drifted away into the most restful sleep I could remember having in a very long time.

I awoke the next morning to bells and Ellsa stiff beside me with tension.

"Oh, Jesus," she said.

"What?" I said groggily. My surroundings were only beginning to fill in blanks in my mind.

"Get up, get up, get up!" She pushed me out of bed. Bells still rang from some undetermined point outside.

"What, what, *what!*"

"I forgot, it's Sunday. We overslept. They know you're here with me!"

Wakefulness settled on me like a cold, wet blanket. Indeed. It was light outside. Those were church bells.

"You must leave *now!*"

She needn't have told me. My sleep-fogged brain and body were doing their best to make the jump from zero to full efficiency in tiny fractions of a second. I struggled with my pants and she helped me with my shirt.

"Hurry, hurry!" There was real fear in her voice, her eyes. It was catching.

I gathered my clothing about me as best I could and went down the stairs, out the front door. No time for subtlety. I headed for my truck at a dead run.

Too late. They sat, lounged, leaned on my truck. All of the men, some of the women. Waiting.

I really had been caught with my pants down, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it.

I waited. The dust settled around my feet. The Earth turned.

"Hello there, Stranger," piped up one of the men, about forty and looking piqued. "Don't let us stop you. We're just passing the time."

I stayed where I was. My eyes flicked from one unfriendly face to another.

"Come on." Younger man. He beckoned me forward. He bore a striking resemblance to Ellsa and the older man.

What could I do? Damned if I did, damned if I didn't. I started forward. They parted around me to let me pass, the Red Sea parting for Moses, threatening to close in and drown me at any moment. The air was deathly calm.

I was opening the door of the truck and breathing a sigh of relief, when the handle was suddenly torn from my grasp.

Somebody punched me in the eye and sent me sprawling backwards into the dust.

They closed around. The older man stuck a finger down toward my face. "You have made a serious error in judgment, my boy." This was punctuated by a storm of spittle that rained down onto my face. I didn't bother to wipe it off because I was kicked in the kidney by a burly farmer who said, "Now, boy, you want to get fucked, we'll fuck you good, 'cept we want you to be well enough to haul your stinking ass out of here."

Behind the farmer, big and red-faced, I could see others rummaging through the bed of my pickup, throwing my belongings out into the road. One of the men came up with the last of my globes. There were three or four of them, carefully wrapped.

The older man turned around, snatched them up, held them before me in a meaty paw, incriminating evidence before the grand jury.

"And just what in hell is this?"

He hauled back and threw one, light blue, hard against the side of my truck. It fragmented with a loud bang and left a scorch mark on the rusted metal.

"Papier-maché and gunpowder! Mister, I don't know who you are, or what kind of game you're playing, but it sure as hell doesn't have anything to do with technology."

He took several steps back and threw the globes one after another against my chest, face, and hands.

The Salesman

The gunpowder scorched and blistered and burned. I tried to summon a few private demons as a retort, but I couldn't manage more than a feeble leering face from my nightmares, that hung in the air between us, shakily, then died.

Then they were upon me, kicking and punching. I rolled into a ball and kept my jaw clamped shut.

When they were finished, somebody lobbed a stone through the back window of my truck, and the old man said, "Now get outta town!"

They retreated down the road.

After a while, I dragged myself weakly to my feet. I blotted blood away from my forehead with my sleeve.

I leaned against the side of the truck watching someone approach. I squinted along the ribbon of dust through heat shimmer.

Leaves rustled in the trees.

"Are you all right?"

Ellsa.

I turned away and gently felt a split lip. "Could be worse."

"Let me help you."

Before I could stop myself, I backhanded her across the face.

When she slowly turned back to face me, the side of her face was an angry red where I'd hit her. Her eyes blazed in a slow burn. She spoke very carefully.

"Do you honestly think you're the only one?"

The question hung in the air between us. I could almost see it there, traced in spidery lettering. She waited behind the words for me to say something. But I did not. I could not. My mind was numb. I could only think to get away, disappear, leave this road town behind me like all the others.

And I did. I climbed into the cab of my truck and the door closed with a squeak and bang and the engine started with a cough and the tires spit up dust and I left. In the rear-view mirror, Ellsa just stood in the road, looking after me, getting smaller and smaller until she disappeared in the dust.

It was only later, with the stars sprinkled out over my head and the town miles behind me, that I finally remembered about the fishing boats. She had asked me if I liked the fishing boats. Those were her boats!

I knew then why she had stood in the road so long looking after me. She had wanted to come with me.

I stayed awake all that night, staring up at the stars. □

The Lady or the Tiger

By Jayge Carr

Art by Lori Deitrick

I won't accept it. (Mental equivalent of teeth grinding loudly, fists clenched achingly tight.) It's not fair!

Calmly: Tests are only pass or fail. This one's fail. Because you designed it for failure. You deliberately picked a — 'phobe, you —

(Mental eyes rolling heavenward beseechingly.) Life, but you're new, aren't you? Didn't they teach you anything?

Petulant: They taught me no world is past saving. This world can be helped. I say —

Soothing mental tone, under-note of serene superiority: Sure it can, sib-in-life. Any subject is salvageable, with enough time and effort put into it. But while we're rescuing these worth-nothings, ten more deserving will be slipping down the chute.

Accusing: Yours isn't the choice. Scouts are too involved to make value judgments.

(Mental version of superior eyebrow cocked.) Judgment? (Gently, experience pointing out the obvious that naiveté has missed.) I applied a test. They failed.

(Mental extremities drumming wall in frustration.) Then: Because you eliminated any course but failure.

Not me. Almost smugly: The nature of the beast. Childish whine suppressed with effort: You just don't like their sexual setup.

Calm matter-of-fact: I don't like their violence. It's the same thing.

Coldly emphatic: I know. That's what I don't like. (Mental back against hard wall, mental lip in cornered yet triumphant sneer.) If I call for a review, nothing else will get done in this quadrant until the review is complete. Either way, those other ten worlds you worry about will have to survive on their own.

You — (A mental if-thoughts-could-kill —) Then, control with an effort: All right, what do you want? (Relief. It WORKED.) Another test. A fair one, this time.

(Hesitation.) (My turn to be smug, to point out the obvious.) Another test won't take half as long as a review.

(Narrow-eyed suspicion.) Exactly what do you consider fair?

Triumphant: We'll have to negotiate that, won't we?

Mama, will you looka that!" It didn't take Benny's shrill wolf whistle or Faisal's exclamation to bring six lounging male bodies to full, one-hundred-percent attention.

The young woman who had been shoved out of the grimy bus stood blinking in the pollution-hazed sunlight. She was slim and lovely and as delicately graceful as a ballerina; her clothes alone, simple but expensive, would have proclaimed her incongruity in this inner city slum-jungle, if the innocent vulnerability of her huge violet-blue eyes and wistful mouth had not. As one, the six men straightened from their standing-on-the-corner poses and moved in for the kill.

"Lincoln Avenue?" Her voice, modulated by a faint and intriguing accent, was as soft and sweet as her face. "Lincoln Avenue? I fell asleep, but the driver had promised to have me off —"

"At the end of the line." Faisal chuckled. "You missed your stop at the nice safe renewal area, so he put you off at the end of the line."

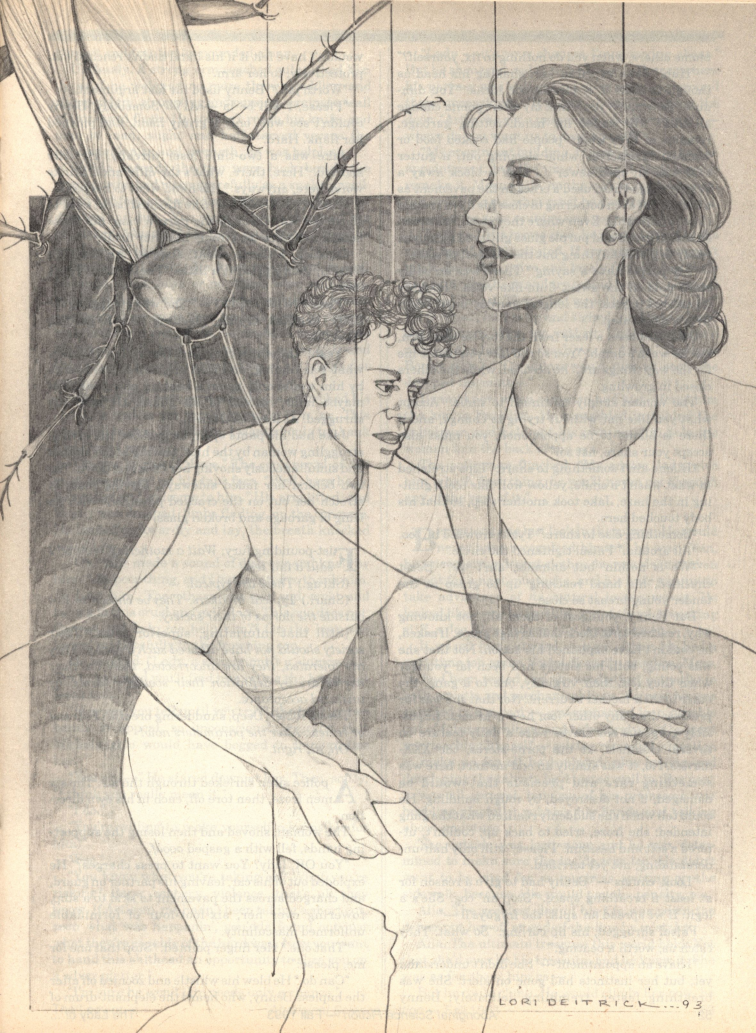
"End?" She seemed puzzled but wholly unafraid, a sign of either ignorance or complete unconcern for her skin. "But I have an appointment at the Lincoln Avenue Circle, Building 1100, for ten of the clock. It is almost that now, must I then —"

Tyson guffawed, drowning out her soft-spoken words. "Easy ride, you don't got to do nothin' but what we tell you to."

"Oh, must I transfer then?" Her appealing wry grimace would have charmed most recipients into protective helpfulness; but these were society's hardened refuse, barely claiming humanity. "I speak not always well, I thought this bus I must use all my journey. Do I wait here then for another —" Her nose wrinkled, as though at a strong smell.

The men surrounding her had lived with their stench so long they were oblivious to it, but they had seen visitors turn up their noses before. Jake growled, "Whassamatter, bint, you don't like it here? Well, we don't got no choice. We the ones highmucks like you shove outta sight and pretend we don't exist. Well, we do. Where we gotta live, is what you made!"

"Is so?" A gentle smile gave her fragile beauty a serene glow. "Yet here you stand, hands empty, doing nothing to improve, not so? How can you



blame others, when you do nothing to fix, yourself?"

"Huh!" Jake gaped at her, shaking his head as though to clear it of unwelcome ideas. "You dim-duck. How much you think my effort gonna change all this?" He waved his hand: rotting garbage, remains of fires where people had cooked food or warmed themselves while sleeping out, a gutter that was an open sewer Half a block away a skinny ragged man used a crack in the pavement as a urinal, not even bothering to close his fly (if it could close) afterwards. Even where they stood, scattered shards of green and purple glass glittered viciously, ready to pierce anything but the thickest of soles.

"My people have a saying." There was an oddly stern note in the sweet flute-like voice. "Roughly translated it goes, the longest journey must begin with a single step."

Jake had been a loser from the day he was born, but he wasn't dumb. "You sound like you blame me for the way things are," he accused, while the others closed in growling.

The woman simply continued to smile. "Accept what you like not without trying to change, and if there is blame to be apportioned, you must also accept your share, not so?"

"Blame ain't something to share." Lips stretched in what wasn't a smile, yellow wolf-like teeth glinting in the haze, Jake took another step, so that his body touched hers.

"Something else to share." Tyson crowded in, too. "All around." Faisal tightened the circle.

"We is nothin' but animals, ain't we?" Beast chuckled, his hand reaching up to grasp at the tender young breast so close.

But Benny, youngest of them all, not knowing why, reached up to block that savage grope. If asked, he couldn't have explained his action. Not that she was young, both his sisters had been far younger when they lost their virginity, one to a gang, the other to their mother's current. Nor that she was far prettier than any other fem he'd ever met. Impossibly gorgeous sex slaves were a daily feature on several channels, at the porno-stores, the XXX-movies. No, it was simply an odd instinct: here was something rare and precious that would be damaged, if not destroyed, by rough handling. He could tell when she suddenly realized what the gang intended: she froze, tried to back up, couldn't, uttered a soft and hesitant "Please," still only half-understanding, not yet terrified.

"Look, chums —" Benny had to give a reason for at least a breathing space. "Stop an' cog. She's a legit. If we spread an' split, the fryguys'll —"

Faisal shrugged, his lip curling. "So what. They catch us, worth a beating."

"I have an appointment —" She didn't understand yet; but her instincts had gone on alert. She was breathing faster, trembling delicately; Benny

wouldn't have felt it if his hand hadn't reached out, protectively, to her arm.

"Worth jail?" Benny used his last argument.

"Please, I will be la — AIY!" Somebody, Benny couldn't see who, only a grimy hand, had pinched her flank. Hard.

Jake was a two-time loser already. He only snorted. "Here, there, what's the difference. Stinks worse here, anyways." His hand went to his pants.

"Nooo-OOOOOO —" She flinched back, tried to shove her way through the narrow ring, but those behind her were too strong, held her firmly.

Dipstick, hitherto silent, slapped the woman's bottom, then jiggled it a little. "That's then. This's now."

"Please NOOOOOO —" She was struggling futilely, helpless, crying, pleading in soft gasping "Don't's."

"Yeah!" the others chorused. Benny, too. He knew what was coming, and that any more interference by him would only mean a beating now instead of maybe later, instead of his share. He mentally shrugged. At least he'd tried.

Jake had his pants open; he grabbed the crying, struggling woman by the hips, tearing at her clothes and simultaneously shoving her back and down. The two behind her faded sideways, leaving room to stretch her out on the cracked pavement with its icing of garbage and broken glass.

Fist-pounding fury: *Wait a mothering minute! I said a fair test!*

(Shrug.) *These are typical.*

(Snarl.) *Typical breakers. They've chosen to live outside the norms of their society.*

(Still that infuriating, superior calm.) *Their society should not have allowed such a choice. They are tolerated, they are uncorrected, therefore their norms are, by definition their society's norms, by unstated acceptance.*

Deeudribble! (Deep, shuddering breath.) *Fair test or review. Alter the parameters now!*

Oh, all right.

A police siren shrieked through the air. The six Amen froze, then tore off, each in his own direction.

The woman, shoved and then losing the supporting hands, fell with a gasped ooooo.

"You OK, lady? You want to press charges?" He exploded out of his car, leaving his partner on guard, and charged across the pavement to skid to a stop, towering over her, six-foot-four of formidable uniformed masculinity.

"That one." Her finger pointed. "Stop that one for me, please."

"Can do." He blew his whistle and zoomed off after the hapless Benny, who heard the elephant-drum of

pursuit and frantically pounded along.

Uselessly. A strong arm reached out, picked him up as if he weighed no more than a toddler, and clamped him, struggling and cursing, against a wall of iron-hard flesh. He couldn't reach his knife, and man to man, slight and half-starved versus the policeman's size and strength, he was helpless.

Within seconds the two were back beside the woman, who had risen gracefully as a snake uncoiling to her feet and was inspecting her backside for damage and dirt. "You want to press charges?" the cop asked. "Assault? He hurt you? Worse? Say the word, and I'll haul him off."

Benny bit his lip. He knew what that meant. Miranda or no, laws or no, there were still basements, still cops who covered for each other, would swear on their souls that he had come in covered with bruises, a gang fight, no doubt. A night in the slammer. Well, he'd give as good as he got, and they'd never have the satisfaction of his begging or crying.

"Oh, no!" The woman reached up and stroked his cheek, a sexless yet tender gesture. "Oh, no. This one tried to stop the others. I wanted only to thank him. And I wanted —"

"Oh, you're one of those." The cop's growl of disgust was echoed on his taut face. "Well, here he is, he's yours and welcome to him." His arm lifted, and Benny was dumped, limbs flailing, on the concrete. He landed awkwardly and lay, the breath knocked out of him.

"Oh." She made a sound of distress and knelt by him. "Oh, poor thing, and I but wanted to thank him. To help him. The others are evil and cruel and belong in this cruel and evil place. This one does not. Cannot you help me help him?" On the last, she looked up hopefully to the frowning cop.

He laughed. "Lady, a slumcrumb's a slumcrumb. Try to help and you'll find him biting the hand that feeds him."

"How can you tell until you try?" She held up two hands in appeal, so unconsciously graceful that Michelangelo would have begged to immortalize her.

"You stu —" He stared down at her. Then, softly: "I think you really mean it."

"I do."

"You're willing to make yourself responsible for him?"

"Yes."

"You know what you're taking on? What you're risking? Rape, robbery, violence, that's all they know. If Artie an' me hadn't been taking a short cut, seen what was happenin', you'dda found out just what they're capable of the hard way. Now you want to hand this shithead an opportunity to slice you on a silver platter."

"I'm sure he won't. He needs only a chance."

The Lady or ...

"Lady — it's your chances I'm worrying about." But he shrugged and marched over to the car where his partner was still sitting, eyes scanning around them unceasingly. "It's your choice." Opening the door. "Artie, we got a passenger. Needs a ride. To — where do you want us to drop you off?"

"My apartment building, I think. I have — had an appointment, but the time is gone. I shall have to remake it. Meanwhile, on the way to my home, you can be telling me what must be done for this friend. I am new to your country and your ways."

"Lady —" His brows rose, he started to get in the car himself and hesitated. If arrangements weren't made *now*, this naive and lovely female was likely as not to come back and try to find her own personal renewal project. Then what would happen if she did? He frowned, bit his lip and sighed. And held a hand out to Benny. "You, too, ratbait. Unless you have a number the lady can reach you at, later." He knew Benny didn't. "Or unless you'd just as soon she dropped the matter."

Benny knew when someone had just offered him the key to Paradise. He scrambled in behind the policeman and held out his own hand to help the woman into the back of the car.

The policeman flinched. "My advice, lady, give him a bath first thing, or you'll never get through any of the rest of it."

Benny took one last look in the mirror. He would never have recognized himself: he was clean, he was wearing decent clothes, he was clean shaven except for a neat mustache, and his hair was cut to take advantage of its natural brown waves. He looked like — he looked like one of *them!* A working stiff, a Joe Blow, citizen-city, a real person.

It wasn't just outward change, either. He had a part-time job and a Social Security number. More, he had been tested and shown distinct potential in both artistic and mechanical lines. So now he was enrolled in a school — gov-sponsored loan payable out of future earnings, and to be forgiven if he went into teaching himself — getting remedial education to make up for all he'd missed, plus honing and developing the talents he'd tested well in. For now, it was all general, but one of his professors was burbling gleefully, rubbing his hands and talking about sculpture.

The outside was legit now; and he was determined to make sure the inside was too. He didn't want to be cited for as much as spitting on the sidewalk, because Alia would pay the penalty, too.

Alia. The greatest day of his life was when the driver put her off at end-of-the-line by mistake.

Alia. The ultimate treasure this world held. Not that she'd ever be his treasure, and he knew it. She was as far above him as —

But he could climb. He would climb. For now, he

was grateful for friendship and help, and whatever time she could spare.

