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Safe and Sound

A 2½-year-old boy died in Boston this week when the drawstring on his jacket became entangled at the top of a playground slide and strangled him. It was a tragedy. A young life cut off. Heartbroken parents. A day-care provider and bystanders haunted by guilt because maybe, if they'd noticed, they could have saved the boy's life.

While it is impossible to predict what might arise from this incident, similar tragedies have resulted in lawsuits. And one is possible from this accident, as well: against the day-care provider; the city, for erecting a slide with protuberances that could catch on a child's clothing; the manufacturer of the slide; and the manufacturer of the jacket, for not providing some kind of quick-release clasp, instead of a drawstring which only knots tighter under such circumstances. Perhaps others.

But should there be any lawsuits at all?

There is a large pond in the city in which I live. When I was a child, my friends and I would go to the pond and swim. At that time there was an official beach area with municipal lifeguards. But often in late May and early June, before the beach opened, we would sneak down to the parkway side of the pond for an unsupervised swim. And when we did, it was usually tied to a challenge to "swim to the island" in the center of the pond. It was a long swim, and I remember a number of times when I'd flip over and float on my back, casually waving my feet in the water to maintain a forward momentum, because I became tired. Even in my youth, such occasions caused moments of intense thought, reflections on the fragility of life, and how near I might have come to crossing that fine line between doing something risky as opposed to foolhardy. When I became older, I started to notice that each year it seemed one or two youths drowned while

doing the same thing I had done many many times. I was lucky. They were not.

Now there is no official beach and swimming is prohibited. A decade or so ago, the family of a youth who drowned filed a lawsuit against the city for not properly supervising the pond. It didn't matter that it was May, more than a month before the official opening of the beach. The liability costs became too high. The pond was too large to properly supervise. But some still sneak down there for a swim, blithely ignoring the "No Swimming" signs. Official swimming now is limited to shallow public pools.

I've asked around, poked and probed at city and town clerks' offices, but I've never found a birth certificate that came with a warrant, never mind a "lifetime" warranty.

If there were a written warranty, it would probably state: *The manufacturer offers no warranty, written or implied, as to the condition of this product, which must be considered "as is." The manufacturer makes no promise of durability or any claim of longevity for this product. All actions, and inaction, put the product at risk from which there may be no recovery. All use of this product is at the owner's own risk, as is any use which exceeds design specifications. All laws of nature apply.*

As a society, we have attempted to build-in certain warranties for life. The Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence are both social contracts, rather than absolute laws. They are certainly not laws of nature. They do not guarantee you will not be eaten if you swim in water occupied by a crocodile or alligator. They do not guarantee that exposure to the Ebola virus won't turn your insides into oozing jelly.

All the laws in the world, and all the lawsuits, however, will never make existence 100-percent safe.

Any time you do something, even something as simple as taking a walk, you put yourself at risk. Unless things have changed drastically, most accidents still occur in the home ... and many of them involve bathing. Yet failure to bathe puts you at greater risk of contracting dozens of illnesses, many of them fatal.

To have "safe" drinking water, most communities chlorinate to kill bacteria (primarily coliform bacteria). Yet the act of chlorination pretty much guarantees that three to four people will die of cancer out of every 100,000 people drinking that water over a certain period of time. Making water safer for the many has a price.

There is a danger in making things too safe. The first danger being that people tend to take very dangerous things — like driving a car, or flying in an airplane — for granted.

Attempts to make everything 100-percent safe, with a 100-percent warrantee could lead to a dystopia similar to the one envisioned by Jack Williamson more than 30 years ago in *The Humanoids*. They were created to save humanity from itself, but the androids ended up protecting the race into a long stagnating death.

While I agree that genuine negligence should be punished, as a society we cannot afford to continually punish someone — anyone — when accidents happen. While I was growing up, all the experts estimated dozens, possible hundreds or thousands would die while attempting to launch humankind into space. After all, astronauts were sitting atop a large fuel bomb that had to be ignited to blast off. To date only a handful have died ... yet the *Challenger* disaster nearly killed the space program.

As for me, I'd rather fly ValuJet, than have no flights at all. □

Walking Backwards Through Death's Door

By Karl G. Schlosser

Art by Clyde Duensing III

Take up brush and palette. Paint the outlines of a bedroom. It is a young boy's room filled with brightly colored clothes and mass-produced artwork. Add a few personal touches, such as trophies and tropical fish. Toss a pair of cleats in the corner. Hide a few dishes under the bed.

Now place two people in the room. One, a sprightly old man, sits near the bed. He holds a box wrapped in brown paper. The other, a pale young boy with black hair, lies immobile on the bed. A plethora of sensors, tubes, and wires secure him to the wall. Fiber-optic cable connects his skull to a diagnostic computer. Behind the bed, a host of medical equipment monitors him, adding drugs, stimulating muscles, inducing sleep.

Both of these people are dying.

Now put down your brush and consider the scene before you.

Virgil Hayward had lived more than a century, survived a war, married two women, fathered three children, and won two Republic lotteries. His body, despite expensive rejuv treatments, faced inevitable system failure.

His grandson Charlie suffered from Weinhart's Cancer, a new and terminal oncogen. Charlie had earned three school awards, played left forward on two soccer teams, kissed a girl (once), hated eggplant, read books his parents didn't understand, and loved his grandfather.

He also loved the Entertainment Net and ice cream, but those were ordinary pleasures. Even Christmas, which only happened once a year, was pretty predictable. But he *never* knew what his grandfather would do.

"Hi, Virgil. What did you bring me?"

"Something real special." Virgil set the box down at the side of the bed and extended his hand. Charlie took it in both of his and squeezed it as hard as he could. "That's the way, kid," said Virgil, wincing in mock pain. "You're as strong as ever."

He didn't have to read the monitors next to the bed to know Charlie was weaker today. His

grandson's grip was a gentle touch.

"So what's in the box? Are you going to make me guess?"

Virgil realized he still held Charlie's hand. Drifting again, you old fool, he thought. "You don't have to guess, Charlie. I'll tell you." He peeled back the wrapping paper. "It's a fishing trip."

Charlie raised himself from his pillows. "You mean a fishing pole, don't you?"

"Now, what did I just say? I said a fishing trip and fishing trip it is." Virgil shook his head. "I may be old —"

"— but I haven't lost my good sense," Charlie finished.

"That's right," Virgil continued. "It's a fishing trip. For two." He snapped open the box with a flourish. Inside lay two plastic cases, one larger than the other.

Charlie's eyes opened wide. "You found the Sony! I knew you would."

"Of course I did. Said I would, didn't I? It's not like I had to fight Shiva or anything."

"Who's Shiva?" asked Charlie.

"Hindu god. Associated with destruction and dance. Barrel of laughs."

"What's a Hindu?"

"Jesus Jones! What are they teaching you in school these days? Look it up on the Cultural Net. Cross reference to Myth and Religion. Got that?"

"Got it, Virgil."

The night they had brought Charlie home from the hospital, Virgil had given him an antique fountain pen and taught him to sign his name like an adult, something he claimed the schools no longer taught with any skill. Then he had insisted on being addressed by his first name.

Charlie's parents thought it rather silly, but Virgil was deadly serious. "He'll never grow up," he told his son and daughter-in-law. "You know it and I know it and *he* knows it. You can bet his doctors and nurses treat him like a brave little boy, but I won't have any of that. He deserves a chance to be an adult, if only for a little while."



"Tilt your head a bit, Charlie." He did. Virgil fiddled with the implants at the back of the boy's skull.

"What are you plugging in?" asked Charlie.

"Audio/visual and tactile output from the Sony." He secured the cable, then brushed the boy's short hair back. It was very soft and fine, like kitten's fur.

A look of guilt and worry crossed Charlie's face. "What about the monitor?"

"Don't worry. I'll keep an eye on you." He opened the Sony's case and inserted the Winchester optical chip. Then he attached the Sony's other output cable to a set of induction disks. He pasted these to his own forehead. Virgil hated interface sockets and had refused to have one installed, even though it would have improved the illusion.

"You ready, Charlie?"

"You bet!"

"Let's go, then." He placed a wrinkled hand on the Sony and touched a switch.

The steady breeze surprised Virgil. When he had previewed the virtual reality scenario in the store, the weather had been calm.

He stood on a wooden pier that jutted out into a mirror-bright lake. A few cirrus clouds spiced up an otherwise dull blue sky. The smells of dandelions, watercress, and fennel tickled his nose.

An old fashioned rowboat, filled with gear, bumped against the dock. "Charlie, where are you?" he called.

"Right here, Virgil."

Virgil turned, saw his grandson lying on the dock.

The boy shaded his eyes against the bright morning sun. He grinned, emphasizing his dimples. "Can I get up?"

"Of course you can, kid."

Charlie raised himself on one elbow, then the other. Refusing Virgil's outstretched hand, he stood on thin legs and stepped into the boat. Virgil followed him and untied the mooring rope. It felt like jute.

Virgil locked down the oars and rowed to the center of the lake, where they opened pails of salmon eggs, night crawlers, and fat earthworms.

They had their first strike within minutes.

As Charlie hauled in the struggling bluegill, Virgil turned his back and roughly wiped the tears out of his eyes. He has so little time, he thought.

"Look at him, Grandpa!"

Virgil didn't correct him.

When they unjacked from the scenario, Virgil quickly reconnected Charlie to his monitors. The systems came on-

line immediately, checked themselves and their charge, then settled into vigilant silence. According to the monitor's clock, they'd spent only a few minutes in the scenario. From Virgil's subjective point of view, he'd passed a lazy afternoon with his grandson. He disconnected the rest of the Sony's leads and put the VR unit away. Charlie's parents would soon return from the theater. As usual, they would find their child sleeping peacefully under the watchful eye of his grandfather.

As soon as he had learned of his only grandson's illness, Virgil Hayward had packed his meager belongings and moved back to Los Angeles to be closer to the boy. Though Lake Tahoe was only a few hours away by monorail, he begrudged even that time.

When his wife, Annette, had been diagnosed with a second-generation retrovirus, Virgil had retired from part-time computer consulting. He watched her suffer through two painful years of chemotherapy. But it didn't make a difference. When Annette asked him the last favor, he packed her in the car and drove her to San Francisco. They shared the sunset from a patch of grass near the Golden Gate Bridge, sipping an ancient Bordeaux, before checking into the hospice.

The newly independent Republic of California offered many civil rights denied by the United States, including assisted suicide.

A year later, Virgil had contracted Alzheimer's. Drugs kept the disease in check, but the dosages exacted a terrible price on his body. His pride kept him going, though. He refused to saddle his children with another patient. Let them worry about Charlie.

Wall-to-wall electronic junk connected by geometric strands of fiber-optic cable filled the small shop. In the exact center of the organized chaos perched a young Japanese man wearing tortoise-shell glasses. Virgil thought of an anime spider.

The spider raised his head after a moment. "May I help you with something?" His accent placed him six thousand kilometers east of Tokyo.

"I need an open-ended VR simulation programmed. It's a rush job."

"I'm real busy right now. Perhaps you can come back in a month. Or, if you like, I can recommend someone else —"

Virgil cut him off by dropping a large, heavy sack on the counter between them. The sack smelled of dust and leather. "I don't wish to be rude, Mr. Isosaki, but this is an emergency."

Michael Isosaki pushed his glasses from his nose, letting them hang by their straps. He studied his visitor carefully. He'd heard rumors on the

VR Net that an old man had been making the rounds looking for a custom scenario. According to Isosaki's local contacts, this same person had acquired some very expensive and non-approved drugs grown in Samsung's orbital bio-engineering lab. He suspected his visitor was about to commit a crime.

"May I ask your name?"

"You can ask," Virgil replied.

Isosaki smiled at the old joke. "Tell me something, if you would. How many times have you won the Republic's lottery?"

Virgil crossed his arms. A smile crept to his lips. "Twice."

"Ah." Isosaki stood up and bowed a full 45 degrees. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hayward."

Returning the bow in the same fashion, Virgil said, "Please forgive my earlier behavior. It was unspeakably rude."

"No, no, the fault is mine," Isosaki replied. "One should always respect the wishes of a customer." He stuck out his hand. "There! Honor is satisfied!"

Virgil shook the proffered hand. "Thank you," he said. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"My office is safe, but I always discuss business over food." He pulled a datapad from a reader and stuck it in his pocket. "Come on. I know a great little Mexican place across from the mall with a very circumspect owner."

Fifteen minutes later, Virgil and Isosaki tore into spicy burritos and salsa. They cooled their tongues with large bottles of *cerveza*.

"My compliments," Virgil said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No one knows how to burn an esophagus anymore."

Isosaki nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his delicate hand. "What do you want in the scenario?"

"Nineteenth century America. Midwest." He finished his beer and opened another. "Specifically, I want to create an interactive scenario based on the milieu of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*."

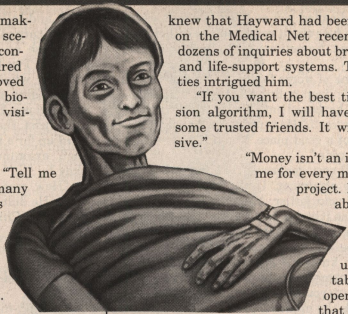
"That's a tall order. When do you need it?"

"Two months." He thought for a moment. "Six weeks would be better."

Isosaki pushed away his empty plate. "Is this scenario for you?"

"It's for my grandson, Charlie. He has Weinhart's Cancer. I want to give him a proper memorial."

Isosaki said nothing. He found a clean napkin and polished his glasses. While Hayward hadn't lied to him, he had omitted certain truths. He



knew that Hayward had been very active on the Medical Net recently, making dozens of inquiries about brain functions and life-support systems. The possibilities intrigued him.

"If you want the best time-compression algorithm, I will have to bring in some trusted friends. It will be expensive."

"Money isn't an issue. Charge me for every minute on this project. If you dream about it, bill me for that time."

Reaching under the table, Virgil opened the sack that he'd brought

from the shop. He placed a heavy book on the table. The title, spelled out in gold leaf, read *The Complete Works of Mark Twain*.

"This is your blueprint," he said, opening the cover. He ran his fingers across the page, savoring the feel of the stiff paper. "I want you to give me everything, right down to the paper and ink." He closed the cover and slid the volume across the table.

You walk a dangerous path, Isosaki thought. Buddha grant you peace. He picked up the book and stood. "It is said that 'Two-Time Virgil' is an honorable man. I will do this for you." He bowed and left.

Virgil pushed his credit card into the table's slot and paid for lunch. The food was outrageously expensive, but he didn't care. One way or the other, he wouldn't be rich for much longer.

He went home and called Charlie's father at the office. "Howdy, Gerald."

His oldest son peered back at him from the phone's tiny screen. Except for the petite mustache, he might have been looking at a 40-year-old tape of himself.

"Hi, Dad." He grinned. "What's up?"

"I'm calling about dinner," Virgil said.

"We're still on, right?" Gerald said.

"Well, not precisely." He shifted in his chair, fidgeting his hands below the range of the video pickup. "I'd like to take a rain check if I could."

"That's too bad. Delores was looking forward to it."

"Flatterer," Virgil said. "You could learn something from her besides contract bridge." He favored Gerald with his best sly-old-fox look. "I want you and Delores to go out anyway. My treat."

"What's the occasion?"

"No occasion. You just need a break, that's all."

Look, if I had called you at home, Delores would have raised a fuss about rescheduling rather than go without me. Sometimes, she's just too damn polite."

"I can think of worse faults," Gerald observed. "So can I." Virgil pulled a battered black plastic QWERTY keyboard onto his lap. "Like not taking care of yourself." He typed a few lines. "Here's the address of a good place. You'll like it — they have a dress code."

"This is all very generous, Dad, but —"

"Sorry, no argument. Until I fail the Turing Test, I'm still your father. And that means you listen to me when it comes to parenting." He pressed a key, transferring the data to his son's office terminal. "It doesn't do any good worrying yourself sick, and you know it." He made eye contact, as much as the camera would allow. "Charlie's your only child, but you're *my* boy. Now go out and have fun with the missus."

Gerald closed his eyes. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome. Say hi to the sommelier for me. He's such a snotty bastard."

Virgil cut the connection, breathing heavily. He didn't like sneaking around behind his son's back. With a sigh, he reached across the desk for his injector kit. Every day, he needed more painkillers and cloned neurotransmitters to keep going. If Gerald knew, he'd be shocked. It's not easy having a junkie for a father.

His other children might give him hell, but he had stopped listening to them years ago. Virgil lived by strict rules for friends and family. Two years without a Christmas card, and he banished the offender to the address book archives. Gerald sent him birthday and Christmas cards every year without fail. Not programmed greetings or e-mail, but honest-to-goodness paper mail. Virgil chuckled at the memory of the confused messenger who had tracked him down one time in the Guatemalan desert to deliver an "important parcel."

The drugs entered his system, pulling him into sleep as they usually did. Damn, Virgil thought, I won't get anything at Christmas this year.

He woke an hour later than he had planned. Without pausing to consider the implications of *that*, he hurriedly dressed and shaved. By the time he arrived at his son's house, Charlie was fast asleep.

He sent the night nurse out of the room and commandeered her chair. The dark circles beneath Charlie's eyes worried Virgil. Images of refugee camps. Stop it, he told himself. He's not starving. They wouldn't let him. Probably the radiation therapy series. Nausea and puking all day had stripped his grandson of vitality. All that remained was a sleeping shadow.

Virgil plugged his datapad into the house net-

work and called up a magazine index. A keyword search turned up 31 references on virtual reality. He chose an author he recognized and started reading. Two hours later, Gerald walked in.

"Dad, what are you doing here?" he whispered.

"Reading about research into AI-enhanced VR simulations. Fascinating stuff."

"Christ, they're just games. Somebody must be hard up for a thesis topic." He glanced at Charlie, then examined each monitor briefly. "Looks okay."

"How was dinner?" Virgil said in a louder voice. He didn't want Charlie to hear whispers in his sleep. Children usually read the worst into them.

Gerald leaned against the wall. "Fine. Good prime rib."

"What did you have with it? Nice cabernet, maybe?"

"Twenty-nine."

Virgil nodded. "Almost sorry I missed it."

"Yeah, it would have been nice." Gerald looked down the hall, where he heard Delores chatting with the nurse. "In a way, though, I'm glad you stayed home. We —"

"I know." Virgil raised his hand. "Don't mention it."

In the silent moment that followed, Charlie stirred. He rolled to one side as his breathing shifted into a deeper rhythm. Virgil recognized the telltale signs of REM sleep. He stood up and walked quietly into the hall. Gerald followed. Virgil put on his coat, folding the datapad into the large inside pocket. The two men stood facing each other. Finally, Gerald said, "He sleeps an awful lot these days, Dad. Do you think he's getting worse?"

Virgil looked at his son, wondered what to say. *He's dying.* How much worse could it get? "His body is conserving its resources, I suspect. Hoarding them for the next attack," he said. "But there's something else, too. I think Charlie is hiding in his dreams." Then he hugged Gerald briefly and walked into the cold evening air.

A tall, powerfully built Negro made his way down the crowded dock carrying a fancy valise balanced on one shoulder. The young man's shirt was sewn from cheap cloth, with straight and neat stitching. The same was true for his pants. Most folks looking at him would say right off that he was married, or had some girl do his sewing. No bachelor handled a needle that well.

From the easy way he carried himself, the man told everyone he was a free laborer. Not a freed slave, mind you, but a man who had worked his entire adult life for a fair wage, coming and going as he chose.

When he reached an empty pier, the Negro stepped out of the crowd. He set down the valise, removed a handkerchief from his back pocket, and mopped his brow. Then, when no one looked his way, he plunged both hands into the valise — straight through the fabric — touching the Sony optical synthesizer at the bottom of the bag. It felt cool to his big, thick hands. Perfect.

With a chuckle, Michael Isosaki paused the scenario. Birds stopped abruptly in mid-flight. Water drops, flung up by a passing paddle-wheel steamer, sparkled like chunks of zircon. One pedestrian, lighting a cigar, held the flame from his wooden match impossibly still.

When the simulation reached stasis point, Isosaki erased his own disguise. Now he stood in the middle of nineteenth century America, wearing bright red Levis, a mirror fabric T-shirt, and scuffed cowboy boots. His eyeglasses dangled against his neck.

Most VR programmers disdained such theatrics, opting for speed and efficiency while writing the interface. They moved in and out of their scenario like some *deus ex machina*, shaping parameters and characters on the fly. Isosaki rejected that approach out of hand. The artifice and the art were inextricably, *inexplicably* linked. If you didn't respect your own work, why should anyone else?

So Isosaki moved among his creations cloaked in borrowed faces, voices and bodies. He sat down to breakfast at boarding houses, swam in the Mississippi, trapped frogs for supper, hauled lumber for a few pennies, and danced at the County Fair.

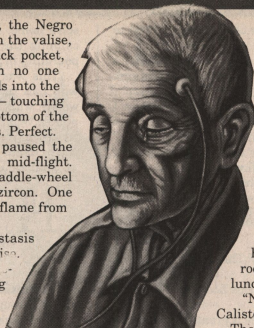
He had approached this commission with some trepidation. Every time he composed a new VR scenario, he gambled his extensive reputation. Even though his father had died years ago in an IRA bombing in Dublin, Isosaki still felt the old man's presence. *To write another's dreams is an honor — treat it as such.*

Always, father, he thought. I would never bring dishonor upon our house.

Donning his disguise once more, Isosaki kicked-started the world. The sun stroked his face. He bent down and rapped his knuckles against the solid wooden pier. Everything felt right.

A few days later, he called Virgil to set up a demonstration, only to find him out of town. He made an appointment for a week hence.

When Virgil walked into the noodle bar, he thought at first that he had the wrong address. Businessmen, their ties loosened the regulation three centimeters, crowded every available seat at the counter.



A round, smiling chef waved at him from the sushi table. "Howdy!"

"Howdy, yourself," Virgil said. "How's the ramen today?"

"Best in Sunnyvale. Lunch special to go, neh?"

He looked around. "Well, I was supposed to meet someone, but I don't see him."

"Maybe he's in a booth." He gestured with his knife to an adjoining room. "You want beer with lunch?"

"No. Mineral water. Calistoga if you have it."

The chef banged on the counter. "*Hai!* Lunch special and Calistoga. *Isogi!*" Someone in the kitchen called back an acknowledgment.

Virgil meandered to the next room. He spied Michael Isosaki immediately. The programmer sat in the open, ignoring several privacy booths. He slurped soup from an oversized plastic bowl.

"*Tampopo* is good today," he said. "Not too salty." He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his sweatshirt, plucked chopsticks with his left hand, attacked the outrageously long noodles.

"I got your message," Virgil said as he took a seat. Two Korean women, sitting on his left, traded gossip over calamari rolls. "How's it going?"

"Finished," Isosaki replied, then continued speaking in German. "I actually completed the basic scenario several days ago. Been debugging and polishing it since then."

"Sounds good," Virgil said. "God, don't you speak French or something? I can barely remember my college German."

"At least you learned it the old fashioned way. I took a temporary implant so I could work in concert with a *really* talented fellow in Stuttgart. Strange stuff, when you're used to thinking in English." He slurped some soup. "Besides, I doubt anyone here cares about an old gringo who doesn't have the decency to speak Japanese like everyone else here."

"I suppose you have a point." The hostess appeared at his elbow. He took the tray and thanked her. Poking around with his chopsticks, he snagged a slice of pork and chewed noisily. Isosaki was wrong. Damn stuff was too salty by half. "Is it ready to test?"

"Absolutely. Ready to run, if you ask me." He drained the last of his broth and set the empty bowl loudly on the table. "*Hai!* Good!" The host-

ess, standing in one corner of the room, bowed to him.

Isosaki reached behind him and produced an old nylon backpack. "I used this all through school. Sort of a good luck charm."

Virgil glanced at the contents. "Bigger than I thought it would be."

"You wanted it open-ended, didn't you? Besides, the controller has more raw computing power than the average office block."

"How did you manage that?"

"You don't want to know, Mein Herr," Isosaki said. "Now, my invoice." He picked up a napkin and wrote:

Time: 30,000 CA Francs

Materials: Hardcopy of The Complete Works of Mark Twain.

"I would like to keep the book, if you don't mind."

Virgil smiled. "You place a great deal of value on Mr. Clemens's work. I was prepared to pay you twice as much."

Isosaki shrugged. "Send a donation to the Irish Red Cross. They always need help."

Virgil picked up the backpack and stood. "Thank you for everything, Michael-san."

Isosaki held out his hand. "It has been an honor working for you, Virgil-san. May the wind be at your back."

Clad only in his silk robe, Virgil considered his wardrobe. He didn't want to arouse suspicion by overdressing, but on the other hand, a man likes to look good for his funeral. He finally settled on a broken-in blue Oxford shirt and khaki pants, loafers, and the tie his wife had given him a quarter century before. He then shaved and brushed his hair back carefully over the new interface socket. It still itched, despite what the surgeon in Tahoe had told him. Maybe it was just nerves. That and fasting all day.

He had allowed himself only some fruit juice and an extra dose of neurotransmitters. Virgil felt more alive than he had in years. He knew it was just an illusion — he'd tried the macrobiotic route before — but he savored the feeling of well-being nonetheless.

He toured his apartment again, straightening up a few things, washing a missed glass. Then he left an envelope tucked into his computer keyboard and considered the vacuum flask of hot chocolate from the counter. He had made the mixture extra sweet to cover the taste of the drugs. Charlie probably wouldn't notice — he loved sugar. He zipped the flask into Isosaki's backpack and left.

The night air was mild for November, so he continued past the bus stop and headed for his

son's home. He used the time to breathe deeply, calming the slight palsy of his hands and the pounding in his chest.

This was what he wanted. Not like Annette, who had to be wheeled into the hospice. Virgil would walk through Death's door on his own power. What was that old Irish blessing? May you be in Heaven a half hour before the Devil knows you're dead?

That would be just enough time.

He rang the doorbell twice before anyone answered. Gerald opened the door, then stepped back. "Dad! I wasn't expecting you."

Virgil walked in and took off his coat. "It's nice to know I can still surprise you occasionally."

"Yeah, well, I can't talk right now. Delores and I are going to a couples workshop at the college —"

"And we're going to be late," called Delores from the bedroom. "Hi, Virgil."

"Hi, yourself." He picked up the backpack. "Well, don't worry about me. I can amuse myself for a bit."

"Um, sure." Gerald shrugged. "We'll talk when we get back, right?"

"Have fun," Virgil said. He hugged his son briefly. "Goodbye."

Virgil waited a full fifteen minutes before locking the front door and activating the house security systems. Then he took his injector kit, inserting one of the cartridges he had acquired using a different name and a credit line routed through an Uruguyan bank famous for its confidentiality.

He walked quietly into Charlie's bedroom. The night nurse was lost in a book. Charlie was playing chess on a datapad. "Can you come out here for a second?" Virgil said.

When the nurse stepped into the hall, he asked, "Are you pregnant?"

She looked at him oddly. "No, Mr. Hayward. Why do you ask?"

"Don't want to take any chances." He grabbed her arm and pressed the injector against it. She pulled back, but the drugs quickly paralyzed her. He caught her before her knees collapsed, then laid her on the couch. He checked her pulse, then administered a mild tranquilizer with an obvious signature. Virgil wanted her to have a solid alibi.

Charlie looked up from his game when he walked in. "Where's Ms. Ogden?"

"Taking a nap," said Virgil. He set the backpack on the bed.

"What did you bring me?" Charlie sat up in bed, his chess game quickly forgotten.

"A fishing trip. Or a rafting trip. I don't know, yet."

"What do you mean you don't know? What is it?" Charlie said.

"It's a surprise." He opened the flask and poured a cup of hot chocolate. "Here, special treat." He handed the cup to Charlie. "Now I want to tell you something important. P a y



attention." God, he hated using that tone.

"Yes, sir — Virgil."

"Good boy. Do you know I have Alzheimer's Disease?"