Like tonight. He checked himself out again in the mirror, and smiled, the smile unfamiliar, framed as it was by the mustache and the cleanly shaven cheeks and chin. Dinner tonight, and helping him with his homework. Double help, because during the meal and after, she'd be subtly guiding him into learning "normal" manners.

He locked the door to his room, slipped the key into a pocket. (Another sign of her pull that, foreign or no, she'd been able to swing a room for him in her very own building.)

She opened the door before his fingers left the buzzer, and smiled at him. "Hello, Benny."

He gulped, his throat dry and closing. Each time he saw her, he thought this had to be perfection, and yet the next time she surpassed her own standard again.

Yet perfection was the wrong word. Perfection sounded cold and unapproachable, and Alia, always, was warm and human.

"Come in." She patted his shoulder, urging him forward. "I hope you like seafood. I have some Maine lobster, they're very like a delicacy I'm fond of at home. So make yourself comfortable, and would you like a drink before we eat?"

He'd learned one lesson quickly. If you don't know, ask; and if you don't want to ask, get someone else to tell you, indirectly. "If you want something."

"I think I do. What would you prefer?"

Moonshine was all he'd ever known. Again he fell back on copycat. "What you're having will be fine."

"All right. I'll pour two."

He was a little disappointed. It was a spicy fruit drink with no trace of alcohol.

The meal flowed smoothly, along with more drinks. There was no lack of conversation: his studies, the comments of his teachers, the amusement when the computerized part of his workday developed a glitch, or when he ran into something totally outside his gutter-ghetto existence.

Later, they sat on a sofa, and he continued talking about his plans, the future opening in front of him thanks to her. For now, he was working hard, almost constantly, but he didn't mind, was glad of it, because it was all for that future, the shining goal he now saw a chance of reaching.

He talked and she listened, and sometimes she talked and he listened. An odd job she had, he didn't understand much about it, but it was important to her, that was clear. So he listened gladly, hearing much more tone and expression than content, a small part of his mind noting that, even in these few weeks since he'd known her, her accent and exotic sentence structure had almost disappeared. Its loss was almost disappointing, her accent had set her apart, been one of the unique facets that made her

what she was. It didn't matter, though. He still worshipped her, both for what she'd done for him, and what she was. Precious, infinitely precious.

As the evening continued, it seemed natural, an accompaniment to the low murmur of voices, to put an arm around her shoulder, to draw her closer, for her to snuggle, soft and warm, trustfully against him. Which of them initiated the next phase, he couldn't have said, afterwards. But she was very precious, and very lovely, and he was very worshipful, and very tender.

Where he got the knowledge to act as he did, he had no idea. All he'd known in the slum was quick and dirty. Maybe he learned it from her, how to be gentle and loving. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was awe. But the last thing he wanted was for her to be hurt or crying or sorry after, so he was slow and careful, and it was mutual, every step of the way.

— *Curse you, is this your idea of a fair test?*

Flick off until I contact you, this isn't part of the test at all.

Ms. Alia Strange?"

"Yes?" Her smile was gentle but impersonal.

"You don't remember me, do you?" His lip curled wryly. "People do tend to see the uniform, not the man."

"Oh, of course." Warmth and recognition rippled in the clear-flute voice and graced her expression, as she tilted her head way, way back so she could face him directly. "You're the policeman who came to my aid a few weeks ago. Can I help you?"

"No." He flushed under his tan. "Not really. I just wanted — I wanted to check, you know, that you were OK and all. That that protégé of yours hadn't gotten you into any trouble."

"Benny?" Her smile was gentle spring dawn. "He's doing amazingly well. He'll need help and guidance for some time yet, but —"

He shook his head, the springy auburn curls (source of ribbing all his life) dancing. "I wouldn't have believed it."

Dimples flirted with him. "It's true. Come in and get comfortable, Officer — Officer —"

"O'Rourke. Rod O'Rourke."

"And I'll tell you all about it. I'm so pleased. It just goes to show —" One hand trustingly entwined in his, she was drawing him inside, into the elegant yet cozy nest she'd made.

Disgust: *I see what you're up to. You're going to goad those two into violence. Make the one jealous — what a word, what a setup! — of the other. Well, it won't fly. I told you the one is atypical —*

(The mental cocked eyebrow again.) And I told you, the word is fair. I've no intention of letting either

of these hot-temperers fight. (A mental shudder that lifted nerves on the other.) No, I'm just doing what you wanted me to. I'm locating a typical specimen to use, instead of an atypical one. Don't worry. I'm totally in control. I'll see that neither of these two get — ugh! — violent.

All right. I believe your intentions are honorable.

My intentions, yes. (Another shudder, suppressed loathing.) But — this is obscene. They're obscene. To mix love and violence the way they do. How can they? Do you realize that these are the only intelligent race that confuses violence with love? How can you bear to play devil's advocate for them —

Whoever they are, they deserve a fair test!

(Suppressed anger now.) All my tests are fair.

With me monitoring.

Come in, the door's not locked."
"It should be, Alia. You don't know who might —" He froze, at the sight of the woman and the tall, broad auburn-haired man seated so closely on the sofa. But she was up immediately, hands outstretched, pulling him inside.

"This is Rod O'Rourke, Benny. He and I have been talking about you. Sit and listen, Rod's had the most marvelous idea."

Before he quite knew what had happened, the three of them were on the sofa, Alia sandwiched between the two men, a yin and yang contrasting pair. Rod O'Rourke, big and brawny, with auburn curls topping a face strong yet open; and Benny No-name, slight and dark and street-wise in a way the other man could never be, if he lived to a thousand.

"Such a good idea, Benny, you must let him tell you all about it."

"No." Rod was shaking his big head. "No, your idea, Alia, all yours."

"Nonsense." The warmth of her delight drew all three into a tight, charmed little unity. "Well, maybe I might have made some casual remark, not realizing, but you're the one who jumped on it, and worked out the how." She patted Benny's arm with a smile, which she somehow broadened and divided equally between the two men. "And he was so right. I don't know how I could have missed it, but he was right."

"Right about what?" Benny awarded the larger man a suspicious glance.

"You, of course." She laughed softly. "All this studying and work, when you're used to being outside —"

"You don't have to, you know," Rod mumbled.



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"But a little exercise might be good for you, blow away the cobwebs. There's a health club down the street a bit, I'm a member, you could come as my guest. Give you a chance to work out a bit, stretch the old muscles, limber up —"

"Exercise?" Benny couldn't believe it. These two had been sitting here talking about *him*, and whether *he* needed exercise!

"If you like the club, its facilities, you could join," Rod went on. "They've a special rate for students, practically zip. If you want something different, we could ask around." He grinned, the Irish green eyes that went with the dark-carrot hair twinkling. "Mens sana in corpora equally sane, you know. And if you like jogging — some do, some don't — I could show you the paths I use."

"Jogging," Benny found himself answering the unasked question. "I dunno. Never into it much." Running for his life, yes; but never deliberate, regular exercise.

"I told you," Alia tapped Rod O'Rourke's pug nose playfully, "I tried your jogging when first here I came. Too dull. Bum bum bum, nothing but feet hitting the ground."

"What sports do you like?" he asked curiously.

"Swimming," she replied promptly. "Great pleasure. Much like — a sport we have, in my home."

"Odd," Rod said with a slight frown. "I'd think swimming was pretty universal."

"Where there is enough water to support it properly."

"Pools aren't the same as the real thing, are they?" He laughed. "Especially the dinks these apartments call pools. The ocean now — I'll have to take you surfing. That's the greatest, the end-all, a real star-ride."

Alia smiled and murmured, "If you say so."

Benny drew back into himself. Of course he'd known it couldn't last. What comparison between him and this self-confident legit could there be? Someone like him had been bound to come along —

But Alia, smiling, was accepting for both of them. And Rod, also smiling, was accepting that acceptance, for both of them. Then, somehow, she'd gotten him to his feet and was easing him toward the door, because Benny had come over to show her his lessons, and this was the only time she had to spare from her own schedule right now —

Miracle of miracles, the tall man was nodding, was walking toward the door.

Rod himself couldn't have said why he allowed her to ease him out, leaving the field clear for the rival he couldn't even acknowledge as a rival, except that somehow ...

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a hairy shadow move.

Tarantula! Summers of work on the dude ranch,

where the things were an occasional menace, where one of the men had had a bite infect, been hospitalized —

He raised a foot and slammed it toward the moving shadow —

Cheat! Those things are dangerous!
Not that dangerous.

No fair, no fair, fry your anima to atoms!

All right, I was just thinking of those other ten worlds.

(Sulky.) You'd drop the Benny-project half complete?

Leave an alter to guide him, he's well along. Now come on and let me —

No.

(Sigh.) All right then.

— and put his foot down, grinning foolishly. It was only a bit of crumpled dark tissue, moving in the slight fan of air from the opening door.

"Is anything wrong?" Alia was asking.

"No." He smiled back at her. "Not a thing. I'll call you when I've made arrangements."

"Do that. Better still, I'll call you. And — thank you, Rod."

He strode down the corridor to the apartment elevators, whistling. Never in his life had he gotten a firmer brushoff, temporary ("I'll call you") or not. Yet ... There was a dreamy smile on his face, and he went down in the air-conditioned cage and exited the complex, not even wondering what new plans he'd have to make to spend his day off.

Time passed, and Benny watched the growing relationship between Alia and Rod O'Rourke with sullen apathy. On his own turf, he'd have fought to the end for what he wanted. But here, he

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was so hopelessly outclassed —

"Oh!" Lesson plans, printouts, sketch pads, and whatnot snowstormed over the floor from two pairs of arms, and Benny shook his head, dazed from the force of the collision.

"Why don't you look where you're going!" he snarled.

The other half of the contretemps had knelt, begun sorting out two sets of possessions; now she looked up, velvet brown eyes accusing. "You ran into me," she stated shortly.

"I — oh!" He shoved the vision of Alia back into the corners of his mind, tried to bring himself to the reality of the U corridor, crowded with busy people trotting along, making a temporary eddy around him and the kneeling fem. "I did?" Old ways warred with new. Once, he would have shoved her aside, stepped on her even. Or grabbed her and looked for an alley. Now ... "I — I didn't mean to."

She had to smile at his abashed expression. "I suppose that's an apology. So if you ask me nicely, maybe I'll hand you your stuff while I gather mine."

"Oh ... OH!" He blinked, saw the mess, and dropped to kneel facing her, his hands going to the scattered objects.

"You are in a daze." She giggled. "Too much midnight book-bashing? Here — yours on this side, and mine on that." She was arranging as she spoke.

"But that's mine," he said suddenly.

"No, it's mine — oh, it is yours. I thought you looked familiar." It was a crow of satisfaction. "We share a class. Old Mundinger's Comparative."

"Yeah, I take that. Didn't notice you there, though." He wondered why not. She wasn't Alia, but by any other standards she was a very pretty fem.

"It's a big class." She smiled gently. "Everybody notices a newbody, though. You a transferee?"

"No, I — I just started late."

"Oh. That's tough, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I have a tutor, though. She's a big help. On most things, anyway." He grinned wryly.

"Well, if I can help —" The lights flickered, and a bell changed brazenly. "Oh, dear," she wailed, "we're going to be late!" She crunched together each stack, shoved his into his arms, and scrambled awkwardly to her feet, eyes darting away down the corridor.

"See you — sometime." His mouth twisted. Except for Alia, these legit bints didn't see him for dirt. Or — the twist tightened — only as dirt.

"Oh," she said. "Sure. Sometime." Oddly, she looked disappointed.

"Ah —" He took a deep breath. Could he have misunderstood? Could she ... "Ah, um, my last class's over at noon."

"Oh." A slow smile. "Mine, too. Do you have to be anywhere?"

"Yes — no, no, I guess not."

"A lot of the students chow at the common," she

The Lady or ...

informed him.

"Oh." He'd simply been returning to his room to eat, unless he had an appointment with Alia. "Do you?"

"Sometimes." There was a distinct twinkle growing in her eyes.

"Today?" She nodded slowly. "Would you mind if I — if we —"

Her smile may not have been as exquisite as Alia's, but it held its own unique magic. "Sure. I'll introduce you around a bit, too. It's hard lines, being new, isn't it?"

"Later, maybe. I'd like to get to know you —"

"Late! Omigosh, come on!" And she was running down the now empty corridor, leaving him to follow, grinning.

— *Very good. That takes care of the one problem, doesn't it? Did you choose that one, or —*

He did. Unknowing, of course. But I definitely approve.

And I. But what about the test?

Soon.

Standing in front of his mirror, trying to hot comb his stubborn curls straighter, into neat waves, Rod O'Rourke tried to analyze the way he felt about Alia. It just didn't make sense.

Not his physical feelings toward Alia — those made sense. Any man would feel the same way, unless he had something missing where it counted. But the way he'd been letting Alia call the tune —

He frowned at his image. Durn curls! OK now, but as soon as the humidity started to work — *sproinging*. He sighed. Some things could never be changed, they just had to be lived with. Like his curls.

Or Alia. He'd always been fiercely possessive about his girls. Well, not the casual ones, but the ones he thought of as his.

But Alia would never be anybody's but her very own. That was it. Take it or leave it.

He winked at his image in the mirror. He'd take it, he'd take it! Then maybe, just maybe, someday ...

Marriage ...

He was becoming more and more sure of his own feelings. He strolled out, whistling.

— *Well? Well? Isn't this good enough? Doesn't it count for a test? And a pass, a strong pass at that? Despite the unstated mores of his society, despite his lessening in his own eyes, he has never stepped one iota beyond mutual consent, never allowed his selfishness sway over your wishes, never jealously challenged, or insisted that he has any rights whatsoever over you beyond what you granted, never —*

Nonsense! He instinctively senses that I am neither as vulnerable nor as emotionally dependent

as would be a female of his own species. He is well aware, whether he admits it to himself or no, that with me, he plays by my rules, or not at all. For now, the tangible reward he receives for that obedience far outweighs the intangible distress of the damage to his male self-image.

(A wail of sheer mental rage and frustration.) So when will you have the test? What have you planned? Do you intend to choose yet another subject? How much longer —

Patience, patience, my so-new associate. Leave it to the old hand. Soon. Very soon. His next visit, in fact.

Rod O'Rourke was on top of his world, bathed in a warm glow of sensual content, even his springy auburn curls were smiling. Alia was great, the greatest, the absolute untoppable. Maybe just a hair too independent for his taste, though. Maybe he'd better rethink plans for permanency. Look at the way she'd taken on responsibility for the scum, just one example. Well, it was working out, but a cop with ambition, on his way up, had to be careful. Next time might not end up so successfully.

Meanwhile, life was terrific and Alia was — was out of this world! He turned in the doorway to wave goodbye, and Alia blew him a kiss.

"Until tomorrow." He blew her a kiss back. "Wish I didn't have to go to work, Darling, but —" He shrugged.

"I know, Rod. My work is important to me, too."

And would send her on, soon, she'd told him so earlier. He'd have to make up his mind by then, on suggesting permanency. For now, though — his memories made him flush with pleasure. Life was perfect as it was!

"Hurry, now," she said with a smile. "Or you will be late."

"Yeah, can't afford another black —" He turned, and something stirred in the shadows. He stared down, his gaze caught by the movement, and a huge brown cockroach froze into waiting immobility.

Revulsion flashed through him, made his stomach squirm. The contrast between Alia the exquisite, Alia and the perfection they'd just shared and this — this *filth*. He shifted weight, slowly raised one foot —

"What's the matter, Rod?" She had turned, was putting the glasses they'd used into the dishwasher. It was the pause when the door should have been closing that had caught her attention, not his own movements. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing." He made his voice lightly casual. "Just remembered something I'd forgotten, that's all." Mustn't upset her. Fastidious, tenderhearted Alia. Mustn't let her suspect — he slapped his foot sideways, and the insect skidded out into the hall, momentarily stunned but otherwise unharmed.

"Be seen' you." He stepped out and closed the door softly behind himself.

Satisfactory? It's harmless, it isn't poisonous, it's Seven considered edible, though not in this culture — and he's had time to think.

They've a cultural bias against the things.

An unreasoning cultural bias. They perform a useful function, after all.

I still say —

Nonsense. That cultural bias, as you call it, is part of what I object to. Now listen, sib, this is it. Sanctity of life. Cultural values. Self control. If he wants to harm it, he'll have to chase after it. Disadvantaging himself badly, because he can't afford another black mark. He'll have to want to destroy it, want to give in to his primitive hunter instincts, more than he's willing to listen to his rational self, and he does have a rational self — or so you've been saying.

(A mental sigh.) All right. I agree.

It's about time.

Rod, remembering the time, trotted down the hall. A movement in the shadows caught his eye again. He frowned. The bug! Suppose it got back into Alia's suite. Suppose —

It scurried away and he headed after it, then hesitated.

He couldn't afford to be late again. The hall was long, and plenty of cross corridors led off it. It might be quite a chase.

Should he or shouldn't he? The filthy things made his skin crawl, but — It scurried away, and he followed. Old hunting instinct, while his rational mind debated.

Should he or shouldn't he?

One more black, and ... the old man already sore ... his up-zooming career could come to a crunching halt. Transfer to a dead-end slot, for now. To hell-n-gone. With worse to come. And ... no Alia. Maybe no job, no nothing.

The lady or the ... cockroach?

The lady, to whom the cockroach was as integral a part of the community of life as a human being, waited.

Should he or —

The lady or the — □

The Conservative Avant-Garde



I almost didn't make it this time. These review columns work on a very tight reading schedule, and if I spend too much time right before the deadline on a book which turns out to be not worth reviewing, I haven't got anything to talk about. This time, I got tangled up with five inappropriate books at the last minute, which must be something of a record.

So I'll have to improvise, leaping into topicalities in a single bound.

The first culprit is *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon* by Tom Spanbauer (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$21.95), which, in my less politically correct moments, I invariably think of as *How The West Was Bugged*. It is a Literary western, disguised somewhat as a Literary fantasy, essentially realistic in its focus, for all the characters hold supernatural beliefs and have the occasional vision. One of the critics quoted on the back of the jacket describes it as *Gunsmoke* written by Gabriel García Márquez and Jean Genet. Hinting at the fantastic (a.k.a. magic realism) is a common sales tactic these days, the same way that historical romances are sometimes passed off as generic fantasy.

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

It's even a pretty good book, well-written and witty, with a wide variety of comic-but-real characters and a caustic view of the Old West that might have come from an X-rated, homosexual Mark Twain. (Though I suspect that even gay readers might find our hero's obsession with his predilections enough to send them knocking on the door of a Trappist monastery.) So, not without merit, but not really *Aboriginal* review material either.

Then came four titles from Black Ice Books, which proclaim themselves "the most radical fiction being written in America today," very Literary, but counter-cultural, with hints of surrealism and cyberpunk, introducing readers to "a new generation of dissident writers in revolt," as if dissident writers are ever *not* in revolt. The cynic can't help but notice the credit, "Published by Fiction Collective Two with support given by the English Department Publications Unit of Illinois State University, the English Department Publications Center of the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the Illinois Arts Council." Ah, subsidized by the Literary Academic Establishment... how, er, "revolutionary" is this likely to get?