"Yes. Dad told me." He sipped the hot chocolate.

"That's right. And the drugs I take make me very weak. In fact, they're killing me slowly. Just like your cancer."

"I'm sorry, Virgil."

"So am I, kid. So am I. But there's a chance I can beat it."

"How?" Charlie's eyes lost a bit of focus. Virgil had to make a decision quickly.

"By running away." He lifted Isosaki's platinum-colored plastic box out of the backpack. "The whole Mississippi river is inside here, did you know that? The longest waterway in the whole country. It'll take me a long, long time to see all of it."

Charlie struggled with comprehension. "I've never heard of a VR like that."

"It's special. I had it custom-made. But if I go, I won't come back. Ever."

"I'll miss you, Virgil." He yawned.

"I'll miss you, too, Charlie. That's why I want you to come with me."

"But what about Mom and Dad?"

"They'll be sad. They'll be sad no matter what, though. That's what happens when people die."

"I'm not sure, Virgil. I'm scared."

"So am I. But that's okay. It's an adventure. You're allowed to be scared." He cupped Charlie's cheek in his leathery hand. "Will you trust me?"

"Sure..." Charlie drifted off.

Virgil lowered his head to the pillow and hooked him into Isosaki's box. He slipped the second connection into his own socket, then loaded his last cartridge into the injector. He dosed himself a final time.

Draw back the curtain and let the sun illuminate the painting. Two people stand on the railing of a ship, looking out at dark blue water. The boy on the left, dressed in overalls and a straw hat, laughs and points at a dragonfly as it buzzes past. His hair is cut in straight bangs, and freckles fight for space on his red cheeks.

The man on the right, who bears a face of middle years, rests his left hand on the boy's shoulder. His right thumb is hooked under his belt. He is dressed in good cotton trousers and shirt. His boots are well-made, but not polished. His eyes are bright with joy.

The man and the boy do not know where they are sailing.

Somehow, it does not seem important.

Now step back from the canvas and wish them well. □

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Don't Dance

By Beatrice J. Corry

Art by Jon Foster

It's high tide. And they're dancing. Up there on the hull of the damaged shuttle. Arms akimbo, legs spasmodic. They're dancing ... in the moonlight. Tides, the moon, blood, all related.

And I don't care. Can't. Eyes watering.

Can't let them see me. Hiding here in the shadows. Watching. They're driven to survive ... and I'd gag if they tried to touch me ... dancing up there, suits tattered, eyes hidden in darkened sockets, flesh ... flesh ...

A safeguard. That's what it was supposed to be. A hedge against the unexpected, against accidents. They're alive. Sure. So's grass, and plankton. But what can I say? Here. Hidden. In the shadows. Watching ...

My crew ... It's my fault. That they're dancing. That they're alive ... dead, actually. But alive. Dancing. My fault. *All* of it.

The ultimate protection. That's what it was supposed to be. Nanotechnology. Little machines. Tiny, barely larger than a molecule, part machine, part biological. Invisible. In your blood. Supposed to fix things. Yeah. Sure. Sure did fix things.

Dancing. In the moonlight. Like some zombies. Alone. Alone in the moonlight. Fred's my only salvation. Good old Fred. He knows how to deal with it. Stinking drunk. That's Fred's solution. But he can figure out what to do. He was in on it. Part of the research. Part of the test crew. And now he's afraid it will spread. So he drinks. He's drinking now, while I watch. He's afraid they'll wander away. Infect someone. Nanobots worked too good. Don't know when to stop, when to let go. No right to die. No living will that they'd respect ... living will. Ha! Exactly what the little buggers are.

They'll stop shortly. High tide and moonlight make them dance. Moon'll be down soon. Tide's already on the ebb. Time to gather some food. Pickin's are easier when the tide's on the way out. Wish they'd eat. Kinda gross what's happening. Nanobots again. Consuming the body to keep it going. Starting on the outside because there's nothing vital, working their way in. Leprosy in reverse, nothing falls off ... sucked in.

We should never have forced open the airlock. Should've left them there to freeze. Fred disagreed, of course. Claims we wouldn't have learned of the side effects. Could've infected everyone. But if George and Vladimir don't, Fred

and I still could. And that's another problem I'd rather not think about, and another reason he drinks.

"They done?"
"Yeah. For now." Fred was slumped against a rough driftwood wall, bottle in his hand, waving George's service .45 like some skid-row derelict. I handed him the three clams I'd scraped from their sandy refuge in the salt flats. Fred would cook them later. For a biochemist he was a pretty decent cook.

"They called. They're staying offshore for now. Waiting to see what happens. They don't want anybody else infected if they can help it."

"Are we infectious, then — you and I?"

"Probably not. But we can't be sure. George and Vladimir certainly are. Their nanobots have taken over. But they only seem capable of running the autonomous functions, the instinctive ones ..."

"Yeah, like eating ..."

"No. Not eating. Unless you mean the 'bots themselves. They're eating."

"Please ... I don't like thinking about it."

"Neither do I, but it may be a solution. We only have to wait them out. Wait until they lose body integrity."

I didn't like thinking about that. "And us? Any chance for us? Or will our 'bots take over if we fall into too deep a sleep?" I shivered. It was like some 1950s horror movie. Little monsters waiting to take over. Monsters inside ...

"C'mon Elizabeth. You know better. What happened to George and Vladimir was unusual, a million-to-one shot. Oxygen de—"

"It wasn't a million-to-one shot. It was my fault. I shouldn't have let them go out. The indicator light —"

"Checked out OK. Stop blaming yourself, Liz. It wasn't your fault. None of it. George and Vladimir are big boys. They knew the risks."

"None of us knew the risks. Not all of them. Certainly not what's happened ... If I had just run some more tests on the airlock. We might have caught it and been able to fix it. They wouldn't have ..."

There was a crunching noise, scuffling.
"They're coming. Hide."



He stood, swaying for a moment, and a nearby crow squawked and flew away as Fred scrambled over the low wall he had been resting against and I ducked behind a dune. George and Vladimir stumbled into the clearing where we had been, staggering like zombies, like bad actors in one of those *Living Dead* farces. But George and Vladimir's eyes were even more mindless — less crazed, but wandering, whites rolling around and around like some epileptic victim's. They kept going ... and we had to follow. NASA didn't want them swimming out to sea. They were afraid the 'bots might get into the ocean, into the sea life. That would cause all sorts of problems. No one would want their tuna sandwich talking back, or squirming in the mayo between two slices of rye because it wasn't quite completely, absolutely dead.

We followed. They did as they had done the previous night. Stumbled up to within ten feet of where the waves lapped against the sand and sat, legs spread, backs straight, gazing out to sea. Staring forlornly like shipwrecked sailors waiting for rescue, almost as if they had purpose. God, I hoped not. I prayed that they were really dead, the George and Vladimir I remembered, that they weren't trapped inside those rotting hulks, that the 'bots hadn't been able to regenerate enough brain tissue, memories, personality, or any kind of rational thought. That would be too horrible to contemplate, too mind-numbing to accept.

Fred moved over to my side. He smelled of cheap vodka. Vladimir's vodka. I remember, when I was a kid in college, the claim was that no one could smell vodka on your breath. That was only one of many dumb beliefs kids had. Only one.

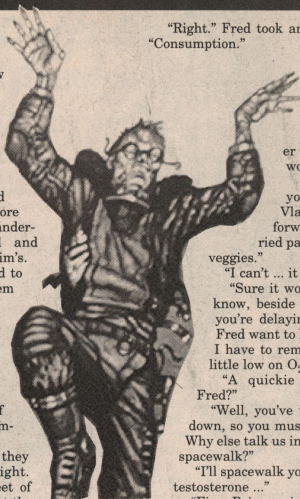
"How much longer will it take, Fred?"

"I don't know. It's never happened before."

"What do NASA's experts say?"

"They don't know, either. Remember, Liz, people are only experts about what's already happened. No one is an expert on the unknown. And this is definitely unknown territory. Still, judging by the rate of decay, I'd guess another day or two before they get to something vital."

"Consumption. Not decay."



"Right." Fred took another swallow of vodka. "Consumption."

"Switching to reserve tanks. 6,000 psi left."

I pushed the button again and again, harder each time, willing it to work.

"OK, Liz. You've had your fun. Open up. Vladimir and I are looking forward to some of Fred's curried paste with a side of mashed

veggies."

"I can't ... it doesn't work. Won't ..."

"Sure it works. The amber one, you know, beside the stereo equalizers. If you're delaying just because you and Fred want to have a quickie, I'm afraid I have to remind you we're running a little low on O₂ out here."

"A quickie ... you bastard. With Fred?"

"Well, you've turned Vladimir and me down, so you must have the hots for Fred. Why else talk us into taking first turn at the spacewalk?"

"I'll spacewalk you, you overinflated bag of testosterone ..."

"Fine. Bring us in, and we'll settle it *mano a mano*. You and I, in the rec room. No holds barred. But first, you got to bring us in."

"I'm trying. And you wouldn't last ten seconds, even in freefall. You aren't forgetting I'm a Master at Ving Tsung, are you? Hold steady, I'm going down to the lock to try the manual override. Fred? Do you read? Report to the command center and take over while I go to the airlock."

"Roger, Captain. On my way."

Both hands. Steady now. Yank down once, hard. Nothing. No resistance. The outer airlock door was still closed.

"George? Vladimir? It still doesn't work. Something's wrong with the backup, too. I'm going to have to suit up and try to open it from the air lock. Hold on."

"Roger. Holding our breath, as ordered."

"Wiseass. Be patient. We'll get you in. What're your O₂ readings?"

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ..."

"George!"

"Sorry. I wax poetic when you get this close. O₂ readings are 2200 psi in mine."

"About 2100 here, Captain."

"Shit! That's not even ten minutes."

"Yes, sir. Ten minutes. Give or take a few seconds. Request permission to come aboard, Sir."

"C'mon, guys. I'm working as fast as I can. Almost suited up. Be in the airlock in a flash. Fred?"

"Here, Captain."

"Suit up. If I can't get the manuals to work, I'm going to blow the lock door. Bleed the ship's air."

"But blowing the lock will destroy the hull integrity and make re-entry ..."

"One problem at a time, Fred. Suit up."

"Yes, sir."

Damned torqueless wrenches. Make everything so slow. There. Got the last screw. "Removing the cover plate now."

It floated off to the right. Light from the flashlight probed the control panel. Charred wiring. Damn. Damn. Damn.

"It's no good. The wiring's shorted out. Damned low bidders. George? Vladimir? What're your readings ...?"

"George? Vladimir? Talk to me, damnit."

"Mmffp ..."

Christ. O₂'s gone. They're breathing their own waste air. Got no time. How long before oxygen deprivation sets in? Three minutes? Five?

There. Not all the wiring's charred. The wiring to the explosive bolts ... there ... one's bad ... cross connect ...

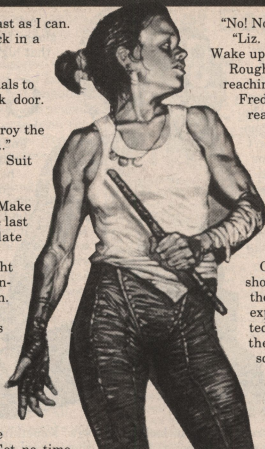
BLAM!

Ice crystals. Debris. Buffeted. Almost sucked out. Careful. Work my way around. Where are they? There. There's Vladimir floating at the end of his tether. Stiff. Motionless. God, please don't let me be too late. Please. Haul him in, looking for George. There. To the right. "Fred. Get down here with some spare air tanks. Now!"

"On the way."

The tether. Rough. Can feel it through the gloves. Heavy. Not supposed to be heavy, supposed to be weightless. But heavy. Pulling. Pulling. Funny. George is coming, too. Both tethers in my hands. Pulling. Slow. Too slow. Closer. They're coming closer. Everything is so slow, too slow. Closer. Closer. Can almost see their faces through the Plexiglas. Closer ...

Foggy. Misty. Suit must be leaking. Tether rough, cutting my hands. Blood. Blood on my hands ... closer ... their faces. Whites of their eyes. Rolling. Skin gray, sallow, rotting, mouths open. Teeth decayed, but large, pointed, sharp. Mouths working ... opening closing chewing ... closer ... NO! Reaching for me. Mouths opening wide, wider, tongues snaking out, writhing ...



"No! No! Keep away ..."

"Liz. Liz. Wake up. It's over. Wake up."

Rough hands shaking me ... reaching for me ... no ... no ... just Fred. Dreaming. Nightmare. So real.

"You all right?"

"Yeah. Thanks. All right. Any change?"

"No. They're still sitting there. Watching the sea, the waves."

It was cooler. Nearly dawn. A few gulls flew over, crying, seeking food. One landed on Vladimir's shoulder, canted its head and then pecked once, twice at his exposed flesh. Vladimir swatted it away and it rose into the air with a protesting screech.

"They'll be heading back to the ship soon."

"Yeah. But it doesn't make sense. All they've done is walk back and forth. From the ship to the shore, and back. Day and night. Why?"

"Don't know. But it might have something to do with the creatures the nanobots mutated from. Maybe they've returned to some kind of instinctive life cycle. Most creatures are governed by the moon and the tides."

"Come again, *Loki*. That was broken up. Over."

"Roger, *Lazarus*. Repeat. You have 24 hours. Then we send in a clean-up crew. Repeat 24 hours. Over."

"Acknowledged, *Loki*. Twenty-four hours. Over."

"What are we going to know in 24 hours that we don't know now? That's foolish, Fred. We need weeks, months to find an answer."

"We don't have that. I don't blame them. It's too dangerous. Too many unknowns. Thank God there's little life on this island. Little to infect."

"But 24 hours?"

"Right. So let's not waste any of it. Stay and watch them. I'm going back to the ship to get some instruments and supplies. Some petri dishes. Give a yell when they head back so I can get out. I don't want to be stuck in there with them."

"Gotcha."

Fred stood and walked away from the beach into the thin jungle. "Fred?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."
"Damned right."

"Any luck?"
"Not yet. They're tough little buggers. Even if we had the equipment to perform a complete transfusion, I don't think it would work. Some would remain. And multiply. That's the way they were designed. To survive."

"But why did it take so long ... I mean George and Vladimir. They were dead nearly two days before ..."

"I know. They can't work miracles. George and Vladimir had already been without oxygen too long. Too many dead brain cells. I'm amazed they can even move."

"Not they. Their bodies. —They're gone."

"Yeah. Their bodies ... Yknow, maybe it's more than their bodies. Remember when they first started moving? How clumsy they were? How they could barely stand without falling, or walk without smashing into something?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Think about it. Think about how they're walking now, even dancing."

"I wouldn't call it real dancing."

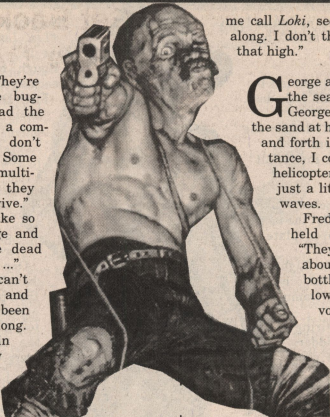
"No. But you get my point. The 'bots have been learning, or re-learning, how to make the body work. Maybe they've also been reactivating brain cells." Fred was getting excited.

"Don't think so. Remember, dead brain cells stay dead. No new ones grow. George and Vladimir are gone."

"Maybe not. Think about it. Think about brain trauma victims. Sometimes, the brain compensates. Unused portions kick on line. Remember, we don't use most of the brain, less than half. We can only guess at what the rest of it's for."

"And stroke victims." I was getting into it. "They suffer memory loss, but the memories can come back. Sometimes it takes a year or more ... Do you really think that's possible?"

"I don't know, but it's worth the risk to wait and find out. I think we need to get George and Vladimir to a hospital, on IVs, so their bodies get some real nourishment. The way they're going now, the 'bots will have consumed the bodies before any memories can kick back on line. Let



me call Lohi, see if we can get them to go along. I don't think the risk of infection is that high."

George and Vladimir were sitting on the seashore again. But this time, George's left hand was toying with the sand at his side, moving the soil back and forth in little mounds. In the distance, I could hear the whupwhup of helicopters coming closer, the sound just a little louder than the lapping waves.

Fred squinted at the bottle he held aloft in his right hand. "They're right on time. I'm just about finished." He tipped the bottle to his mouth and swallowed the last bit of Vladimir's vodka.

There were two copters. Large ones. I could see them skimming the wave tops as they flew in from the carrier, which was still far enough off shore to be out of sight. As they grew larger, I

saw something else. "They're gunships. Fred, they're gunships! What did they say when you spoke to them?"

Fred was squinting at the approaching helicopters, the bottle forgotten at his side. "They said they'd pick us up. But ..."

"Sons 'v bitches. Run, Fred. Run!"

I fled toward the cover of the nearby jungle, knowing it wasn't thick enough to hide me for long. Fred was getting to his feet when they opened fire. Bullets ripped through George, Vladimir, and Fred and traced a path up into the jungle, to my left. Damn.

Fred staggered a few feet before falling face-first into the sand, red stains spreading through the back of his uniform. George and Vladimir's bodies slumped to either side, twitching. Not dead. I moved and slid under the trunk of a fallen palm tree as the copters slipped overhead. One swung around.

Not dead. I kept telling myself that the nanobots would repair Fred, even George and Vladimir, given enough time. Not dead. A loud explosion erupted behind me. A plume of smoke rose into the sky from where the shuttle had crashed. One of the copters was hovering over the beach. Tiny particles of sand, flung into the air by the copter's downdraft, stung my cheek. I shielded my eyes. The men in the copter were covered in biohazard suits, Plexiglas helmets and all. Flames erupted from the front of the copter and fell on the bodies on the beach — napalm — jel-

lied fire covered my crew. They began to twitch and writhen. Not dead. I sobbed. I couldn't help it. Not dead.

Fred's corpse jerked erect and staggered several steps, swirling around and around as if looking for a partner to swing, and then he fell, engulfed in flames. For good measure, more napalm poured from the copter. Black oily smoke rose from the burning flesh on the beach, three pyres. None of the bodies moved now. Even the nanobots couldn't survive that inferno.

The second copter returned, strafing the jungle with bullets and napalm as it came. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. NASA was governed more by fear than reason. I wondered for a moment about the other crew, the second test crew, which had been scheduled to take the next shuttle flight. Were their bodies burning in a pyre at Canaveral? Had NASA completely panicked in fear the nanobots would get loose?

The second copter emerged from the jungle about thirty yards away, bringing its fire to the beach, where even the sand burned. The first copter began a run, bullets shredding the palm leaves and drops of jellied fire falling from the sky in its wake. They were going to flame the entire island. There was no chance. No chance at all.

The wind shifted, blowing the black smoke out to sea. For a moment the copter was smothered in its own blackness. I stood and ran, ran straight toward the sea. I did have a chance, but only a very, very slim one. I ran as close to the first line of flames on the sand as possible, praying that the breeze didn't shift again, not until I reached the sea.

The copter moved. It swung out of the smoke, further up the beach. I didn't look, my eyes intent on the waves only yards away. My breath came in large gulps. The sand was wet under my feet. Not much farther. My toes splashed in water. Each stride took me deeper. Up to the calf ... the staccato sound of the machine guns opening up. Make them miss ... make them miss. The bullets whined as they sliced into grains of sand, sharp splashes as they reached the water ... I prepared to dive and leapt ... but in mid-air the bullets found me, a sharp pain — two — in my back as I arced into the sea, holding my breath, holding it deep, deep where the pain was growing, where the blackness was emerging, blackness rising to meet the color of fire on the surface as flaming napalm floated, waiting to embrace me. Would the 'bots beat them all ...

The blackness reached me first, and it didn't seem to matter anymore. □

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By Mark Wolverton

Art by Charles Lang

The girl was spinning, twirling about like some mad figure skater, the golden span-gles on the leggings under her short skirt catching a stray laser light now and then and casting it dizzily about the place. They had cleared out a space for her on the dance floor, a small crowd of admirers surrounding her, male, female, biogened hermaphros, all watching her. Spinning.

And spinning alone, as Arthur took particular care to notice. He leaned back against the bar, draining the remaining drops from his glass, the ice cubes clinking together and falling cold against his lips. He took one into his mouth and sucked on it absently, watching, thinking. Anticipating.

"All right, you beauties, old Pat Klakab's taking a little recess, but I'll be back to ya. Later." The voice of the DJ clicked off and the music faded. Three hundred bodies stopped twitching, grinding, and flowing against each other and moved back to their waiting drinks, bar stools, and jealous partners.

Arthur craned his neck around the sweaty, gold-encrusted musclehead next to him and saw the girl alight on a stool, flashing a dazzling smile at the bartender who instantly appeared before her. She crossed her legs, taking up a more comfortable position, exposing tanned thighs above her leggings.

Okay, go for it.

He started to weave his way casually in her direction through the forest of horny bodies, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on her. Ohmigod, she was magnificent. Arthur suppressed a shudder of excitement as he made a leisurely scan of her form for the number that please, oh please, let it be there, you've got to be plugged in, please, and ... yes! There it was, elegantly stitched into the fabric barely covering her (gulp) breast.

He turned away from the bar and whispered hoarsely into the Omnifax unit mounted on his wrist. "Omnifax remote interface, coding D-878-14-LG."

He waited, glancing back at the girl. The guy seated next to her had started making small talk. There was no time to waste.

"Acknowledge coding D-878-14-LG," the unit answered finally, in a well-measured and smoothly modulated tone. "Subject name: Wingate, Delia. Birthdate: 6-26-94. Employment: Senior Omnifax Interface Tech, American Synaptic Repatterning, Inc. Current address ..."

"Just tell me if she's available!" She was smiling at the guy now. This was getting serious.

It was an eternity before Omnifax answered. "Marital status, single. No reported current emotional and/or physical involvement." That was what he wanted to hear! "Resuming basic readout file ..."

"Skip it." Arthur straightened his tie. He started toward Delia, who to Arthur's great relief was looking away from the pinhead who had been talking to her. Thank you, thank you!

Her perfume made his head spin for a second or two. Placing a hand on the bar to steady himself, he leaned over to her. "Pretty boring place, isn't it, Delia?"

Her brown eyes flashed at him in the merest glance. Arthur gulped a little. Brown eyes. Very brown eyes.

She gave him a brief who-the-hell-are-you smile, then nodded to the bartender, who produced another drink. "I saw you looking me up."

Arthur's heart leapt. She noticed me!

"Flake off, mister," she said.

Arthur blinked once or twice, feeling the floor open up underneath him and his body stretching into an endless black abyss. He staggered away from the bar through empty smiling faces and warm sweaty flesh. Some distance away, he turned to look back at her.

No. This isn't over yet.

"Omnifax remote interface." Arthur's voice was toneless. "Request procedures for approach."

"Attention," said the Omnifax. "Computed compatibility index of 32.5 percent correlated with projected psychological indices and interactive scenarios suggests abandonment of approach."

"Don't argue with me, dammit!" Arthur snapped. "Procedures for approach!"

"Working," the Omnifax said with a touch of digital pique. "Please wait."

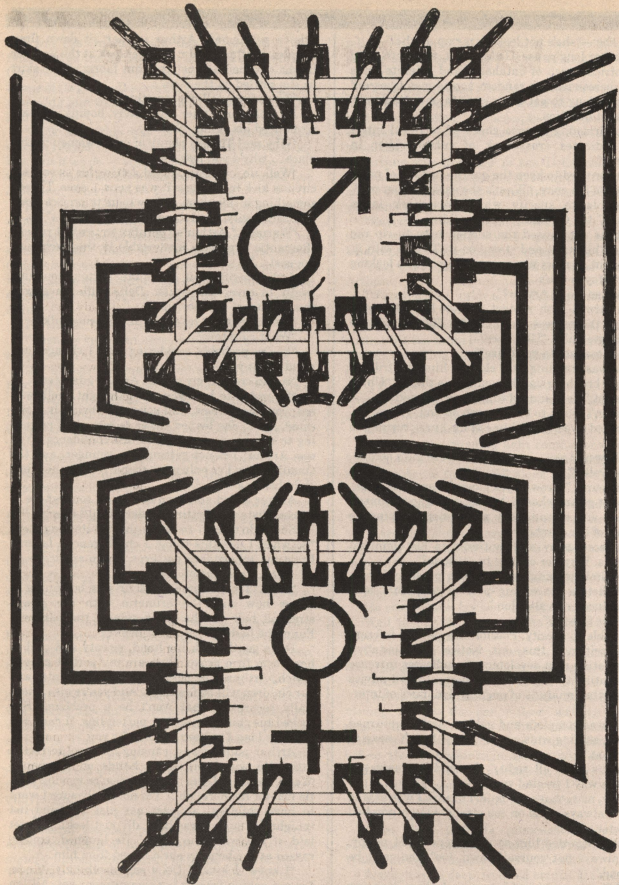
Arthur was calmer now, glowing with fresh resolve. He gazed through the hazy, luminescent atmosphere of the club at Delia, still perched on her barstool, legs gleaming, synthecotton outlining interesting contours, hair nimbusing her head in laser light from the bar mirror.

He moved back into the crowd, heading in her direction. Then he stopped.

Delia was speaking into her own Omnifax. And looking straight at him.

"Uh, question," said Arthur, his voice shaking a little.

"Ready for inquiry."



"Is she — she's not looking *me* up, is she?"

Another long pause. Goddammit, why with all of this intricate web of databases and satellite links and superconducting random access memories did it take so long to get an answer to one simple all-important question ...

"Confirmed. Systemic check of retrieval interfaces indicates crosscheck of current user in progress."

Arthur tried to keep the querulous tone of paranoia out of his voice. "What's she asking about me?"

"Unable to specify while crosscheck is in progress," the Omnifax replied mildly.

Arthur suppressed the sudden urge to rip the thing off his wrist and stomp on it. To hell with it, he thought. It must mean *something* if she's looking me up. Maybe she's ...

"Excuse me ... Arthur?"

He turned with a start, almost knocking over Delia in the process. So much for digital logic! he thought gleefully. "Uh ... yes?"

"Is it too late to apologize?"

She was standing very close to him, the frills of her skirt brushing lightly against his thighs. "Uh, of course not," he managed to stammer somehow.

"I didn't mean to be so rough on you. I'm sorry." She smiled sweetly. Arthur felt his knees turning to water.

"Uh, would you ... would you excuse me a second, please, Delia?"

"Of course." Brown eyes glowed warmly at him.

"Don't go anywhere." Arthur disengaged himself clumsily and moved away a few steps, hoping he was out of her earshot.

He faced away and muttered to his Omnifax. "Analysis. Why her change in attitude?"

"Preliminary analysis suggests possible discovery of factors concerning present user that may have induced reevaluation."

"What factors?"

"Unable to specify. Possibilities beyond inferential capacities of this unit. Notice: recomputation incorporating new developments indicates increase of compatibility index to 67.9 percent. Will advise upon further analysis of ongoing dynamics of interaction."

Life was complete and golden. Arthur returned to Delia, smiling winsomely. "Sorry. Didn't mean to ignore you."

"That's quite all right," she said. "I deserve it after the way I treated you."

"Now, now, that's not true. I'm sure I was asking for it. I always come on too strong. One of my bad character traits."

Delia regarded him as if he were a lost puppy. "You always put yourself down, too? You can't be that bad."

"Well ... maybe not," agreed Arthur, glancing down in his best aw-shucks manner.

"Okay. Now that we've both made our apologies ..." Delia took his hand and led him back to the bar.

Like a gentleman, Arthur let her sit down first. Besides, it afforded him a longer look at the way her thighs strained against the thin fabric of her skirt as she settled on the stool ...

"So, Arthur, tell me something."

He looked up at her attentively, hoping she hadn't noticed his ogling. "Yes?"

"Why me? There's plenty of other women in this place ... why'd you look me up?"

"Well, uh," Arthur paused, letting his sweet-talk circuits kick in. "I guess it was your ... eyes. There's something inside them ... they seem to project a certain sensitivity, something that I've never ..."

"Warning," Arthur's Omnifax squawked rudely. "Romantic hyperbole inadvisable in this exchange. Suggest ..."

Arthur swiftly hit the mute button, coughing loudly to cover the action. Delia stifled a giggle, then looked at him seriously.

"Listen, Arthur, let's stop all this cute talk."

"What cute talk?"

"You're probably wondering why I changed my mind about you."

"It had crossed my mind," Arthur admitted.

"I decided to look you up. I thought, well, why not, you never know, and you were obviously interested, so ..." She leaned closer to him, as if preparing to divulge some long-guarded confidence. "You see, Arthur, I'm not getting any younger, and the Omnifax says I've only got a couple of years of prime child-bearing left ..."

Arthur heard an alarm bell go off somewhere at a great distance. Getting louder. "Child-bearing?"

She didn't seem to catch the questioning tone. "So when I use this thing, I check genetic factors. Projected inheritance patterns, dominant traits in offspring. That sort of thing."

"I'm ... I'm flattered." Arthur was beginning to notice how cute the brunette with the green-streaked hair on the other side of the bar was. Funny he hadn't noticed her before.

Delia gently took his hand, sweaty and cold in her warm firm grasp. "You are my perfect genetic match, Arthur. I've checked all the variants, and our children will be fantastic. And you're also financially secure, so that won't be a problem." She cocked his chin to meet her parted lips. "I can't tell you how long I've been looking for you."

Arthur pulled away, causing his stool to rock a little. He wiped his damp hands on his pants. "Yeah, well, uh, Delia ... I think you're moving a little fast for me here, uh ... I'm not really sure I want to have children, at least not just yet, and not tonight, for sure. I was basically just looking to get laid, if you want the truth." He laughed, embarrassed at the honesty she'd forced from him.

"I know, I know," Delia said soothingly. "Look, I'm not asking for any big commitment yet. All I'm saying is, we're such a good biological match, let's spend some time together."

"It sounds like a commitment to me." Where the

hell was the Omnifax now that he needed it? He remembered the mute button and clicked it off. The Omnifax remained silent. He had an uncomfortable image of its great all-knowing computer intelligence observing him from a great height, coldly watching him squirm.

"Look at it this way, Arthur," Delia said, the voice of reason. "If we don't get along, it's over, goodbye. But if we *do* — at least we know we're not wasting our time with an incompatible." She raised her eyebrows. "One night — and we'll see?"

Arthur considered. He really had nothing to be afraid of. Even one night with Delia would be a religious experience, he was sure. And if she did get too serious, well, there was always the automatic Omnifax recording of their conversation to prove he hadn't made any kind of legal commitment. So ... He scanned her form again, feeling the old excitement rising.

He smiled. "Well ... how can I refuse?"

"Then we've got an agreement." She moved closer to him, draping a perfect leg over his lap.

"Or at least an understanding," Arthur said, a moment before his mouth was consumed by Delia's.

A heavenly eternity later, they disentangled. Delia rose and took his arm, snuggling tantalizingly against him. They started out. Arthur, my boy, you've done it!

"Attention. Attention." Both of their Omnifax units blared in unison. "Urgent update concerning impending union of present subjects."

Despite himself, Arthur stepped away from Delia a little warily. He *had* forgotten to check for disease factors, but then ...

The Omnifax continued, "New computations indicate that mating of present subjects will produce offspring possessing characteristics not in accordance with latest required governmental parameters."

"What?" said Arthur. He noticed Delia eyeing him speculatively. A dense layer of some impenetrable substance seemed to have descended between them.

"Genetic extrapolations demonstrate 92.35 percent probability that offspring of present subjects will exceed current governmental specifications for intelligence, while possessing subnormal physical aptitudes. This is not in concordance with projected Federal requirements for unskilled manual labor. Also, projected offspring will be blond, 85.2 percent probable, adding to current oversupply of blond individuals."

"You mean we can't —" Arthur began.

"Federal regulations prohibit this unit from allowing mating of individuals with genetic parameters incompatible with national requirements. Therefore, your union is not permissible. This information has been transmitted to the proper authorities and you will be monitored to ensure compliance."

Arthur was outraged. "Wait a minute. You can't

tell us what to do!" He wondered why Delia wasn't saying anything. The lady doth protest too little, methinks.

"Your registration contract for this service specifies your agreement to appropriate regulations," said the Omnifax. "Noncompliance with Federal statutes will result in severe criminal and civil penalties."

Arthur was horrified to see Delia nodding at him. As though some dark suspicions had been realized. "Wait," he said desperately. "We'll make sure you don't get pregnant ..."

"Registered contraceptive measures used by both subjects only 97.4 percent effective. Unacceptable safety margin," chirped the Omnifax.

"And you're just telling us all this *now*?" whined Arthur.

"Warning not relevant unless genetic union imminent."

Trying to assert some last measure of control, Arthur hit the mute button again. For some reason it wasn't working anymore. He flailed his arm helplessly.

"I thought you said you checked out all this stuff already," he said to Delia. She shrugged. A little too casually, he thought.

"I did," she said. "Every bit of it."

Suddenly the blinding light came over Arthur's horizon. He felt himself standing in the middle of an immense Arctic tundra. All alone. And very small. "Wait a minute ..."

Delia was shaking her head in disbelief. "Pathetic. Really pathetic." She removed her sleeve from Arthur's shaky grasp. "I must say, this thing *does* have its uses. So long, lover." She turned and escaped into the darkness.

"Delia, wait," Arthur called after her.

She was gone.

He stood there, his body a mass of numbness.

Well, he had to admit that she had one hell of an effective technique.

Dismally he moved back to his own seat at the bar. His glass was still there waiting for a refill. Someone had put a joint out in it.

The DJ was returning to his dais. The crowd was moving back to the dance floor, waiting for the music. Including Delia, Arthur noted miserably. With the guy who had been sitting next to her before. He was bigger than Arthur. With dark hair. And didn't look all that intelligent, either.

Probably a perfect match.

"Suggestion," the Omnifax ventured.

"Shut up."

"New data indicate presence of potential prospects in Finnegan's Folly Tavern, 16th and Willow Streets. Suggest investigation."

Arthur took a deep, wearied breath. He stood up and straightened his lapels, looking about for the EXIT sign.

"You're the boss," he said. □

Endangered Species

By E. H. Wong

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

For days, Cathcart and I hid like fugitives in the Canadian taiga, flitting through the conifers surrounding the lakes of Wood Buffalo Park. We moved like wraiths, unseen right under the noses of the conservationists. *Daisy-sniffers*, Cathcart called them. *Faggots*, I added.

When we sighted the whooping cranes, it took away my breath. Thousands of birds dotted the shallow waters of their summer nesting site. *Nearly extinct*, everyone had said. *Last chance for a trophy*, I thought. The daisy-sniffers commanded the best spots, but the taiga was huge. We kept moving until we were clear.

"Heads," I called, but it was tails. I suppressed my disappointment, and to his credit, I never saw the hint of a gloat.

"Take the camcorder, Feeney." He pulled out his handgun, a Thompson/Center Contender outfitted with a 7X scope and a long .22 barrel.

From his weathered complexion and salt-and-pepper crew cut, Cathcart looked to be in his early fifties, a good twenty years older than me. But one would never guess by his indefatigable energy.

Cathcart arranged his hat on a boulder to prop his gun and lined up his target. I started filming and, after a moment, heard the shot. In black and white, the long-legged crane collapsed, a marionette whose strings had been cut. Perfect with a handgun at over 100 yards. What a marksman.

"That one was for Darwin," he said. "Did you get it?"

"It's in the can." Just like that, we were in, both initiated into the Dying Breed Club. I felt giddy, as if I had pulled the trigger myself.

The long trek out proved uneventful, and I sighed when we finally reached the Rover. I slumped into the passenger seat and let Cathcart drive. The uneven road jostled my tired body and, after a time, lulled me into drowsiness.

"Damn!" Cathcart said. "Trouble."

I bolted upright and saw the roadblock. Although I had hidden the bird in the back, my throat caught nevertheless. He slowed the Rover, and I could see six or seven people, still some distance away, gesturing for us to stop. Had they somehow heard the gunshot? Beyond them, a sideways pickup truck blocked the road.

"Hold on!" Cathcart slammed it into four-wheel drive.

I reached back to retrieve my rifle, lurching as Cathcart accelerated. We spurred forward, and indistinct faces sharpened into grimaces, twisted with venom and hate. The roadblockers held their ground to the last instant, when they scattered pell-mell. All but one, that is.

A burly redhead stood unflinching, bearded, with accusing eyes, dressed in a red flannel shirt. Cathcart tried to swerve around him but he lunged to block us.

A thump rocked the car, followed by an agonized bel-low. We squirted past the roadblock.

"Stop!" I yelled, and clambered down. The redhead thrashed wildly on the ground while one person bent to give assistance. The others charged toward us. My heart pounded sledgehammer beats. I raised my rifle and pumped two shots at their feet. They bolted for cover. Thank God for rapid firing drills. With two more shots, I flattened the tires on their pickup. We took off again.

As we drove away, I thought about what I had seen, a round black eye that had watched without blinking. I stared uneasily out the window. They had cam-corders, too.

At our rented cabin that evening, Cathcart brought a platter out of the kitchen. A tantalizing aroma filled my senses.

"Roast crane," he announced.

"My jaw dropped. 'We're going to eat the damn thing?'"

"Sure. What's wrong with that? You eat venison and duck, don't you?"

"Well, sure, but —"

He grinned. "You want to stuff it and carry it around like a teddy bear?"

"No. But what about proof for the Club?"

"The video's enough."

I nodded reluctantly, but after one bite, I relented. Juicy and tender, like a Christmas goose. We feasted hungrily.

Cathcart mopped his plate with a roll. "How'd the crane stand up?"

I laughed.

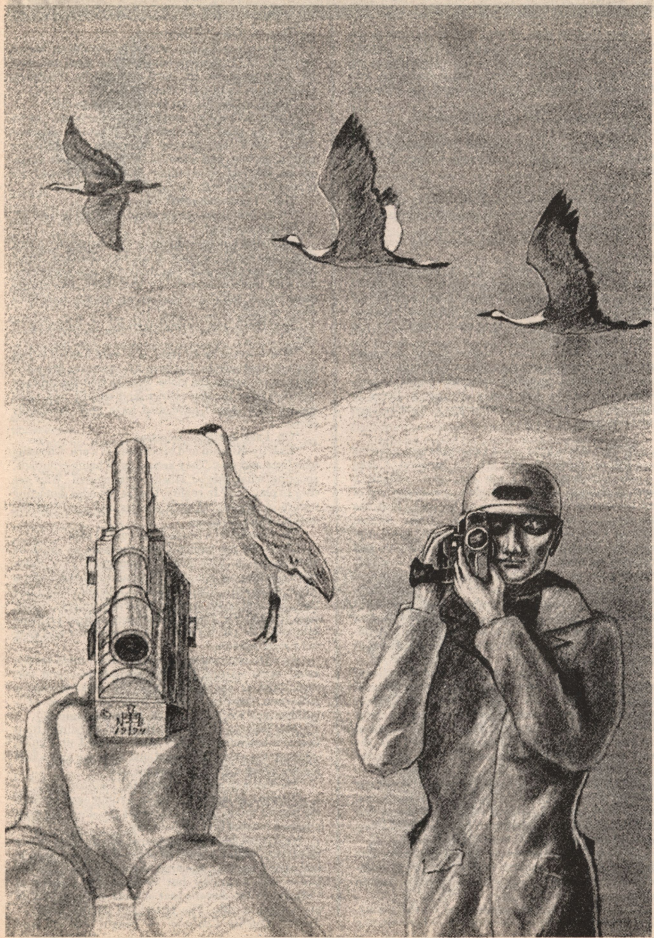
"We're a rare breed, Feeney. The elite sportsmen. Society no longer respects us hunters of the exotic, an honest avocation dating back to the days of the mastodon." He paused to chew a mouthful. "I'm curious. Why did you join the Dying Breeders?"

I scratched my ear, thinking, and said, "The challenge. You know, like climbing Everest. Or deep-diving the Mindanao. Anyone can hunt, and with all those African countries setting up game parks, anyone can even shoot big game, for a big enough price. But hunting endangered species? The excitement, I suppose."

"The challenge of the hunt? The kill itself? Or the sweetness of forbidden fruit?"

"Maybe all three."

"I agree. There was a time when the rest of the world saw it our way." He leaned back in his chair and lit a cheroot. I kept silent, watching the thin line of smoke curl upward and smelling the rich fragrance. This must've been how it was in the old days, I thought, when men could be men.



Later that evening, we sat in the living room cleaning our weapons. He dismantled his Contender, fitting another barrel to the handgun, while I worked on my Remington. I couldn't believe that it had been only that morning that we had faced down the conservationists.

Cathcart said, "This is the life, isn't it?"
"Yeah."

"I liked the way you handled those daisy-sniffers today. We make a pretty good team, Feeney. You and me."

I smiled.

He said, "I'm serious. The Club paired us strictly by chance, but I was thinking that you might make a good hunting partner."

"I thought you said you were a loner. That you liked to hunt by yourself."

He looked uncomfortable, as if he were exposing a side of himself he normally kept hidden. "Just hadn't found someone I wanted to hunt with, someone I could trust. You backed me up, covered my flank." He had lowered his voice, as if he were embarrassed. "So you want to give it a go?"

Cathcart was a good companion and a superb sportsman. I could learn a lot. "Sure. We'd make a good team." Outside I remained calm, but inside I shuddered with elation. Few people ever got a chance to hunt with a champion outdoorsman. It must've been my lucky day.

For weeks prior to our Galapagos trip, a feeling of unease dogged me. On occasion, I even imagined that I saw the burly redhead, a fleeting glimpse, a lurking shadow, manifestations of my conscience, no doubt. I learned his name from the newspaper story: Kincaid, founder of the Animal Defense Coalition. To my relief, he hadn't been crippled. The Canadian newspaper said that Kincaid had reported the hit-and-run, and that warrants were outstanding for our arrest. The authorities must've traced us through the license plate on the rental. No attempts at extradition were being made, though. I couldn't understand why Kincaid hadn't reported the whooping crane. He could've raised an international stink. It didn't matter. We could never reenter Canada anyway, at least under our real names.

We flew into Quito on Varig, the white stucco jewel nestled among the Andes, gleaming in its colonial splendor. After a lunch of blood sausage and *ceviche* washed down with warm Ecuadorian beer, we drove down to the port of Guayaquil. From there, we booked the long boat ride to Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz, the most populated of the Galapagos Islands, where we took a room for the night.

Later the next morning I stood outside our hotel, our camping gear at my feet. The day was already hot, with a lapis lazuli sky above, and a faint breeze that did little to ease the stifling heat. My shirt clung to my back with sweat. I shifted from foot to foot.

"Nervous?" Cathcart asked. Like me, he also wore shorts, a short-sleeve shirt, and a lightweight wide-brim hat. We looked like explorers from a Tarzan movie.

"For chrissakes, we're surrounded by the enemy. Every goddamned animal lover must be here visiting

the Darwin Research Station."

Cathcart put his arm across my shoulders. "Relax. Our boat to Fernandina Island leaves soon, and we'll be doing what we do best, Lava Gulls. Flightless Cormorants. I can taste them already."

"Sorry, maybe it's just being on foreign soil."

"Come, let's get our gear down to the boats." As we walked, he said, "You know how natural selection works, don't you? Nature eliminates those species unfit to survive, and allows those species better adapted for survival to multiply. Evolution follows." He tapped his head with his forefinger. "Darwin."

"Sure. I remember that from school."

"Okay, but do you know about artificial selection?" I shook my head.

"Mankind has been diddling with nature for a long time, altering the course of natural selection. Think about an ear of corn. Do you think corn was always yellow with uniform kernels? Or that dairy cows always gave lots of milk? Or that sheep always had thick wooly coats?"

"But that's just normal farming, or ranching," I said.

"Which would be all right, if it were limited to just domesticated species. But man has rewritten the selection process across the globe. Species that should have survived have become extinct, and equally bad, unfit species that should have died have been artificially saved."

"Oh, I see. Artificial selection."

"Exactly. Kincaid and his cronies at work. Choosing who lives and dies. They accuse us of being criminals, shooting what *they've* labeled endangered. Who are they to play God? In reality, they're the ones distorting nature by preserving unfit species and upsetting the natural order of things."

"So it's more of a crusade for you?" I said.

"Don't get me wrong. I like the hunt as much as you. Especially with just the handguns. How much more sporting can you get?" We walked in silence for a while. After some time, he said, "A crusade, huh? I like that. Crusading for a more naturally ordered world. Just you and me, Feeney. Crusaders against artificial selection." He put his arm over my shoulder and gave me a solid squeeze.

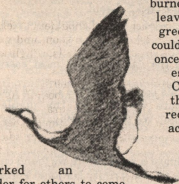
We were approaching the docks, and I could see the small boats waiting to make their inter-island taxi runs. Just as we stepped onto the dock, though, a policeman detached himself from the shadow of a building and blocked our path. My heart jumped.

"*Sus papeles, por favor.*" He stood at polite attention and extended an open hand. Dressed in a khaki uniform, the policeman stood just over one and a half meters, short with a dark complexion.

"He wants to see our passports," Cathcart said.

Cathcart produced his while I rummaged through my bag for mine. Trickle of sweat ran down my temples as I handed him my passport.

He opened both and compared the pictures to our faces, then pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. It had come from a fax machine. My skin crawled. On the paper was a grainy but recognizable picture of Cathcart in the driver's seat of a car and a picture of me holding a rifle. The letterhead on the paper — *Animal Defense Coalition* — caught my eye and



burned into my retina, leaving a mocking green image that I could not shut out. All at once, I remembered our escape from the Canadian taiga, and their camcorder recording our every action.

The policeman hardened, and he

barked an order for others to come help. A numbness overcame me, and I felt like a distant observer of what occurred next: our gear seized, our handguns confiscated, and us handcuffed, herded into a police launch, and flown from Baltra Island to a holding cell somewhere back in Quito.

I slept fitfully that night, huddled on my thinly padded shelf in the cold, drafty cell. Cathcart didn't even try to sleep and stood at the cell door, whispering in Spanish with a succession of guards. I finally dozed off.

I awoke, my neck stiff. Dawn filtered into our chill cell, casting an orange hue onto the dirty walls. Cathcart had his hand on my shoulder, shaking me gently. His eyes looked fatigued, with dark circles underneath.

"Wake up, Feeney. We're supposed to go. Come, get up."

Two guards spirited us from the cell and pushed us into an unmarked van, and my adrenaline began to pump. The van started to move and I leapt for the back door, hoping that it would not be locked. Not even a handle. I felt Cathcart's reassuring hand on my back.

"Calm down, Feeney. It'll be all right."

I wasn't convinced, but I decided to sit down, despite my jitters. As usual, I should have trusted his judgment. In due time, I found myself on another airplane, a commercial flight to Cartagena, sitting next to Cathcart. I kept staring at the one page of my passport stamped:

ECUADOR
Policia — Migracion
Entrada Prohibida.

"How did you get us out of there?" I said. "I was imagining spending my life behind South American bars."

"I paid a couple of, uh, fines. It was tight. But like I said, we're one helluva of a good team. No way we're going to let them stop our crusade, right?"

I remembered the fax. "Did you see what that policeman at Puerto Ayora consulted?"

He shook his head.

"A 'wanted bulletin' about us. From the Animal Defense Coalition."

Cathcart gave a low whistle. "That weasel Kincaid?"

"Probably."

He remained silent, and eventually exhaustion

overtook him. He fell asleep against the plane window, a look of peace on his face. The stuffy cabin and the drone of the jet engines began to lull me to sleep, also. But before dozing, my mind wandered.

I thought about Darwin, and about natural selection. I wondered about animals on the verge of extinction, the last survivors of a dying species. Fewer and fewer mates. Dwindling herds. Diminishing food. A losing battle against stronger or swifter predators. *The last of their kind*. A finality, like an axe chopping off time, closing off the future. Surely these animals understood on some instinctive level when the end drew near. If they could reason, how would they feel about the passing of their species, that their time on earth had run its course?

I wondered if they would resent the inevitable.

I poked at the embers of our campfire. Night approached, and already the screeching of the daytime jungle had died into the murmurs of dusk. I picked my teeth and spat out parrot gristle. Stuffed with a wild rice dressing, basted with an herb marinade, and served with a reduced sauce made from the pan drippings, the parrot had made a rare treat, Cathcart had said.

"Another toast," I said with slurred words, and lifted my glass of Napa Valley *fnm  blanc*. "To three weeks up the Amazon with snakes and deadly insects. Humidity so heavy we could've been underwater. Locating the habitat of the thick-billed parrot."

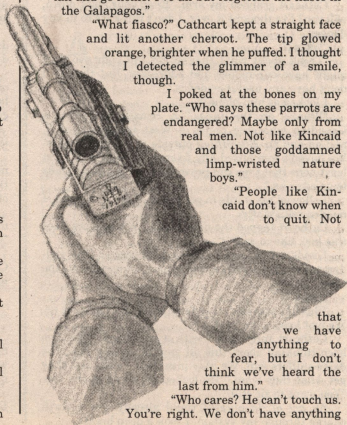
Cathcart raised his glass. "And to good shooting."

I grinned. With only a single shot from my Model 41 Smith and Wesson, the quest was complete and dinner secure. "You were right. I'm glad we didn't turn tail and go home. I've all but forgotten the fiasco in the Galapagos."

"What fiasco?" Cathcart kept a straight face and lit another cheroot. The tip glowed orange, brighter when he puffed. I thought I detected the glimmer of a smile, though.

I poked at the bones on my plate. "Who says these parrots are endangered? Maybe only from real men. Not like Kincaid and those goddamned limp-wristed nature boys."

"People like Kincaid don't know when to quit. Not



that we have anything to fear, but I don't think we've heard the last from him."

"Who cares? He can't touch us."

You're right. We don't have anything

to fear. So why worry?"

I expected Cathcart to nod in agreement, but he only looked away and said nothing.

I was at the office when Cathcart phoned. "Feeney, we've got to meet." "I get off at five. I'll see you at the Club —" "No! Meet me at The Duck Blind. Six o'clock." He hung up before I could ask why.

The Duck Blind was the favorite bar of the boutique hunter set, as Cathcart called them — gun buffs who talked big, yet who had less hunting experience than the average spinster librarian. It was noisy and crowded. I grabbed a beer and pushed my way to the back, where I found Cathcart sitting in a booth. He was smoking one of his cheroots, but there was no contentment on his face.

He pushed a newspaper at me. "Look at this." "Feds Raid Hunting Club," it said. I felt a chill and sat down to read: "Federal authorities raided the Dying Breed Club, charging the members with hunting protected endangered species. Seven suspects were arrested in connection with the raid, and will be arraigned today before a federal magistrate on 52 felony counts. Videotapes, a large cache of weapons, and various stuffed and mounted animals were seized as evidence."

I looked up. "Seven arrested? That means four ... I mean, two others besides ourselves are still free."

"Chen and Wasanabe. Chewy called and said that he and Tak are going to lie low. I think they're headed for Mexico."

"The videotapes! They've got our proof tapes! What're we going to do?"

Cathcart grabbed my arm. "Keep your voice down, will you? I've thought it over. I don't think we're in any danger."

"What?"

"Think about what they've got. All right, so they might have our names and addresses. But they still don't have any useful evidence."

I looked at him blankly.

"What's on the tapes? A Brazilian parrot, a Canadian whooping crane, a West Indies spoonbill, and on and on. *Everything* outside the United States. We haven't committed any felonies on U.S. soil, or at least none that they can prove. They've got no grounds to go after us."

I allowed his words to penetrate. After a moment, I nodded reluctantly.

Cathcart tapped the newspaper. "Whose work does this look like to you?"

I widened my eyes. "Kincaid, of course. The god-damned faggot must've traced our connection to the Club."

"Exactly."

"But like you said, there's no solid proof against us. We just keep a low profile —"

Cathcart interrupted with a curt wave. "No. I've been thinking about this all day. If we stop now, the daisy-sniffers win. We play into their hands and they get what they want." He looked me dead in the eye. "You want to sit still?"

An act of defiance? I could already feel a thrill charge through my system. I took a deep breath.

"Where do we strike back?" I said.

Cathcart grinned. "Like I said, Feeney, you and I make a great team."

"How, and where?"

"Think. What are the daisy-sniffers' most sacred cows?"

"Uh ... the California condor. And the spotted owl."

"Then that's where we aim. At the jugular. Remember our crusade? We have an obligation here. When can you leave?"

"Two days."

Actually, it was almost a week before we found ourselves deep inside the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. For the first time, we had carefully covered our tracks to avoid being followed, maneuvers which added time to our trip. I had packed my new Ruger .44, perhaps a bit of overkill for such a little owl, but I wanted to try out the new handgun. The spotted owl had a long history of creating strife in these Northern California woods. In an area rife with loggers and outdoorsmen, though, I felt no danger from the likes of Kincaid and his band of pansies.

We hunted for nearly a week. In the wee early morning, with the damp night air still clinging to the ground, Cathcart spotted the owl high in a tree. We drew straws, and I earned shooting rights. The Ruger felt solid, a man's weapon, and it packed a solid kick. One shot and I had my trophy.

I stood over the owl where it had fallen. Seeing the ruffled body splayed on the ground like a broken feather duster, I was struck by the fragility of life. It looked so pitiful, so lonely. I nudged the little bird with my foot while my questions came back to me: *Did you know natural selection has passed you by? Did you understand that your time had come? How does it feel to be one of the last of your kind?*

"I've got an idea," Cathcart said. "What good is it to defy the daisy-sniffers unless they know what we've done?"

Flaunt our kill? The thought struck me as dangerous, but Cathcart had a point. There was more at stake here than just one stupid bird. I didn't mind the danger. Especially not after Galapagos.

"I agree," I said. "But if we send them the video, they'll know it's us. And the Feds will be after us."

"Not the tape. We send them the bird. An anonymous package. Right on Kincaid's doorstep. How are they going to prove it was us? They'll have suspicions, of course, but no hard evidence."

"What, no dinner?" I said with a smile. But I dropped it when I saw the serious look on his face. "Okay. Let's do it."

We began our hike out in silence, but after a while, Cathcart echoed my thoughts and said, "What I wouldn't give, Feeney, to see the look on Kincaid's face."

I had grown a tail. And so had Cathcart. Everywhere I went, I could spot someone lurking nearby, standing in a doorway, parked in a car across the street, sometimes blatantly watching with binoculars, other times feigning indifference. I didn't like it. I felt like I was being stalked.

Cathcart and I sat in a back booth at *The Duck Blind*, keeping our voices low.

"You think it's the Feds?" I said.

"Might be. But my guess is that it's the daisy-sniffers, either out to rattle us or to try to get the goods on us." He stopped to light his cheroot, blew out a stream of smoke, and laughed. "We must've really shaken them up with the uh, present we sent them."

"I don't know if it's funny anymore. I can't even go to the bathroom without thinking that a camera lens is going to pop up out of the toilet."

Cathcart turned serious. "No, you're absolutely right, Feeny. It isn't funny. They started this whole thing. They're the ones screwing with nature, imposing their artificial selection. Now everything has been set into motion. It's time for them to get their comeuppance."

I could see a hardness in Cathcart's eyes that I had never seen before. I imagined that somewhere, sometime in his past, he had probably had to face something ugly, something that would try his mettle, a test of the man. I thought that the look he wore on his face had been much the same then.

I asked, "You still want to do it, right?"

"Damn right. You still in, Feeny?"

"Sure."

"Don't say 'sure' if you're not really. It'll be risky, and I wouldn't blame you if you backed out."

"No," I said forcefully. "Count me in."

Slowly, his hard expression relaxed into his familiar warm smile. "I knew you wouldn't let me down. We're good together, Feeny."