The four books are *The Kafka Chronicles*, a novel, sort-of, by one "Mark Amerika" (Not three "K"s? Oh come now, don't hold yourself back.); *Revelation Countdown*, a story collection by Cris Mazza; *New Noir*, another story collection

by John Shirley; and an anthology, *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation* edited by Larry McCaffery. (All list-price at \$7.00 each.)

First, let me say that the Shirley is a dark gem, a collection of vivid and startling crime/suspense/horror stories — about abnormal mental states, not ghosts and Things — which is probably going to miss its audience buried among the Literaries. It may well become a collector's item in the future, even a rarity if enterprising horror and mystery dealers don't go out of their way to stock it.

But the other three books, I can't say I found very inspiring. What does the avant-garde output of the "most radical" writers in America today consist of?

Sex and incoherence, mostly. Which is not quite the same thing as incoherent sex, but close, and very, very familiar.

I was hoping to do a piece on cutting-edge magic-realist-cum-literary crossovers. I think Mr. McCaffery sent me these books because I've made an effort to seek out such material in the past. But none of these Black Ice volumes is quite what I had in mind, and, to coin a phrase: shit, there goes the column. I am right on top of the deadline, and I am *stuck*.

We will have a digression.

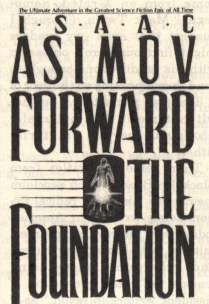
My acquaintance with the avant-garde in fiction goes back many years. It isn't profound, but ever since I was in college, I have

been aware of such things. I was a great browser among the literary magazines in the university library. And, for the last twenty years, I've had a friend in England who collects mainstream literary anthologies and magazines. I am also a great browser in used-book stores, a great attendee of library book-sales, and I've been keeping this guy supplied with everything from *The O. Henry Memorial Awards* volumes going back into the Teens to *New World Writing*, *Evergreen Review*, *New Directions*, etc., etc., some of which I read before shipping off to him. And, in college, I made my first attempts to read William Burroughs (didn't get very far) and even *Finnegan's Wake* (about three pages). To make life really interesting, the New Wave (remember that?) was in flower back then, *New Worlds* was getting really strange (and its circulation plummeting), and these influences reinforced one another. (*New Worlds* was a very mixed bag, ranging from wonderful to absolutely dreadful; its book-review section was a real education: the first place I ever heard of William Burroughs, or Alain Robbe-Grillet, or lots of other people who aren't in the English Literature curriculum.)

1970 was, literarily, a good time to be eighteen years old, and eighteen is about the right age to discover the avant-garde. Forty is too late. ("I am not an old fart," to steal a wonderful line from John Skipp. "I am a senior young fart.") Eighteen-to-twenty-two is when the literary young person becomes intensely interested in the possibilities of *form*, in finding new and weirder ways of putting words (or more frequently, word-salad) on the page. It's the age when wanna-bes turn out huge amounts of "deep" poetry, none of which anyone understands (but rhyme and meter are unthinkable), when one tends more naturally toward what one thinks is stream-of-consciousness rather than well-

crafted narrative, trying to be revolutionary before understanding such prosaic matters as pacing and point-of-view.

Yes, I've been there. I came away understanding that science fiction's New Wave was only one more manifestation of a continuing phenomenon which goes like this: new, brash, young-turk writers get bored with the perceived strictures of the storytelling art, and with the seemingly-conventional or classical writers held up for commanded admiration by critics and/or literature professors, and



they want to tear it all down. They attack the form of the story itself.

Now, for a digression within a digression: I want you all to go out and read a favorite book of mine, *The Golden Ass* by Lucius Apuleius. Lucius wrote in Latin, in the late 2nd Century A.D. He was an African, from what is now Tunisia; his native language was Punic, and his acquired Latin had a very strange flavor, which became known as the "new speech," and developed into a literary movement. In other words, avant-garde. Well, sort of. There's a lot more to *The Golden Ass* than that, which is probably why it was preserved. Lucius may well have

been the Clark Ashton Smith or even the R.A. Lafferty of his day. His novel is the oldest complete novel to survive anywhere in the world, to my knowledge. It's fantasy, comedy, horror, satire, and it's still great reading, though, of course, we lose most of his style in translation. (I recommend you find a modernized version of Aldington's 16th-century version, which by a fluke of another 400 years of linguistic development best approximates in English the weirdness of the original Latin.)

The most intriguing thing about Apuleius is that his book shows a full range of "modern" storytelling technique. He writes in scenes, with dialogue. He paces, describes, pulls surprises, and even — and this is pretty incredible since the idea was not to be formalized for another 1700 years — touches on the matter of controlled point-of-view.

What we learn from him is that prose *storytelling* hasn't changed very much over the millennia. This is not to say that it doesn't change at all, that no experimentalism is valid. Sure, many writers have changed the way we tell stories, including Cervantes, Poe, Joyce, Kafka, Borges, and maybe even J.G. Ballard, and I might point out that these tend to be older, mature writers who know what they're doing rather than pretentious newcomers.

But a story is still a story. It's a narrative of imaginary events or life-experiences which the reader shares, not necessarily to "identify with" in the daydream sense of "Gee, I'll pretend I'm Tarzan swinging through those trees," but something that is witnessed and must be, to some extent, understood. That's what readers want. That's what they always want. If they don't get it, if the readers can't witness or share the fictional experience — if the noise drowns out signal — then, for all Samuel R. Delany has written whole essays to prove there is no such thing — the piece of writing

lacks *content*. It is word-salad. Imagine the oral storyteller in the marketplace babbling obscurities no one can follow. The audience drifts away.

But in every generation there are "dissident writers in revolt" who try to produce "the most radical writing" in the land in *exactly the same manner*. Down with story! Throw out idea, character, emotion, pacing, scene-setting! Announce yourself with a silly byline like "Mark Amerika."

Word-salad. You can't read it. You can't eat it. Not good for very much. What I concluded from reading *New Worlds* and from reading since, all the way up to these Black Ice books, is that the "experimental" story is perhaps the most conservative of literary forms. To paraphrase Alexei Panshin, who was talking about sword-and-sorcery at the time, it seems to be a literary dinosaur, completely unable to evolve. The irony is that sword-and-sorcery *did* evolve. It shed its fur jockstrap and turned into the Del Rey Books sort of generic fantasy trilogy. I am not sure this is an improvement, but it is *change*. The avant-garde story seems unable to change.

Mark Amerika's book starts out like this:

niceties niceties nice cities
(don't exist) meanstreets
meanstreaks
means&ways

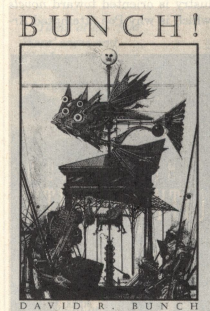
falling headfirst into the pavement
our buoy of boys
cracks his numbskull and turns
more nonsensical
derivation inside/out & backwards
(summer
salt wintry peppering)

And you can read a few pages of that before you get tired of it, having gleaned virtually nothing, and realized that there's nothing here which would have been out of place in *New Worlds* in 1970 or *Evergreen Review* in 1960 or

Books

various literary magazines decades before that.

Avant-Pop's "radical, subversive talents of the post-modern new wave" (including Doug Rice, Kathy Acker, Harold Jaffe) can do little better. They're discovering that they can write about sex. They like funny verbal tricks. Samuel Delany has an essay in split-screen, narrative on one side of the page, exposition on the other (and these flipped over between pages, to force you to read a little bit of one, then a little bit of the other), manages to say at some length merely that "the unspeakable" is a matter of relative con-



text, that what you'd tell your lover in bed is very different from what you'd say at the dinner table, or to your proctologist. There is one very funny graphic feature wherein Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is illustrated with pornographic prints and excerpts from the Marquis de Sade. But I don't find anything particularly radical or subversive here. And the Cris Mazza book strikes me as (I know this is going to sound terribly provincial, but so be it) the sort of dull, literary-mainstream fiction that guarantees that little literary magazines are going to continue to have

small circulations. It is that direct opposite of Popular Fiction, Unpopular Fiction, and likely to stay that way.

The John Shirley volume doesn't really belong in this discussion. It has a strong potential for break-out into larger genres, both horror and mystery. What the other three really lack is any sort of real-world vitality that the best science fiction, whether by William Gibson or Isaac Asimov, gains from being *about something* which may actually matter. Generation after generation of avant-gardists will meanwhile remain of extremely limited interest.

No starred ratings are really possible for these books. I recommend the Shirley, but not the others. Delany cultists will want *Avant-Pop*. Order from Fiction Collective Two, 4950/Publication Unit, Illinois State University, Normal IL 61761.

And here's a word for you would-be columnists out there. It's always possible to wriggle out of these situations, and make your deadline with even the unlikeliest material. When you understand that, you're a columnist.

And now, we resume our regular service:

Farewell from a Master

Forward the Foundation

by Isaac Asimov
Doubleday/Foundation, 1993
416 pp., \$23.50

While there may yet be franchise volumes, and any number of short stories can be expanded into novels by others, this is the last *real* Isaac Asimov novel we're ever going to see. It is a sequel to *Prelude to Foundation* and continues the story of Hari Seldon, inventor of Psychohistory, from early middle-age to death. It is certainly the best of the later Foundation books, largely because it returns to the form of the

original trilogy and is made up of a series of novellas, each of which leads into the next as the solution to the problem in the first story becomes the problem to be confronted in the second. This speeds up the pacing and avoids the long and sometimes tedious conversations that fill out, say, *Foundation's Edge*. There is far more story per wordage here.

The ideas are, of course, largely familiar, because all this book can do is fill in how the events of the original trilogy got started. That is the inherent shortcoming of the self-pastiche. There are robots in it, subtly manipulating behind the scenes, almost like (as one of the bad guys suspects) gods. The themes of prejudice and social division, which became so prominent in later Asimov, return. And the author writes with more than ordinary feeling, possibly because he knew this was his last book, and he was never shy about acknowledging his oncoming death. There is a sense of urgency, also because the story demands it, since Hari Seldon is racing against time and his own mortality to get Psychohistory going before the Galactic Empire falls apart. By his own admission, Asimov began to increasingly identify with his character, and *Forward the Foundation* therefore becomes unexpectedly moving when, in the final *Encyclopedia Galactica* entry on the last page, Seldon is found dead at his computer in the midst of his work. Asimov, who when once asked by an interviewer, "What would you do if you knew you had only six months to live?" replied, "Type faster," wanted to die that way. Alas, he didn't, and quite possibly when he wrote that last page, he knew that he wouldn't.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Bunch!

By David R. Bunch
Broken Mirrors Press, 1993
157 pp., \$8.95

Here's a real triumph of the small press, a book I, as a fan, have wanted to see for twenty years, but which never could have come from a big-time publisher. In 1971, Avon published Bunch's scary/funny/unique volume about a mechanized future, *Moderan* (a fix-up of many stories, like *The Martian Chronicles*, something halfway between a novel and a collection), and he hasn't had a book out since, not because he doesn't deserve it, but for boring reasons of publishing industry economics and convention. Now, as a hundred and more years ago (as Edgar Allan Poe found out the hard way), the publishing industry is oriented toward *novels* (which is why Poe attempted Ar-

otherwise wouldn't: for example a world in which people leave their children out for the trash compactor ("In the Time of the Disposal of Infants"), or bored workers kick human heads around the apartment ("Any Heads At Home"), and so on. The contents range from Bunch's first professional story in 1957 up to one original. Read it all and your mental state will be definitely ... ah ... changed. You'll also suspect, as I do, that no one, not even Bunch, could keep this up for a book-length, single work. Now let's hope Broken Mirrors will reissue *Moderan*.

Order from: Broken Mirrors Press, P.O. Box 380473, Cambridge MA 02238.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

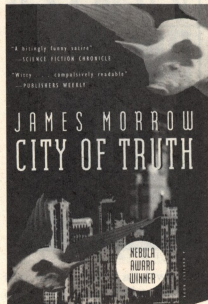
City of Truth

By James Morrow
Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993
144 pp., \$7.95

James Morrow keeps getting better and better as a satirist. He trick is to get your attention with glib, sparkling humor, then deal with the subject matter *honestly*, no matter how dark the consequences.

City of Truth takes place in Veritas, where everyone is brain-burned to tell the truth all the time, no matter what. Yes, it's an old sitcom idea, but Morrow takes it where we've never been before. In Veritas, the tabloid headlines read "Controlled Study Negates New Arthritis Cure" and the warning on a cigarette package says, "The Surgeon General's crusade against this product may distract you from the myriad ways your government fails to protect your health," and people send their children off to Camp Get Rid Of The Kids. Our hero has a job rather like Winston Smith's. He is a "deconstructionist," entrusted to destroy literature and art which contains "lies," i.e. anything imaginative.

Now this could be an opportunity for simple-minded, gush-



thur Gordon Pym, having gotten a very familiar sort of rejection of a proposed collection), and Bunch has rarely written anything longer than ten pages.

Here we have the non-*Moderan* Bunch. He has created a kind of short story uniquely his own — he is a *real* radical, subversive writer, quite unlike the self-proclaimed avant-gardists — filled with poetic prose, sharp edges, satirical insights, and *clarity*. His secret is that he lets you see and experience things you

ing, heart-is-more-important-than-head preachment, but it is precisely here that Morrow shows his mettle. The hero's son contracts a dread disease. Nothing can save him, short of a miraculous remission brought on by factually unfounded hope. So the hero takes the boy to Satirev, the City of Lies, where pigs really do have wings, there is a Santa Claus, snow is hot, and people make vaguely New Age noises about "balancing" the boy's "energy flow" while the disease organism works relentlessly through his system.

The ending, which you've probably guessed by now, is very moving, and brings the story around to a synthesis of the two points of view.

Highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

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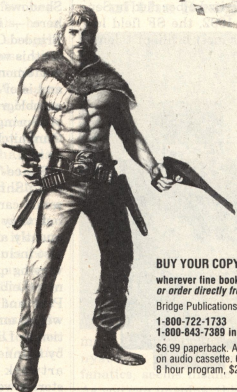
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Hail and Farewell

Gummitch and Friends

By Fritz Leiber

Donald M. Grant, 1993

222 pp., \$60.00 (deluxe limited), \$30.00 (trade)

When Fritz Leiber died in September, 1992, the SF field lost one of its most brilliant talents.



Gummitch and Friends was his final project, a collection of cat-related stories.

The best-known story in the

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

collection is the classic "Space-Time for Springers," which introduced Gummitch, the superkitten. Leiber also included, though it's only slightly cat-related, the brilliant "Ship of Shadows." The rest of the fiction here — including "Thrice the Brinded Cat," written especially for this volume — is, I'm afraid, not among Leiber's best work and is of interest mainly for its autobiographical content. Fans of "Springers" will enjoy seeing Gummitch's further adventures as well.

"Space-Time for Springers" and "Ship of Shadows" alone would carry many lesser books, but they have also been frequently anthologized. The book also includes some cat poems of varying quality by Margo Skinner (Leiber's second wife) and Poul and Karen Anderson, as well as an explanatory introduction by Leiber and an afterword by Skinner. Roger Gerberding's artwork complements the stories well. The deluxe edition also includes tributes to Leiber by fourteen notable writers, which are by turns delightful and moving.

If not the very best of Leiber, *Gummitch and Friends* is still an interesting project, and revealing in its autobiographical aspects. The book is certainly worth acquiring if you're a Leiber fan (as you should be) or a cat admirer.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2



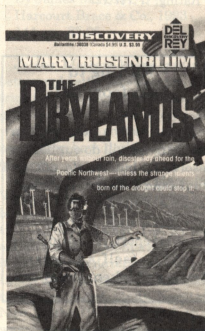
The Drylands

By Mary Rosenblum

Del Rey, 1993

271 pp., \$4.50

Here is a book that should not be judged by its packaging. Don't let the Del Rey imprint or the techie cover fool you; *The*



Drylands is something special. Mary Rosenblum's first novel is moving, suspenseful, and absorbing.

Due apparently to climate change, the next century is seeing severe, worldwide drought. Much of the United States is desert, and the population is swarming into refugee

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camps in the overtaxed cities. Riots have begun breaking out against the Army Corps of Engineers, which has been given the job of managing and rationing the ever-shorter supply of water. Colonel Carter Voltaire has just been put in charge of the Columbia Riverbed Pipeline in Oregon, where he is waging a losing battle against saboteurs. Nita Montoya, a woman from the Drylands to the east, has a psychic ability that could help him, but she fears persecution if she reveals it.

The plot is well constructed and not predictable, though

legitimately science-fictional, a really remarkable first novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Ye Gods!

By Tom Holt
St. Martin's, 1993
296 pp., \$19.95

Tom Holt strikes again. Having taken on Vikings, Norse mythology, and the *Flying Dutchman*, he turns to Graeco-Roman mythology with *Ye Gods!* The results are, as usual, hilarious.

Jason Derry is a suburban everyman who just happens to be a Hero. He is getting rather disinterested with the drudgery of slaying monsters and finding treasure when, as so often happens to hapless mortals, he is drawn into a power struggle among the gods. Of course, with Holt writing it, the situation is not tragic, but comic. We learn, among other things, how Heroes always find their way home, how to file an insurance claim for an act of gods, and what else Prometheus brought the mortals that really ticked Jupiter off.

There is a point buried under all the nonsense, but it's unobtrusive. Holt's humor is intelligent, sardonic, clever, and very British. He moves effortlessly from slapstick to farce to crackling wit. This author has yet to disappoint me, or to fail to move me to tears of laughter. *Ye Gods!* is delightful.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Conscience of the Beagle

By Patricia Anthony
First Books, 1993
210 pp., \$21.99

I'll start this review with a disclaimer: although First Books shares *Aboriginal's* editor, Charlie Ryan has had no influence on this review, nor does its content have any relationship to my continued employment. All opinions expressed are

honestly mine.

I wanted to read *Conscience of the Beagle* because I'm a fan of the stories of Patricia Anthony's that have appeared in this magazine. It is original and fascinating, if not wholly successful.

The narrator, Dyle Holloway, is a Home Force policeman, heading a four-man team sent from Earth to the colony world of Tennyson to investigate a series of bombings. Dyle is paranoid, though not, we soon realize, completely unreasonably. In fact, all four policemen have serious mental problems, and

Conscience of the Beagle



much of the population of Tennyson, a world of religious fanatics, seems insane as well. As you can imagine, this makes a criminal investigation difficult, especially when Dyle's tragic past gets in the way.

At the halfway point in this book, I thought it was going to get an uncritical rave, and I was uncertain whether I should review it under those circumstances (who'd believe I was being objective?). But as the book continued, I found Dyle's paranoia more and more annoying, and found it ever more dif-



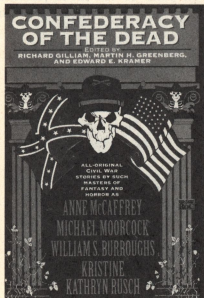
Carter takes a little too long to figure some things out, and even the conspiracy is credible. The expected love story is resolved in a non-clichéd manner. The characters are believable, with real depth to them. The most notable aspect of *The Drylands*, however, is Rosenblum's evocative visions of a world gone dry. When I walked outside after having been reading the book for a while, I was momentarily taken aback to see flowers and green grass, so strong is the effect of her vivid descriptions.