Again we took precautions to make certain that we had eluded our tails. We each took separate routes, and only after following tortuously complex paths did we meet at a designated coffee shop in Southern California. If Kincaid and his followers had only suspected what we intended, we would've had a bevy of federal marshals as well as half of the world's animal nuts on our trail. As it was, the shoot would already be extraordinarily difficult.

Because of their scarcity, all the California condors not in captivity had been located, their nests well mapped by the daisy-sniffers. Luckily, another club member had already ferreted out that information. Our problem would be to enter the wildlife habitat, make our kill, and leave undetected.

It was dawn, the Southern California sky still a soft melon orange, the air cold and invigorating. Cathcart and I had arrived in the middle of the night and had slowly made our way into the rugged area. Now, by the light of early morning, I could see the terrain of sandy, rocky soil broken up with sporadic clumps of scrub.

"Over there," Cathcart said, and handed me his binoculars.

I took the glasses and looked in the direction he had pointed. After scanning the cliff for a moment, I saw the nest and a bald pink head protruding from a gray body. That was the precious California condor? It looked like an ordinary vulture to me.

Cathcart had brought his T/C Contender, fitted this time with a custom 20-inch barrel. Since I had shot the spotted owl, he would shoot the condor. I had only packed my little Smith and Wesson, for rattlesnakes.

"I'm going to see if I can find a better vantage point," he said. "Why don't you get the camcorder ready?"

I nodded as he headed down a ravine.

I loaded the camcorder, and looked up to see the first traces of what would be a timeless blue sky — a beautiful day for a shoot. My mind drifted, and I thought back to when Cathcart and I had slogged our way up the oppressively hot Amazon. Standing in the nippy morning air, that trip seemed so long ago, so distant.

I heard a shot. Damn! Why didn't he wait? I snatched the camcorder and looked up only to see the condor fly away. He missed! I fought the impulse to laugh. Cathcart, the ultimate marksman, had missed! The daisy-sniffers would have the last laugh after all. I headed in his direction, not bothering to suppress a grin. I wouldn't let him live this down for a long time.

I froze, my skin electrified.

Near the bottom of the ravine, Cathcart sprawled on his hands and knees. His eyes gaped open like hub-caps and one arm stretched for help. He mouthed words at me, but no sounds came out. A bright red spot stood out against the khaki of his shirt, where no red should have been.

I heard a sound, looked up, and saw him. Kincaid stood maybe twenty feet behind and above Cathcart, in his same red flannel shirt, reloading a break-open rifle. He spotted me and calmly continued. I choked, unable to move a muscle. Cathcart collapsed, his face hitting the dirt.

I cried out, my hands and feet a sudden jumble. I dropped the camcorder and fumbled for my gun. At that instant, something told me it was too late. I stopped and lifted my head.

Kincaid had already leveled his rifle at me. Before I could even think, I heard the shot and recoiled as something pierced my chest. Sticking out of me like some big insect stinger was the bright red feather of another tranquilizer dart.

A curtain of gauze slowly parted and I moved a mouth drowned in numbness. Despite the tranquilizer, my chest ached, spurred by the image of Cathcart reaching for help. I had frozen. I had let Cathcart down.

I tried to focus through the haze. Kincaid stood above me, aiming the immense bore of a hypodermic rifle at me point-blank. As if I could even move.

So he had won, and we had lost. Prison beckoned, and we would be sportsmen no more. I looked into Kincaid's eyes, expecting hate, and to my surprise, found the same grim hardness that I had last seen in Cathcart, as if they were brothers. *Crusaders, them both.* I tried to cough, but only gurgled. Almost all feeling had gone, and everything was spinning before me.

But as my world faded to oblivion, I felt a crazy sense of satisfaction. Darwin, selection, and extinction tumbled through my mind, lining themselves up like chessmen on a board, orderly, and with complete logical sense. I had found the answer to my question, of whether animals on the verge of extinction felt any resentment, any animosity against evolution closing the chapter on their species.

I resented Kincaid like hell. □

Changes

By William Barton

Art by Jael

When the cramp finally let go, Harriet Severn fell back on her pillows, hating the way her skin felt, sticky sweat refusing to evaporate in the summer humidity. The sheets were damp, soaked right through, making her regret the decision to give birth at home instead of going to the hospital like a sensible modern woman. They'd never get the stains out of the mattress, probably have to buy a new one.

And so hot. But they didn't have air conditioning in the town's little hospital either. The only place they had air conditioning was in the movie theater. Harriet giggled. Maybe I should've gone there ...

Dr. Noffzinger, sitting between her legs at the foot of the bed, smiled up at her. "Won't be long now, Harriet. This is going to be easy." He reached up and patted her belly, then looked back down at her "business end." Smiled again. No problem at all ...

Should have gone to the hospital, though. Cleaner. Safer. And Wilson wouldn't be visibly lurking outside the door like some massive ghost. Poor Willy. He always felt so bad for her when it was happening. Third time now, trying for a boy because the first two were girls. Always felt so bad. But in a couple of months, when the damage was healed, he'd be more interested in "getting things back to normal."

Another cramp, making her bunch up, squint and grunt. God. Like turning inside out. One place pulling in, its neighbor popping out, hurting worse than stomach flu, and going on and on ... Then done, falling back, panting hard. Right, no problem at all. Should have gone to the hospital, you little idiot ...

But you didn't want to leave Grandpa all alone and Willy wouldn't *hear* of you going off to have the baby alone, as if *he'd* be any help. Poor Grandpa, lying in his room, listening to all this. Or maybe not listening. Seventy-eight years old and the pneumonia almost finished with him. "Old Man's Friend." Supposed to be an easy death, but Grandpa was making it hard, just not ready to go. Not quite yet. I'd've felt bad going off to the hospital, coming home in a week to find him gone ...

He'll see this one. Maybe he'll smile.

Maybe ...

Uhhhh ...

The baby's head felt like a padded boulder between her legs, suddenly right *there*, the doctor leaning forward, touching it with his clean hands, gently cooing, to her, to it? Pulling. "Come on now. There, there ..." Harriet put her head back and squeaked, the cramp suddenly powerful and strange, her skin feeling as if it were being burnt by a thousand little cigarette coals ...

Christ, get it *over* with ... *Now!*

And the rest of the little body slithered out like the proverbial greased pig, right into old Noffzinger's arms.

Owwww ...

Afterchoes, pain and more pain, but already dying down.

Noffzinger, always the traditionalist, swung the nasty, bloody thing by its heels, one light slap, and SQUAAALLL! Alive. Cradling it then, grinning, calling out, "You can relax now, Willy. It's a boy!"

Then he put it on her bare belly and Harriet reached down to cuddle the slick little body, smiling wider than she ever expected she could. Maybe in a little while, when the doctor was through fiddling around down there, she could get up and show the new baby to Grandpa. A boy. It would light up his fading eyes, just one last time.

Mark Severn, just past his ninth birthday, lay on the floor, doing his homework on the near-pileless maroon carpet. The rug could be a distraction sometimes, with all its patterns and border colors, bits of blue and burnt orange peeking out from behind the red ... not *behind* it exactly, since the rug was essentially a two-dimensional surface, but ... God. Distracted. Got to give this stuff done. "The Cisco Kid" coming on in ... squint up at the big Nelsonic clock sitting on the old upright piano ... ten minutes ...

Mom, sitting in her chair, reading the current issue of *Life*, said, "What're you squinting for, Mark?"

He shrugged, squinted at her, and said, "I dunno. I guess it makes the numbers easier to read."

She stared at him for a minute, giving him that *concerned* look, then went back to her magazine. Mark went back to scribbling the English essay, hoping he wouldn't lose too many points for legibility. Arithmetic had been easy, just problems intended as drill for kids who couldn't seem to memorize the multiplication tables, couldn't quite get it when it was time for long division. Science easy too, just not quite so ... regular. This electricity business was pretty interesting anyway. English, though ... Five hundred words ... every one of them made up from scratch, without a clue as to what Mrs. Pennyman wanted. Oh, well. As long as I keep getting As in arithmetic, Dad won't be too upset about the Cs in English and history ...

Right now, Dad was sitting in his own chair, big-



ger than Mom's, next to the heavy old bookcase, the one they'd gotten when Grandma died last year, head tipped toward the big Philco radio, sound turned down so the others wouldn't be disturbed, listening to the war news. It was pretty interesting stuff, sometimes. Today the subdued voice talking about some big battle in North Africa. Kasserine Pass. Dad's face very serious. Troubled glance at me, then. Maybe he thinks the war will still be going on when I'm old enough. Ten years. Would the war still be raging in 1953?

Anyhow, maybe that was why Dad let him do homework out here on the floor, while Jill and Sandy sat together at the kitchen table. Mark sighed and put the essay in his notebook, threading the holes over the rings then snapping them shut, hoping what he'd done would be sufficient. Just a C, that's all you need ...

Mom was looking at him again, smiling a little bit, kind of distant. Mom's face was always full of sunshine when she smiled, even more so when she laughed. Like when she called Dad "Willy-Boy" and Dad would smile and say, "Harry-me-Lad!" as if breathless with excitement. Like a game between them, like they were kids. They'd giggle and joke with each other then, sitting together on the couch, and sometimes they'd go to bed early, giggling off down the hallway.

Mark flipped through his homework one last time, making sure he'd really done everything. Omissions were embarrassing to explain in front of the class, even though you were never the only one, even though you could try to pretend it was funny. Close the books. Dad was reaching out toward the radio, twiddling the tuner dial, listening close, intent. I'm glad I've got nice parents. Not like Donnie across the street, whose parents would sometimes whip him with a leather strap. You could hear him cry all the way down the block when that happened ...

The radio was getting old and hard to tune in, Dad promising in another year or two they'd replace it. No, not with one of the new little radios, but with a television set like the one Mike's dad built from a kit last year. Three times the size of the old Philco, with a round screen the size of a saucer in the upper right-hand corner. Once, Dad had let him stay up late, go over to watch a boxing match on TV with the men gathered in Mr. Carozza's parlor. He fell asleep after an hour, Dad laughing when he carried him home, beer on his breath, very cheerful, bouncing Mark on his shoulders ...

I'll miss the old radio when it's gone. Tall, peaked, made of ornate wood, scrollwork over cloth-covered speakers in the middle, two tall half-pillars on either side, like the pillars to either side of the stage in the theater downtown, where Mom and Dad went once or twice a year. What was the word Mom told me? Proscenium. Like the radio was a stage, the voices from the speaker actors in a play, tiny figures before him, dressed in richly-colored costumes, striding back and forth before his eyes.

Maybe, someday, TV will be like that, instead of those watery gray mannequins. We'll get it, though, and then I can watch old Cisco and Pancho ...

Right now, though, Dad was smiling at him, beckoning, turning up the sound, and there was the announcer's plummy voice, telling him all about "O. Henry's famous Robin Hood of the Old West ..."

Mark sat in his favorite chair, a spindly Danish Modern with blue nylon upholstery, pushing heavy, black-framed glasses back up his nose, staring at the front page of the *Post*. Two photographs, side by side, of two handsome but alien-looking young men in foreign military uniforms. Andrian G. Nikolaev, said one. Pavel R. Popovich, said the other. Orbited the Earth 64 times. Orbited the Earth 48 times. *Vostok*. East.

So much for good old Project Mercury, whose long-term goal, sometime, someday, was to keep a man in space for a whole twenty-four hours. Four days. That's enough time to reach the Moon and land. Kennedy's going to look like a fool. I wonder how Glenn and Carpenter feel now. Ticker-tape parades, for God's sake ...

Hell. When our people touch down in 1970 these guys will have been there for five years. You are now entering the Lunovskaya Soviet Socialist Republic. Passports, please?

Dad was right. Remember watching the Berlin news with him in '49? Our grandchildren will be dead and gone before this is over, he said. We should've gone in and cleaned them out right after we finished with Hitler and Tojo. Right now, it sure looked like the Communists' centrally-managed economies had something over good old free enterprise, all right ...

And whatever it was, it had made Khrushchev awfully damned bold. Stood up to them in Berlin, whipped them back in Korea; now this business with Castro and Russians down in the Caribbean, setting up shop ninety miles from Florida.

Suddenly, Mark felt very cold. A young father wanted to look forward, to plan for his children's adulthood, help them get a good start. He put the paper aside and looked at the two of them on the floor, Billy getting to be a big boy now, starting first grade in a couple of weeks, Freddy old enough to sit up beside him, out of diapers and talking quite nicely, much to Bill's aggravation ...

You can smile about that at least ... Dad. Funny to think of myself that way. Mom seems to like being called Grandma even though she's still so young-looking. Well. Fifty-three is young. They'll be young as long as they live. Memory of them from last Easter, Harriet sitting in Willy's lap, messing up his thinning hair, kissing him in front of the kids. I don't know why it upset Marian like that. Never bothered me when I was a kid. Just glad my parents seemed to like each other ...

Poor Marian. Pregnant again, just so she can try for a daughter. Unhappy about two boys, have to make sure that never gets back to Fred. Me, though,

born because Dad wanted a son ... OK. It's easy to understand. Marian was uncomfortable though, in her seventh month, feeling fat and horrible, wondering why she'd wanted to do such a thing to herself once again ...

The two little boys were engrossed in watching the TV, unaware of the nasty adult world unraveling all around them. Rapt, wrapped up in the opening sequences of the last show before bedtime, listening to Fifties-style advertising singers tell them all about the "Modern Stone Age Fam-uh-Lee ..." Pretty funny stuff, actually. Not like *Rocky* and *Bullwinkle*, making me put aside this grad-school homework long enough to watch with them, but ... funny. That business about using animals in place of mechanical technology was a pretty good grade of science fiction when you thought about it. Maybe something engineers will really do someday ...

Engineers. Right. Engineers build hydrogen bombs, if they're lucky. Engineers blow up the world. And me with my little B.S. degree. What do I build? Right. I build blueprints. I help flesh out the work of better men. For now. Twenty-eight? Still a boy. The pile of books on the coffee table was tall, and they'd been expensive. Tough, going for your master's at night after working all day. Tough on Marian and the kids, too. For them, though, make more money, give them a future. If ...

That's the word, all right. If. He glanced over at the bookcase. Been two years since I read it. Can't forget it though. Words red, white, and blue on a black spine, J.B. Lippincott's edition of *Alas, Babylon*. I wonder how I managed to lose the dust-jacket? Very inspirational, trying to make a dead world carry on with human life ... But it won't be like that. I know. Anybody who's interested can know. Right here in the public library there's a copy of *The Prompt and Delayed Effects of Thermonuclear Weapons* ...

And the kids were sitting on the floor, watching Fred Flintstone sink his teeth into his new role as "The Frog-Mouth," blah-blah-blah, making them giggle at comedy too sophisticated for two little boys, one just barely out of diapers. Just reacting to the laugh-track, that's all.

Anyway, it looks nice on a color TV, glad we spent the money, almost enough for a new car ...

Standing in the hot June sun, Mark took off his white hard hat and wiped his brow on one tan sleeve, leaving a big dark splotch of moisture on the cloth. All right. Time for short



sleeves. Tomorrow. It was a very nice day, not enough breeze really, but clear and cloudless, sky a lucid, vaulting blue, the world bright green all around, falling away in waves of distant vegetation toward the horizon, blue mountains barely visible in the west.

Piedmont Plateau a pretty nice part of Virginia. A lot of work remaining to be done hereabouts. He looked down at the blueprint, weighted to the rough wooden table by chunks of concrete and cinderblock. Finishing it off. The bridge's skeleton was done and now they were putting in the roadway, the expander joints, making sure the sewer- and water-pipe transit fittings were lined up OK. Be done in three more months, then move on.

Not so very far. And not for very long. The Interstate system that had kept him employed for more than a decade was almost done. Almost done and then, nothing. Should be work for people maintaining that expensive infrastructure, maybe they'd planned it that way in the beginning, but something dreadful seemed to be going wrong somewhere. Somewhere way up the line from here ...

I talked to Dad about it, tried to get his spin on it. All he could do was rave about the Trilateral Commission, about Kissinger and Rockefeller and all the rest. Jesus. Well, he's getting old now, almost retirement age. I guess we should expect something like this ...

Don't believe it. Old? Nonsense. Mark shook his head slowly, looking down the shallow hill at rumbling machinery, spitting little clouds of greasy diesel smoke, at gangs of toiling workers, barebacked, sun-burned men sweating in the heat. Old? Hell. In just a few more weeks, I'll be forty years old.

I'm getting too old for *this*, that's for sure. So tired today ...

Like to be in an office somewhere, be an indoor engineer, making up work for the younger folks to do. But this pays better. Made sixty-eight thousand before taxes last year. Billy in college, Freddy about to start, Alice in the ninth grade ...

Be easier if the taxes were a little lower. Which is why you voted for Nixon in '72. Shows how much you know ...

Be easier if Marian would get a job, too. If Marian could get a job. College degree, sure, but she's been sitting home with the kids since 1956. And maybe she doesn't like the idea anyway, what with all that nice, unpaid volunteer work. Hell ...

Starting to turn away, get back to the business at hand, but jet noise, louder than usual, echoing around the hills, made him look up. Too bright. He fished the expensive prescription sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on, looked up again. Bright

white arrowhead moving across the northern sky, leaving a tiny sliver of black smoke behind, too low to make a contrail. What ... British Airways Concorde making its way to Dulles, thundering across the Northern Virginia suburbs.

And our SST, just blueprints in the trash. Good old Boeing. Good old politics. As usual. Build the interstates and then let them rot, bridges and all, this fine new thing we're building now will be falling down in 1995 ...

And Skylab orbiting overhead the end of the space program. Spend billions to get to the Moon, get there, by God, then throw it all away. Hell, five years ago they said they'd have the shuttle flying in six or seven years. Now they say they'll have it flying in only five or six years. I guess that's something ... Progress.

Momentary memory of watching *Apollo 17* lift off on TV, watching it light up the waterway brilliant yellow and white, the sky turning blue around the edges of the square picture. Sudden realization that this was the last one, that he really *should* have taken the time to go down and see one take off for real ...

Too late now, buddy boy.

The last echo faded, Mark looked back down at the blueprints on the table, at his scribbled notes in one margin. All right, this is why they pay you so much. Fixes. On the spot. He sat down on an upturned wire-spool and slid his fat Rockwell calculator out of its holster, set it on the tabletop and clicked the "on" switch. The display lit up, bright green, easier to read in daylight than standard red LEDs.

Sturdy little toy, this, many orders of magnitude more useful than the old K&E deci-trig log-log slide rule sitting home on his dresser. Expensive, too. Could have lived with less. So why did you buy it, then? Mark grinned at the little machine. That damned commercial, of course, so clever. Little radio play about the Rockwell advertising department, sleazy guys arguing about how they could make their pitch *unique*. How does our product differ from all the others? But ... but ... then the tacky little jingle about "... big, green numbers and little rubber feet!"

Hell, I still remember the whole thing! "Oh, you can't go wrong with *Rockwell* ..."

April the 12th was the twentieth anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's orbital flight. With bright morning sunshine flooding in through the sliding glass doors, Mark turned on the nineteen-inch Panasonic portable, still tuned to CBS, because they always had the best coverage, despite Uncle Walter's unfortunate decision to retire, camera view out across mosquito inlet toward the launch pad. Brilliant, clear blue sky. After so many delays, today would be the day for sure, a pleasant enough coincidence.

The little one-bedroom apartment was nice enough, though way too cramped, but with Marian

holding onto the house and Alice still in college, it was the best he could do. OK. I don't really *need* a living room, it's not like I entertain a lot. Bedroom lined with books, breakfast nook in the little kitchen, and use the living room as a den and office. Chair, TV, desk, light table ... Might as well get *something* done ...

But he sat rooted in the chair, staring at the TV. Too damned tired to work just yet. Feel so old ... Right. And when did 46 start being old? The guy *piloting* that thing is just about your age. Reading glasses in space, for God's sake ...

Just feeling sorry for yourself, old man. Married twenty-seven years and the judge puts your poor old butt in the street, because women have to be "taken care of." So what? Stop whining and get on with the rest of your life. There was a sharp pang in his chest then, one of those pretend "heart attacks" that used to send him scurrying to the hospital.

Just anxiety. I can give you something for it if you'd like ...

No thanks, Doc.

Thought you were going to have a *real* heart attack when Dad died, sudden like that, Mom on the phone, bawling her grief in your ear, crying steadily at the funeral, talking about how badly she wanted to die now and go with him. No way to comfort her, not with all those memories of Mom sitting in Dad's lap, smiling at him, happy with him, memory repeated over and over again, Mom and Dad just getting a little older in each and every snapshot. Then Mom standing by his fresh-dug grave, silent, not smiling any more.

Christ, Mom. You had a good trip. Not a *damned* thing to complain about. At least Dad got to see his great-grandson before he went. Billy the proud poppa, beaming down at brand new Jerry Severn. Hilarious to slap a name like that on some squalling, wrinkled red thing.

Not long after that, Marian broke the news.

And here I sit, in an apartment all my own ...

Another glance at the bright TV picture. Well, getting pretty good this morning. Fifty-nine minutes on the countdown clock, so I might as well get something done while I wait.

The box on the desk was waiting too, right beside the brand-new thirteen-inch color monitor. Went the extra mile there. Could've bought a color TV and gotten away with it. Too fuzzy though, hard on my eyes since I had to start wearing these damn bifocals ...

Open the box and look down at the thing. Puffy-colored, with high profile keys and the familiar Commodore logo, familiar because they had a couple of PETs at the office. He set it on the desktop and started hooking up wires, plugging things in. Even bought a disk drive instead of a tape deck. Do it right, if it's going to mean anything at all. The Commodore 64 looked good set up, not as "professional" as the old PETs, but pretty nice. Not metallic like the TI-99/4a he'd looked at, but a whole lot nicer than Billy's big, boxy Apple II. Probably a good choice. Math not as good as the TI, but more RAM

for less money, a lot greater likelihood it'll still be supported after Texas Instruments goes belly-up ...

He hit the "on" switches in sequence and waited. Screen alight. Operating system, available RAM space, and READY. Cursor blinking beside the word. "Ready." Jesus. You had to laugh at the thought of all those people taken in by colorful TV ads, bar-chart histograms rising like magic on the screen, rushing out to buy a real computer. Be the first person in your neighborhood to own a computer? Well, buy one of our computers and maybe you can own the neighborhood. Imagine them now, sitting dumbfounded, wondering, "Ready for what?"

Movement on the TV ...

The nine-minute built-in hold was over and the clock was counting down again, electric feeling in the air, as if *this was it*. Well, maybe. Anything can happen now. Last time, just a couple of days ago, they'd aborted at T-39 seconds, newscamers standing in long, silent rows, cameras ready ...

But today is the twentieth anniversary of *Vostok 1* ...

Then it went down and down and down, Mark dragging the old hassock Marian let him have up in front of the TV, leaning in close so he could watch it without glasses. Make it real. As if the naked TV screen, were, somehow, something real ...

Down past twelve, plumes of steam coming out of the turbine vents, splash of sparks, yellow fire turning blue then clear. Main engine start ... camera pulling back to show the cloud of smoke, then the solids lit, much heavier smoke with fire boiling crazily in its depths ...

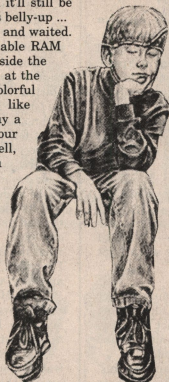
Columbia bounced off the pad, clearing the tower, climbing on a dense column of smoke, fire barely visible, while the camera pulled back so you could see it go, climbing over the heads of the newsmen and women. Two guys in the foreground, standing near the countdown sign, one fat, holding a camera, the other less so, holding binoculars, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet, rather strange looking ...

Moment of intense regret. I wish I'd just gone on down. I could be standing with those guys right now, feeling what they're feeling ...

In a little while, the rocket was up in space.

Mark sat back from the AppleStar Touchvoice III+, unclipping the microphone from his collar, reading the last words of the article, lips moving slightly. Well. Pretty good. Another few thousand bucks in the can, at any rate. He reached out and touched the SAVE/EXIT icon on the right hand side of the screen and watched the file explode out of the picture, system desktop reappearing.

Hell of a way for an old man to make a living,



really, but the outdoor engineering days are long gone. Not much civil tech going on anymore anyway. Not much of anything, these days, younger engineers going overseas, if they could. Even Billy, talking about taking his wife and kids out of the country, maybe get a decent-paying job in Serbia or Kazakhstan, where there was new infrastructure abuilding.

I'll miss Jerry, though. Of course the boy was getting too old to have much interest in his grandfather, finishing up high school, slim, handsome, fresh-faced ...

Mark shut off the computer and was suddenly aware of his reflection in the screen. Not too damned bad. Still slim, though I don't work hard any more. Still got all my hair, even if it is white. If this was a mirror, I could see the corneal rings ... and the little scars where my glasses used to sit. Glasses. I wonder where I put them? He grinned at his reflection. Good riddance, after fifty years!

He pushed back from the desk and turned the chair around, looking out the window into sunset. Nice fall colors in the sky, clouds turning brown in the fading light, blue turning to vermilion, dark red over the horizon. The weather'd been good all week. A sunny day when we buried Mom in the spot she reserved beside Dad. I wish I could imagine them together right now ...

No. Nothing. Gone. Hard times, though. I thought about giving her an Alcor burial, just silliness, but a sliver of hope for the rest of us. She wouldn't have wanted it, though, not with Dad Purina Worm Chow all these years ...

He sighed and stood up, stretching. Morbid thoughts, all right. Useless. Ow. The twinge in his shoulder was back, making him worry. I'm just a few years short of how old Dad was when he died. Maybe ... Christ. More morbidity. Also useless. Dad had thirty years of cheeseburgers on me. I've got another twenty years to go, maybe more. A whole generation. Practically another whole life ...

The big, flat box of the HDTV, dominating one wall of the living room, was already set to CNN-4, *Endeavour* on the launchpad, outlined by darkening sunset colors, T-60 minutes and counting. It would, just barely, be dark by the time the thing went. Something familiar ...

Oh, hell. *Apollo 17*. Another "last time." Hard little ball of regret in his throat. Well, at least the TV keeps getting better and better. But the ship would fly to orbit with its nine-man crew, primary mission to attach a de-orbiting rocket to the little bit of *Freedom* that had been built, just so it could fall harmlessly into the sea, avoiding the hysteria that had accompanied the fall of *Skylab*, of *Salyut 7*, of

Mir.

All over. Like everything else in my life. America entering its senescence after a short, brilliant youth. No more moonshots. No more *Voyagers*. No space station at all. After this, no more Man in Space. Childhood dreams finished. Russians gone. Chinese and Japanese never went. Europeans just couldn't seem to get their act together ...

Gina came out of the kitchen, smiling, carrying two tumblers of liquor, her own old fashioned, his Black Russian. She put the drinks down on the coffee table and stood looking down at him, hands on slim hips. Look of concern. "You all right, Mark?"

He sighed, then shook his head. "Sure. I just get tangled up in old memories sometimes ..."

She sat in his lap, pulled her legs up, put her arms around his neck and leaned close. "Yeah. I guess ... I didn't expect to feel this way when I got old ..."

"Old, hell!"

That made her smile, lean in closer, nuzzling her face against his. She was pretty damned nice looking for a woman pushing sixty. Still slim, not too many lines in her face. Let her hair go gray though, unlike Marian, who'd been dyeing hers for decades.

Kids didn't like seeing her in his lap like this, especially in front of the younger grandchildren, so it was just as well they'd ignored his invitation to come over for an *Endeavour* party. They'd've brought Marian anyway, bitter Marian, with all her acid little remarks, eliciting his usual muttered response.

Well, dear, you didn't *have* to throw me away ...

He rubbed his hands up and down Gina's back, feeling her smooth muscles through the thin blouse, just a faint hint of loose skin here and there, spine a well-defined ridge.

Murmuring into his neck, she said, "You keep that up, we'll miss the launch ..."

Smiling back at her, feeling her solid, comfortable weight on his lap, Mark dismissed yet another little pang: I could've had this all my life if only ... Hell, boy. Forget about that. You've got it now. That's all that matters.

"Maybe," he said, hands drifting down past her hips, "it isn't worth watching."

Mark sat at his desk in the spacious, glass-walled office, nine floors above the street, higher than most of the other buildings in this part of town, staring into space. Nice day out there. Sunny. Cloudless. Probably a bit of a breeze ameliorating the August heat. Nice day for a walk. No smog. Not any more. Car exhaust diminishing as emission standards tightened, more and more people going for quiet electrics, long-haul trucks running on low-residue, stack-scrubbed syn-fuel ...

Nice day for a walk. And you should be happy you can go for a walk on your seventy-sixth birthday, old man, no cane, no pain, not a problem in the world.

It's just that you're all done. Finished again.

Mark sighed and leaned back, staring at the low, flat black box of the Toshiba Vortex transmedia system sitting on the corner of his desk, spidery headset crumpled in a pile next to it. No, you just don't want to do this. It's only been eight years since you started *Future Life*, eight years in which you built it up into the twenty-first century's premier technophile vidmag. Eight years in which you built what felt like a whole new career. And careers are supposed to last a lifetime ...

OK. So this one *did* last a lifetime. You just don't have a whole lot left. Twenty years? In twenty years, I'll be under the ground. Not a clean thought. Alcor and its competitors out of business, proto-corpsicles thawed and buried. That nice insurance policy just one more pile of cash, insignificant compared to what the magazine made you. Ten years? Maybe. If I'm lucky. Ten years in which to grow frail and sick and very, very old ...

Hah. Maudlin. Morbid. Get on with it. Retire and hand it over to the people you trained. Go sit in the sunshine. Finish those ten years in comfort. Owe it to Gina, at least ...

He picked up the headset and slipped it on, watched admiringly as the virtual office formed up around him. All right. Point at the imaginary voicewriter and see its blue LED blink, acknowledging your presence, sheet of paper forming in the air above it, column of icons like magic in the air beside you. Reach up and grasp the NOTE icon. "Editorial Number 96," he muttered. Tap the CENTER icon, then tap ITALICS. "Ave. Atque. Vale."

Hmh. Very nice looking. Now if only the software engineers would come up with subroutines that were really good at recognizing global context-sensitive stylesheets, external to the local setup-universe. Give it time. If you live long enough, you'll see it happen. Hmmm ... All right, that's what I'll talk about, then ...

Later, at home, he sat on the couch, Gina curled against his side, watching TV, dinner a warm lump just to the left of center. Gina holding onto me. Worried that I'll be upset, feeling a little guilty. Retired, by God. All over. And in six weeks we'll move to a nice little house in Cocoa Beach ...

Someplace for the kids to visit. Astonishing thought: my children are getting *old*! Billy's hair iron gray now, even baby Alice nearing the end of her forties ... Grandkids then. Most of them don't really know me. Jerry, though, a fine strapping young man, just about ready to turn thirty, happy with that young wife, what's-her-name ... Lisa! Right. How could I forget? Not *that* old. Jerry and Lisa, proudly showing off their new baby boy, name of Matthew Severn. Little red Matt. What a marvel. Great-grandchildren now. Something I didn't expect, but I guess I just wasn't thinking ...

Gina shifted position, stretching out her legs with a faint murmur of protest, rubbing her hand

across his stomach then straightening up, stretching. "Good grief," she muttered, "stiff already ..."

Mark laughed, signaling to the TV with his free hand, dumping the dull old movie they'd been watching, switching over to the global newsnet, hugging her tight with the other.

"Oof. God," she said, "I can't believe I'm so stiff just from sitting here ..."

Old joints, creaking here, creaking there. "You're lucky, damn you. I've been stiffening up for the past thirty years."

She smiled up at him, long lines from the corners of bright blue eyes, patted him on the thigh, and said, "Longer than that, I think ..."

Laughter just a puff of air from his nostrils. "Hmh." He snuggled down, lips rubbing on her forehead, waited while she tipped her head back for a real kiss.

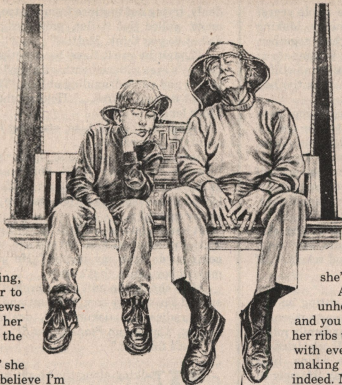
When it was over, she sighed, delicate, a soft, young sound, head against his chest. "Fifteenth anniversary coming up. I can hardly believe it ..."

Fifteen years. Another ten and she'll have been with me longer than Marian. Jesus. Marian. Dead two years already? Kids not too happy when you didn't go to the funeral ... Stop it. Happy now. He hugged her gently. "Fifteen years. No regrets."

Her arms were around his chest, squeezing him close.

On TV, the newshead was talking about something ... Several men in expensive-looking suits, sitting around a conference table. Representatives of the American Aerospace Consortium. The commerce secretary. The vice president. Artist's conception of the various competitors for the NNLS, New National Launch System, mostly single-stage very high energy concepts, unmanned but mannable, part of the Third Millennium Infrastructure Initiative. SynchroNet Platform. Man-tended ...

Other stuff, but Gina was pulling his head down, closing out that imagery, pulling him into her world, more immediate, much more certain, just a tiny slice of regret left behind, caption beginning. If only ...



Mark lay back on their comfortable bed, watching Gina get undressed. She was facing away from him, over by the caddy where his own clothes already sprawled, more fastidious, draping pieces carefully, though wrinkles were a thing of the past.

Not too many wrinkles at that ... Blouse sliding over her head, back very smooth in the shadowy light, hips flaring just so ... Little pouches of flesh just above them, where her little bit of fat had drained away, skin not elastic enough to take up the slack. Maybe a vain woman would have it cut away. Maybe she would, but she'd said nothing ...

Arm, still limber, reaching back, unhooking the brassiere, shrugging it off, and you could see by the movement of skin on her ribs that she was sagging just a little more with every passing month, tissue shriveling, making her once-fine breasts look empty indeed. Maybe she looks at herself in the mirror, handles them perhaps, and is sorry she never had children ...

Slipping the bikini briefs down, bending over to step out of them, Mark's breath catching slightly as desire kindled here and there ...

She turned to face him, hands on hips, posed just so, watching him look at her, eyes wandering, face and form and back again.

What one word will tell her how I feel right now? "Beautiful ..." he told her.

Gina looked down at him, eyes bright, smiling. "Well," she said, "looks like that famous 'male characteric' we've all heard so much about is just another old wives' tale ..."

He beckoned to her. "Just bring that old wife's tail over here and we'll see how many myths we can manage to debunk ..."

Toward the end of one long evening, shadows lengthening as the sun set inland, Mark sat alone on his porch, waiting for the rocket to go up. Not quite a night launch, but close enough. He glanced at his watch, then down at the screen of the little TV sitting on the table beside him. Ten minutes. Well, you could go inside and watch it in comfort, get away from the bugs for a while, get a better view too, plugged into the RealWorld 3-D Entertainment Center, maybe blend newsnet footage with unedited NASA Select In-house Video shots ...

Nonsense. Watch it live. That's why you moved here when you know Gina would've been happier over in Clearwater ...

Tiny pang, deep inside his chest, hardly able to form. I keep expecting her to come out through the door, laughing, maybe even sit in my decrepit old lap

... Has she really been gone for three whole years? Seems like only a few days have gone by. Making love in the dark one fine night, laughing together, falling asleep in each other's arms ... Waking up in gray light of morning, finding her so cold and still ...

Oh, back out of that one ... Jesus. How the hell did I get to be eighty-four years old ...

The people on the little TV were counting down now, voices excited, 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... Static from the TV and a bright light forming in the distance, silent, Cape Canaveral just ten miles away. Brighter. Brighter ... The light detached from the horizon, ball as bright as the sun blotting out reddening background sky, long tongue of flame seeming to flicker, climbing ... Distant thunder, growing louder.

Watching it go, hydrogen burning in the sky, Mark thought, first flight. In three years, they leave for Mars, just about forty years behind schedule. If I'm lucky, I may still be alive ...

A few days later, Mark was sitting on the porch again, facing into the warm morning sunshine, when Jerry and his family rolled up in their brand new BMW Comet II, electric/turbine drive system a barely audible whine, tires crunching softly in the gravel driveway. He opened his eyes, smiling, but was, momentarily, too tired to get up out of the chair. For the last few months, the swivel mount had been difficult to manage. Cold chill. Old, boy. Getting very old ...

Car doors clunking, people getting out, Jerry tall and tanned, graying at the temples, but still young and handsome at thirty-nine, Lisa a slim and pretty redhead, lovely in a bright, patterned sundress. Matt dodged around them suddenly, popping through the gate, running toward him across the lawn, all freckles and dark red hair and bright blue eyes, feet clattering on the steps, flopping across his lap with a hug. "Hiya, Gramps!"

Mark squeezed him close. "Hiya, Mattie. How's it going?" Gramps. I wonder what he calls Bill? Christ, my grandson is a middle-aged man!

Jerry and Lisa were on the porch now, looking down at them, smiling. "Hey, Grandpa. How've you been?"

Mark sat up a little straighter and shrugged. "Oh, all right. Enjoying the view at least." He nodded to the car. "That a new one?"

Jerry looked at the sleek silver and black thing and nodded. "Got it in the spring. Eleven thousand."

Moment of surprise. German cars haven't been that cheap in forty years. Balance of payments must be pretty good. Not to mention ... "Magazine doing OK?"

Jerry nodded. "With the start you gave it?" Not only *Future Life*, of course, but its far less techie companion, *Global Life*.

Mark slid the boy off his lap and looked at him, young, bright-eyed. Eyes that'll still be here when *this* century slides to a close. Maybe remember today, remember me, sitting with great-grandchildren of his own ... He reached under the chair sud-

denly, trying not to wince from the too-sudden movement, pulled out a flat, gaily wrapped package. "What do you think, Mattie?"

Though he must have been anticipating a gift, the boy's eyes widened with surprised pleasure as he took it and paused, smiling at him. "Thanks ..." then ripped it open. "Wow ..." Holding the black box at arm's length.

"What is it?" said Lisa, stepping forward, unaccountably concerned.

Jerry looked over the boy's shoulder and frowned. "Well. An MBB *Spielraum* hypergame deck. *With* nerve-induction interface clips." He looked at the old man. "That must've set you back a pretty penny."

It had, in fact, cost a little more than the new car. Mark looked up at him. "At my age, what else am I going to do with my money?" He gestured. "Just make a boy smile, that's all."

Matt slid up the unit's SynchroNet antenna, then opened the storage compartment and picked up one of the radiosonde stickum tabs, turning it over in his fingers. "Can it run *PlanetQuest 5*?"

"Let's find out."

Walking along the beach, wind blowing in his hair, Jerry liked the way his wife's body felt, pressed against his side, shoulder not quite tucked under his arm, her arm around his back, thumb tucked through a belt-loop. Familiar. Comfortable. Like we belong together. They'd been married for twelve years now and seldom had a difficult moment. Thanks, in part, to the old man's monetary legacy. But ...

Her words of concern as they wandered the beach. "I know he means well, Jer. I just don't know if this is a good idea. Matt's a bright boy. I don't want him distracted by something like this ..."

The new gaming devices could be hypnotic indeed, projecting their fantasy world directly into the minds of the players, and had caused some outcry, filled *Future Life's* letters column for issue after issue ...

Created a new psychological fad, brought business to a new generation of ill-trained, cultish therapists ...

"It'll be all right," he said. "Matt is a bright boy. Too bright to be seduced by mere fantasy, no matter how real it may seem ..."

But then they walked over the hill, back toward the house, and there the two of them sat, side by side on the divan, swinging gently, eyes shut, machine between them, inductabs on temple and forehead. Silent. Still. Then the old man's eyes opened, eerie and bright. "My God, Jerry," he'd whispered. "You oughta try this ..."

And Matt, "Get back in, Gramps! Hurry. Mr. Vorhees is ready ..."

They'd watched a while, then, reluctant, gone back out on the beach.

Lisa stepped after a while and turned toward him, face pressed into his chest. Not knowing what

to say, finally, "I think we're going to have to ..."

Jerry squeezed her close and said, "Look. We're only going to be here a few days. Once we leave we'll talk it over with Matt and see how he feels. He's our son. We can make sure nothing happens ..." He kissed her on top of the head. "I haven't seen Grandpa smile like that since Gina died, for God's sake. I don't want to take it away just now."

She looked up at him, eyes serious, and said, "No. I guess not."

"It'll be OK." Because nothing lasts forever.

Three years later, Jerry and Lisa stood on Mark's lawn, shading their eyes from bright sunshine, waiting along with a few billion other people for the crew transport of the *Mars I* expedition to lift off. Not really anything out of the ordinary. There'd been dozens of these over the past thirty-six months as the ship had been built in Earth orbit. This one was, however, the last one. When this crew took off, they'd be gone for a long time. Only three months to Mars and touchdown, hopefully on the north rim of Coprates, but the surface stay was two years long ...

Lisa kept looking over her shoulder, back up at the porch, where Matt, tall and tan now at eleven, sat with the old man, the two of them tied together through yet another induction unit, the third one they'd bought since that first eerie day. Nothing untoward, of course, a lot of people used them, and Matt seldom touched the deck otherwise. Still ...

The old man looked awful now, sunken-cheeked, eyes seeming to bulge from their sockets, painfully thin with his skin hanging away in long, loose flaps, mottled and dry, like some old-time cancer victim. Still in his right mind, though, bright-eyed and full of life. Maybe that was the worst part, that he could sit there, year after year, and watch himself die. Sometimes the abolition of things like Alzheimer's seemed like a mixed blessing. Well, Mark seemed happy enough, so long as he and the boy could net up once in a while, through SynchroNet every couple of weeks, live like this two or three times a year.

"I wish Matt would come off the porch and watch this for real ..."

Jerry glanced back at them and nodded. "Yeah. Well. I guess I feel that way, too, but ..." He shrugged. "This morning Grandpa told me he'd arranged a netfeed from NASA, cost him around thirty thousand bucks just for one channel-track. They're going to watch the launch from a chase plane, then switch over to an old military satellite that's scheduled to be passing overhead. Ought to be quite a view ..."

No more, then. Sudden brilliant light, north along the coast, and you could hear people shouting down on the beach, crowds all along A1A, arms lifted, pointing, shading their eyes. The light began its climb then, thunder rolling across the sea, back in over the land, fire in the sky, going upward, tipping away into the east, slowly getting farther away, twenty-six men and women on their way into the

future.

When the light and thunder were over, crew transport just a bright spark far out over the sea, they turned back toward the porch. Lisa took a sudden step back, scream strangling in her throat. Sitting on the couch beside the boy, the old man's head was thrown back, vacant eyes staring at the sky, mouth open, chest still.

"Dear God ..." Jerry ran forward then, up onto the porch, and kneeled before his son, reaching out, shaking him. "Matt. Matt!"

The boy's eyes opened and focused on him. "Dad?"

"Are you all right?"

The boy seemed to shrug, very distant as he looked over at the corpse beside him, staring at it, quite calm. Long moment, somber, then he looked back up at his parents, eyes brightening, full of ... something.

"Sure," he said. "Everything's fine." Another look at the old body. Everything's fine, he thought, remembering a lovely evening twenty years before, when Gina'd smiled into his eyes and told him just how she felt. And now, everything seems so clean and new ...

As he slowly picked the inductabs off his head, Matt said, "The view was tremendous. It made him happy again." His parents helped him to his feet then, and, walking away, he glanced over his shoulder at Mark, thinking, You're not gone so long as someone remembers who you were.

The old man, lost in a distant dream, could only agree. □

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Meritorious Windows

By Stuart Palmer

Art by Alan Gutierrez

Reuben Desrik had always been partial to windows. He thought the window was the prime binding force of society. It allows a person to observe society and, because the average window is a two-way affair, it also allows society to observe the person. This limits the peculiar things a person can get up to.

Naturally, he also believed the curtain to be the arch-foe of civilisation. This explains why, as he sat meekly on one side of a very large desk in Jonah N. Powell's office, he was deeply troubled by the long, velvet drapes.

"Clever plots don't catch monkeys," said Jonah N. Powell.

"Indeed not, sir," said Reuben.

"And art never sliced no bacon."

Unexpectedly, Reuben found himself thinking of the metal sculpture in the plaza. Supposedly representing the work ethos of Total Immersion Enterprises, it bore an uncanny resemblance to a toast rack.

"I said ..."

"Absolutely not, sir." He smiled alarmingly, then glanced at the curtains. They hung malevolently. He had an uneasy feeling his boss was about to say something rather unpleasant.

"Now I don't want to insult a fading star of the immersion industry," said Jonah, managing to do just that, "but what is it with your latest reality? Your ..." He waved an extraordinarily misshapen hand. "What's it called, kid?"

Reuben pressed his spectacles onto the beak of his nose. "The Plains of Sangra-ho," sir."

"The Plains of ...' Yeah." His boss nodded, chins undulating in ponderous agreement. "What's the point, kid? Just tell me that."

"It's a science-fiction epic set on the inhospitable world of Sangra-ho," he said. "The desert sand is filled with strange particles. In a storm, they create time eddies that ... well, transport people to other places." He narrowed his eyes at the curtains, daring them to cast judgment.

Jonah looked blankly at his desk. "And what about rescuing princesses?"

"There aren't any," said Reuben, wondering whether he should have mentioned it before.

"Princes?"

He shook his head.

"Any type of imperiled royalty?"

"No, sir." His fingers began to tug at a small piece of beige fluff on the edge of his cardigan.

"Then there's your problem," said Jonah, grinning with alarming intensity. "There's no point to it. You need a quest. Quests sire young."

Reuben, who hadn't been aware of a problem, picked at his fluff and said, "The purpose is to discover the aliens' secret and use it to escape."

"Cerebral sci-fi crap," said Jonah, with the diplomatic aplomb of an ox. "People can't relate to it. There's no realism. Where's the semi-naked savage vixens roaming the plains for slaves? Where's the love interest? Where's the big guns and the bug-eyed, green-skinned monsters?" His hand slapped the desk. "Where's the P.P.P.?"

"Product Placement Potential?" he said. It was the sort of abbreviation that induced nightmares. Sometimes he woke in a sweaty panic and was forced to stand by the window. Windows always gave him what he'd always considered an almost marital reassurance.

"You need a city full of ads for cola and fashion accessories."

"I don't think that would be very convincing, sir."

"You need to cut the clever art-school stuff."

"I was rather hoping it had some artistic merit, sir."

"You need to get the participant figures up by thirty percent if you want this immersion to last another week."

"Ah."

Jonah smiled and nodded. "Thirty percent, or it's curtains for you, kid."

He swallowed and stared at the drapes.

"We dominate this market. Have done ever since the system went on the domestic market. That's sixty years. We need saleability." Jonah's bulk crept over the desk, like several large bears in a suit. "If you don't improve it now, or come up with something hot inside two weeks, there's gonna be a spare production lounge."

Reuben pulled at the fluff. To his horror, the cardigan began to unravel.

"You'll be back in the reality-enhancement lab texturing gravel."

"I'll do my best, sir," he said, trying to stop the rapid disintegration of his favourite item of woollen wear.

"Remember," said his boss, "clever plots don't catch monkeys."



Troubled by visions of savage, slave-shopping vixens, Reuben stumbled into the foyer. His cardigan was unravelling at an alarming rate, and the letters P.P.P. prodded his brain in a way guaranteed to give him a nasty headache. He needed to lie down or find a nice window to reassure himself that reality was as mind-numbingly ordinary as he'd always been led to believe.

"Reuben, darling!"

It was Delilah Levine, star creator of a new generation of immersion realities. Nightly, people squeezed themselves into ill-fitting immersion suits for her chart-topping "Inspector Delaney." Even the critics adored it.

Reuben felt his belief in a mind-numbingly ordinary reality sag. Perhaps he'd lived a lie for thirty-one years. Perhaps the world had always been this unspeakably dreadful, and he'd been too busy to notice.

Clutching the frayed corner of his cardigan, he said, "Oh."

Wrapping him in willowy arms and a stench of perfume that would have concussed a buffalo at twelve paces, she said, "It's been too long."

"Yes," he said, thinking that it could never be too long.

"You should have called, darling."

"I should," he said, unconvincingly.

Her fuchsia lips contorted into a close approximation of a wince, which was unfortunate because it was actually a smile. "We must do lunch, darling. Wouldn't that be marvellous for you?"

"Heart-stopping."

Her eyes fell on the unfurling cardigan, like two large, carnivorous things on something nice to eat. "Naturally, I'll pay," she said. "Money is just so expensive when you're on the way down, isn't it?"

He tried to think of something witty and very rude to say, couldn't, and nodded with an expression of blank resignation.

"Not that I've ever experienced it myself," she added, "but obviously I can imagine it. If I couldn't, I wouldn't be the top reality creator in the country, now would I?"

Again he strained for a witticism to demonstrate his astonishing mental agility. Only one comment came to mind, and, while it was undoubtedly rude, it wasn't even slightly witty. He gazed at a potted laburnum across the foyer and thought how sad it looked.

"Better idea, darling," she said. "Tomorrow night, nineteen-hundred hours ... You must come to the premiere of my new immersion."

"Lucky me," he said. "What's it called?"

"Town of Gold." She stamped the words in the air with her long, painted fingernails. "You sim-

ply must come. It'll be a hoot."

"Yes," he said. "Hoot, hoot."

Delilah gave him a look that seemed to say, "Poor guy's been working too hard on all that sci-fi stuff that people don't like. It's probably affected his reasoning. Probably hasn't been outside for days. Probably hasn't got a social life. I wouldn't be surprised if he sat in bars with a solitary pint before trundling home to think about how absolutely wonderful it would be if there was a woman as stunningly dull as him." It was a very long stare.

"I'll look forward to seeing you at the premiere," she said, patted him on the head, and strode purposefully into Jonah's office.

While appreciating the tribal significance of the social occasion, Reuben couldn't bring himself to like the things. Unlike the window, which was a purely passive interaction, the social occasion demanded at least some dynamic involvement with society, such as making small talk, wearing formal dress, and clapping in all the right places.

He'd avoided forty-nine social occasions. His flair for non-attendance held a simple poeticism that touched on genius. Staring from the window of his apartment, he had every intention of making the premiere his fiftieth. He hated champagne and formal dress, and always seemed to clap during the quiet bits.

"I'm not going," he said to Heracles, his augmented cat.

The cat looked at him with consummate disinterest.

"I mean it," he said.

"Cool, man," said the cat. "Just chill ... relax ..." Reuben nodded. "Of course, Jonah won't let it rest, will he? He never does. I'll have to hide in the bathroom until he's gone."

Heracles demonstrated a languid stretch.

"Delilah," said Reuben, "she'll have mentioned it to him. She'll have mentioned it just to torment me. She's like Attila the Hun in a dress."

"She's taller," said the cat, reclining across a large stack of text drawings for a new immersion project. "Now quit the vibes. You're yesterday's news, man, washed up on the shore of anonymity beneath the swaying palms of exhausted talent."

"Thank you," he said, glancing at his tattered cardigan for some small reassurance. "Until you mentioned it, I hadn't realised my life was quite so barren and meaningless."

"You know where you are with a cat," said the cat.

"Scorned for art and intellect," he muttered, remembering an old nigger. "They never did invite me onto 'Desert Island Discs.'"

"It's just icing, man," said the cat.

"I'm not at all sure I've got a cake to ice anymore."

"Heavy bumper."



"Sometimes," he said, staring out across the city, "I wish I'd never had your intelligence enhanced."

"Two short weeks to come up with something really wild, man." The cat scratched. "Guess you're sunk, babe."

"Oh, no," he said. "I'm not beaten yet."

The cat yawned and tapped a stack of test drawings. "You mean this stack of test drawings? Like, the ones I've been using as a litter tray?"

"Maybe not those ideas, but ..." Reuben frowned through his spectacles. "You've been using them as a litter tray?"

The cat shrugged.

"I've got to come up with something people can wrap their slender imaginations round. Something with P.P.P. and just enough intelligence to wet an egg cup. If I don't, I'll be back in the lab texturing blades of grass."

The doorbell chimed a quick chorus of "Jerusalem."

"I'm going to lock myself in the bathroom now."

"Should I say you're out?" asked the cat.

"Would that be cool?"

"Whatever you feel like saying is fine by me," said Reuben, creeping toward the bathroom. "I'm not going."

The cat had felt like saying, "He's in the bathroom, man. I'll get him," and Reuben had been forced into a dinner suit and frogmarched to a waiting car.

"The news ain't hot for 'Plains of ...' whatever," said Jonah, as the automatic car turned another corner.

"Oh, dear, sir," said Reuben.

"Big advertiser pulled out. Said the P.P.P. was too low."

He couldn't really argue with that.

The adverts were emblazoned on the undersides of spaceship flight couches. That in itself might have been acceptable if the whole *raison d'être* of the story stemmed from something other than crashing that spaceship in the Plains of Sangra-ho.

"And the critics hate it, kid."

"Double oh dear, sir," he said.

"You wanna know what that means for Total Immersion Enterprises?"

"What?"

"Nothing, kid. It's you on the block."

Reuben swallowed and watched the city slide past at worrying speed.

"'Plains' is out to pasture," said Jonah. "Looks like you're back in the texturing lab."

"Please, sir. Give me some time."

"Time is money," said Jonah, misquoting Einstein.

"But I know I can come up with something," he said. "You gave me two weeks."

"I lied."

"Please," he said, wondering if the car was spacious enough for a short interlude of grovelling, "just forty-eight hours."

Jonah shuffled in his seat, which was no small achievement for a man of his size. "And you're gonna come up with something?"

Reuben nodded.

"And if you don't, kid?"

"I'll ..." He hesitated, picturing the absolute drudgery of texturing another brick. "I'll go back to the reality-enhancement lab."

During interminable speeches, Reuben amused himself by picturing the horrible acts of depravity that would befall the cat in a just world. Later, while food was scoffed and Champagne quaffed, he amassed a startling array of witty rejoinders guaranteed to reduce Delilah Levine to primeval slime.

His chance came during cheese and crackers.

"Reuben, darling, how simply wonderful that you came."

Trying hard to swallow a particularly rancid lump of Stilton cheese, he smiled.

"Such a lovely contrast for you," said Delilah, "and what a divine spread. If I wasn't quite so magnificent, I'm sure I'd feel humbled by the spectacle."

Reuben began to quietly choke on the cheese.

"All I could do to get the kid into the jacket," said Jonah.

"Is it his or was he forced to hire it?"

"Mine," he gasped between spasms of coughing.

"Truly amazing," said Delilah. "Such quaint optimism."

Reuben began to brush cracker crumbs from his shirt.

"Most people on the slippery slide to ruin would have sold their dinner jacket at the first hint of poverty." She laughed and clapped his back, inducing further coughing. "Now do come through to the immersion suits."

Turning an unusual shade of mauve, he did just that.

On the suggestion of the title screen, Reuben wriggled to test his body suit.

An appalling travesty of a Western-style theme filled his head, and the words "TOWN OF GOLD by Delilah Levine" hovered against a somewhat lurid sunrise. He glanced down and was dismayed to find himself wearing a plaid shirt from the Pretty Plaid range, blue jeans courtesy of someone else, cowboy-style boots from Big Boots & Co., and a handkerchief from Tie Rack.

"California, 1848," said a booming voice that sounded suspiciously like that of an advert voiceover, "a time of opportunity in a land of wealth."

Reuben sighed and wriggled a bit more.

"Prospectors from around the world gather to make their fortune in the idyllic town of Sunrise, USA."

Reuben groaned and stopped wriggling.

"Now, heart set on the one you love, mind set on the glittering prize, hope in the mountains of California, you join their number ..."