The Drylands is exciting and

ficult to enjoy a book in which nearly every character is crazy. The final enormous conspiracy revealed simply failed to convince me; it was just too elaborate, much more convoluted than necessary to accomplish its goal. Also, Anthony fails to fully confront the dire moral implications of her ending.

Conscience of the Beagle is in many ways a powerful book, and the characters are often fascinating. It is a highly original and ambitious work, worth reading in spite of its failings. Patricia Anthony should have a hell of a career ahead of her.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2



Confederacy of the Dead
 Edited by Richard Gilliam,
 Martin H. Greenberg, and
 Edward E. Kramer
 Roc, 1993
 480 pp., \$12.00

Confederacy of the Dead is an uneven anthology of Civil War stories, mostly horror. There are several contributions that I can't imagine why the editors accepted, a few brilliant ones, and many that are merely okay. I

agree with Michael Bishop in his remarkably honest introduction: there are too many zombie stories. There's also too much romanticization of the Confederate cause.

The best stories: "The Sunday-Go-to-Meeting Jaw," by Nancy A. Collins, is effective, quiet horror with no fantastic elements. Algis Budrys's "Grabow and Collicher and I" is brief and potent. Ed Gorman's "The Quarantined Man" is unforgettable horror that doesn't need to resort to gore.

Other stories of particular interest are William S. Burroughs's "Death Fiend Guerillas," Gregory Nicoll's "Terrible Swift Saw," Lee Hoffman's "The Third Nation," George Alec Effinger's "Beast," and Michael Moorcock's peculiar and opaque "Colour." Many of the others are predictable, clichéd, or both.

Obviously, not every story in an anthology can be a gem, but the editors of this one should have exercised more discrimination. Greater variety of style and subject might also have been nice; themes that work once get tired when you run across them over and over again. There are enough good stories to recommend *Confederacy of the Dead*, if you like horror or have a particular interest in the Civil War.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Moving?

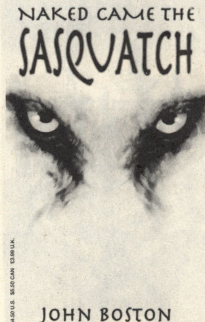
If you plan to move between now and October, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

The U.S. Postal Service doesn't always forward copies, and destroys them, charging us 35 cents for the privilege. That's why we cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee, if you move and don't tell us.

Naked Came the Sasquatch
 By John Boston
 TSR, 1993
 345 pp., \$4.50

Every so often I give a non-series TSR book a try, but rarely do I find one that's readable for more than a few pages. John Boston's *Naked Came the Sasquatch*, however, marks a real upswing in the quality of books from this publisher; I hope it's a sign of things to come, and not a fluke. Not that it's a great novel, but it's generally well done and a lot of fun.

The book is set in Basin Valley,



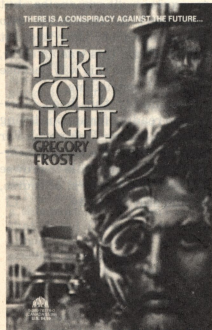
a very small town in the wilds far east of San Francisco. Michael Fenberg, the editor and publisher of Basin Valley's newspaper, is beset by woes. A new paper is coming to town, seemingly with the sole intention of putting him out of business. He's doing a bad job of parenting his orphaned younger brothers. He's obsessed with the memory of his wife and child, killed in a car accident. He's growing interested in new reporter Elaine Mitikitski, who has problems of her own. And his brother John, who is obsessed

From the Bookshelf

with catching a Bigfoot, is suspected of being a brutal murderer. Surprisingly enough, Boston makes most of this funny.

Naked Came the Sasquatch is too long, and the mix of horror and humor doesn't always gel, especially when the humor moves over the edge to farce. It's often very funny, though. Michael and Elaine, the two main characters, are sympathetic; if Boston could have made all his characters as believable, both the horror and the humor would have benefited. It's a very good first novel, and worth your time and attention.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2



The Pure Cold Light

By Gregory Frost
AvoNova, 1993
256 pp., \$4.99

With *The Pure Cold Light*, fantasy author Gregory Frost turns to science fiction, in this case of a cyberpunkish sort. Despite a lot of familiar trappings, the book has some interesting and original aspects.

Thomasina Lyell is an independent journalist whose inves-

tigations of the enormous ScumberCorp conglomerate and its drug Orbitol lead her into unexpected and very dangerous territory. The novel features evil megacorporations, huddled, impoverished, drug-riddled masses, mass media as opiate, strange drugs, and conspiracies. Frost's version of this setting is well done, though, and features an original and surprising plot twist.

The Pure Cold Light includes many well-done humorous, horrific, or telling details. Frost provides solid characterization as well as lots of suspense and action. He takes us over familiar territory, but he does it expertly, and the destination, at least, is unexpected.

Rating: ☆☆☆

PITFCS: Proceedings of the Institute for Twenty-First Century Studies

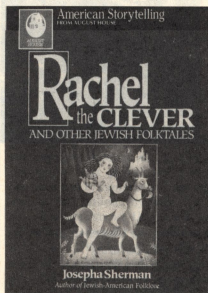
Editor Theodore R. Cogswell
Advent: Publishers, Inc., 1993
(P.O. Box A3228, Chicago, IL 60690)
384 pp., \$50.00

Behind that deliberately pretentious title lies a wealth of entertainment and enlightenment. Theodore Cogswell started *PITFCS* as a "fanzine for pros" in 1959, and everyone who was anyone in the SF field signed up. It printed mostly members' letters, sprinkled with essays and humorous poetry, and the discussions were wide-ranging and fascinating. Remarkably, most of the dialogue remains fresh (though those of us who came in late might wish for the occasional explanatory footnote).

PITFCS only lasted a few years, but they were productive ones, as becomes evident from a brief examination of this collected volume. There is an immense amount of material here: 384 large pages of tiny print. And what material it is. In the

slightly over half of the book I've made my way through so far, I've read Poul Anderson's critique of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, Isaac Asimov's analysis of what makes his story "Nightfall" a classic, Fritz Leiber's view of the differences between SF and "mainstream" writing, Kingsley Amis defending his then newly-published *New Maps of Hell* against all comers, racy limericks by Brian Aldiss, and Mack Reynolds's recipe for a Moroccan snack which incorporates *Cannabis sativa*.

Just some of the issues: Should SF writers unionize (a real union, with a closed shop and strikes and all)? Is SF dead now



that there's a real space program? Do editors have the right to change authors' stories? Is psychology a science? Is *Starship Troopers* evil propaganda? How can we get the mainstream to respect SF? Most of these debates are still going on, and the *PITFCS* discussions are still relevant, though it's sometimes depressing to see how little progress has been made.

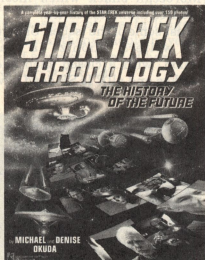
The list of contributors is astonishing: Asimov, Ellison, Anderson, Aldiss, Blish, Dick-

son, Campbell, Merrill, Knight, Wollheim, Budrys, Leiber, Pohl, Vonnegut, Amis, and many more.

If you can't scrape the \$50 together, at least get your local library or club to do it. *PITFCS* is not to be missed.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Noted:



Rachel the Clever and Other Jewish Folktales

By Josepha Sherman
August House, 1993
171 pp., \$18.95

It's pushing the boundaries a bit for an SF and fantasy reviewer to write about a book of folklore. *Rachel the Clever* is tangentially related to the field, however, since many of the folktales have fantastic elements, and it's a good enough book that I wanted to tell you about it.

The tales Josepha Sherman has collected are delightful whether or not you're familiar with the traditions of Jewish folklore. They are the perfect length for reading aloud, or for dipping in and snacking.

Sherman has included some peculiar and interesting items, such as a version of Cinderella involving a rabbi's son instead of a prince and the prophet Elijah instead of a fairy godmother. The tales of Chelm, the village of fools, can be sidesplitting. *Rachel the Clever* will provide an entertaining introduction to Jewish folklore for anyone, young or old.

Star Trek Chronology: The History of the Future
By Michael Okuda and Denise Okuda
Pocket, 1993
184 pp., \$14.00

With two current series, one old series, and six movies, the *Star Trek* universe keeps growing, with no end in sight. Michael and Denise Okuda's *Star Trek Chronology* began as an in-house effort to codify the show's future history for the benefit of scriptwriters, and turned into an elaborate project, starting from the Big Bang and extending to the 33rd century, and including every event that was so much as referred to in passing in the old *Star Trek*, the first five seasons of *The Next Generation*, and the movies. (The animated series and the published novels have been declared non-canonical.)

The book's a lot of fun if you enjoy the universe; I haven't been a Trekkie in many years, but I got a kick out of it. Considering how little attention was given to continuity, especially on the old series, the chronology fits

together remarkably well, with some exceptions, as the authors note. The book also includes amusing explanations of some inside jokes and references, and there are some good jokes hidden in the index as well.

Unfortunately, the chronology is already badly out of date, since it's nearly a season behind on *The Next Generation* and doesn't include *Deep Space Nine* at all; it's not just a matter of adding new material on to the end either, since "past" events have to be integrated. This book is not an episode guide; it includes only a bare summary of the "historical" events from each episode, not subplots and personal matters. The authors try to explain discrepancies, but they don't tie themselves into knots doing so; they are not afraid to say, this was an error, or, it was done this way because of budget restrictions.

Presumably this book is required reading for anyone trying to write a *Star Trek* novel. For fans of any of the show's incarnations, it's enjoyable to browse in. *Star Trek* haters, of course, should stay far away. □

This is a double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription, or one if you paid the quarterly rate.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

Pass the Banana



I recently came across a book with a rather interesting title—*The Third Chimpanzee*, by Jared Diamond (1). I knew that there are two species of chimpanzees, the common chimpanzee and the pygmy chimpanzee, but didn't know what the third one could be.

I guess it is obvious to you.

But I must have been a bit slow the day I picked up that book. As it turned out, the third chimpanzee was the dolt who had just pulled that book off the shelf — me. How can that be? you might be asking. Is Bob Metzger actually some little ape who works in a circus act juggling styrofoam balls, spends his evenings watching old Tarzan movies, hoards bananas, and bangs out a science column in his spare time? Hopefully not, although I will admit a weakness for old Tarzan movies — Johnny Weismuller only, of course.

No, I don't really believe that I'm a chimpanzee, and I don't believe that Jared Diamond thinks so either. The title of the book is a grabber, something to make you take that book off the shelf — and it certainly worked for me.

So, what is Diamond trying to say in this book?

A technique called DNA hybridization can be used to tell how closely related any two species are. The technique consists of mixing together the DNA from the two species, and then measuring how much the melting point of the mixed (hybrid) DNA is lowered below the melting point of pure DNA. It turns out that for every 1 degree Celsius drop in the hybrid mixture, the two DNA samples will differ by 1 percent.

So what?

Assume that I got hold of a sample of your DNA and a sample of chimp DNA, mixed them up, and checked out the melting point of the

hybrid concoction. How much of your DNA is identical to that of the chimp's?

Think about it.

That DNA is you. It is your blueprint, containing all the information that defines you — everything from that brilliant three pounds of mush between your ears to your cute little dimples. It is you. So how much of you do you think you have in common with a chimpanzee?

10%?

Possibly 20%?

Maybe even 30%?

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. You share 98.4% of your DNA with a chimpanzee. What keeps you out of a cage in a zoo is a mere 1.6% of your DNA.

Strange.

Here's something even stranger.

I mentioned above that I thought that there were only two species of chimpanzees, the common chimp and the pygmy chimp. These chimp species appear to be so identical in appearance that it was not until 1929 that anatomists even bothered to give them separate names. Chimps living on the equator in central Zaire are called "pygmy chimps" because they are slightly smaller than the more widespread "common chimps" that range across Africa, just north of the equator. However, even though the anatomical differences are slight, their reproductive behavior is quite different. Unlike common chimps, the pygmy chimp will assume a variety of sexual positions, either sex can initiate copulation, females are sexually receptive for much of the month — not just a brief period during mid-month — and there are strong bonds among females or between males and females, not just among males.

But in the final analysis, these

two species are still just chimpanzees. What do you think the DNA differences are between the common and pygmy chimp? Surely, it must be infinitesimal — parts per million, parts per billion.

No.

Their DNA differs by 0.7 percent.

That number is not much less than what separates us from the chimpanzees. Do you find that a little bit scary? We like to think of ourselves as this wondrous creature, so superior, so separate, so much more highly evolved than our brother apes.

Are we?

The answer to that question is both yes and no. It's true that we are genetically very similar, but those small differences are crucial, making us the unique creatures that we have become, allowing us to dominate this planet, to create works of art, to explore the heavens, and to kill billions by genocide. I would recommend this book because of Diamond's discussions of how that 1.6% of DNA has affected us. But, in addition to that and just as interesting is his view on how much we do have in common with our chimpanzee cousins.

Diamond examines our unique behavior and anatomy and tries to paint a picture of why we are what we are. I am going to go over a few of the many questions he asks, and I'm sure that you'll find many of the answers surprising — I know I did.

1) What is the effect of men being larger than women?

2) Why amongst all the apes does man have by far the biggest penis?

3) Why don't women manifest outward physical signs or behaviors to indicate when they are fertile?

4) Why are human females the only mammal to experience

menopause, and what is the function of it?

5) What are humans really looking for in a mate? — or how to get the man or woman of your dreams (I've saved the best for last in the hope that you'll keep reading. Please don't skip to the bottom).

It is a fact that men are, on average, 8% taller than women and 20% heavier. How does this difference affect our behavior? Does this difference simply mean that it would be natural for men to dominate women, that men should go out and do battle in an attempt to bring home the bacon while the women should stay back in the cave grubbing for roots and taking care of the babies? No.

If you look at the ratio of male to female size in mammals, and then compare it to their behavior, you find a very interesting trend. It turns out that among polygynous mammals, the average harem size increases with the ratio of the male's body size to the female's body size. For instance, male and female gibbons are the exact same size, and are completely monogamous, while male gorillas, which typically have a harem of three to six females, weigh double the female, and the elephant seal males, who outweigh the females by a factor of four, have an average harem of forty-eight females.

What has caused this to happen? Well, in a perfectly monogamous environment, where there is a female for each male, there is not much competition for females — there are enough to go around, so that each and every male can acquire a female. But in a polygynous species, where competition is so fierce, the bigger the male, the more likely he will be able to beat off the attacks of fellow males in quest of his harem. The bigger the male, the larger the harem, and therefore more of his genes get passed along to the next generation.

What does this say about humans? If we are to believe this biological rule, it would mean that we are not totally monogamous, that we have a genetically driven component, as manifested in the differences in body size, for males to acquire more than one female. Is this really true? I don't know, but it is certainly interesting, and might

explain some of the philandering tendencies of our species. Of course, males no longer battle it out with clubs, the physically strongest male winning the woman. This biological rule may still be working on us, but the dominant male is now determined by power — which may be defined in terms of money, politics, or box office sales.

Despite decades of study and probably millions of dollars spent, there is to date no adequate theory of penis length for the great apes. Consider this — the length of the erect penis averages 1.25 inches in a gorilla, 1.5 inches in an orangutan, 3 inches in a chimp, and 5 inches in a man. Why the difference? All four of these species manage to propagate themselves quite nicely, despite the wide variation in size. If anything, the larger penis would seem to be a disadvantage to the propagation of the species — couldn't the added protoplasm be used much better in making fingers longer, adding a bit more muscle here or there, or increasing brain volume (not to mention the added likelihood of some predator taking a chomp out of such a large target)?

Some anthropologists feel that the human penis has become large, not due to any physical requirements for the act of copulation, but because it has become an organ of display, like the peacock's tail or the lion's mane. This seems a bit of a stretch to me. I find it hard to believe that as some muscle-bound male was about to capture a female and haul her back to his cave, he catches sight of a ninety-eight-pound weakling of a caveman, who happens to be so well endowed in the penis department that he relinquishes his woman and slinks back to his cave.

I'm not so sure of Diamond's theory of penis length, and even he admits that many aspects of the human penis remain obscure, and represent a field rich for research. The thing to remember is that nothing in nature is arbitrary. Man outdistances the other apes in penis length for a reason — but for a reason that we just don't understand at the moment.

Most mammals are sexually inactive for a great deal of the time. They copulate only when the female

is in estrus — that time when she is ovulating and capable of being fertilized. During this time, females seek copulation, presenting their genitals toward males. For some female monkeys, apparently those not wanting to take any chances, the area around the vagina and buttocks turns blue or red, in order to enhance her chance of some dim-witted male noticing her.

But this is just not the case with humans. We are always sexually active. And unless human females are carefully tracking subtle changes in body temperature or monitoring hormone levels, they cannot tell when they are ovulating. What this means, is that the function of human copulation is not conception, which appears to be really nothing more than a byproduct. There are many theories on the real function of human copulation, but most of them center around the concept of cementing the relationship between males and females, of both partners feeling sexual attraction at all times and thereby bonding emotionally with each other.

That's just great.

We're all very glad that's how it happens to be.

But why?

Is this just a lucky break for us? Probably not. This is a hotly debated question, but the answer may lie in the problem of human babies — they need a huge amount of help to survive. The odds of survival are enhanced by a male/female pair who are emotionally bonded, who find each other sexually desirable at all times of the year.

For an antelope stampeding across the African savannah, it makes little difference if the male remains emotionally bonded to the female, stays with her after the baby is born, and cares for both the mother and baby. This does nothing to propagate the species — the baby antelope is on its feet in a matter of minutes, running with the herd, and being nursed by the female. A love-sick antelope, hanging around the female, would do nothing to enhance the likelihood of the survival of his offspring.

Human babies, on the other hand, require a lot of care, and a lot of teaching, to insure their survival so that those precious genes may be passed on. Mom and Dad working

together have a much better chance of Baby surviving than do two individuals who happened to have found each other desirable for only a few minutes, but later couldn't be bothered with one another.

Now, as to the question of menopause. Until reading this book, I did not realize how uniquely human this is. This is a real case of that 1.6% difference in DNA radically affecting what we are. Most other animal species rarely survive past reproductive age.

If you don't think too hard about that, it would seem to make perfect sense. If an animal's primary function is simply to pass along its genes, that would mean that when it is no longer fertile, it would simply not be logical for the animal to keep on living — it is consuming resources that are better spent being consumed by its offspring.

So why is this not the case for humans? The reason is probably twofold — the larger danger that childbirth represents to the human female, and the danger that a mother's death represents to her offspring. Because it can take up to 20 years for a child to be raised and to learn the skills necessary not only to survive but to prosper, if the mother dies before that child comes to adulthood, the probability of her genes being propagated is diminished. And the most likely way for human females to die is in childbirth (not in modern times, of course, but under more primitive circumstances).

And why is it that childbirth is so dangerous for humans? It is because human babies are huge. A 100-pound woman may deliver a 10-pound baby, while a typical 200-pound gorilla female will only deliver a four-pound baby. Human babies are big because of our big heads which are filled with that big brain. The human species is at its design limit, with a baby's head now barely able to pass through the female pelvis. This high risk in childbirth implies that it's best for human females to become infertile long before death in order to insure the survival of their children, to care for and teach them until adulthood. My female readers may be thinking this highly unfair, and wondering why men do not experience menopause. The reason for this is

simply that childbirth does not represent a risk of death for fathers.