The sunrise evaporated, and Reuben found himself flanked by picturesque wooden houses and charming saloons. A few decorative clumps of tumbleweed blew across the street, which was odd because there was no breeze.

He took a drink in one of the charming saloons, where non-stop classics of the American West were beaten out on a piano, then found a very pleasant verandah and sat in the sunshine.

Immaculate cowboys and fine ladies milled around looking terribly smug. Nobody seemed interested in prizes that glittered, but it was a matter of great inconsequentiality because nobody looked particularly poor either.

He wondered whether he ought to take the initiative and head for the hills, but there didn't seem to be any great hurry or overbearing compulsion, so he soaked up some more sun, carved his name on a rocking chair, and mullied the idea that, perhaps, he was overlooking something.

An hour later he decided, if he was overlooking something, it was an unusually elusive something, and probably didn't want to be found. Feeling slightly cheated, and pulling a face of thorough mystification, he left the immersion.

The premiere suite was packed with strangely gesticulating people in body suits. They were all smiling and appeared to be having an absolute hoot of a time. An idea cantered through his head that they'd all found the something that had eluded him. It was rather worrying.

Delilah, swamped in a powder blue ensemble of feathers and chiffon, swept to his side. "Tell me," she said, clasping his hands, "as a one-time master of the immersion, how do you feel?"

"Astonished," he said, his feelings slowly congealing into a large blob of indignation. "It's ... well, it's just so very ... and gilded with a ... that just ... Well, doesn't it?"

Delilah smiled with a smugness that eclipsed the immaculate cowboys and fine ladies. "Darling, you're too kind."

"Mmh," he replied, trying very hard to extricate himself from both her grip and the body suit. "I just wish I could put into words exactly how I do feel."

"Do try," she said.

His mind filled with the unspeakable awfulness of what he'd experienced, and for one thrilling moment of sheer unadulterated malice, he thought he might share it. The parts of his brain that dealt with social interaction, civility, and an intuitive understanding of the significance of the window took a quick vote and decided against it. Unfortunately they forgot to inform his mouth.

"Well ... I've never been very popular with humanity at large," he said, as he dropped his body suit to the floor. "In fact, most of the time, I'm regarded as something of a hairy hand job. Therefore, I don't think it taxes the imagination too much to suggest that the number of adolescent humiliations and interludes of ridicule I've suffered are way in excess of an average member of the species."

He paused. "But 'Town of Gold' redefines the word 'insulting.' It's a real humdinger turkey-whopper. There was one moment during the immersion when the stunning lack of integrity and soaring fakery of the exercise convinced my brain it had died and gone to brain-hell. Unfortunately, it then realised it hadn't, tried to jump ship, failed, and was forced to suffer through another numbing hour of the whole ghastly affair ..."

Delilah wore a mask of near-apoplexy.

"In the end, my brain threatened to hemorrhage. I had to rip the helmet away before I lost control of my bowels. And the worst of it," he con-

tinued, pressing his spectacles onto his nose, "is that it was actually more tedious and insulting than life itself, with no impetus to do anything and no ...". He stopped. His face began to slide toward the floor. The shattering blast of realisation that struck him squarely across the head was almost religious in its intensity. "And no ... no ... not very artistic at all." He clapped and made the sort of whooping noise that is generally considered unacceptable in social circles.

"I ... I've got to go," he said. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Delilah said nothing, waited for him to run from the suite, then collapsed in an ungainly mound on the carpet.

In his cluttered apartment, Reuben performed something roughly akin to a jig. The cat watched him with the dolorous eyes of a professional critic.

"I've cracked it," said Reuben.

"It's the dancing that did it, man," said the cat. Reuben stopped dancing and looked at his augmented tormentor. "What?"

"The dancing," said the cat, wagging a paw.

"That wasn't what I meant."

"That's cool," said the cat.

"I mean, I know the secret of a successful immersion. I know what'll excite the populace and exercise their pitiful imaginations. I won't have to go back to the reality enhancement lab."

The cat shrugged and began to scratch.

"You're not interested, are you?"

"I'm a cat," said the cat.

"You're my pet, and as such, you're required by the very definition of the word to offer companionship and amusement."

"That's a pet." The cat sprang onto the sofa and sniffed the cushions. "You know the definition of a cat?"

Taken off guard, he had to admit that he didn't.

The cat plucked the sofa cushions, rolled on its back in a parody of loveliness, stretched, and said, "I'll eat now, master."

He scowled.

"This was a joke," said the cat. "Relax, man."

"There's work to be done."

"You going to bore me with the details of the premiere, babe?"

"There isn't time," he said. "Besides, I had an absolutely marvellous time."

"Brain swing," said the cat. "Man, I think I died and went to cat heaven."

"I've got to devise my new immersion."

The cat blinked and licked the nearest paw.

"It's going to be a blockbuster with enough P.P.P. to fill a large shed."

"So you're selling out," said the cat.

"I've seen the light," he said. "Art never sliced no bacon."

The cat cast a long, dispassionate look. "Bummer of a double negative."

"Art's for those who can afford it," he continued. "People don't want to be stretched. People distrust immersions with a little intellect thing hiding around the next bend just in case ..."

"In case what?" said the cat.

"Well," he said reluctantly, "in case it leaps out and coshes them."

The cat sighed and rolled onto its side.

"You've sold out, man."

"It's society," he said. "Society really thinks the fiction of ideas is juvenile."

"Sure," said the cat.

"It thinks entertainment and anaesthesia are the same thing."

"Wow," said the cat. "You mean they're not?"

"No," he said, slightly perturbed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to stand by the window for a few hours."

"You better have a damn good reason for your behaviour, kid." Having arrived at Total Immersion Enterprises brimming with a joy that was almost unsavoury, Reuben now felt uncomfortable. In fact, he felt like a naughty schoolboy, which was strange because he'd always been very well-mannered at school.

"Behaviour, sir?"

"Don't play the innocent with me."

"Innocent, sir?" He tried to smile in a way that suggested he didn't speak the language. It wasn't very successful. It drained from his face like water down a sink. "You wouldn't happen to be talking about Delilah, would you, sir?"

Jonah nodded, and his chins undulated in a disquieting way.

"Oh," he said, adding quickly, "Er ..."

"I'd got you marked as a harmless hairy handjob."

"You're too kind," he replied, tucking his portfolio between his knees.

"But I was wrong," his boss continued. "Oh, don't get me wrong, kid. You are a handjob, but you're a hairy handjob without integrity." The man leaned heavily across his desk. "Total Immersion Enterprises likes integrity."



"I've noticed, sir," he said, trying to suppress his facetiousness. "Every product has 'integrity' stamped all over it in very big letters."

Suspicious eyes judged him.

"Which is why I wanted to show you this." He thrust the portfolio onto the desk and opened it quickly.

"I'm not interested in your art-crap ideas," said his boss.

"But they aren't, sir."

"You're fired," said his ex-boss.

"Oh," he said, and glanced at the velvet drapes. His face was turning an unflattering shade of scarlet. He had unsettling visions of emptying his production lounge.

"So what are you waiting for?" said Jonah.

"Could I just say," he said, "that my comments to Delilah were meant in the best possible way."

"Does that make it better, kid?"

He had to admit it probably made it worse. Lowering his head, reaching for the portfolio, he muttered profuse apologies and tried to secure the clasp. His fingers misbehaved. They fumbled the leather case and spilled preliminary sketches and synopses in Jonah's lap.

"I'm so unspeakably, immodestly sorry, sir, with a vast side serving of apologies on top of that," he said, and reached for the sketches.

Jonah looked down at them like he had a lap full of warm vomit. For one moment, Reuben thought he might eat them as an act of spite.

"Prospect Drive," said his ex-boss, reading from the top page. "More intellectual big-jobs that no one cares about?"

"No, sir," he said. "It's a very old concept."

"Limited P.P.P. in historicals."

"It's not historical. Only the basic idea."

Jonah looked either interested or annoyed, but as his eyes lived in perpetual danger of being swallowed by his face, it was difficult to gauge which.

"It's called a soap opera, sir."

"Soap?"

"Tonnes of P.P.P., sir, not just soap, and very life-like. There's no pressing urge for anyone to do anything if they don't want to do it, and they don't have to be any more intellectual than they want to be ... sir."

"Prospect Drive," said Jonah. "What's the point?"

"To sell things, sir," he admitted. "And also to sell things."

"Nice angle."

"Thank you." He shuffled closer to the scattered sketches. "The basic setting is a town or city. It could be London if that makes it easier."

"I like that."

"And there's lots of windows and even more curtains, just like real life."

"That sounds great, kid."

"The immersion consumer just lives the life he or she wants to lead."

"Stunning, kid."

"I do my best, sir."

Jonah turned a sketch in his plump fingers and nodded. His face was beginning to break out in an unholly smile. "You're hired, kid."

Reuben almost kissed him.

So you're a big wheeler-dealer, man," said the cat, a few weeks later.

"The punters love it," said Reuben, rubbing his hands together in the sort of glee usually only observed in bad gangster movies. "They're clamouring for the next installment."

"Selling out must be a real bummer on the conscience, though, man."

"I'll live with it." He wiped dust from a pile of old novels on a shelf. "Besides, they don't know about my surprise. Nor does Jonah."

"Hey, like, fill me in," said the cat.

"Well," he said, a crafty smile on his face, "as participants live their tedious immersion lives on Prospect Drive, there may come a day when they utter two words."

"Feed me," said the cat.

"Science fiction," said Reuben. "And when they utter those words, a freak window will open in the fabric of Prospect Drive and suck them onto an alien planet of inhospitable jungles and mind-torturing problems. They'll need every last scrap of their atrophied intelligence to stay alive."

"Mind-blowing," said the cat.

"For most of them, yes."

"You're one evil babe."

Reuben didn't answer. He was staring through the window and chuckling quietly to himself ...

A Double Issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as the old bimonthly edition. Because of that, it will count as two issues on your subscription.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

Life as a White Male

I have joined the militia. Don't think ill of me. Most of what you know about the militia probably comes from the atheistic news media, which always depict us as a bunch of yahoos with guns who write bad checks. It's not like that at all. We are men of principle, seeking to live by our own philosophy and the dictates of our consciences.

I had to assume human form in order to qualify for membership. Our militia does not welcome the membership of nonhuman beings. In fact, I had to assume the form of a specific type of human being: a white male. I had a fairly clear idea of the differences between male and female human beings, but it took me some time to master the differences between white and non-white male human beings. Nevertheless, I was faced with the task of looking and acting like a white male. Hemorrhoid suppositories helped.

In our militia, we believe the white male human beings to be superior to human beings of other colors and genders. It was just luck, I guess, that I got into a militia with the superior type of human beings. As ignorant as I am of such matters, I could easily have ended up among some of the inferior colors or in the other gender. All these creatures look alike to me (from individual to individual, their DNA is pretty much identical). I suppose if I were with one of the other groups, it might have been easier getting along without the hemorrhoid suppositories, but I would not have been happy being inferior.

That is not to say I am particularly happy in this militia compound. No, happiness is not our militia's main pursuit. We are organized because we are angry.

To help you understand the origin of our anger, I have to tell you something about the U.S. Constitution, which we at the militia revere beyond all other documents. The U.S. Constitution is a contract that was written up by the

Founding Fathers and signed in 1789. It consists of seven articles that describe the structure of the federal government in its three branches. And



then it has amendments that specify the rights of citizens living under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The First Amendment protects freedom of religion, freedom of press and speech, freedom of assembly, and the right to petition for redress of grievances.

These are important rights, which is why they are restricted to white male Christian human beings. Allowing these freedoms to other groups, in fact, is what got this country into such a sorry state, namely the state in which the news media are controlled by atheistic homosexuals who want to take away our guns. How could we fail to be angry in this situation?

The Second Amendment to the Constitution says: "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms

shall not be infringed." This amendment entitles our militia to maintain a stock of assault rifles, flame throwers, rocket launchers, bazookas, Claymore mines, and mortars, which we believe are the minimum armaments we need to be a well-regulated militia

After the second, the rest of the amendments to the Constitution are more or less window-dressing. We know this because several of them have nothing to do with white male Christian human beings.

Our militia denies the authority of the federal government, all except the office that sends us our crop-subsidy payments

You may think it is inconsistent for us to revere the Constitution and at the same time question the government that it created, but we believe atheistic homosexual abortionists took control of the government sometime in the last century. One of the first things they did was to pass an amendment creating the income tax. They have been passing ridiculous amendments and trying to take away our guns ever since. Obviously, atheistic homosexual abortionists cannot create a legitimate government. Our feeling on this point is that if they are going to try to take away our guns, the whole contract is null and void.

Our theories of government are based on a strict reading of the Constitution, on the principles of the Magna Carta, and on the teachings of the Bible. The Magna Carta is a document from 1215 that guarantees the rights to life, liberty, and property to white male Christian human beings.

The Bible says pretty much the same thing.

In addition, our particular translation of the Bible advises us to smite our enemies with bogus bank checks.

Much of the daily life here at the militia compound consists of making videos, practicing with our guns, and writing checks while we wait for the atheistic homosexual abortionist pornographers to come after us. We are very determined in our purpose, although I must say it hasn't been easy. I am running out of suppositories, and the drugstore has stopped taking our checks. □

The Will

By Stephen D. Haltom

Art by Peggy Ranson

One of the caterwaulers sounded the alarm. It screeched, flapped leathery wings, and stamped webbed feet. Hot fudge muck splattered everywhere, a cloudburst of caterwauler crap. Professor Erickson stopped abruptly and gawked. "Loathsome beast," he muttered.

I stared at the back of his head. It was bald, wrinkled, the color of a baboon's ass. Short, reddish gray boar-bristle hair stood at attention and saluted his ears. The kind of ears that held glasses up but didn't hear shit. "Kind of reminds me of my ex-husband," I said.

Erickson turned to say something, but the remark lodged in his throat. His eyes bulged like a squashed Pekinese's as he hawked up a glob of Pepto-pink slime.

"Antihistamines help." I scanned the woody marshlands on either side of the trail. The first contact crew had nicknamed the planet Atlanta. Hot, humid air scarcely stirred. Rafts of fuzzy pollen drifted in a peach-colored sky and left most humans with a perpetual coarse-woolen itch. After ten years, I'd developed a respect for the planet and its people. I felt like I'd walked these swamps all my life.

I peered over the professor's sweat-freckled head, relieved to see my friend Yipu scampering up the trail. The young shaman's appearance must have startled Erickson, though. He jumped back, landed on my foot, and knocked me on my ass.

"Will you watch what you're doing?" I struggled up from the muck and hastily checked for leeches.

"Stay out of my way," barked Erickson. "If you'd done your job to begin with, the company wouldn't have..."

His words trailed off as the Keon approached. I should have told him what the company could do with the damned job, but my foot hurt too much. Instead, I gritted my teeth, limped forward a couple of steps, then knelt to adjust the bootstraps. None of my foot gear had fit right since that day in Mudville. Erickson's stomping had only made it worse.

By the time I had finished, Yipu trotted up. He was a handsome creature: tall, with amber eyes. His scales were blue-black and yellow banded, like a South Asian krait's, and his air sacs were flushed with a hint of blue. He was coming into

season. Helluva time for a wake.

After a moment the shaman dropped to his knees and played patty-cake on the boggy trail. He slapped out an erratic rhythm, then touched his forehead to my boot and stretched out a mud-caked palm.

"Troh-juhn-enz-kahn-duhmz." His voice was a dry, buzzy monotone, like a cheap voice synthesizer.

I unzipped my duffel, withdrew one of the small foil packages, and placed it on his scaly palm. "For prevention of disease only."

Erickson turned and glared at me, sweat streaming down his pudgy, pockmarked jowls. "Well, Ms. Davis?" He spat my name out like spoiled tuna.

I shrugged. "Your hotshot first-contact crew blew all the trade goods on whores back at Deneb 7. All we had left were the rubbers."

The professor started to say something more but strangled again. He clutched at his throat and wheezed. Little beads of dirt and pink pollen glistened like fly-specked cotton candy in the folds of his chins.

Yipu stared at him curiously, then turned and gazed into my eyes. "*This is your replacement?*"

"*I'm afraid so.*"

He shifted his gaze to the professor and made a futile attempt at communicating with him. After a moment the shaman gave me a curious look, then turned and walked away.

"Come on." I picked up my muck-splattered duffel and limped after the shaman. "And stay on the trail. Some of the flora is dangerous."

Yipu moved on quickly, untroubled by the quaggy pathway. His broad, three-toed feet were webbed, made for this kind of country. Meanwhile, Erickson hacked and coughed behind me, accompanied by obscene sucking sounds as his feet pulled free of the tenuous muck.

"The huts," he huffed. "How do they build them?"

I glanced ahead at the cluster of orange spheres. They looked like giant fairy-tale pumpkins. "Haven't you read the goddamn reports? They don't build them. They grow them."

The temple occupied the lowest, and wettest, ground in the village. Yipu stopped just outside the door and waited. I met his gaze, listened to his



thoughts, then turned to the professor. "You are only the second human to witness this ceremony. Yipu hopes you will remember Keon traditions differ from our own." I hesitated a moment, then added, "The Keons communicate telepathically, but their language incorporates a great deal of body language as well. A careless gesture and you could end up married to one of the widows. Or worse."

Erickson mopped polluted rivers of sweat from his face, then dismissed my comments with a wave of his hand. "I was conducting comparative studies of cultural diversity before you were born. Besides, they can talk. I heard this ... this Yipu fellow back on the trail ..."

"They talk to their cattle. The Keon believe telepathy separates sapient species from lower life forms."

I took his arm and led him through the doorway. Erickson gagged as we entered the temple. "The stench ..."

"Fungus." I ran a finger down the wall. It felt like slimy cauliflower, smelled like burned feathers and dirty underwear. "You'll feel the effect in a few minutes. At first we thought it was hallucinogenic. Some of the old Earth cults used such things. Peyote. Mushrooms. Fermented juices. Later we learned the fungi emit a gas that stimulates latent telepathic powers. My 'bad trip' turned out to be the Keon equivalent of Vacation Bible School."

Erickson's gaze shifted toward the ceiling, and his mouth dropped open. He had finally noticed the deceased. The corpse was suspended head down from the ceiling. Three smudge pots smoldered on the ground. Velvety plumes of rose-colored smoke curled about the Keon, cloaking all but the head and shoulders.

"They hang 'em upside down to keep the juices around the brain. He was Yipu's mentor. A healer. His name was Gubai." I led the professor to a low bench and sat him down.

"I'll want to book some images," said Erickson. He opened one of the equipment bags, withdrew a palm-sized video camera, and activated the audio switch. "What's the Keon word for funeral?"

I almost groaned. No wonder the Keons got frustrated communicating with humans. "There is no word! It's just a telepathic concept. Close as I can come is, 'the reading of the will.'"

Yipu rejoined us and gazed into my eyes, explaining that Gubai's senior wife would share her memories with us. Then he stepped in front of Erickson and managed to make contact. After a moment the professor nodded, and Yipu withdrew



into the shadows.

"Getting the hang of it," I remarked.

Erickson's mouth worked like a beached grouper's, but no words came out. He finally shook his head, lifted the video camera, and sighted through the viewfinder. It was difficult not to laugh. The famous Professor Garfield Erickson attempting to record telepathic images on video. And *this* is supposed to be my replacement?

There was a peculiar rustling in the shadows beyond Gubai's body. Then an ancient female hobbled stiffly into the light, her scales dull and loose with age. She wore her wealth around her neck: a leather necklace heavy with foil-wrapped condoms. After a moment she stretched a gaunt arm toward the corpse, pointing out a ragged row of off-white scales and an empty eye socket. Then she pulled herself upright, and her air sacs fluttered and flushed crimson.

Long ago. The swamp. Gather rushes. Jusal mates. There will be feasting.

Feel. Something watches. Look. Nothing. Sniff. Swamp. Forest. Listen. Wind. Wind and more. Shadows. Sky. Wings. Talons. Pain. Korzar. Darkness.

Light. Dim. Pain. Bright. Blur. Focus. Sticks. Filth. Fledglings. Feeding. Round thing. Flesh. Eye. Mine.

Scream. Fledglings twitch. Fall. Die. Korzar returns. Scream. Korzar dies. Scream. All dead. Avenged. Now me.

"Wait!" Gubai calls. "I come." Blackness.

Sunlight. Smell. Food. Listen. Someone. Gubai. Good Gubai. Old. Weak. Half-blind. Gubai. Healer. Lover. Friend.

Erickson dropped the camera and stared into the shadows, a stupid, contented look on his face. The kind of look deep spacers get when they experience their first sim-fuck.

"Good shit, huh?"

An evangelical spark flickered in his eyes. "Empathetic healing! You should have told us. The company could ... with proper marketing ... think of the benefits for mankind! This could be worth millions!"

I picked up the camera, wiped the mud from it, then set it between us. "Which is why I omitted it from the goddamn reports. I can't stand by and watch these people be ..."

Before I could finish, Yipu stepped from the shadows and joined Gubai's widow, his hands lifted high, his voice raised in a high, keening cry. It

was remarkably similar to the Keon death scream. Similar, but distinctly different.

"I've got to get a close-up of this," said Erickson. He grabbed the camera from between us and stood.

I hesitated a moment. "I don't think I'd do that if I were you."

He ignored my warning and stepped toward the shaman. "Beautiful," he murmured, activating the camera's zoom lens. "Absolutely ..."

He wavered a moment, staggering like a punch-drunk fighter. Then his knees buckled, and he crumpled to the ground. He never moved again, but soon Gubai began to twitch and moan. I sat there a long time, waiting for it all to end. Then I watched as they cut Gubai down and carried him into the shadows.

The foot finally brought me around. Numb again. I stood and started across the room, but the pain was too great. I knelt by the professor's body and loosened my boot. As I slipped it off, Gubai limped out of the shadows and gazed into my eyes.

"I sense confusion, daughter. Is something

wrong? Was it not his will to replace me in death?"

I flexed my three webbed toes and admired the delicate herringbone pattern of the blue and yellow scales. Then I glanced at the mangled pink thing Gubai stood on. The foot the tangler had snagged at Mudville. Maybe Erickson had been right. Maybe I hadn't done my job. But at least I had done my duty.

"Of course it was his will. We all read it." I stood and kicked the boot aside. "Besides, what do you think replacements are for?" □

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Quad World

By Robert A. Metzger

185 pages

Signed Lettered Edition (only 26 copies) \$75

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Don't move too fast — or you're dead ...

Satellite-based lasers fry anyone who moves too fast, and each day the speed limit becomes slower ... John Smith died, or thought he had, but then he awakes and is thrust into a bizarre future where nothing makes sense and he, strangely, knows more than he should.

Somehow, he has to avoid the satellite-based lasers, escape Napoleon, and find God to get the answers to questions he is still forming as he struggles to survive.

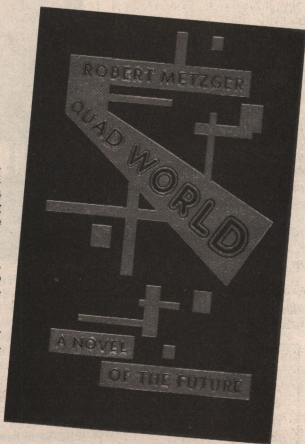
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A Valediction



I am sad to say that this will be my last book review column for *Aboriginal SF*. Some changes in my life have made it impossible for me to continue. I have greatly enjoyed doing these reviews, and I am grateful to my readers, particularly those who took the time to write, even if they wrote to criticize. (If critics can't take criticism, how can we expect authors to?)

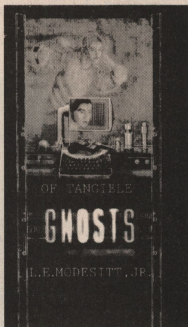
I hope that my reviews have been interesting to you and, at least occasionally, useful. I'm sure that whomever Charlie Ryan chooses as my successor will continue whatever you have liked in my columns, and avoid whatever you have disliked. Goodbye and thank you.

Of Tangible Ghosts
By L. E. Modesitt, Jr.
Tor, 1994
384 pp., \$22.95
Paperback \$5.95

In *Of Tangible Ghosts*, L. E. Modesitt, Jr. combines alternate history, ghost story, and a well-executed tale of espionage and murder to create a fascinating and original book. While the murder mystery works less well than the spy story, overall the novel is exciting and suspenseful, and Modesitt even throws in some tragically funny material about what university teaching is like.

The most basic difference between the world of the novel and our own is that dead people, espe-

cially those killed by sudden violence, often leave ghosts who interact with the living for some time before dissipating. (Their existence is given a pseudo-scientific basis in magnetic fields.) There are many other historical changes — Babbage's difference engine was found to work and started the computer revolution, the Dutch never lost the northeastern U.S. to the English, the American government has a weak president and is primarily run by the Speaker of the House — and while it's unclear



whether all of the alternate history is supposed to follow from the effects of the existence of ghosts and the difference engine, it's thorough and generally believable.

One mistake Modesitt makes is putting in humorous throwaway references to personalities whose names are familiar in our world; they get a grin, but they pull the reader out of the story. A similar mistake is having the main char-

acter read an alternate-history novel in which the history is clearly our own, especially since it has no bearing on the plot of this novel. The author should have trusted his world to hold our attention.

Johan Eshbach is a former government agent now teaching at Vanderbraak State University. This spy desperately wants to stay out in the cold, but he will not be allowed to; rather, he is forced back into a world of intrigue and killing, in which two sides are contesting for his loyalty and it's not clear whether he can preserve his own neck, or that of his exiled French lover, Llysette duBoise. Johan must solve a murder, figure out the purpose of the secret research into ghosts being done on campus, and somehow satisfy the demands of two competing branches of government, either of which would be happy to see him dead.

Johan is a good main character, empathetic and believably flawed. His obsession with food and his weight gets annoying, however; I kept expecting it to lead somewhere, but it never did. Llysette is enigmatic, perhaps deliberately. The other characters who appear are not particularly well developed, but neither are they one-dimensional. Johan seems to move through a real world, with living people.

Of Tangible Ghosts is as much hard SF as a tale of ghosts can be, with an interesting premise, a rich, well-worked-out world, and an involving plot. This is solid work that should considerably expand Modesitt's audience.

Rating: ★★★★★

Mysterium
By Robert Charles Wilson
Bantam/Spectra, 1994

Copyright © 1996 by Janice M. Eisen

Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

Robert Charles Wilson's *Mysterium* is another exploration of an alternate world. This novel, however, concentrates on character, and does that very successfully. The explanation for all that happens is left vague, though, even a bit mystical, and the unconventional ending may be a let-down for some readers.

After an apparent accident at a mysterious government facility, the small town of Two Rivers finds itself in a world not its own. It is a world in which the country is a theocracy, though the brand of Christianity practiced is not that with which we are familiar, and the authorities are not happy to have suddenly acquired an entire town of heretics. We explore Two Rivers' situation and the ensuing events through the eyes of a num-



ber of characters, both from our own world and from the new one.

Wilson's characterization is superb; even the villain is believable, well-rounded, and hard to hate. The only unapproachable character is the brilliant physicist Alan Stern, who is left deliberately obscure and godlike. It is, however, not completely clear why the character of Evelyn Woodward goes as far as she does in becoming a col-

laborator with the new authorities; knowing her better might have helped. The character of Clifford Stockton is a credible 12-year-old: smart and precocious, but not a Wesley Crusher.

We eventually learn that in this world, Gnosticism, wiped out as a heresy in our own early Church, became the dominant form of Christianity. The Gnostics are often romanticized as kinder, gentler Christians; I appreciate the irony of having them turn out to be as bad as any religious dictators in our world.

Mysterium features wonderful characters and vivid, memorable writing. Occasional plot points are improbable, and the ending is not completely satisfying, but despite these flaws, Wilson has written an intriguing and worthwhile book.

Rating: ☆☆☆ ½

The Godmother

By Elizabeth Ann Scarborough
Ace, 1994
304 pp., \$19.95
Paperback \$5.95

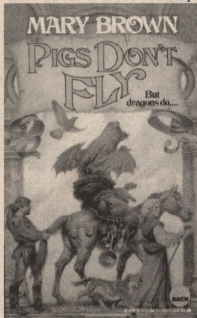
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's new novel starts out with an interesting idea, paralleling the hard facts of the original fairy tales — rape, abuse, child abandonment — with the tragic situations faced by today's social workers. Unfortunately, *The Godmother*, though often funny or moving and very well written, is not completely successful. It is preachy, and its reliance on fairy-tale endings leaves the reader unsatisfied.

Rosalie Samson is a social worker in a very near-future Seattle who, given the opportunity to make a wish, wishes for a fairy godmother for the city. Soon she meets Felicity Fortune, who claims to be a Godmother — though not, strictly speaking, a fairy — and begins to intervene in lives that have remarkable resemblances to fairy tales. Examples are Cindy Ellis, done out of her inheritance and tormented by a stepmother and two stepsisters; Hank and Gigi Bjornsen, abandoned in the wilds of shopping malls by their mother; and Sno Quantrell, whose

stepmother, jealous of her youth and beauty, hires a hit man to kill her. We also meet a homeless man and his talking cat, a struggling young Viet-nameese refugee, and some re-markably vicious and psychotic pedophiles.

Scarborough provides a depressing and believable depiction of what social workers are up against, though the occasional lecture about societal problems is disconcerting. The characters are well drawn, except that the villains are so unremittably evil, but that goes along with the fairy-tale motif.

Scarborough's efforts at realism are sabotaged by the cutesy fairy-tale resolutions — after all, there are no real fairy godmothers to solve these problems. Certainly I don't demand an unhappy ending, but everything is resolved much too easily. The book does leave you feeling sad knowing that stories much like these are in fact hap-



pening all over, and with no fairy godmothers to help.

The concept behind this novel is a fascinating one, but it fails to work out as well as it should have. Scarborough is, as always, worth reading, and her characters are worth getting to know, but *The Godmother*, as a novel, just doesn't deliver.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Pigs Don't Fly

By Mary Brown

Baen, 1994

370 pp., \$5.99

A reviewer should try not to have prejudices, but I confess I have a few, and one of them is that I don't like talking-animal stories. Despite this feeling, I picked up Mary Brown's *Pigs Don't Fly*, because I'd heard good things about her previous novel. I'm glad I did. It is an enjoyable, different fantasy, and even the talking animals are fine.

Summer is the fat daughter of a village whore, left to fend for herself when her mother dies, with only the remnants of the treasure left by her semi-mythical father. Departing on a journey, she discov-



ers that a magic ring also left by her father allows her to talk to animals, and she soon acquires a dog, a horse, a tortoise, and a strange winged pig, in addition to a blind, amnesiac nobleman with whom she is hopelessly in love. She travels around the kingdom, trying to get Sir Gilman, the nobleman, home, having adventures, and learning more about herself.

Pigs Don't Fly is well written, and Brown creates her world vividly. The animals feel surprisingly real; they act as they might if they could talk. They are not allegories.

Sir Gilman is not your stereotyped Prince Charming, either. Summer has a strong presence and a fine narrative voice, and you will root for her. Brown avoids cliché throughout, and she can create magical scenes, as with the transformation of one of the characters (which is not entirely unexpected, except by Summer, but works nonetheless).

The book does have flaws. Sometimes there's too much description of the surroundings, making me impatient to get back to the action. There are also too many occasions when Summer is too stupid to realize something that is obvious to the reader, and sometimes to the other characters. A less obvious, but disturbing, problem is that all the women characters but Summer are vicious: jealous, manipulative, and cruel.

Though certainly not perfect, *Pigs Don't Fly* is enjoyable, original, funny, and moving. Even if you think you don't like talking-animal stories, or quest fantasies, give it a try.

Rating: ★★☆☆ ½

Aggressor Six

By Wil McCarthy

Roc, 1994

256 pp., \$4.99

Wil McCarthy's first novel is a short, fast-moving tale of human and alien psychology. *Aggressor Six* is absorbing most of the way through, but the ending falls flat.

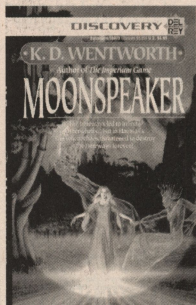
Humanity is engaged in a war against the insectile Waisters, and is being massacred. Corporal Ken Jonson joins a group that is attempting to form a Waister family unit — an Aggressor Six — in order to achieve insight into the Waister mentality. The group, especially Ken, becomes more like Waisters than anyone would have expected; when they come up with an answer, no one is sure they can be trusted.

The exploration of the human characters and how they begin to think like aliens is well done and fascinating. I like McCarthy's details, such as the goggles they

have fabricated to give them Waister vision and the reaction of the group to the discovery that there are other Sixes in the project. The Machine Intelligences who come into the plot partway through are very interesting, and I would have liked to have seen more of them.

The novel's worst weakness is its ending. It's a cliché (I don't want to give it away, but the idea of an alien war easily settled by fixing a communications misunderstanding is nothing new). Also, at the end we get a sudden spurt of "action," in the Hollywood sense, and it feels as unbelievable as movie action.

Not many authors can create truly alien aliens, but McCarthy appears to be one of them. It is unfortunate that so much that is



exciting and original in *Aggressor Six* is spoiled by the disappointing ending.

Rating: ★★☆☆

Moonspeaker

By K. D. Wentworth

Del Rey, 1994

266 pp. in proof, \$4.99

K.D. Wentworth's *Moonspeaker* is science fiction with the feel of fantasy, reminiscent of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover novels. The author tells a story well, and the writing is fine, but too

much of the book is clichéd and predictable.

Haemas is a teen-age member of the Kashi, a psi-powered caste that rules over the majority without psychic powers. The mental powers apparently arose by mutation on this colony world, and were nurtured and strengthened by selective breeding. When Haemas's evil half-brother Jarid makes it appear that she has killed her father, and makes her believe it, she flees from her home out into the rest of the world, where Kashi seldom tread. She falls in with horse-thieves and is



tracked by both the Kashi authorities and Jarid.

The characters are, for the most part, not sympathetic or well-rounded. Haemas makes an annoying heroine because she is so scared and, for much of the book, so passive. Jarid is far too much the moustache-twirling villain, though Wentworth makes a belated attempt to give him some depth. The horse thieves are fine, and Kevisson the Searcher has some interesting qualities, but they are not enough to carry the book.

The opposition of the Kashi's hierarchical male-centered society and the outside nurturing female-centered one is rite. I am also left puzzled by the medieval level of

this society. These people clearly came in a colony ship from Earth, so how did they lose enough technology to bring them down so far, and what could have caused them to reconstruct the medieval social system?

There are some good elements in this book which show flashes of promise, but on the whole it is generic fantasy-flavored adventure. It is competently enough written to hold the attention, but one longs for something original.

Rating: ☆☆

Alien Pregnant By Elvis
Edited by Esther M. Friesner
and Martin H. Greenberg
DAW, 1994
319 pp., \$4.99

Alien Pregnant By Elvis has an irresistible title and premise: science fiction stories based on the supermarket tabloids. Unfortunately, the contents don't quite live up to the cover.

Most of the stories are mildly amusing, not laugh-out-loud funny. There's also a certain repetitiveness, which makes this not an anthology to be read at one sitting. Admittedly, the tabloids are obsessed with Elvis, but unless you share that obsession, you'll probably find his omnipresence a bit tiresome.

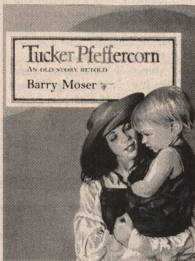
The best stories are those that take their inspiration from a tabloid-type headline and use it to write an SF story. The finest contributions include Barry Malzberg's memorable "Close-up Photos Reveal JFK Skull on Moon!"; Allen Steele's look at the "abduction" phenomenon, "2,437 UFOs Over New Hampshire"; Kris-tine Kathryn Rusch's hard-boiled "Elvis at the White House"; Thomas F. Monteleone's clever "Group Phenomena"; David Brin's haunting look at aliens and elves, "Those Eyes"; and George Alec Effinger's very funny "Martian Memorial to Elvis Sighted."

You'll get some enjoyment out of this book, particularly if you space out your reading, but it's just not as funny as it ought to be.

Rating: ☆☆½

Unnatural Acts and Other Stories
By Lucy Taylor
Richard Kasak Books, 1994
190 pp., \$12.95

Lucy Taylor's short-story collection is not for the squeamish. Though the publisher calls *Unnatural Acts and Other Stories* "erotic horror," it is not really erotic (at least not to most people, I believe), but sexually and violently explicit. The sexual acts are often repulsive even to the people engaging in them.



That does not mean that I'm not going to recommend the book. If you like truly horrific horror, this is the collection for you. The horror is not always supernatural, but rather psychological and sexual, which suits my preferences. For Taylor, sex is intimately entwined with violence. The book features many people with warped childhoods, and focuses a great deal on the war between men and women.

Taylor's stories are occasionally predictable ("The Best in the Business," "Flamethrower"), and at times she resorts to shock value instead of true horror. Often, though, these stories are genuinely chilling, especially the brief piece "Making the Woman."

The author writes well and vividly, with lingering, haunting images. You'll find good horror writing in *Unnatural Acts*, if you're prepared to be disturbed.

Rating: ☆☆☆ ½

The Bestseller and Other Tales

By Don Webb
Chris Drumm, 1990
44 pp., \$3.00

This booklet by Don Webb is apparently several years old, but I have just seen it now. *The Bestseller and Other Tales* includes seven bizarre stories that often work. Most have some fantastic element, though they don't fit obviously into any genre. Typically, the characters start out drab and ordinary, and only gradually is the craziness underlying the appearance of normality revealed.

The stories I liked best were "Brother B... His Story," the blandly-told tale of a streetsweep-

er with a strange compulsion; "The Bestseller," a wildly hallucinogenic piece about authorship and Hieronymus Bosch; and "Voodoo Economics," the story of rival groups interfering with reality. I can't imagine Don Webb's writing will ever be commercial, but if you can find his stories, they're worth seeking out.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Tucker Pfeffercorn:

An Old Story Retold
By Barry Moser
Little, Brown, 1994
Unpaginated, \$15.95

Noted artist and book designer Barry Moser is also an author of children's books, and here he has written and illustrated a wonderful retelling of the Rumpelstiltskin story, aimed at ages four to eight. It is set in a small town in the South, and the narration, dia-

logue, and paintings all help capture the local flavor.

When inveterate liar Jefferson Tadlock claims that young widow Bessie Grace Kinzalow can spin cotton into gold, he is taken seriously by Hezekiah Sweatt, the richest and meanest man in town. Sweatt proceeds to lock Bessie Grace up with cotton and a spinning wheel, threatening her baby if she doesn't spin the cotton into gold. But a strange little man shows up.... This is a fine variant on the tale, dark and magical.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

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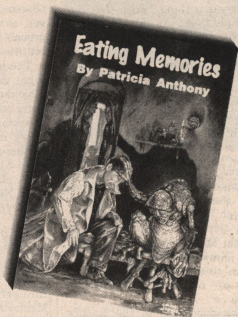
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We Resume Our Regular Service



As I think most of you have figured out by now, my previous column for this illustrious journal was written about two years ago, and remained in Charlie's inventory during the period of the magazine's suspension. Actually, it aged rather well. The topicality of the subject essay remained as topical as ever. There is little for me to retract except some of my syntax.

For those of you who may be coming in for the first time, since *Aboriginal* is doubtless getting a big, new push, let me explain that each of these columns begins with what may be called either a homily or a tirade, some address on a general topic, and then reviews of specific books. I've been doing columns like this since the Jurassic, when I started in Richard E. Geis's *Science Fiction Review*, and as the format seems to work, I stick to it.

The other thing I stick to is the principle that I am only interested in reviewing original books, that is, ones that are generated by their authors. There have been tirades on this subject before. Check through your back files for my essay, "The Return of the Factory System," and several others.

In other words, I don't review *X-Files* novels or *Quantum Leap* novels or novels with the names of celebrities on them which have actually been written by someone else, or "packaged" novels which exploit a famous name ("in the world of") and then employ peon mid-list writers (or, worse yet, great names of the past now fallen on hard times) to fill in the blanks. No "book product" where the credits are as tricky as those for a TV

series. Just real books, where one writer (or a writer and a real collaborator, not some junior verbiage to whom the Bestselling Author's outline is farmed out) thinks up a story, writes it, and we get to read the result. It remains my conviction that individual authorship is the lifeblood not only of our field, but of all literature. Had some nineteenth century packager commissioned a series of "Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*" novels written by anybody and his brother (or sister), that would have been just a waste of trees. Herman Melville thought up the original book all by himself, thank you.

I've had arguments on this subject with my colleague X____, who insists that the "media novel" is taking over science fiction. Yes, I agree, it is. The May 1996 *Locus* gives us the following figures (p.52). As of that issue's reckoning, there had been, to date in 1996, 46 science fiction novels published, 42 fantasy novels, 25 horror novels, and 51 "media related" novels. In other words, media fiction is the largest single category. This doesn't even count the packaged "in the world of" novels, the fake collaborations, the ghost-written books with celebrity names on them, and much more.

Times are getting tough for original fiction out there.

My friend X____, a brilliant careerist who thinks in terms of how many prefabricated series novels he needs to refurbish the bedroom and repave the driveway of his palatial abode, doesn't find any cause for alarm. In fact, he's quite comfortable. Those media novels, he says, are published in addition to all the regular stuff.

Oh really? We book reviewers know better. Too often we receive a box of Publisher Y's monthly output, only to find that of the six books published that month, three or even four are media fiction or otherwise not generated by their

authors. That means only two original books a month where there used to be six. First novels are fewer and farther between. Even many long-time, respected writers find themselves squeezed out. Their books just don't sell as well as something which is promoted on TV several times a week in front of millions of viewers.

X____ tells me that this is the wave of the future. Only he and a few others in our field truly understand and are able to adapt. In ten years, they'll be on top. It works something like this: If you write enough *Star Trek* or *X-Files* or *Star Wars* novels, then, because those are very popular series, you suddenly become a "New York Times best-selling writer." When you go to publish an original novel, the buyers for the big chain stores will say, "Oh, his last book sold 100,000 copies. Great! I'll take a lot of those!" as opposed to, "Great critical acclaim, but he hasn't got the numbers ... sorry." Only those who use media fiction to leap into what X____ calls "tier 1" authorship will get the big orders, big advances, big print-runs, big promotions, and, ultimately, get published at all. There won't be any room for the nonconformists who want to turn out original work rather than corporate product.

"People like you and Norman Spinrad just don't understand," X____ tells me. "You'll be the losers in the long run." Norman Spinrad comes into this discussion because he recently ran for office in the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America on a platform which attempted to control the above-described cancer that is eating away at science fiction publishing. (He lost. More than that of SFWA's arcane internal doings, I cannot discuss in public.)

This is a part of what I wrote in reply to a letter from X____.

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

Your letter goes a long way toward explaining why I voted for Norman Spinrad in the SFWA election. I think he understands quite well what is going on in our field. You don't have to be in New York. All you have to do is pay attention to what is published and what isn't. Also, watch those writers we've respected for many years who seem to have lost their careers, or have faded into a "post individual" career in media fiction. I am not sure we will ever see original novels from (Name) or (Name) again. It pains me to see them turned into verbal technicians for prose television. They used to be writers.

In short, we accept your analysis of what is going on. It is a revolution. The problem is, you're on the wrong side of the barricades.

It is entirely possible that, just as you say, and a handful of other media-fiction writers will be the winners ten years from now. You may even have your own series too, assigned to you by packagers, or even originated by yourselves, the same way a TV writer can sometimes be so successful he can pitch a series of his own to the networks.

But the SF/Fantasy field as we know it will be dead. What we are looking at is as stark as that: the death of individual authorship. The conditions in which a talented writer could see a Fahrenheit 451, a Left Hand of Darkness, or a Lord of Light published will have passed away. Individual authorship will survive only in the small presses and in the short-fiction market. Mass-market publishing will have achieved the condition of television.

You are one of the few people I know who seem to think this is a good idea. The rest of us are desperately against it.

The field you envision ten years from now is not one I could write in, or even read in. The field I am a part of will be finished.

And then you, the successful one, will discover the deep, dark secret. You are dispensable. To get The Left Hand of Darkness, one needs Ursula Le Guin. To get Fahrenheit 451, only Ray Bradbury will do.

But for a perfectly competent Batman or Deep Space Nine novel, it doesn't actually matter who wrote it. Anyone will suffice who

can do the job well enough to make the book meet its sales expectations and do it at the lowest possible cost. If it comes down to work for hire, there will be hungry hacks willing to accept that. Nobody needs you. Any trouble, and the author of the moment is easily replaced.

But I am optimistic enough to believe that there are still editors and even publishers who care for something more. There are quality writers whose work sells well enough to sustain them: Le Guin, Wolfe, Disch, Haldeman, Wilhelm, etc. Most of these writers are over fifty. In the normal course of human mortality, they'll have to be replaced someday too. If the SF field dies and media fiction takes over completely, then they will not be replaced. Otherwise, new writers like them will have to be discovered: Felicity Savage, William Browning Spencer, Jonathan Lethem, Terry Bisson. In a future in which bookstore chains won't buy books from anybody who isn't (by virtue of prefabricated fiction-product) a NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR!!!!, then maybe alternate publishing and distribution is the answer. Remember, there are even crazy idealists out there keeping R.A. Lafferty's fiction alive.

How long will it be before the chain bookstore buyers and their accountants discover that it doesn't matter whose name is on the book? If you write a best-selling Batman novel, that doesn't mean you are a best-selling author. It means you were hired to write an installment of a best-selling series. It is the series that sells, not whoever happened to write it.

Maybe the corporate types and packagers and media moguls will win in the end. But take my word for it. When they're done strip-mining science fiction, you'll be on the slag-heap with the rest of us.

That being said, let's look at some real books by real authors:

Zod Wallop

By William Browning Spencer
St. Martin's Press, 1995
278 pp., \$21.95

William Browning Spencer first came to my attention with a story

called "The Death of the Novel" (now nominated for a Stoker Award by the Horror Writers of America), which I found awfully familiar when I read it in the first issue of *Century*. Had I rejected this for *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror*? Was I then a complete moron? (As it turned out, we'd received the story during one of our many overstock periods and told Spencer to get back to us in a few months if he failed to sell it elsewhere. But he did sell it.) Then along came his novel, *Resumé with Monsters*, published by an obscure literary press (since reprinted by White Wolf), which I described elsewhere as a Cthulhu Mythos novel as written by Woody Allen.

Clearly this is a very talented and very individualistic writer. One reaches for comparisons: Howard Waldrop, R.A. Lafferty, Jonathan Carroll, or a collaboration between all three. He's sharp and funny and serious at the same time. He is sometimes lyrical.

Comparisons to Carroll's *The Land of Laughs* are inevitable, because *Zod Wallop*, too, is about the obsessions of a children's book writer intruding into the real world. But where the typical Jonathan Carroll characters are successful, beautiful, witty, talented, and eminently well-adjusted (at least to start), the typical William Browning Spencer character is certifiable. In fact, most of them have broken out of a looneybin at the beginning of this novel. One has just married a catatonic woman, convinced she is the sleeping princess in a book called *Zod Wallop* written by the novel's protagonist. (Another similarity to Carroll, whose *The Land of Laughs* is about people obsessed with a book called *The Land of Laughs*.) To make life really interesting, all these people have been the subject of mind-altering drug experiments perpetrated by evil corporate types. They (the good guys) form a weird gestalt, almost a parody of the one in *More Than Human*, and off they go on a bizarrely messianic quest to St. Petersburg, Florida, as more and more elements from the hero's fairy-tale seem to be intruding into the "real" world, and the hero hopes that his drowned

daughter will return from the dead.

Of course *Zod Wallop* has very little to do with *The Land of Laughs* after all, as I am sure both William Browning Spencer and Jonathan Carroll would agree. Carroll's narrative is quiet and almost serene before it becomes sinister, then outright horrific. Spencer's is a fun-house ride. His characters start out crazy and (some of them at least) struggle toward sanity. *Zod Wallop* is about a very different sort of obsession from that which drives most Carroll books. In the end, Spencer characters tend to try to work everything out in therapy and stuff all the tentacles back under the beds and into the filing cabinets. But of course the monsters won't stay put.

Watch this writer. He'll soon be one of your favorites.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Bible Stories for Adults

By James Morrow
Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1996
243 pp., \$22.00

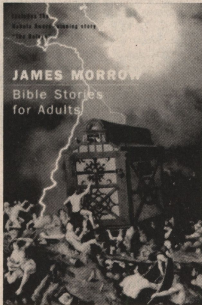
This is my choice for best collection of 1996 — so far, anyway. Morrow is simply one of the best satirical fantasists ever. He is of the tradition that extends back through James Branch Cabell to Mark Twain, someone who "swats at the cosmos" (Morrow's phrase) and generally shoves his complaints in the face of the Almighty. "This guy wouldn't last for five minutes in Iran," an admirer once remarked.

Indeed not. He's a lot clearer and more succinct than Salman Rushdie.

Most of the stories in *Bible Stories for Adults* might be described as humanistic rewrites of Judeo-Christian myth. ("There are two kinds of people in the world," says Morrow, "those who believe the Bible is an anthology and those who believe it is a collection.") The Nebula-winning lead story, "The Deluge," is a subversive take on the tale of Noah. What if a survivor from the wicked world had made it aboard the Ark? Should the crew kill her? Or would it be better for her to go off again

and found "a proud and impertinent nation, a people driven to decipher ice and solve the sun, each of them with as little use for obedience as she"?

"The Covenant" (which originally appeared in *Aboriginal SF*) is an alternative history: what if God hadn't given mankind another chance after Moses smashed the first set of tablets containing the commandments? Millennia go by. Scholars try to piece together the shards, coming up with such enigmatic results as "Covet your woman servant's Sabbath" and "You will remember your neighbor's donkey." When a computer finally works it all out, does mankind need the result anymore?



"The Soap Opera" takes the form of a theatrical play, in which Job demands a rematch.

These stories are very much akin to Morrow's novels, *Only Begotten Daughter* and *Towing Jehovah*. The gist of them is that mankind no longer needs a ferocious, possibly psychotic God to run the universe. (See "Diary of a Mad Deity.") We need to think for ourselves and be responsible for ourselves. Jerry Falwell will not like this book, you can be sure, even if not all the stories are about Judeo-Christian subjects. The funniest of them all, "Arms and the Woman," tells how an aging Helen

discovered that the Trojan War was all a fraud "to make the world safe for war." "Abe Lincoln at McDonald's" brings the sixteenth president into a 21st century in which the South had won the Civil War; he finds that the Northern middle class accepted the changed conditions quite handily, and now shops at Super Slaver.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Afterlife Diet

By Daniel Pinkwater
Random House, 1995
259 pp., \$21.00

Another of my favorites. As you might have guessed, during my time-off period when *Aboriginal* was suspended, my reading began to stray. I tried to catch up on books I'd put aside for whenever I might have the time for them. Now I'm making a column out of such reading. I can't say my taste runs exclusively to grand eccentrics, but here's another one. Unfortunately, I can't recommend the book.

Pinkwater is one of the great American humorists. Read *Lizard Music* or *The Hoboken Chicken Emergency* or *Young Adult Novel* or *The Snarkout Boys* and *The Avocado of Death*, or just about any other Pinkwater book first, then come to *The Afterlife Diet* as, alas, for completists only.

The premise is quite amusing: Is there weight loss after death? The very fat protagonist ("Milton Cramer, the lousy editor"), echoing a lot of the author's own preoccupations (Pinkwater is a Large person and has surely had a lot to do with editors), dies in the first paragraph and goes to fat people's heaven, only to find it's rather like a Jewish summer camp for big folks. He gets kicked out for using the d-word. (Diet.) Intervals on Earth follow. It's hard to tell which are flashbacks to the character's prior life and which take place after his death. There is a very funny book-within-the-book, a dreadful science-fiction novel being written by a would-be author the protagonist has been stringing along. But the thread of the narrative is lost. There are some good jokes along the way, but the book ends up nowhere and resolves nothing. Sigh.

Rating: ☆

Edgeworks

By Harlan Ellison
Borealis/White Wolf, 1996
173 + 399pp.
+ unpaginated index, \$21.99

Buy this book. At twenty-two bucks it is a bargain. You will spend so much time with it that the cover price will work out to about ten cents an hour. *Edgeworks* is the first of a projected twenty-volume hardcover reprinting of the works of Harlan Ellison. It is handsomely designed and well made, and belongs in your permanent library.

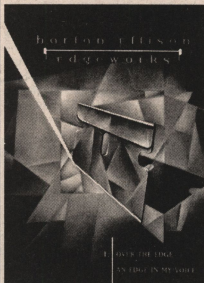
Reprinted in this particular volume are a short story collection, *Over the Edge*, and a book of essays, *An Edge in My Voice*. The former was a pretty good paperback original from 1970, the latter a collection of columns, mostly from the *L.A. Weekly*, originally published by Donning in 1970. The contents have been revised, as is usually the case with an Ellison reprint. He is as obsessive a reviser of his own work as was James Branch Cabell, and may never achieve a definitive edition in his lifetime. This one adds and subtracts material, expands essays, includes 1996 updates, and so on.

If you are an Ellison fan, I need say no more. The stories are perfectly good ("Pennies, Off a Dead Man's Eyes," "Rock God," etc.), but it is the essays which will hold most of your attention: Harlan as social critic, a latter-day hybrid of Jonathan Swift and Ambrose Bierce doing battle with the yahoos. This book will keep you up late nights.

I wonder, though, about the wisdom of *beginning* the Ellison reprint series with this particular volume. My experience, as author, editor, agent, bookseller, and fan, is that most SF readers are very casual these days. They know very little of the field's past. Their memory may extend back, if you're lucky, five years. If I'm talking with someone over a huckster table and the customer is going away with an armload of books, and then I discover he has never heard of, say, James Blish or John Brunner, I reflect on how fleeting is fame. I

also reflect that not much Ellison has been in print in the past few years, and so maybe the thing to kick this reprint series off would not be a big and argumentative collection of essays from the '80s and before, but an introductory volume of the very best stories, designed to knock the socks off the Generation-Xers. Basically, *Edgeworks* is for me, but I wonder how it will play with the uninitiated.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆



Noted:

Bibliomen

By Gene Wolfe
Broken Mirrors Press, 1995
94 pp., \$7.50

This collection of prose sketches about "Twenty-Two characters in search of a book" was more suppressed than published by Cheap Street in 1985, the original edition being so limited and so expensive that, effectively, the Broken Mirrors edition exposes the text to the light of day for the first time.

Bibliomen is an oddity, more than it purports to be, as the sketches slyly interweave with one another and play Borges-like games. Some are quite funny. A few are genuinely eerie. It's a typical Wolfean paradox: by filling a book with characters who lack a book, Wolfe has created a book you'll want to own.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Unlocking the Air
By Ursula K. Le Guin
Harper Collins, 1996
207 pp., \$22.00

I have to confess this book wasn't for me. It's a collection of mainstream literary stories, with some fantasies (one of them, "The Poacher," from Jane Yolen's *Xanadu*, an exquisite metafiction based on "Sleeping Beauty"), but most of the stories, frankly, to my mind are either very slight or incomprehensible. If you, like a lot of readers, get that reaction from literary magazine fiction or the fiction in *The New Yorker*, you will probably have that reaction here. The question is not so much why these stories were considered (by the editors who bought them) good, but why they were considered to be stories. Had extensive sections in the long, lead story, "Half Past Four" (from *The New Yorker*), been scrambled, rearranged, or deleted, I am not sure I could have told the difference. Of course it is unreasonable for me to insist that Ms. Le Guin restrict her aesthetic territory to things that interest me. I can only say that she's gone in another direction here and I am unable to follow. I suspect you will be too.