So now we come to the last question that I listed above. What is it that humans are looking for in a mate? From a biological perspective, is there some secret that I can reveal to you that will make you irresistible to the opposite sex?

Yes and no.

On the no side is the principle of Optimal Intermediate Similarity. We develop our beauty standards by imprinting on the people that we see around us in childhood — especially our parents and siblings. The old adage that a man is looking for a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad, or that a woman is seeking a father figure, appears to be true. However, wired somewhere deep within us is an avoidance of incest. Even though we may imprint on our parents and siblings, we do not mate with them, which would be bad news genetically, with shared recessive genes then manifesting themselves into nasty birth defects. We want someone like Mom or Dad, but not exactly like them.

A statistical method used to measure how similar couples are to each other is called the correlation coefficient. If one hundred husbands and one hundred wives all lined up and you noticed that each pair had identical hair color, then the correlation coefficient for hair color would be +1.0, while if the match were only 50/50, the correlation coefficient would be 0.0 (and therefore a random distribution), and if all blondes had spouses with dark hair, then the correlation coefficient would be -1.0.

What has been found is that the highest correlation coefficients for couples — around +0.9 — are present for religion, ethnic background, race, socioeconomic status, age, and political views. The next highest correlation coefficients are around +0.4 and exist for personality-driven things such as extroversion, neatness, and I.Q. Coefficients for physical traits average around +0.2, not as high as for personality traits and religious socioeconomic similarities, but significantly higher than 0.0. However, some physical traits show a very positive correlation coefficient. The length of the middle finger rates a +0.61, meaning that an

unconscious level, people seem to care more about the length of the middle finger than about hair color or intelligence.

So what does this mean?

Simply that like attracts like.

That means that if you're a Catholic Democratic Irish male with red hair, stand six-foot-three, and live in a New York City penthouse, it is quite unlikely that you would find yourself attracted to a Chinese Buddhist female who stands four-foot-eleven and lives 200 miles outside of Beijing in a mud hut — even if you just happened to cross paths with her when she was in New York City for a Young Communists International meeting. You simply would not have imprinted on that type of female, nor would she have imprinted on you.

So what can you do?

Suppose that your middle finger length and hair color don't match the prospective mate you see sitting across the smoke-filled barroom. Is there something that you can do to increase your odds, to make you more desirable?

Perhaps.

Throughout the animal kingdom, males do some mighty strange things to attract females. Diamond uses as an example the bird of paradise found in New Guinea. These males have evolved to the point where they have massive, brightly colored tails which they proudly display during mating periods to attract females.

What is it about these big tails that would tell a female that this male is of superior genetic make-up, so that if she mated with him her offspring would stand a much better chance of survival? On first inspection, you might think that the exact opposite would be true. The bird with the biggest, most colorful tail would be the one that would be the favorite target of predators, easier to spot, probably couldn't even move as fast as those birds with smaller tails. Wouldn't it be better to mate with that colorless nondescript male with the stubby tail that a predator wouldn't even notice?

It doesn't seem to work that way in the animal kingdom.

What that male bird with the massive tail is telling the female is, that even though he's got this ridiculous tail and predators are al-

ways after him, he is of much superior genetic makeup to that colorless bird hiding in the leaves.

Why?

Survival of the fittest.

The bird with the big tail, and all the generations before him, has been forced to become stronger, smarter, and more agile, in order to have survived. The colorless bird with a small tail does not have to possess such superior genes in order to survive.

This behavior seems to work in humans also — or at least it worked for us in the dim past, and we keep manifesting the behavior in our modern world. We males can't grow big tails that attract predators, but we can exhibit dangerous behavior, behavior that would seem to lessen our chances of survival. We males can drive too fast, drink too much, take drugs, parachute from airplanes, or stand in front of charging bulls. We can put ourselves in danger, thereby saying we are of such superior genetic quality that despite the incredibly stupid situations we put ourselves in, we not

only survive, but actually thrive.

Mate with me.

Is that true?

Think about it. What is the stupidest thing that you ever did to impress the opposite sex? Do you remember it? It was pretty stupid, pretty reckless, wasn't it?

So if your middle finger isn't of the right length, then maybe fire-walking or snake handling is the answer to attract the mate of your

dreams.

Good luck, and happy hunting.

I also suggest that you get Diamond's book, curl up in a big soft chair for an interesting read, and snack on a few bananas.

1. Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee*, Harper Perennial, 1993, \$12.00. □

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A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$2 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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Connie Willis
John Kessel
Kevin O'Donnell Jr.
D.C. Poyer

M. Lucie Chin
Joe L. Hensley
and Gene Deweese
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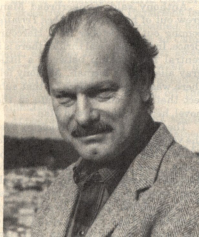
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Dino Minutiae

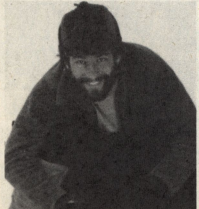
As I write this column, Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* is chomping away at the movie record books as it enters its third week of release, and stunning audiences with its vision of dinosaurs as lithe, birdlike beasts of rippling muscles and wild animal cunning. In case you haven't read absolutely everything you wanted to know about the movie, here's some inside trivia on what it was like to attend the world premiere:

Outside the Uptown Theater in Washington, D.C. the limousines were



Joe Haldeman

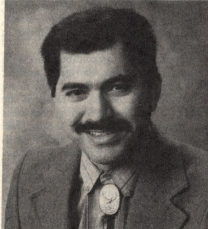
lined up three deep. We walked into the theater through a bright tunnel created by TV and still camera lights, photographers and fans thronging the edges of a red carpet. The benefit affair was a mishmash of glittering movie stars and casually dressed advocates for children



Doug Franklin

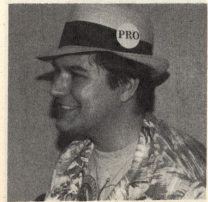
and the homeless, U.S. senators and inner city youths, philanthropists and technical film wizards. And there was Muhammad Ali, moving slowly and signing autographs.

At the "cast party" afterwards at the National Building Museum, large potted ferns, background sounds of thrashing and roaring, a light show of moving shadows, and ice cream cakes shaped like dinosaur eggs set the Mesozoic mood. Sam Neill proved to be as quietly charming as he is handsome. A willowy, sunny Laura Dern stayed



Alan Gutierrez

close to boyfriend Jeff Goldblum (surprisingly sexy in person), who says he read some books on chaos theory to prepare for his part as a mathematician. Stan Winston, whose famous studio created T-Rex, refused to take much credit, saying he was simply part of a team. Michael Crichton is very tall.



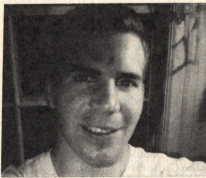
John Gregory Betancourt



This issue we are privileged to have a short piece by multiple Hugo and Nebula winner Joe Haldeman, titled "Market Day."

Haldeman, who achieved superstar status in the mid-1970s with *The Forever War*, won the Hugo and Nebula two years ago for the novella "The Hemingway Hoax".

His latest novel is *Worlds Enough And Time*, now out in paperback from Avon, and he has just completed a novel titled *1968*, which his wife, Gay, describes as "on the edge of science fic-



Jon Foster

tion." Haldeman is president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. He and his wife live in a small Florida town, but one semester a year for the past ten years they have travelled to



Pamela Blotner



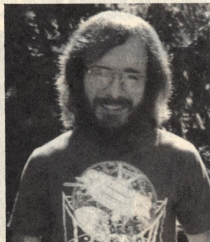
Patricia Anthony

Cambridge, where Joe teaches in the MIT Writing Program. Gay says they both enjoy the change to city life. "We go to shows, eat out too much, and ride our bikes up and down the Charles River," she says.

Dying is not a final act, but an occasional event that punctuates the life of a spacer in "If I Should Die Before I Wake" by Doug Franklin.

Franklin's last piece for *Aboriginal* was "Newport's World" (issue 37-38). Franklin was enjoying the unusually warm weather in the Anchorage area, writing novel outlines while working his day job and thinking about going paragliding when I spoke to him. He says he has been having a "fairly hectic year so far" with the death of his father and the birth of his third child.

"If I Should Die" is illustrated by Alan Gutierrez, who is busy with three book cover projects. One is a series of books by Jeffrey Carver, called *The Chaos Chronicles*, for Tor Books. Another is a young adult adventure series for Pocket Books featuring the teen-age males, Jake and Nog, of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. The first title, *Star Ghost*, is due out in February, and the next one, *The Stowaways*, is due out



Graham P. Collins



Robert Pasternak

in April of 1994. He is also doing covers for a Hardy Boys series from Pocket.

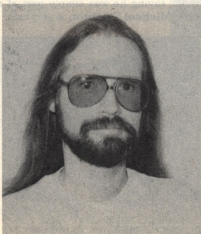
Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld* is the setting for a real aboriginal tale by John Gregory Betancourt called "Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit."

Betancourt has visited *Riverworld* before in "The Merry Men of Riverworld" which appeared in *Tales of Riverworld*. Look for "Human Spirit" to appear in *Quest to Riverworld*.

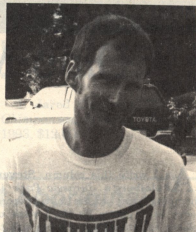
Betancourt is now collaborating with Greg Cox, another *Aboriginal* author, on a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel called *Devil in the Sky*. It features the Hortas, those rock-chewing creatures familiar to fans of the original *Star Trek*.

"Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit" is illustrated by Jon Foster, who just finished 42 paintings for the second of three graphic novel installments of *Neuromancer*, based on William Gibson's book. Despite all the effort, Foster has not had his fill of the dark and gritty side of technology.

"It intrigues me," he says. "It's more exciting when there is a problem, when things aren't handled so politically correctly, when there's lots of emotion, turmoil, and characters on the social edge. I hope I will get to do something else along this line."



Clyde Duensing III



Greg Abraham

Readers may find themselves gritting their teeth at the horror, pain, and love that surrounds the abused woman in "Gingerbread Man." *Aboriginal* fans will have no trouble identifying this as a story by Patricia Anthony: it slips into your psyche like a knife into butter.

Anthony said "Gingerbread Man" grew out of her novel *Brother Termite*, coming out in October from Harcourt Brace. In that political thriller there is a central relationship between a little gray alien and a woman. Anthony felt there was more to explore on that subject that she couldn't get into in the novel, hence "Gingerbread Man."

These days Anthony is rejoicing over the very good reviews for her novel *Cold Allies* in the *Washington Post*, *Newsday*, *Locus*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, among others. Berkley has already snapped up the paperback rights.

"Gingerbread Man" is illustrated by Pamela Blotner. She is a sculptor who has taught at universities and now teaches at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. She started on our editorial board, and decided to try her hand at illustration.

Blotner says, "I was an illustrator some years ago for the Houston Zoo. When I showed Charlie (Ryan) my



Cortney Skinner



MICHAEL BELFIORE

Michael P. Belfiore

portfolio, which is mostly pictures of animals, he said, 'Can you do aliens?'

Blotner is married to Eric Stover, the executive director of Physicians for Human Rights. She accompanied her husband on a recent mission to Cambodia, and they managed to get away afterwards for a romantic week in southern Thailand that included snorkeling and scuba diving off the Phiphi Islands.

Appearance doesn't tell the whole story in "The Fermi Paradox Explained on a City Street Corner" by **Graham P. Collins**.

Collins, the author of "Variations on a Theme" (*Aboriginal* Nov.-Dec. 1989) is a Kiwi who traded the green hills of New Zealand for the streets of Manhattan, and a Ph.D. physicist who gave up research for journalism. He is an associate editor at *Physics Today* and also the New York correspondent for *New Zealand Science Monthly*.

"The Fermi Paradox Explained" is illustrated by **Robert Pasternak**, who says these days he is doing lots of quick, what he calls "subconscious paintings." When I spoke to him he was also working on a CD cover and some book



Lori Deitrick



Chuck Rothman

projects, and preparing for DragonCon in Atlanta in July.

Humankind leaves a dubious legacy to the universe in "Indigenes" by **Greg Abraham**.

Abraham has a story coming out in *Renovated Lighthouse*, has written several short stories and mystery novels, and is working on an SF novel. When he's not writing, he works as a "quasi-technical plebe for the Port of Portland." He is single, enjoys weightlifting, and recently got lost while flying an airplane.

"Indigenes" is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing, III**, who collaborated with Carl Lundgren on the cover of our last issue.

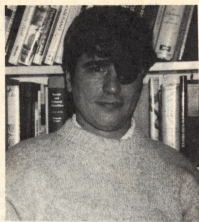
Duensing says he is working on another, major painting with Carl that is "a little beyond the scope of my regular painting." He has also completed some book covers for Llewellyn Publishing and is working on a series of full-color illustrations for a company that produces T-shirts from original art.

Today we think of recycling as fashionable, desirable, maybe even an ethical duty. But in "The Recyclers" by **Anthony J. Howard**, it is a law of survival, and a cruel one at that.

Howard credits *Aboriginal SF* with giving him his start. "The Recyclers" is



Carol Heyer



William Shefski

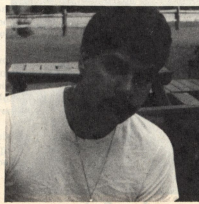
his first short story sale. He has also written a fantasy novella called "Shadow of the Dragon." Howard makes a living as a private investigator and recently started his own P.I. firm.

"The Recyclers" is illustrated by **Courtney Skinner**, who just finished a cover for Pat Anthony's *Conscience of the Beagle* from First Books. He had some help: artist **Tom Kidd** stopped by and caught him in the middle of painting. "I said don't just sit there and comment, and I kind of pushed him in front of the easel. He worked on the fire and sparks."

The post-holocaust tale "The Salesman" by **Michael P. Belfiore** is set in a day when peoples' prejudices can be fueled by differences besides race, sex, or religion.

This is Belfiore's first short story sale. However, the young actor and playwright has several dramatic works to his credit. One play, *Dangershaft*, was produced by the Experimental Theatre Wing in New York City, and some short works of his have been produced by the Zombie Mambo Performance Group in San Diego.

Belfiore recently moved to Minneapolis and was cast in Theatre De La Jeune Lune's play *Children of Paradise*, which went on tour to Yale Repertory Company and received national attention. He says he is now at work on a series of short stories about a lesbian Lakota Indian holywoman who works



Jamil Nasir



Allison Fiona Hershey

part-time at a New York bank.

"The Salesman" is illustrated by Charles Lang, who says he has decreased his workload in order to refine some areas he was weak in, and is already seeing good results and lots of positive feedback. An unfinished painting of his took a staff ribbon at Boskone.

Lang has a day job as a process technician, and works on components of components of stuff that is so high-tech, he can't talk about exactly what he does.

Some humans are put to the moral test by alien beings in "The Lady or the Tiger." It is written by Jayge Carr, a Texas lady.

Carr is the author of *Leviathan's Deep*. Her story "The War of '07" appeared in *Alternate Presidents*, and she has two stories in recent issues of *Analog*, "Castles in the Air" and "Mourning Blue." *Analog* is also where she sold her first story back in 1976. She says this is how she got her start: "I could write a better book than this!" "Why don't you?" "Because I'm not a writer." "How do you know until you try?"

"The Lady or the Tiger" is illustrated by Lori Deitrick. When I spoke to her she was busy with a craft she did while



Jerry Fuchs

she, husband David Deitrick, and kids lived in Alaska: she paints on the surfaces of antlers. "For a while I didn't hear from my friend in Alaska, then all of a sudden he sends me a stack of antlers."

The movie industry is always trying to outdo its previous successes and give the audience something new. In "Screams Are Not Enough" by Chuck Rothman, the line between reality and fantasy gets even fuzzier.

Rothman, whose last story for *Aboriginal* was "Natural High" (issue nos. 37 & 38), has a story coming out in *Behind the Mask*, an anthology of superhero stories from Tor Books. Rothman says the superheroes have nothing to do with any existing ones in comic books. The character he writes about was one he invented when he was a 12-year-old.

Rothman is writing a lot of short stories these days. Look for another of his in an upcoming *Aboriginal* issue.

"Screams Are Not Enough" is illustrated by Carol Heyer, whose latest children's book, *Robin Hood*, is just out. She is now working on a dinosaur book (a popular subject these days) for Boyds Mill Press and consulting with a paleontologist "to get the facts just right."

A clever, reclusive businessman and a deranged scientific genius butt heads in "Spongehead" by William J. Shefski.

This is Shefski's first short story sale. He has also written articles for *Spy* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and has several other short stories awaiting publication. Shefski is a video technician who loves computer games, "of course, the more complicated, the better."

"Spongehead" is illustrated by Charles Lang.

Humanity rubs off on all it touches in the story "A Trace of His Kindness" by Jamil Nasir.

Nasir, whose last *Aboriginal* story was "Sunlight" (issue nos. 33 & 34), says he wrote "A Trace of His Kindness" for his wife Vicki. He came up with the idea during a Writers of the Future workshop, wrote it, and put it under the Christmas tree for her. He says that she likes "sweet little stories" not "as dark as the ones that boil inside me."

Nasir just finished writing a novel and has recently sold some stories to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Universe*, and *Interzone*. One story, "Sleepers Awake," actually has his wife as a character, as well as himself. "Even my secretary is in it," he says.

"A Trace of His Kindness" is illustrated by Allison Fiona Hershey. Hershey has been working on some artwork for games and gearing up for the WorldCon in San Francisco. Since she used to live in the San Francisco area, she says it will be like "old home week."

Rat Race by Jerry Fuchs is back in



Jael

its third installment. Fuchs is happy to report that he is no longer selling eyeglasses for a living. He recently got a full-time job doing animation for laser light shows. Instead of transferring the animation art to cels, images are digitized then projected by lasers. These moving outlines can be huge and, he says, much more sophisticated than he imagined.

Our cover art is by Jael, who in the past six years has completed more than eighty cover illustrations for SF, fantasy, horror, and mainstream books by leading publishers.

Jael attends as many SF conventions as deadlines permit, teaches fantasy illustration at the Yard School of Art in Montclair, New Jersey, and is currently showing work in the Washington, D.C. gallery Worlds of Wonder.

"Poem from the Stars" is by Wendy Rathbone, who also wrote the poem "Flashing the Black Long Streets" (*Aboriginal* Sept.-Oct. 1987). Rathbone is a cat lover, and has published poems in *Pandora*, *StarLine*, *Nightmare Express*, and *Mystic Muse*, among others. □



Wendy Rathbone

Up, Up, and Away ...



More good news to report this issue. The United States Postal Service has approved not-for-profit second- and third-class mailing privileges for The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, Inc. — which is to say *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

Though it took a bit more than two years to see it through, the long endeavor has finally borne fruit. The wait has been painful at times, and during the two-year period we have only had the funds for minimal mailings, which means that we have only sent out one, or, at best, two renewal notices to those whose subscriptions were about to lapse, rather than the four to five recommended by most magazine publishers. Hence, our circulation has shrunk a bit. We hope to get out two renewal mailings this summer to catch up, as it were, and we are aiming at reactivating our circulation-building program through direct-mail campaigns this fall.

I want to thank again all of our faithful subscribers who have hung in there while we worked things out.

Once we get the circulation back on the upswing, we can look seriously at increasing our frequency again.

Boomerang Awards

More good news. The votes have been counted by the official jury, and we can announce the Boomerang Award winners for 1991 and 1992, as selected by you, our readers.

It was in 1991, you might recall, that we did our *Interzone* swap issue. That did not have a serious impact on the voting, however, except that the winning entry did have a distinct "old country" flavor to it (My old country — I don't know about yours).

The winner for best short story was "For Fear of Little Men," by Terry McGarry (March-April 1991). That made 1991 a very good year for Terry, as she also won second place in the new award instituted by Andre Norton that was given out at the World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago.

The art for Terry's story by Patricia Davis almost walked away with the award for best art in 1991 as well, as it finished second, just one vote behind *Dreamlands*, the cover for the *Interzone* swap issue done by British artist Mark Harrison. Because *Interzone* doesn't ordinarily use color art for its interiors, all

of the stories were illustrated by selections from Mark's book *Dreamlands*.

Finally, the 1991 winner for best poem went to Robert Frazier for "White Light, White Heat," in our Sept.-Dec. 1991 issue.

Running away with the calories and the Boomerang Award for 1992 was Richard K. Lyon's "The Secret Identity Diet" (Winter 1992).

The next installment of "The Adventures of Lightningman" will appear in an upcoming issue of *Aboriginal*.

Richard is working on turning the story into a novel, and there has been some movie and comic-book interest, but nothing sealed in cement.

For art, 1992, appropriately enough, marked the first black-and-white winner with Jon Foster's illustration for "Dead Sky Eyes" by John W. Randal (Winter 1992).

And the winner for best poem was "Having Seen These Marvels" by Terry McGarry. This marks the second time Terry, who works at *The New Yorker* magazine for grocery money, has won for best poem. She also won a Boomerang Award with "Imprinting," published in 1989.

The balanced equation

Whether you realize it or not, a short story has a great deal in common with science and math. All three are based on balanced equations. All three require an economy of expression. And all three must, once each equation is compiled, withstand the test of time.

Based upon the thousand or more manuscripts we receive here at *Aboriginal* each month, it is obvious that most would-be short story writers do not understand this essential fact.

In science and math, the components of each equation consist of mathematical symbols, a sort of shorthand.

You could, for instance, fill several entire blackboards with all the parameters of one of the most famous equations of all time. Or, more simply, you could write $E=mc^2$.

$E=mc^2$ is an elegant, precise, expression of the balance between matter (or mass) and energy in the known universe. Energy may be converted to mass, and mass may be converted to energy. The constant is the speed of light, squared.

The constant in a short story is the

prose with which it is told. That prose must be concise, direct, and elegant, because it has to hint at more than it actually says. Like the speed of light, the prose in a story sets a pace for that given universe. And like light in the real universe, the prose in a story can slow down near objects of great mass, or weight, or appear to be a wave or particle, depending upon the intention of the observer.

The biggest problem with 90 percent of the submissions to us and other magazines is young or inexperienced writers who let their equations get out of balance, usually weighted with too many words. Words which act as if they are in the presence of a black hole, even when they should be flying at maximum speed. In short, the equations are cluttered, bogged down. For example:

The very sharp iridium alloy on the knife let it slip easily through the cloth of his uniform and through his flesh. A thick, hot torrent of blood soaked through his shirt and ran down his side, making a puddle on the floor.

The blade sliced his side; blood pooled at his feet.

Both paragraphs above say essentially the same thing. Einstein is more likely to have written the second. Action scenes should be tight, brisk, even though the above may be an extreme case.

The essence of good writing is not picking what words to use; rather, it is choosing what words to discard. Write it simply, quickly. If you are bursting at the seams to fling about purple prose, save it for your love letters, which, one hopes, your beloved will never publish while you are alive.

But if you want to write a short story, you have to make your prose lean and mean. (Which doesn't mean you can't still help elderly people across the street. Just be sure to ask if that's where they really want to go.)

Until next time when we look at other elements of the short-story equation (plot, character, setting, theme, symbolism, and the red herring). □

Screams Are Not Enough

By Chuck Rothman

Art by Carol Heyer

She was being stalked. Carol Preston could hear the footsteps, echoing hers in the icy night, tapping out words of warning. She hurried along, mindful of the headline on the newsnet the other day: **GLOVE KILLER CLAIMS THIRD VICTIM.**

The steps behind her increased their pace.

She should never have taken that shortcut, she thought, hurrying along. The neighborhood was bad enough during the day, and the chilly, starless night made the boarded-up buildings and dirty sidewalks into a playing field for a game of terror. Next time, she'd ignore the cold and take the long way. Next time, she'd take a cab. Next time ...

Please, let there be a next time.

She glanced behind her. A man, his face hidden under the shadow cast by the brim of his hat, was still following. He wore a tattered brown trenchcoat, its pockets deep enough to hide any weapon. Any weapon at all.

She thought about breaking into a run, but something stopped her. It was partly the fear of looking foolish, and partly the image of a deer darting off just as the hunter fired.

She looked back again. The man was gone.

Carol paused, heart pounding. It was ridiculous that she had been so worried.

But she would have felt better if she had seen where he went.

A bright green street sign, defaced with yellow spray paint, said "Kittridge Street." Only one block to the parking lot and safety. She could see the edge of it now, a brightly lit haven.

She took two more steps before the arm snaked out and grabbed her throat.

Her senses on edge, she tried to scream, but a gloved hand was stuffed into her mouth, gagging her. She tried to struggle, but it was no use against the attacker's strength. Even biting down on the hand that violated her did no good.

There were tears in her eyes as another hand pawed her. Please, no, she thought desperately. Please kill me instead ...

"Cut!"

The hands let go. As if out of nowhere, men and women emerged from the shadows, some carrying electronic equipment strapped to their backs and shoulders. A curly-haired man with a reedy voice seemed to be leading them.

"Bill," he said, "that stinks."

The man with the gloves looked abashed. "But, Steve, I —"

"What we're selling here is *terror*," Steve said. His pale blue eyes seemed almost to glow with an inner fire as the light hit them. "Not a cheap feel in the dark. You're supposed to scare the *shit* out of her."

She stood dumbfounded, watching Steve berate the would-be killer.

"But, Steve —"

"You're supposed to jump out in *front* of her, you asshole!"

"But I thought —"

"Don't!" Steve pointed his finger at Bill. "Don't ever try to think. That's my job."

She could stand it no longer. "What is all this?"

"Alison, hon, you were fine," Steve said. "You're a professional." He jerked his head at the embarrassed murderer. "Not like *some* people."

Alison? The name was vaguely familiar, but it wasn't hers. "Could you please tell me what's going on?"

"You know. You're making another cube."

"Cube?" The word gave her a funny feeling, as though her mind itched. "Who are you?"

Steve stared at Carol, then turned angrily to a man in his forties who carried a pack of electronics slung over his shoulder. "Didn't you dump in her memories?"

The man paled. "You didn't tell me to, Mr. Coleman. You didn't say 'dump.'"

"You half-witted little prick! Give her her god-damn dump!"

Dump. Memories. More itchy concepts. Along with ...

Carol reached for the back of her neck. She felt a tiny chip about the size of her thumbnail stuck there like a leech.

Now, truly terrified, she tore the chip away and threw it into the street.

"Damn it, Allie," Steve said. "What's gotten into you?" He stepped toward her. "Without your recording chip —"

"Go away!" Carol kicked his shin and he yelped. Then she turned and ran.

"Someone go after her!" Steve shouted, but no one pursued her, as though they enjoyed his discomfort.



MAROL
FEUER

Coleman cursed. "Allie, goddamn it, come back! You don't know who you are!"

She ignored him and continued her flight.

Carol kept running until she finally reached a well-lit main street. She collapsed onto a marble step, panting.

Here, at least, there were people and light. A drugstore across from her blared out its wares in neon holograms: drugs, candy, office supplies. Harsh music came from the doorway beside it, the words "Barnabas Blowtorch" floating above it, not making clear if it was the name of the establishment or the band inside it. A man wearing a see-through top and flared pants stood on the steps by the door, glancing up and down the street and looking at the time implant on his wrist. A woman in a pink-dyed fur coat walked past, arm in arm with another woman in a body suit designed to look like a tuxedo.

The scene calmed her. It was familiar, normal. The big city on a Friday night.

But what city?

She shook off the question. It was less important than others.

She put her hand on her hip. There, where she instinctively expected it, was a pouch tied to her belt. She ripped open the Velcro.

There was a wallet inside.

Immediately, she felt better. It would have something with her name on it. And, more importantly, money.

She checked through its contents. Three credit cards, all in the name of Alison Altamonte. She stared at the plastic, running her finger over the raised letters as though rubbing it might somehow change the name to her own.

The cash was more soothing. Three hundred dollars. She wouldn't starve, at least.

And there was a driver's license, with the same name as the cards. She stared at the tall woman there — dark hair, perfectly proportioned nose, cheekbones that gave her a friendly attractiveness. The face was familiar — too familiar.

She found a compact at the bottom of the pouch and snapped it open. The mirror showed a twin to the woman on the license. But her name was Carol Preston. Why did everything say it was Alison Altamonte?

She stuffed everything back where she found it. The mystery would have to wait; they'd be coming for her soon.

As if in answer to her thought, she spotted Coleman on the other side of the street, glancing around angrily.

She looked away. Behind her, a multicolored sign said "Leeder's Senticubes." It changed as she watched to say, "Just in — Palace of Ecstasy."

Staying in the shadows, she made her way inside.

The store was stuffy, much too warm after the evening's coolness. A clerk, a teen-aged, girl with a fashionable false moustache, didn't even look up from the TV playing beside the cash computer. Bright, impersonal fluorescents lit the aisle, straight, narrow paths between tall cabinets of cheap plastic that towered over her, filled with fist-sized cubes with bright colors and garish lettering, all screaming for her attention. At the end of the aisle was a bin of cubes, the words "Half Price" sloppily hand-lettered on a cardboard sign taped to its front. And above that ...

She saw herself.

It was a poster, half life-size, a semiholo effect that accentuated the curves of her body. The expression on her face was one of distilled terror.

The sight of it made her feel uncomfortable, as though she had stumbled on a nude poster of her mother.

A man was shown, back to her, a knife in his hand, red with rust or blood. "Screams Are Not Enough," it said in bold letters that seemed to ooze. "A Steven Coleman Senticube." And the final line: "Starring Alison Altamonte."

Carol heard a new sound and turned, frightened, to see the door opening.

"Hey," came a voice she recognized as Coleman's. She crouched down beneath the shelter of the bins like a child trying to make herself invisible.

"Hey, you!" Coleman called again.

"Yeah?" The clerk's voice was surly, as though helping customers was not part of her job.

"Did a woman come in here?"

Carol felt her pulse quicken.

"No one," the clerk said in a bored voice. The sound of a laugh track intensified.

"Shit," Coleman said.

"I told you this wasn't going to be easy." It was a new voice, more gravelly.

"You shouldn't have made her so goddamn paranoid."

"It was in the script; you said it would make the cube a bestseller. Why the hell didn't Jerry dump in her memories?"

"Jerry's been fired. And I pay you too much to get only smartass talk." There was a pause. "Oh, hell, Bill, this is going nowhere. Let's go back to the hotel. Either she'll come to her senses, or someone will recognize her. Come on."

The door opened, then shut. The only sound came from the TV.

Carol stood up. Safe for now, she thought.

She looked again at the poster. It still made her feel embarrassed — but also curious.

She carefully searched through the bins of cubes. Their titles referred to sex or violence or death, often at the same time. Cheap thrills.

She soon found what she was looking for:

"Screams Are Not Enough."

Carol placed the cube on the counter in front of the girl. "I'd like this."

The girl nodded, her finger absently patting her moustache into place. "Minute," she murmured. A man covered with black mud spun out a straight line that hung in the air like a target. A woman dressed in gold bangles made the obvious reply.

The girl laughed, loud and harsh. A commercial came on and she turned to Carol.

She'll recognize me, Carol thought in a panic, fighting the urge to turn and run. She'll think I'm Alison Altamonte.

But the girl didn't look up as she ran her scanner over the cube. "Twenty-five thirty," she said.

Carol pulled out the bills. "Is there a hotel nearby?" she asked as the girl made the change.

"The Hilton." The clerk glanced at the TV and, satisfied that they were still selling hamburgers, added, "Three blocks away."

The words made Carol tense. Coleman would probably be staying at the Hilton. "Anyplace else?" She forced a smile. "The Hilton's out of my price range."

"There's the Midtown Inn. Cheap, but no dump. Go up one block, over two. Here," she added, pushing the change over the counter and staring at the screen as the show resumed.

It was twenty cents short. "You owe me —"

The girl glared at her.

"Never mind," Carol murmured. She left for the Midtown.

The girl was right. The hotel would do for a place to hole up for awhile. The room was small, but clean, with a pastel green carpet and beige walls. There was something comforting about hotel rooms, Carol reflected. Perhaps their sameness, the things you knew would be there even without opening the door — a bed, a flatscreen TV across from it like an altar, a mirror on the wall, tiny soap in individual wrappers, an ice bucket whose top wouldn't quite fit.

Carol sat on the bed, shoes off, feet up, fingering the cube, staring at the face on the plastic wrapper, then at the face in the mirror. She felt wary of using the cube, as though it were something her mother warned her against. You don't always heed such warnings, but you can't easily forget them.

"You won't know until you try it, will you?" she murmured.

Carol unwrapped the box.

The cube was made of black plastic from which a small nine-pin plug protruded.

She reached around and touched the back of her head. There was a square of plastic at the hairline.

Lifting up the dark strands, she plugged in the box.

At first, she noticed nothing. Then, slowly, she

felt a strange detachment from herself. She was still in the hotel room, feet up on the bed. Yet she was someplace else, too, in a dark house, the floor creaking beneath her feet. Every step seemed ... dangerous.

The hotel room receded away, to become a long-ago memory. She walked through the house. She had returned there, she knew, ten years to the day after her sister had died, brutally raped and butchered. Now she had been forced by circumstances (Circumstances? What circumstances?) to spend the night.

She thought she heard laughter. It disturbed her. She was supposed to be alone.

A door creaked.

She ran to the phone, lifting the receiver. All she heard was silence.

A footstep. Another.

She tried to run, to leave the house, but the doorknob came loose in her hand. A razor blade hidden in the edge sliced into her palm.

More laughter.

She watched in horror as the blood welled up.

"Greetings," said a male voice, like steel brushes rasping on a grindstone. "Happy Anniversary!"

She screamed.

"Go ahead," said the voice, laughing harshly. "Your screams are not enough."

A clammy hand grabbed her —

Carol tore the cube from the back of her neck.

It took her several minutes for the feeling of horror and disgust to become manageable.

How could anyone want to experience that?

And, how could anyone want to play the victim? To live out your terror and humiliations for thousands, millions? To have people inside your head, feeding on your most private thoughts? The idea appalled her.

Yet Alison Altamonte had. Several times. She was an actress, after all, and the cubes needed realism.

But how much, Carol thought with a start. If the script calls for terror, how far do they make you go? If the script calls for making love ...

With millions watching. And feeling it along with you.

Carol felt sick. It was an abomination. It was impossible to imagine she would have agreed to anything like that.

She stared again at the picture on the cube, and recalled Coleman's words to her as she ran away.

"You don't know who you are," he had said.

Carol picked up the phone.

She was right about the Hilton. "Hello?" came Coleman's reedy voice once the desk clerk put her through.

"Mr. Coleman," she said. "This is Carol."

"Carol? Carol who?"

"Carol Preston."

There was a short pause. "Alison? Are you all right?"

"Mr. Coleman, who am I?"

"Alison, I know this is difficult, but we can fix everything. All you need is a memory dump."

"I need to know who I am, Mr. Coleman." Despite herself, her words had a razor edge of hysteria in them. "Please help me."

There was the sound of a voice muffled by a hand over the receiver and she wondered what orders Coleman was giving his assistants. "Alison —"

"My name's not Alison! I'm Carol!"

"Sorry," Coleman said, his voice desperately placating her. "I'm just used to calling you Alison."

"Why?"

"Because, damn it, that's who you are!" He seemed to fight to keep his voice under control. "Carol is just the role you're playing."

"I'm a person, not a role."

"You're a cubestar. You can't make a cube if you're conscious you're playing a part; the audience will know you're faking. So we create an artificial personality for the role. Carol Preston. *That's* who you are."

She found herself trembling.

He paused. "Once you get your memory back, you'll be your old self."

"Alison," she murmured. But what would happen to Carol?

"Yes, exactly." From his tone she could tell he felt she was beginning to make progress. "Now if you'll just —"

And she heard another voice in the background, interrupting him. "We traced it."

Carol slammed down the phone. She grabbed her coat and rushed out the door. They would be here soon.

Amid all her confusion, though, one thought was crystal clear: no dumps. Once Alison returned, Carol would be gone.

She wouldn't let them do that to her.

Carol managed to compose herself as she reached the lobby. It wouldn't help if she ran out in panic and called attention to herself. Best to slip out and have the desk clerk believe she was still in her room.

The lobby was nearly empty at the late hour, save for a bored-looking young clerk talking with a man and a woman who seemed to be checking in. Good. If she could just move quietly, they might not even look up.

But the woman, evidently restless, glanced at Carol as she passed. It was the girl from the cube store, her false moustache slightly askew. "It's her!"

Carol began to run.

A few steps took her through the glass doors and

onto the sidewalk, which was well lit, but deserted. A few lights glowed in storefronts down the street, and she sprinted in their direction.

"Wait!" came a voice behind her. "We want to help you."

Carol ran faster.

She turned a corner, trying to keep from gasping for breath. She couldn't keep running all night.

She glanced around for a sanctuary. The front of a store was brightly lit, a holosign proclaiming, "We never close."

It was a slight chance, but she took it. Maybe there'd be a back entrance.

The store had a single clerk, plus one customer, a man in a heavy raincoat looking at some wrapped holoporn magazines as though he wanted to be invisible. Carol ducked down behind a rack of greeting cards.

Someone ran past the entrance, and kept going.

Carol relaxed. Some luck at last.

But she couldn't stay here forever. Trying to look like she wanted to buy something, she made her way to the rear of the store. There was a door, the word "Private" stenciled on it. She reached for the handle.

It was locked.

"Alison?"

Carol felt her heart stop. She turned. The man in the raincoat was beside her, his face rugged and strange, but his gravelly voice just too damn familiar.

"It's Bill, Alison."

She tried to run away, but he had her arms. "Now, Alison, calm down. It'll be all right."

"Bill, please," Carol said, struggling. "I'm not Alison any more."

"I understand," Bill said, in a slow tone that meant he was humoring her. "Don't worry. I paged Steve as soon as I saw you come in. They'll be here in a minute."

She was too tired to put up any more than token resistance. "Bill —"

"It's all right."

"Listen to me!"

He paused. "All right."

"I don't want to be killed."

"We're not —"

"You're going to turn me into Alison. That means Carol will be dead. I may be an artificial personality, but I *feel* real. I feel like I have a life. But once Alison's back, I'm gone. If that's not being killed, then what is?"

Bill's grip on her was a bit less steely. For once, someone appeared to be believing her. "But they created you out of Alison's personality. You're part of her, and your memories will still be part of her once she's back."

"But I won't be *me!* Carol won't exist anymore. And why? To entertain people. If that's not a trivial

reason for dying, nothing is." Carol paused. "Please let me go."

Bill seemed to be considering her words, then shook his head. "Carol, I'm sorry, but —"

She tore free of his grip.

He was slow to start after her, delayed by indecision and surprise. She made it to the door before him, and darted into the cool night air.

Right into Steve Coleman. The director clutched her like he had caught a prize fish. "It's all right, Alison. It's almost over."

"Let me go," Carol said. She felt other hands helping Coleman, keeping her prisoner. "Don't kill me."

"It'll be all right," said Coleman.

Carol looked into his face, and saw the concern there. He truly thinks he's helping me, she thought. Something snapped onto the back of her neck. "Please don't," she murmured.

"It's on, Steve."

"Perform the dump."

"No," Carol said. "Won't somebody please *listen* to me!"

The memories flooded in like a sea of acid, burning away her identity. She was being consumed by the truth, and she felt herself beginning to fade away.

"It's all right, Alison," Coleman said. "You're going to be all right."

I'm *not* Alison, she thought desperately. I'm Carol Preston, and I deserve to live.

The new memories ignored her, continuing to assail her, a lifetime replayed in an instant. So much at once; Carol could only recall the past day. Desperately, she hung onto every moment — the terror in the parking lot, her image on the poster in the cube store, the girl with the moustache, the hotel — using them as a shield, trying to make a protective shell around the central core of her being.

I know who I am, she thought. I'm Carol Preston.

She could sense Alison now, a consciousness slowly forming beside her own. Alison's memories were still overwhelming.

But they were disorganized, missing a solid sense of identity. Carol could feel an overtone of uncertainty in the face of her own certitude.

I'm Carol Preston, Carol thought again and again, reliving the sparse moments of her short life. She could feel Alison becoming more and more confused about herself. Alison was an actress, used to submerging herself into a part and becoming someone else for a few hours,

I know who I am, Carol thought. Alison doesn't. Perhaps few people ever really do.

Carol now shared Alison's consciousness, a mirror image of her own, distorted and stained by experiences Carol had missed. Alison's confusion was turning into panic as she realized her self was Screams Are Not Enough

fading away. The fear was palpable, a scream fighting to reach her lips, and failing.

The terror was familiar. Too familiar, cutting too close to Carol's heart.

Bill had said they had made her from Alison's personality. Maybe from Alison's own worst fears ...

It's all right, Carol thought. I'm you, Alison. I'm you.

I'm Alison. I was just a section of her that she had always ignored. She was not dying, Carol realized.

She was rejoining.

Something in her head seemed to click into place, and the storm in her mind vanished.

"That's it," someone said, "Dump's complete."

She blinked and staggered, nearly falling, steadied by Coleman's grip on her arm, And to scattered applause.

The sound startled her. She looked around, seeing familiar faces and the equipment of her trade. All the people she had met as Carol were there, from Steve Coleman down to the girl from the cube store.

They had recorded it all. All her movements had been subtly orchestrated.

"Great job, Alison," Coleman said, only she knew his name was really Tom Howard, and he was an actor just like her. "Your idea was brilliant."

Yes, it *had* been her idea to create Carol, using her own fears about her identity as the basis for the cube.

God, how could she have been so stupid?

"Great job," said a tall man with a moustache. She knew he was the real Steve Coleman. "Something screwed up at the end; but that's not your fault. We'll just fade it into nothingness and let everyone feel Carol die." He held up a cube. "This is award-winning stuff, Alison. Award-winning stuff."

"Is that it?" she asked, approaching him.

Coleman nodded. "Better wait until we back it up. We didn't want to have any extra recorders just in case Carol spotted one and — hey!"

She snatched the cube from him, her sudden movement taking him by surprise. Before he could overcome it, she smashed the plastic to the pavement, then snapped it under her shoe.

Coleman turned white. "Alison, you're crazy! What are you doing?"

Alison found herself laughing. "I don't know, but maybe I do know who I am." She started away, feeling as though a weight had been lifted. "You're going to have to find someone else to scream for you, Steve. Sometimes ..." She smiled. "Screams are not enough."

She walked off into the night. □

Spongehead

By William J. Shefski

Art by Charles Lang

When the kid turned up dead I shut down all my systems for awhile, hoping to avoid all outside contact. The cops got in anyway. Of course. They always do.

My screens lit up. "Are you there?" The voice, fouled by years of cigarettes, was female. Smoking cigarettes, at \$65 a pack, must be a strain on a policewoman's salary as well as lungs. But then they have supplemental incomes. Or so I've heard.

"Yeah?"

"Sir." The honorific didn't come smoothly. It took some doing to choke off such a short word. I opened my eyes. Even seeing her head and shoulders on the screen it was obvious that she was a big human; could stand square with most men; that any hazing — by her male peers or criminals — must have ceased long in the past. Her shoulders filled the screen. Blond hair was swept back under the gray cap — a big, foghorn-voiced fascist of a blond Freda. Just my speed.

"Can I help you, Ma'am?"

"We're investigating a murder. We'd like to see you."

"I know of the murder. I can send you a statement."

"We'd like to see your home. We can get a warrant."

"What a novelty. When's the last time you had to resort to that?"

"It's been a long time, but for someone in your position, we can do what's necessary."

"Not necessary. Come right on up. The place is a mess, though. I haven't been out in nearly a month. My cleaners are set to work only when I'm not here. And I haven't been out."

"We've seen worse than you can imagine. Pick up as best you can. We're on our way."

I didn't budge, just fired up all the other systems for the first time in a day and a half. The cleaning machines began to whir in their closet. I shut them down cold. If they saw the mess I don't think I'd have been able to hold them back with anti-tank missiles. As it was, they probably just caught a quick whiff of the mess, nothing they weren't used to. "Tsk tsk tsk tsk ..." they seemed to say as they wound whinily down, admonishing me. I thought I'd catch up on the latest in the murder story while the cops rode the 160 stories to my penthouse. The big screen on the wall at the foot of my bed glowed gray, and in a

second I saw the title page of *The Wire*.

The Wire is the best news service that ever was, and it's a good thing too, since they're practically the only one left now. I raised the head of the bed a symbolic quarter-inch, to fool myself that I really might get up off my back at some point during the day. Momentarily I contemplated having the cleaners pick up the sheets of paper scattered all over my bedroom and other parts of the apartment. I looked at the floor and decided against it.

After I accessed *The Wire*, the service automatically fed me stories related to the last one that had appeared on my screen. I skimmed through the text versions of the murder story. I could go back and read them in detail later. I ordered up the video version, since I needed a quick update, and I was presented with the stock Joe News airhead reporter, in somber mode.

The somber airhead was speaking to my Nordic copwoman, asking her inane questions. My stomach knotted while I sweated my name coming up in the interview. It didn't. She gave him no information and even less satisfaction. The segment ended. The screen asked me if I wanted to play it again. Before I could decide, my apartment became decidedly "fuzzy."

"Officer ..." There was no sense protesting their entry. They have keys to everything.

"I don't have time to fuck around, Mr. Lack. Nor to search for polite language. There are other murders. Just tell us what the deceased Bobby Morgan was doing here two nights ago." She said "the deceased Bobby Morgan" as if she had copied the phrase directly off the kid's driver's license. She looked around the room, her mighty shoulders filling the heavy coat. Mmm. The coat reached to about an inch above the floor. She looked like a tank. I almost swooned.

Her partner didn't come into my bedroom. I heard noises out in the clutter — searching noises.

"I must be one of your prime suspects."

"There can only be one prime suspect, sir, and, yes, you're it. In fact ..."

"I'm your only suspect."

"Correct." I caught a glimpse of her partner through the bedroom door, a big brute, inches shorter than she, and not shy about overturning



furniture.

"Bobby was here the night he died."

"How do you know him?"

"He's the son of my former business partner. But you must know that by now."

"Why was he here?"

"I think that's all I want to say about it until I consult my attorney. I'll write up a statement and send it right over, signed, sealed, and delivered."

"Well, why don't you give me the video version."

I know an order when I hear one. "Bobby woke me out of a sound sleep. You can see how easy it is to get in here. You have pass keys, but Bobby had brains" That didn't go over too well; she moved a step closer threateningly. Her nose crinkled up, like she had been stopped in her tracks by an unpleasant smell. I had warned her. My cleaning machines had been on extended furlough, and no matter how tough a bitch a woman is, a messy house gets her where she lives.

Her motion brought to me a bit of her own scent, in lovely contrast to the staleness — a touch of lilac, I thought. "And," I continued, "he had a genius for these thinking machines that control our lives. He could get in and out of your station house without letting your systems wake up the watch sergeant."

"Yeah, well. For such a clever boy, he sure makes a dumb corpse," she said. What a big, cold block of ice her heart must be. "I don't care how he got in. I want to know why he was here — and his condition when he departed."

I caught a glimpse of her partner again, stirring up papers just outside the door. Then it came into the room. An older model, noisy but kept in good repair — probably by Ms. Amazon herself. The municipality might skim on budget and the maintenance garages might be riddled with corruption and peopled by corner-cutting patronage incompetents, but cops take good care of their partners. Their lives depend on it.

The brute poked through some papers on the floor with its telescoped arms. Its outer shell was long and gray — like the human counterpart's overcoat — with no articulation for a thorax section. It looked like she was trying to match the machine to her own image.

It found something it thought interesting, and pulled it up to its faceplate to read. It tossed the paper aside, letting out what sounded like a growl. Merely coincidence. The extension of its arm made the noise. The growl had a chilling effect, though. I wondered if Edison ever had any of his inventions come back to haunt him.

"He was here about an hour. You can check the building system records, or my apartment system records. You probably have, you probably know that much already. This is an expensive building. One of the disadvantages of that is the sensitivity and

reliability of the sensors and the system meters."

"We already checked."

"So. He was here for an hour. He babbled incoherently for most of it. He was a mess. Drugged probably. What did the autopsy show?" She said nothing. "I tried to calm him. Then he left."

"And you stayed."

"Wasn't he found in that abandoned mall? How many miles away from here? The building recordings should show that I never left. You must know how he got out. The building surely traced him. He no doubt blinded the sensors on the way in, but he would have no reason to mask his exit. And judging from the state he was in, I doubt he thought of it."

"We do know, and you don't need to know. But you made your fortune in the thinking machines. You and his father invented them. You must know a thing or two about diddling the sensors, too."

"Check *The Wire's* business section. Years ago you couldn't go a week without a story about me and Big Bob Morgan. I was the organizer. Bobby's dad was the computer wiz. That was the angle of nearly every story ever written about us. Journalists loved us for that. Made their job so simple. The point is, I've never laid my own hands on a computer chip in anger."

"Are people really the way they're portrayed on *The Wire*?"

I didn't answer. She stared at me like a school teacher waiting for an answer. I felt my eyeballs jiggle as I strained to maintain a defiant eye contact, just like in grade school.

"Yes, most are, I think."

"Like you said, we have a good sense of what goes on in this building. Don't go anywhere. Write us a statement if you like. We'll be back to go over it with you tomorrow. If you want to waste money on an attorney, go ahead. Hire six of 'em. It'll just be less money for your heirs."

"I have no heirs."

She spun and headed out the door. The hem of the heavy coat stirred the papers into a small zephyr. As the coat swung out, I saw her hit a button on a controller at her hip. Without a word — or a whir — her partner rolled out behind her. It turned and took one last chilling look at me.

I dialed up my attorney. I protested that my place was too much of a disgrace to be allowed on screen, thereby having an excuse to keep his grotesque visage off mine. He told me to write out the statement. He said he'd keep me out of jail. He's paid to say such things.

I then called up the hidden codes that checked the status of my passport and alerted the hovercraft on the roof to warm up and ready itself. The screen at the foot of my bed gave me an unrequested image of the hovercraft, the fastest thing in this part of Municipal America.

I wrote the short statement out on the big screen. I revealed just a bit more than I had already told the sweet-smelling fascist detective. Bobby had woken me up, babbled for an hour, something about sponges. I tried to calm him. He screamed at me and stomped out. I read in *The Wire* about his body being found the next morning. I shut everything down for the solitude. Big Bob died last year. Bobby's mother had been dead for a decade. I knew no other relations. The police knew who he was, so the estate would take care of the body. I paid my respects privately. End of story. Signed ...

I then sent the statement to the only printer in the house that still held a few sheets of paper. Instead of having a house machine fetch the document, I decided to get it myself.

So, for the first time in some 12 hours, I got out of bed. I headed straight for the washroom. Then, for the first time in two days, I left my bedroom area.

From a closet I dug out the ancient PC, the one that wasn't — and couldn't be, it was so old — hooked up to the general network. I cleared a table, set it down, unfolded it, and powered up. I prayed it would start up like always. It had been Big Bob and his avid interest in ancient technology that kept the thing going. With Bob gone, the next time the thing crashed would be the last. Big Bob used to call it the Stanley Steamer, after a steam-powered auto. It was slow. You could almost hear it chug along. But it was off the network, and so it was secure.

After refreshing myself on the workings of the venerable machine, I wrote out a statement of what really happened that night.

I was dreaming of changing a tire. When I was a kid, cars still had tires that needed changing, but I don't think I ever changed one. Yet it was an adult me that was struggling with the wheel. The rubber on the wheel was soft, almost melted, and I couldn't control it. The weight shifted and I dropped the wheel. "Might as well be shoeing a horse," I said.

Then I was awake. And there was something in my head.

"You might as well be shoeing a horse," Young Bobby said. His voice cracked, as if he hadn't used it in a while, or it had been ruined by long, loud screaming.

He was standing over me in the dark. His head was huge and round in shadowy silhouette.

"Lights up," I said. The room brightened. He was wearing some kind of screwy helmet. It was round and smooth, made of gray plastic. He held a small gadget in his hand. The gadget was connected to the helmet by a coiled cable. "How did you get in here?"

He didn't answer. He took off the helmet. There was a wild look in his eyes. He reached out and moved to put the helmet on my head. I ducked and scrambled out of the bed away from him.

Spongehead

"What are you doing?"
"Let me show you," he croaked. He moved toward me.

"Bobby! Stay right there. What is that thing?"

"Let me SHOW you," he insisted.

"Not until you tell me what it is."

"I'd really rather you saw ... and felt, for yourself."

I remembered Big Bob then, telling me about the trouble he had with his son: how the kid never went out, never did anything but putter in the poor light of his exquisitely-equipped workshop. At first, father was proud that the son seemed to be following in his footsteps — a born hacker — and might someday surpass his achievements, those inventions and patents to which I had so luckily hitched my own financial wagon.

Then he began to complain. Young Bob had come of age, skittered through his schooling with mediocre grades, managed a doctorate on the brute force of his intellect, then sealed himself up in his ever more elaborate laboratory. I hadn't seen him for a year before Big Bob's death.

The young man that stood before me showed the pallid skin and thin, underdeveloped musculature that comes from spending a life in front of computer screens, bathing in cathode rays. I'd have no trouble subduing him, I thought, if it came to that — if I could ever work up the energy to get out of bed.

I wondered what I looked like to him. Probably just as pallid, frail, and subduable.

"Is that what you've been working on all these years, Bobby?"

"Among other things."

"What does it do?"

"It just recorded your dream."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I can play it back for you. It would be easier if you just let me show you."

"I don't want you to play me some motion picture you created with your computers."

"But it's not image manipulation. This thing is the next step. Direct cerebral access. Let me show you."

"How can you prove it?"

"You might as well be shoeing horses."

For a moment I didn't know what he was talking about.

"That was in the dream you just had."

"Or in a dream you planted."

"Either way I got into your head."

He came closer.

"Intruder!" I yelled, and my cleaning machines whirred into the room. The short floor unit went for Bobby's legs. Its vacuum started to suck. The papers began to move. In a second the suction would take Bobby's legs out from under him. The tall declutterer aimed its claws at Bobby's throat.

"Stop!" I said softly. The vacuum noise eased

away. The claws were a half-inch from Bobby's throat. He was motionless, terrified.

"Now, Bobby. I know you had no trouble getting in here, but it looks like you didn't think to disable my slightly modified house staff. Your dad's and my inventions may have been trivialized into janitors by commerce, but they have much more potential. Don't come any closer with that thing."

"Uncle John, I..."

"Don't call me 'Uncle.' I have my suspicions about your father's death."

His face was a mask. He had no feelings on the matter. I began to worry.

"I see you don't have a story on that subject in your magic helmet there." He still held the helmet out toward me. I took the headpiece from his hands. I looked inside. Nothing but dark padding. I felt around, but found no peculiar flat or pointy things.

"How does it work?"

"It's too complicated to explain to a non-techie like you. It's better to show you."

"Not on your life. Let's go on the theory that what you have here is something akin to the virtual reality gizmos."

"It's better. It's not virtual. It's actual."

"How could that be?"

"It taps into the perception centers. Sight, sound, touch, smell, taste — they're all accessed directly. I've decoded the brain-wave frequencies. I use the natural waves as carriers for my own instructions to the brain chemistry that controls thought. That's as simple as I can make it. I've been working on it for 20 years."

"C'mon now. I know you're a monomaniac." The cold eyes seemed to thaw a bit. He may have been hurt by the label. He recovered in an instant. "But that would mean you started the project at about age three."

"Near as I can figure."

I remembered the shy child locked up in a room, angering his gregarious, brilliant father with his isolation. Bobby had been working all these years on what he had just brought into my rooms. Then came another image, a future image of a world where everyone wore one of Bobby's helmets, where everyone's perception centers could be tapped directly, where a person's past, present, and future could be created by some code-happy software geek, perverted Tempe film producer, or even by those self-programming monstrosities that Big Bob and I put on the market. Or worse, some politician could learn how it works. Wasn't Hitler a wiz with the new technology of the era?

"Did your father know about this?"

"In the end, he did."

"You went to him with it?"

"Yes."

"And he turned you down."

"I knew he would."

"And you killed him."

"Um."

"How? The coroner said natural causes. No more thorough autopsy was ever done. I saw that."

"He had the helmet on."

"He let you put it on?"

"And I shut off his brain."

I stared in disbelief. This anti-social boy had the power to shut people off like mechanical toys?

"Big Bob let you put that helmet on him even after you explained what it was?"

"No. I didn't tell him. The helmet did. Then it shut him off. I wanted him to know what I'd done."

"Then you didn't even give him a chance to turn you down for backing."

"I knew he would."

"And you just ... turned off his brain with that thing? Bobby ... he was your father."

"I know. But you know what they say. You can't do anything significant with your life until your father is out of the picture."

"And now you want me to back you?"

"You made my father a success. If we do it right, this can make even more money than the thinking machines."

"Is that what you're after, money?"

"No, not just."

"Bobby, your father was a brilliant man. I got lucky when I met him. You were lucky to be born to him."

"You say."

"If it's not money you want, what is it?"

"I can't tell you. You have to let me show you."

"Don't be funny. You don't think I'll put that thing on my head now, do you?"

"Guess not."

"Let me guess. You have a poison pill virus hard-wired into that prototype that would become part of every production model of the helmet. On it is some kind of post-hypnotic suggestion that would make anyone who had one do your bidding."

"Close enough. Pretty good for a non-techie."

I continued. "So then, at the right moment, you throw a switch and take over the world or something."

"Only after an adequate market penetration for the task. That's where you come in."

"How mad scientist of you."

"You and Dad — why do you both always think the worst of me? I don't want to rule the world. I want to save it."

"Messianic then. Yes, even worse than mad scientist."

"Look, Uncle John ..." He began to move.

"Un-stop!" The machines stirred.

"AH! Wait. Okay, okay!"

"Stop!" The claws were just touching his throat.

The papers came to rest again.

"We're long overdue for a new messiah," Bobby said, with all seriousness. "It's been 2050 years since Jesus tried to teach peace. Obviously it didn't take."

I walked over and looked him in the eye. There was no reaction. He was out of it. Flat affect all the way.

"I can't let you stop me from doing the Lord's work."

"Oh, really."

Just then Bobby moved.

"Un-stop!" I yelled, expecting the next thing I'd see would be his severed head rolling on my cluttered floor, paper sheets sticking to the bloody stump.

Instead I heard my own voice. But I wasn't speaking. Bobby must have had a miniature thinking machine built into the helmet, and it had taken steps to help its master. It had sampled my voice, analyzed it, and now duplicated it.

"Stop!" the helmet said, in my voice. The machines froze. Bobby slipped out of the tall machine's grasp.

"Un-stop! Intruder!" I said again. But it was too late.

"Stop!" the helmet repeated.

He was on me, trying to fit the thing on my head. I struggled. He was strong for a thin, pallid weakling. He turned me with one hand and flattened me on the bed, face first. With the other hand he popped the helmet partway on my head. I wiggled and shook, and it shifted off for a moment. He twisted my arm behind me, causing a thunderbolt of pain. Then the helmet was on.

For a few moments I thought I was going to black out. I caught some images of what must have been Bobby's introductory ideo-movie, and it was very convincing, and inviting. My head felt like a dry sponge. Then it quickly began to absorb the ideas and they became mine. I believed that Bobby was the greatest man on earth; that world history had been nothing more than a long wait for Bobby. It all sounded pretty good.

The helmet enticed me to become lost in it. The images of goodness and light, of a utopia headed by Little Bob, were hard to resist. I knew I must, though, or become a zombie in Little Bob's thrall, doing his bidding, using my financial abilities to get a helmet on every head in the world.

I used my last iota of self control to lash out.

"Intruder! Ears off!"

The big cleaning machine took Bobby off me. The short one stayed back, since it sensed me in the area. Bobby's helmet wailed pitifully in my voice. "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

But the cleaning machines couldn't hear anymore.

The tall machine dragged Bobby away. It was Spongehead

rigged not to be gentle with intruders. Bobby's neck was broken before I could get my hands into the control panel.

I can't be sure I would have allowed him to live if he had survived the struggle. I tend to think not.

I had the body stuffed into the waste canister of the shorter machine. I then sent them up to the hovercraft while the body was still warm, so the building sensors would detect it. The hovercraft flew them to the abandoned shopping center where they dumped the body.

I went back to bed.

When they came back, I had the tall machine crush Bobby's helmet in his claws. I tossed the ruins of the device into my disposal, where they were vaporized.

I waited around to see if the incompetent police department caught the scent.

It seems they had. I can see why now. The lovely Valkyrie detective must be one of their best. There was no sense waiting around to see what more she came up with. As I climbed the stairs to the hovercraft, I thought about searching for Little Bob's lab. I could destroy all records of his work. I thought better of it. If found, nobody would begin to understand it. It would all rot. If someday someone finally discovers the same things Little Bob did, it'll probably be long after I'm gone. Who has 20 years to spend on one project? Hopefully nobody will feed the problem to one of Big Bob's elite thinking machines.

Well, you do what you can. There are no permanent solutions.

The hovercraft lit up as I boarded and buzzed off to the south.

The cops must have known I would leave the country.

Maybe they didn't mind. □

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A Trace of His Kindness

By Jamil Nasir

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

I woke up cold in a tumbledown shed, morning lumps wreathed in the crabgrass outside, birds singing in the gray chill.

I had been dreaming of my old, smelly down comforter back in Kentucky Settlement 15, but a worn wool blanket was all that was around me. I sat up stiffly in the dead leaves I had piled under the leaning roof the night before, trying to keep the blanket on me. The shed looked a hundred years old, which would date it back before the Fire, but there was no sign of the house it had once stood near, nor of a garden — no sign except a faint, comfortable feeling under the branches of the forest, as if whoever once lived here had been contented.

In a few minutes I struggled up and stretched, trembling with cold, brushed leaves off my blanket, rolled it up, and stuffed it into my hobo sack. I smoothed down the few hairs left on my head, picked up an old gray hat, and put it on.

"Morning, Mr. Pickens," I said to get the sleep out of my voice.

A worn-out pair of boots slouched by the shed's decayed wall. I pulled them on.

"Morning, Mrs. Johnson." They were a size too small, and pinched my corns, but I knew that would wear off as I walked.

I stretched again, took a drink of plastic-tasting water from a bottle in my sack, and pissed in the grass. Then, my morning preparations finished, I hoisted my sack and started off stiffly, feet swishing in the wet crabgrass. A shaft of sunlight shot a bank of mist gold ahead of me, and the smells of pine, skunk cabbage, and damp dirt were clean and fresh.

In a hollow below the road a ring of the giant mushrooms shaped like twisted human faces made me jump swimming out of the mist. They probably know the scientific reasons for them at those new universities that make the educational radio broadcasts teaching people to read and do arithmetic, but some say they're spirits, the spirits of the ones who brought the Fire on us, come back to sleep unquietly in the land they almost destroyed. I crossed myself quickly and climbed up out of the mist, up to the new one-lane road that ran sleek and black along a break the road men had burned through the trees, where you could still see blackened ground under a couple years' growth. Another thing they were always yelling about on the radio was The Need For Infrastructure.

My boots clopped on the road, sun shining through the trees, birds singing their cheerful morning song, my breath clouding in the wet air. I hadn't eaten since the last Settlement, and I was hungry, so to distract myself I started to talk.

"I must be getting old, Mr. Pickens," I said to my hat. "Not able to go without food like I could when I was your age."

And being thought of, Mr. Pickens's spoor came out of the hat, warm and laughing and rosy, forming itself into a face like an old, wrinkled apple I could almost touch in the air, looking just like he had the day he had hobbled down from his front door to give the hat to me.

"Who are you kidding?" he snorted, beaming. "I'm old enough to be your grandfather."

"Hah," I said. "You're a baby."

He laughed. "Who are you kidding," he said again. "You'll walk a hundred miles before you need a meal. Me, I couldn't go out of my own yard even if I was sober."

And Mrs. Johnson, listening from the boots she gave me after letting me sleep in her basement on a flinty Christmas Eve, scolded: "Hush, both of you. It makes a person tired to hear you complain about your age when you know it's just laziness."

Soon the road came out of the trees at the top of a valley, and I could see for miles through the lifting mists in the autumn sunlight, over oceans of brown, yellow, and red leaves — and in places blue and purple where the mutant trees grew. One of them stood off the road to my right, holding great plumes of feathery leaves above big, woody gourds, its trunk bulbous and swollen, not much like any tree I had ever seen. Looking at it reminded me of my mother long, long ago scolding me about teasing the mutant children: "Remember you're one of them, with your talking to places and things as if they were people." She never could understand that people leave *traces* on the places and things they touch, and if you're still you can feel them.

Thinking of the old woman made me sad, as it does even after all these years, but as soon as my almost-new green scarf caught my melancholy, its spoor rose up in a great dander and was the wild-haired, flashing-eyed girl who had wrapped it around my neck with a laugh and a tug when I was



NH 793

shivering on a corner in New Miami last winter, then gave me a kiss that heated me down to my numb toes.

Now she stood large as life on the road in front of me.

"Hey, grandpa!" she yelled. "You going to cry? Need a handkerchief?"

And I laughed instead, and started down into the valley. There was sure to be a Settlement along this road, probably just over the hills ahead, where some kind soul would give an old hobo something to eat.

I strode on until I came around a stand of trees and felt a sudden chill of fear.

The road fell steeply for a hundred yards below me, then ran over a new concrete bridge that spanned one of those cracks the explosions of the Fire made, shaking the earth the way a man would shake a blanket. The gorge was only 10 yards across, but the spoor that came out of it made me want to turn and run. Something savage lived down there, or had happened there, something cruel and hungry and angry; I sensed the rending of flesh and gushing of blood —

I took a step backward — then thought better of it. The last Settlement was a good fifty miles back, and besides, I would be in land I had worked before, which is bad because folks get the idea you're a regular moocher, and some of the generosity goes out of them.

Anyway, if there really had been something terrible in that gorge, the road men and their government bosses, who were getting control of the country now, would surely have heard of it and come to clean it out, the way they did the gangs that used to terrorize the Settlements when I was a little boy and the gray haze covered the sun, making it winter all year round.

"What do you think, Pickens?" I muttered.

But he couldn't know. He was a spirit of kindness and comfort stuck to an old hat; and he had been no adventurer or man of the world even in the flesh, I guessed.

I took a breath, hoisted my sack, and made myself march down the narrow road to the gorge. As I got near, a rotten smell mingled faintly with the evil feeling in the air.

The gorge was deep, angling into darkness through solid rock. A few clouds had come over the hills on some skittery fresh winds, and as I set my foot on the bridge the whole valley went gray and chill as one of them covered the sun. Everything was very quiet; there was only the hurried scuff of Mrs. Johnson's boots on the concrete.

Then one of the skittery winds gusted, blowing Mr. Pickens's hat clean off my head.

I grabbed desperately, then watched Pickens tumbling down into the gorge, and into darkness.

I hesitated, but not very long. Old Mr. Pickens

had been my comfort in hunger and cold when the doors of Settlements were shut against me, and when wolves howled in the hills on freezing nights. I couldn't bear to lose him. I slid off the foot of the bridge, over rough grass, then rocky dirt, then along steep, raw rock still ragged where the giant explosion had torn it so many years ago. I climbed down, clinging to ledges and cracks and a few wiry shrubs, the opposite wall echoing back my scuffling and hard breathing, down into the dark and bad smell and evil feeling.

Then my trembling foot slid loose and I tore my fingernails trying to claw a handhold, and I slid, then with a sickening feeling fell —

— onto my feet and rear in darkness, the wind knocked out of me, but otherwise not hurt.

As soon as I could, I scrambled to my feet. As my eyes got used to the dark I could see an uneven rock floor scattered with pebbles, chunks of dirt, leaves I had torn out on my way down. It was warm and silent, without the songs of birds or the souging of wind. A good place to spend the night, if it hadn't been for the feeling and the rotten smell. Something had died down here, and that made me wonder if there was any way out.

I'd best find Pickens and try to answer that question. I felt my way forward, rattling some rocks down the steeply sloping floor. The wall to my right leaned more and more sharply as I went, until it became a ceiling, and soon I was in a place like a cave. And there was Pickens, lying tilted on his crown. And there was a pile of bones — some of them human bones.

I grabbed Pickens and whirled around to run. But I couldn't, because something blocked the way.

He was grotesquely big, but so stooped he looked no taller than me, with long, twisted arms he used to hold himself up, ribs sticking out of his horribly hunched chest. His head was long and narrow as an insect's, mouth slavering, and he was filthy, caked with dirt.

I was frozen. I couldn't move.

He came closer, breath rasping, turning his head from side to side to get a look at me with huge, cataracted eyes like poached eggs. Eyes that could never see in the glare of the sun, or even the light of the moon, could hardly see here in the darkness.

His sickening rotten-meat breath gusted on my face. He reached for me with clawed hands like tree roots.

Trembling, I put Pickens on my head and shut my terror-beared eyes, straining to feel his comfort for the last time.

Seconds went by.

I squinted my eyes open.

The mutant's wrinkled face was a foot from mine, turning this way and that while his eyes wriggled —

He was trying to see the thing I had put on my head.

He grasped Pickens crushingly and pulled it off. He sniffed at it. Then he slowly and clumsily put it on his own head. It slid off. He clawed it up and put it on again. It sat there precariously, a shapeless gray hat on the head of a mutant monster.

Then something strange happened.

The mutant's face slowly changed. His tree-root hands, which he had raised to reach for me again, stopped, and made little gestures in the air, as if he was clumsily feeling something. His shoulders sagged and his jaw got slack. His horrible eyes wriggled upward, and he half raised a hand as if to touch the hat on his head.

Could he feel traces like I could? Wonderment burst upon me. Was he feeling Mr. Pickens in the hat, being soothed by his kindness and comfort and friendliness —?

He leaned a hunched, gnarled shoulder against the rock wall and grunted. By degrees he lowered himself stiff-limbed to the floor. I stood frozen. In a few minutes he was asleep, sitting against the wall and snoring great gusts of evil-smelling breath.

I hardly breathed for minutes that seemed like hours. Then, slowly and carefully, I lifted Pickens off the mutant's head. Heart pounding blindingly, I stepped over him and felt my way up the steep floor to a place where there was space above me. I tiptoed among loose rocks. Scuff-marks and dirt showed where I had fallen on my way down, but the walls there were sheer. I tiptoed on. High above, a ribbon of heart-bursting blue was cut by the mocking finger of the concrete bridge. But to my despair the floor sloped down again, and the walls started to get farther and farther apart.

I went on, almost running now, stumbling and falling, thinking I heard the rasp of the mutant's breath behind me. The sky receded and was lost again, and I was plunged into blackness.

I'll never know how I climbed out, along jagged rock, up sheer walls, over teetering ledges, with more strength than I ever had as a young man. But an eternity later I lay gasping on coarse grass. There was a little dew on it, shining in the light of day, and a gray, brisk wind filled the valley with the cold smell of rain, clouds sailing across the sun, making light and shadow chase each other over the ground.

I staggered to my feet and limped toward the bridge I had to cross again to be on my way and far from here.

As I put my feet on it, holding Pickens tight in my hands, a howl echoed up from the gorge, a rising, gurgling scream of rage and despair.

I jumped a foot in the air and started to run.

But halfway across the bridge I stopped.

I looked down at the hat.

And being thought of, Mr. Pickens took shape, his

old, rosy face and twinkly eyes smiling.

He winked at me and nodded his old head.

I stared at him sadly. But there was no mistaking his look.

I took a big breath and leaned over the low concrete parapet of the bridge. I fingered Pickens gently, running my hand over the familiar, shapeless felt. Then with a shudder I dropped it into the gorge, watched the gusting wind flip it over and over and blow it against the sheer rock wall, until it slipped into the darkness below, where the mutant crouched in his cave all alone, barely able to see and not knowing how to talk, with no company and no one in the world of his kind, probably left down there to die as a newborn under the Severe Mutation regulations.

I stared into the gorge a long while, remembering things about Pickens —

Then I pulled my scarf and old jacket closer against the freshening wind, crossed the bridge, and set out again for the hills that thick gray clouds were piling over now.

And instead of emptiness where Pickens had been, a faint warmth stirred, as if he were still there, or as if a trace of his kindness had rubbed off on me. □

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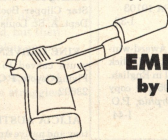
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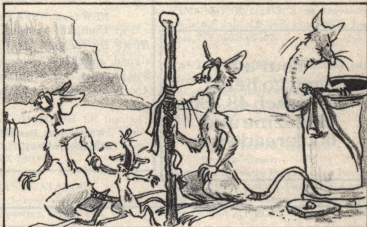
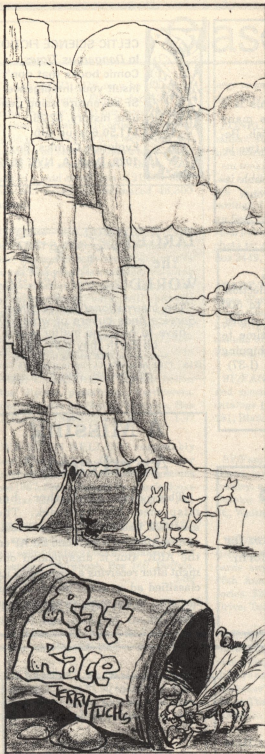
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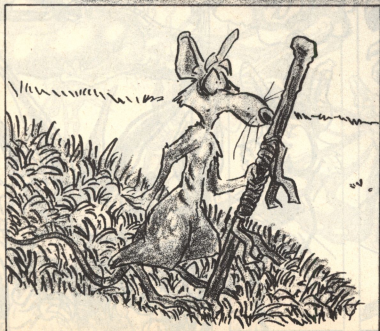
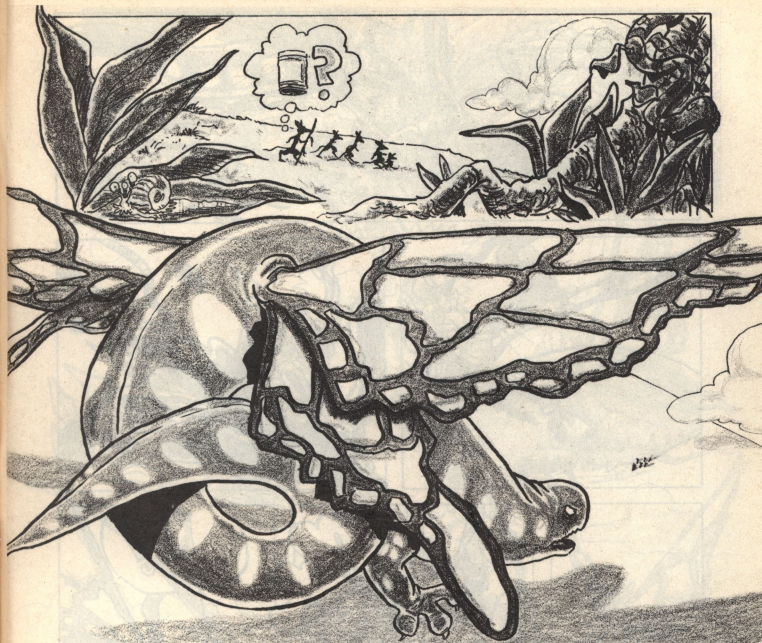
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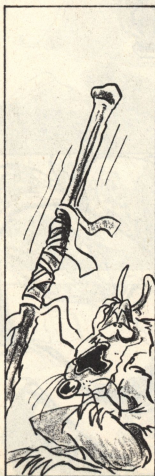
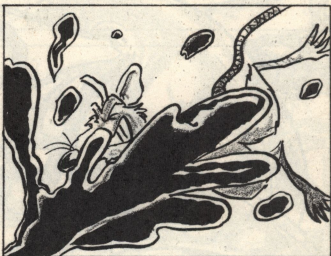
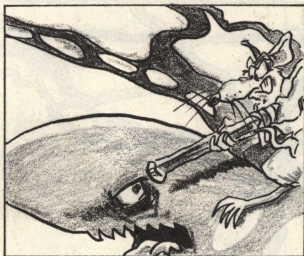
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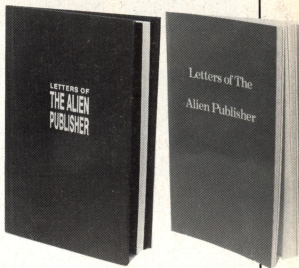
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