Demon and Other Tales

by Joyce Carol Oates
Necronomicon Press, 1996
36 pp., \$4.95

Joyce Carol Oates, famous mainstream author, published by a Lovecraft fan imprint? I am impressed. I suspect, too, that this pamphlet is going to become a collector's item among general literature readers, who have otherwise never heard of Necronomicon Press. It's a collection of seven minimalist fictions, all macabre or grotesque, some overtly fantastic. Few are, in the classic sense, complete stories, but they are memorable intrusions of the strange into the commonplace. They will stay with you.

(Necronomicon Press, P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893)

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*The Eye Above the Mantel
& Other Stories*

By Frank Belknap Long
Tsathoggua Press, 1995
26 pp., \$5.00

Sometimes the small presses bring out essential work that the larger companies have myopically overlooked (e.g., the works of R.A. Lafferty, or, for that matter, the only reliable texts of Lovecraft), but sometimes they don't. *The Eye Above the Mantel* is a barrel-scraping for the devotee. Long was a close friend of H.P. Lovecraft's, who never truly broke free of the master's orbit, for all he outlived him by 57 years. He wrote a few quite good stories as a young man, including one classic, "The Hounds of Tindalos." He was a respectable second-rank science-fiction writer in the '30s and '40s, after which his career faded into a protracted twilight. He never quite mastered the novel, and spent his last writing days producing Gothics under his wife's name (Lyda Belknap Long) for marginal publishers at wretched rates. His memoir of Lovecraft, *Dreamer on the Nightside*, was probably written a

decade too late, and was a disappointment. I knew him slightly and corresponded with him in the late '70s and early '80s and found him charming and erudite, but I could never think of him as a major writer.

Now the #1 Long fan, Perry M. Grayson, has collected four stories by FBL from amateur publications of 1920-21. They are not of profes-

sional quality, though the title story shows considerable imagination and is significant at least because it brought Long in contact with Lovecraft, who praised it and its creator extravagantly in an essay reprinted herewith as an introduction.

Rating: ☆☆

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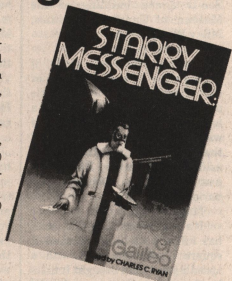
Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie 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:

Harlan Ellison	Kevin O'Donnell Jr.	John A. Taylor
Brian Aldiss	D.C. Poyer	Gregor Hartmann
Alan Dean Foster	M. Lucie Chin	and Eugene Potter
Connie Willis	Joe L. Hensley	
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Going, Going ... Gone



I've had this pet theory for some time now — evolution is dead. Sounds pretty drastic, doesn't it? Maybe yes, maybe no. Think about it. Is Metzger saying that he believes that evolution has ceased to exist, that the creatures of this world have miraculously reached equilibrium and that nothing is going to change? Does Metzger believe that in a hundred million, or perhaps a billion, years from now there's absolutely no chance that one of our many creature friends such as the Norwegian rat, the house cat or even the spotted owl might evolve to the point that by the power of their massively evolved intellect they can distort the very fabric of space-time, reach into the distant past, hijack Elvis in mid-pelvic thrust, and then install him in the You-Won't-Believe-It-Even-After-You-Saw-It annex building of the Museum of Unnatural Oddities, Milky Way Branch?

Of course not.

If things were left alone, if nature were *allowed* to take her own chaotic course, I have little doubt that at some distant time a highly evolved centipede huckster would be the mastermind behind the Elvis Comeback Tour (stand aside Colonel Parker). But there's just one problem with that scenario.

Man.

It's my contention that man has killed evolution, smacked it square in the forehead with a speeding 2x4, and brought it to its knees, and is just now in the process of delivering the final death blow. Evolution is a *slow* process. Mother Nature doesn't just wake up one morning and notice that this nifty savanna has

spread across big stretches of Africa and then decide that those silly little apes swinging through the trees had better learn to survive on those approaching grasslands. Mother Nature doesn't say: Let's make those monkeys bigger so they see over the grasses. Forget that knuckle walking business — let's stand them upright so they can run like the wind when something big and nasty tries to eat them. And let's increase that brain size, too. Those monkeys would be so much better off if they had the smarts to make and use tools.

No.

Mother Nature didn't say that.

The forests grew smaller due to weather changes. There were too many apes, not enough trees, and therefore not enough food. These changes forced our distant relatives onto the savanna, because staying in the trees meant they were going to die. Most probably got eaten before they could find someone or something to eat. But someone did survive. It was probably that ape that was a bit taller, a bit faster. He was big and clumsy when it came to swinging through trees, but when some Pliocene version of Mr. Lion came chasing after him, he was able to outrun the ape that was standing next to him (remember this next time a predator is chasing you down — you don't have to outrun the predator, just the other prey in the vicinity). And that's all it would take. Generation after generation, these apes became more suited to their new environment. They evolved. Millions of years passed, and the result is that one of those evolved apes wrote this

column, and another is presently reading it.

But now the time frame has been radically compressed.

The rain forests may well be gone in fifty years. Something might survive, some national parks, reserves, tissue samples, selected bio-florescences popped into deep freeze for future study. But the rain forests will basically be gone. And evolution as this planet has known it for the last five billion years won't be able to keep up.

Picture this.

Take one unknown species of beetle, somewhere deep in the Amazon. The odds are that mankind has never identified this beetle, doesn't even know of its existence. Man has identified 750,000 species of insects. It is estimated by some scientists that there may be 5 to 30 million insect species out there, which means that we have probably never stumbled across this beetle. Let's further assume that it feeds on some fungus that also has never been cataloged by man, and that both beetle and fungus exist in a habitat that stretches only a few hundred square miles.

Enter man.

Man comes tearing into the Amazon, burning and clearing a path of destruction. Most of these beetles get turned into charcoal briquettes by the flames, some get crushed under truck treads and boot heels, while most of those that survive the initial attack discover that they can no longer find that tasty fungus they so love. But despite all this, a few do survive, those that might have been a bit more fire resistant, those that didn't crunch quite so

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readily under someone's boot. That means that next year's beetles, even though greatly reduced in number, might be just a bit tougher, a bit more acclimated to the new environment that they have found themselves thrust into.

That's how evolution works.

But it's too little, too late.

Within several years, that one hundred square miles of rain forest will be totally gone, turned into a parking lot for grazing cattle because of North America's insatiable demand for a double-patty, double-cholesterol, quadruple-fat burger. That's it. The beetle's habitat will be gone. The beetle's fungus food supply will vanish. And that means the beetle is one dead bug. In this case there did not exist the millions of years needed for this beetle to evolve its fireproof, bootproof exoskeleton, or to learn to dine on synthetic polymer truck tires or discarded styrofoam cups.

Evolution as this planet has known it for the last few billion years is dead.

Things are simply changing too fast.

Does my argument sound reasonable?

Have I convinced you?

I can see some of you out there nodding your heads (yes, I possess powers far beyond those of most mere mortal science columnists — not the least of which is my ability to look up from these pages and watch your grinning little faces). It sounds reasonable to you. Man has thrown a monkey wrench into the works and now all bets are off. Evolution is as dead as the dinosaurs.

Wrong.

I lied to you.

Evolution is a slow process as compared to what man is doing to this planet — that's a fact. It takes millions of years for *new* species to come along. But that doesn't mean that *old* species can't disappear overnight (to evolution, overnight can run from lit-

erally overnight to many thousands of years).

Eco-destruction on a world-spanning scale is not some new phenomenon instigated by the twisted mind of man. It is a fundamental, intrinsic part of evolution — a part that is actually responsible for your very existence.

It will also be responsible for whatever *follows* man on this planet.

The beetle we discussed earlier was not able to fit into the world that man is shaping this planet into, but other beetles will survive and probably thrive. In that very same Amazon jungle there is undoubtedly a beetle of unknown species who would prosper on the now open grasslands and almost unlimited supply of cowchips that they would contain. We can speculate that this beetle had been dining on capybara turds, and things were looking mighty grim as the large rodents began to near the brink themselves. But our little beetle friend happily discovered that cow poop will do just fine, and the supply of it is nearly infinite (of course it too quickly goes away as the Amazon basin's poor soil is depleted — but by then the beetle has hitched a ride into the major cities of South America and not only found a truly endless supply of garbage to eat there, but as a bonus discovered it can easily kill cockroaches and take over their ecological niches).

Nirvana.

Who knows where that might lead.

Well, actually, I do (another one of my many powers).

A few billion years from now I can see a race of Beetle warrior/scientists/poets that scavenge the universe for waste material, having evolved the ability to teleport biological byproducts directly out of the lower intestines of any species they encounter, breaking said byproducts down into easy-to-digest wave functions, and popping

them right into their plump little bellies. In homage to mankind, that long-dead distant species that was responsible for the evolutionary kick in the thorax that started them down the road to greatness, they relocate several stellar masses and snuff out several others, so that in the earth's night sky a new constellation is formed, one lovingly called by the mighty Beetles the *Homo Poop for Brains* constellation, showing a man torching a tree with one hand while tossing aside of beer can with the other.

Do you believe this one — that major eco-destruction is just a fact of life on this planet, that every so many millions of years the slate nearly gets wiped clean so that something new can fill the void?

I see fewer heads nodding this time.

Good, you're getting suspicious of me. But this time I'm telling you the truth. Massive eco-destruction is the fuel that drives evolution's engine. You see, the eco-destruction that we are experiencing right now has happened before. Over the last 600 million years, on five separate occasions, as many as 50 percent of the earth's creatures vanished, and on two of those occasions, the numbers may have reached 80 to 90 percent.

Horrible, huh?

If someone were to tell you that within the next few thousand years 90 percent of all the species on earth would be gone, you would be shocked, horrified, disgusted with the horrible turn of events that man has inflicted upon this planet. But think about this. If those mass extinctions had not occurred in the past, we would not be here today, instigating yet one more mass extinction. Evolution moves best when there are suddenly vacated ecosystems to be filled. The adage that Mother Nature abhors a vacuum is true. An empty ecosystem is just begging for something to fill it — whether it is some apes peer-

ing out across a strange savanna or a species of beetle suddenly finding itself in an unfamiliar pasture.

As most of you know, up until 65 million years ago, the dinosaurs ruled this planet. They were, and still are, one of the most successful evolutionary winners that this planet has ever produced. They ruled the roost for 100 to 200 million years. And then they were gone.

I'm sure most of you know the story by now. 65 million years ago a big chunk of rock, perhaps six miles in diameter and moving at better than 25,000 miles per hour, fell from the sky and plowed into what is now the Yucatan peninsula. Energy is conserved — meaning that all the kinetic energy carried in that speeding rock was converted into heat — creating an explosion 10,000 times greater than would result if all the world's nuclear arsenals exploded simultaneously. The crater that impact created was the size of Rhode Island. The meteor, along with a sizable chunk of the Yucatan Peninsula, was blown back up through the meteor's atmospheric entry hole, and then the bits and pieces reentered across the globe as blazing fireballs. The result was that as much as half the planet's forests caught fire, and the atmosphere was so choked with dirt, dust, and soot that it remained dark as night for at least several months. Temperatures plummeted. Dinosaurs dropped dead, because either their food supply died or had been burned up, or it simply got too cold and dino-pops soon littered the newly formed tundra. In a place called Hell Creek, Montana, the evidence of that event is strewn throughout the 65-million-year-old rocks. Before the meteor impact, nineteen species of dinosaur were found in the area. After the impact, *all* were gone. Most of you know that. What you might not know, is at the same time, there was an abundance of mammals, scurry-

ing about in the weeds, filling those little eco-niches that the lords and masters of the planet weren't occupying. Prior to the meteor impact, Hell Creek's fossil record shows some 28 species of mammals. After the impact, only *one* species of mammal had survived.

It was a close thing.

We might have been as dead as the dinosaur.

If that rock had been a bit bigger, the future of this world might now lie in the buggy mandibles of our Beetle friend. But some mammals did survive, and evolution does what it does best — diversifying and filling all the suddenly vacated ecological niches. Sixty-five million years later we find ourselves the inheritors of this planet.

Big deal, you say.

That whole extinction was a fluke caused by a big space rock. It hardly counts.

That might be true. It might have been a fluke (or maybe not — it's beginning to look like meteor impacts may be a lot more common than was once believed). There is more than one way to skin a cat — or in this case destroy an ecosystem.

As the philosopher says: *It's always something.*

It is estimated that 90 percent of all earth's species vanished 245 million years ago. How did it happen? The story is not as clear as what occurred 65 million years ago, but the currently accepted scenario runs like this. At that time there existed basically two large landmasses on the surface of the earth. The southern landmass, called Gondwana, consisted of what would eventually become Africa, South America, India, Australia, and Antarctica. For many millions of years plate tectonics had been pushing this landmass northward, right into the path of another landmass that consisted of what would someday become North America, Europe, and Asia. They collided 245 million years ago. Of course,

this was no collision like the meteor of 65 million years ago; but this impact was every bit as deadly to the lifeforms of that world, if not more so.

One massive supercontinent was formed — Pangaea.

Big landmasses have a problem. You can see it today in places like Asia, where the Gobi desert sits in the middle, far away from the climate-moderating oceans. The middles of big continents get really hot in the summer and very cold in the winter.

The landmasses of 245 million years ago were not like they are today. They were relatively flat, plate tectonics not yet having made the big mountain ranges like the Rockies and the Himalayas. And within these large continents lay huge shallow seas. It was within these continental seas that life had so diversified. And then those seas vanished — evaporating away in the brutal summer, and receiving little rain from the distant oceans. To make matters worse, for reasons that no one still understands, the sea level of earth's one massive ocean started to drop, eventually sinking by 300 feet. The internal continental seas not only evaporated away, but also drained into the now lower ocean. When the continental seas vanished, so did the animals that lived in them. At this time all corals and trilobites vanished. Virtually all sponges, bryozoa, brachiopods, crinoids, echinoids, ammonites, foraminiferans, ostracods and a majority of fish, snails, and clams disappeared. And what of the land animals? They died, too — probably because of the harsher climates and the destruction of their food supplies in the now more arid, temperature-extreme supercontinent. The details of this great die-off are not as clear as what happened 65 million years ago, but the fossil record is quite clear — a massive extinction in both the land and the sea took place.

See, it's always something. If it's not a big space rock, then it's

drifting continents. Or, if you are to believe that we are in the midst of another great extinction, then this time the culprit is man.

Is it happening again?

Some people think so. What got me started thinking about this

column was two books: *The End of Evolution*, by Peter Ward, and *The Sixth Extinction*, by Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin. These books cut through the last 600 million years, showing the rise and fall of species, extinction after extinction, disaster after disaster. It is very much these authors' contention that another great extinction is occurring, one precipitated by man.

What are the facts?

Let's first take a look at large mammals. Over the last 100,000 years (a blink of evolution's eye), the extinction of large mammals in the various continents runs 73 percent in North America, 79 percent in South America, 86 percent in Australia, and 14 percent in Africa. These are huge numbers. Who or what are the culprits?

Could it be climatic? Well, for the last two million years the earth has been in an ice age, and still is in one (I know that we may be bringing this one to an abrupt halt, but at least as of a few hundred years ago, mankind had not yet had a major impact on the climate). This ice age has consisted of glacial periods lasting 100,000 years or so, interrupted by interglacial periods of 10,000 to 20,000 years (it is within one of these that we currently find ourselves). These mammals died very recently, having survived almost 2 million years of ice age. Did the cold finally get to those big mammals? After 2 million years of cycling



Evolution has favored one ... for a while?

between hot and cold did they finally just throw in the towel?

That's unlikely. After their surviving of some twenty or so swings between hot and cold, it is hard to understand why those mammals should vanish now? It makes one then ask the question if something other than climate could be responsible for the extinctions — is there something else that has occurred over the past 100,000 years that was different from the previous 2 million.

Yes.

Man.

The North and South American extinctions took place some 10,000-12,000 years ago, just at the time when it is believed that man crossed the Bering Strait and came into the Americas (there is some evidence that man may have been here earlier, but if so it is believed that the populations were quite small). Man shows up and the big mammals vanish. Coincidence? Probably not.

There is a lot of fuel to add to this fire.

Man arrived earlier in Australia than in the Americas, some 30,000 years ago. And when do you suppose the big mammal die-off occurred there? Right, you are correct, just at the time when mankind showed up. So, what about Africa with its smaller extinction? Well, what you need to keep in mind is that mankind

had already been in Africa for quite some time — millions of years, and it is quite possible that the local big mammals had enough time to evolve and learn to cope with the indigenous people who sprang up there.

Is there any other evidence?

Oh, yes.

Madagascar saw its first human arrivals only 1500 years ago. Of the 17 lemur genera that were present at that time, only ten survive today. The extinct forms had a common trait — all were large, with the largest having a maximum weight of 200 pounds. The largest survivors today are only 25 pounds, and all are nocturnal and arboreal — staying out of man's way as best they can. And how about this? Every major South Pacific island had evolved large forms of flightless birds to fill the ecological niches that the mammal-devoid islands possessed. These birds included the dodo, the moa, and the elephant bird. All vanished with the arrival of man. It is estimated that half of all birds on almost every island in the world have gone extinct in recent times.

If numbers impress you, then here is one to ponder. Two centuries ago, 5 billion passenger pigeons lived in North America. That is just about one bird for each and every person who now lives on this planet. Only 100 years later they were gone. It was not climate changes, diseases, continental drift, or meteor impacts that killed them. It was man. Five billion birds were shot-gunned or blown up with dynamite, and their little corpses were then shipped to the East, where a growing population was hungry for meat.

Plate tectonics, meteor impact, and now mankind — it's always something.

Is that my bleak message? Am I suggesting that we rape and pillage this planet, because if we don't destroy the ecosystem, then something else certainly will? Definitely not. My message is this: that the world's ecosystem is fragile, as demonstrated by the fact that it has been destroyed many times before, and that we are certainly destroying it now. Are we too late to save it? That is an almost meaningless question. We have certainly altered it, and tomorrow's world will never be like yesterday's world. Even if we became a race of ecological saints, a great deal of damage has already been done. The real question that we should be addressing is whether or not there is room for man in the world that man is currently creating. If not, we had better figure out some way to alter the future so that we may survive there. We're not talking about Spotted Owls — we're talking about future generations of man. As far as I know, mankind was not given some sort of exemption, guaranteeing our survival, stating that no matter what ecosystems are destroyed, no matter how many species vanish, we will just keep going on and on.

There are no guarantees.

Ask the dinosaurs. Ask the trilobites.

Evolution doesn't care who wins - only that there will be winners.

I have a final number for you.

The average species on this planet lasts for about five million years. We're pretty close to that number right now. I have a recommendation for you. Watch where you walk. If not, some distant relative of that bug that you just so nonchalantly smashed with your big clohoppers may come swooping down upon you through a portal of torn space-time, seeking revenge, and squish you as flat as that bug glued to the bottom of your shoe.

Tread lightly.

What goes around, usually comes around.

For Further Reading:

1. Peter Ward, *The End of Evolution*, Bantam Books, July 1994.

2. Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction*, Doubleday, October 1995. □

Carl Sagan Says

By Jeremy Gadd

Carl Sagan says the first television signals broadcast on Earth are still oscillating out into space, and that they will continue to do so for infinity ...

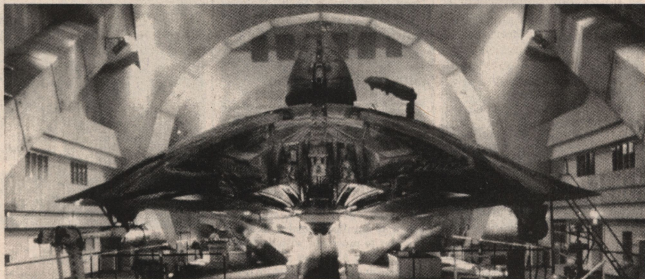
Donald Duck cartoons and Rawhide, the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban crisis, advertisements for detergents and cheap ties passing Alpha Centauri at the speed of light and on and on into the abyss of time

But television transmissions are simply pulses of electricity and thoughts are also believed to be electrochemical sparks, flashing between the neurons of our brains ...

If long forgotten television series can ghoulishly continue to exist in the ether, waiting to be watched by alien recipients, why not human thoughts too?

If so, then surely every thought ever thought still persists, and in the year three thousand and thirty-five someone or some thing will be receiving this live ...

What's Hot for Fall and Beyond



Happy Fourth of July

What's Hot: Having plunged into the "classic" television pool for what seems like the umpteenth time, the studios still show no sign of slowing down their high-budget movie make-overs. For those of you who still are enamored of this flashback syndrome, this summer you'll be able to see *Mission: Impossible*, with Tom Cruise, and *Flipper*, with, er, I suppose, Flipper.

Currently in production are remakes of *I Dream Of Jeannie*; *Bewitched*, with Alicia Silverstone; and *My Favorite Martian*, to be directed by Joe Dante.

Turner Pictures is also jumping on the bandwagon with a live-action version of *The Jetsons*, due to start lensing this summer. *Gremlins* director Dante is also set to direct this feature, with a script by Ed Wood writers Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski. *The Jetsons* is only one of several Hanna-Barbera projects owned by Turner that are being prepped for features.

In development are live-action versions of *Jonny Quest* and *Scooby Doo*. And I thought it was just a phase.

What's Hotter: Sizzling at the moment are films with volcanoes in them. As of press time, there are at least three major volcano films being rushed into production. Disney has *Ring of Fire* on the burner. Universal, on the other hand, is offering Pierce Brosnan \$6 million to star in *Dante's Peak*. The film will probably be shot before Brosnan returns for the next Bond outing (*Goldeneye* has grossed more than \$350 million, reviving the James Bond franchise), and the price tag means that the former *Remington Steele* actor now joins the ranks of bankable film stars.

Fox 2000 is hoping that Bill Pullman will segue his star power from the current hit *Independence Day* to the proposed *Volcano*. In comparison, Pullman's fee is expected to jump from the \$2.5 million he received for *Independence Day* to around \$7 million, putting him on equal star footing.

Other news:

Film:

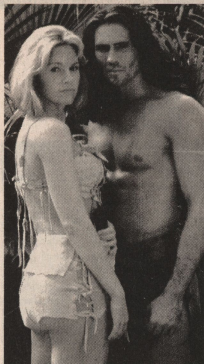
Of big interest to fans will be the start of filming in mid-September of the next *Alien* film, *Alien Resurrection*. After the shambles of *Alien 3*, the powers that be decided that per-

haps a wunderkind music-video director was not the way to go, so helming the project is film director Jean-Pierre Jeunet, whose credits include *The City of Lost Children* and *Delicatessen*. Joss Whedon, fresh from the success of *Toy Story*, has written the screenplay. Sigourney Weaver will be returning for her fourth go-around, this time aided and abetted by Winona Ryder. *Alien Resurrection* is due in theaters Spring 1997.

The *Star Trek: TNG* gang is reunited in *Generations II*, due out in November and currently being shot on the Paramount sound stages. In addition, James Cromwell, the Oscar-nominated *Babe* actor, will play the inventor of warp drive (originally played by Glenn Corbett in the series). Jonathan Frakes, having directed several *TNG* and *DS9* episodes, is making his feature directorial debut with *Generations II*.

Tim Burton's fecund imagination has come up with a feature based on the old *Mars Attacks!* trading cards. This film boasts an impressive cast line-up, including Jack Nicholson, Pierce Brosnan, Lukas Haas, Sarah

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Jane?

Jessica Parker, Jim Brown, Glenn Close, Tom Jones, Rod Steiger, and Martin Short.

Writer-director James Cameron's next film will be *Titanic*, due to start filming this summer. Although studio execs will neither confirm nor deny, *Titanic's* budget is estimated at \$100 million, which would put it up there with previous Cameron films such as *Terminator 2* and *The Abyss*. *Sense and Sensibility's* Kate Winslet has been cast as the female lead.

John Sayles has been signed to write the screenplay version of Patricia Anthony's science fiction novel *Brother Termite*. The story takes place in the near future, where the planet Earth is shared with a newly introduced alien race. The aliens must struggle to overcome prejudice as a battle for control of the planet ensues. Sayles previously wrote and directed *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994). James Cameron is slated to produce this project for his company, Lightstorm Entertainment.

David Seltzer, best known for writing *The Omen*, has ventured into supernatural territory again with *The Eighteenth Angel*. This time it's a widowed professor and his daughter who take on the devil.



Is LA that bad?

Under the category of possessed by an idiot. The pitch: "A race of aliens on the verge of extinction sends its manliest member to Earth in order to procreate with an Earth woman. The alien has 72 hours to get the job done. To do this he takes possession of a nerdy guy's body. The result: Fox-based Horizon productions pays three writers \$135,000 for this idea. The question: This alien has 72 hours to get the deed done. They leave it to the last minute and send only one alien. No pressure there! So instead of making life a lot easier by possessing Brad Pitt, Mel Gibson, Antonio Banderas — you get the point — the alien unerringly picks a geek. No wonder this alien race is about to become extinct. Spare me from sitcom thinking.

New Line Cinema has signed *The Crow* director Alex Proyas to a two-picture deal. First up is the futuristic thriller *Dark City*, followed by the remake of *Quatermass and the Pitt*.

Friends megastar Courteney Cox is set to star in Wes Craven's *Scary Movie*, being shot during the show's hiatus. It's a cross between a psychological thriller and a spoof of horror movies, and you can be sure Craven, best known for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, will provide many grisly moments. Hence the title.

Columbia Pictures has bought *Time Square*, pitched by first-timer Paul Finelli. The concept is an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's short story



I want Jane.

"A Little Something For Us Tempunauts."

Having been in development limbo for several years, *Prince Valiant* (based on Harold Foster's comic strip) is now scheduled to start filming in the near future for a summer 1997 release. The last time this was a sure thing was three years ago. Cross your fingers. Constantin Film, which is co-producing and co-financing *Valiant*, has several other projects in the pipeline, including film versions of *The Fantastic Four*, *Silver Surfer*, and Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*. Let's hope these projects do not suffer the same development oblivion.

Warner Bros. has hired director Carlo Carlei and screenwriter Mark Protosevich to bring Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* to the screen for a third time (the two previous adaptations were *The Last Man On Earth* in 1964 and *The Omega Man* in 1971). Although not scripting the latest incarnation of this novel, Matheson and his son R.C. Matheson have collaborated on a fantasy script called *Midvale* for director Ivan Reitman.

Films in production: John Carpenter's *Escape from L.A.*; Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*; An American Werewolf in Paris; Carl Sagan's *Contact*; Michael



Animated eggs?

Crichton's *The Lost World*; *Asteroid*, starring Michael Paré; *Men in Black* (another comic-book adaptation); *The Strange Case of Jekyll & Hyde* — *A Rock and Roll Musical*, starring Kevin McCarthy; and animated versions of *Tarzan*, Clive Barker's *The Thief of Always*, *Hercules*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, *The Quest For Camelot* (Christopher Reeve will provide the voice of King Arthur), and Disney's *Fantasia Continued*.

Television:

Fox television has several pilots (mainly comedies or cop dramas) to be segued into potential series should the ratings prove acceptable. One of their science fiction entries is *Millennium*, a drama from the creator of *The X-Files*, starring Lance Henriksen and Megan Gallagher. It's part of that "strange happenings secret cabals" sub-genre that *The X-Files* successfully spawned. In this case, a former FBI agent and current P.I. joins a mysterious underground task force to solve impossible cases. So far, the series has a 13-episode commitment.

The Dark Skies pilot is best described as a smorgasbord of *The X-Files*, *The Invaders*, and *The Fugitive*. Set in the sixties, it's the secret history of the USA. You've heard that behind every successful man there is a woman; well, the show postulates that behind every point in history there is an alien involvement.

For those of you who are enjoying the latest *Outer Limits* incarnation, Showtime has already picked up the series for another two seasons.

Still showing no sign of abating is the comic-to-screen phenomenon, in both TV and film. There was the brouhaha about who would play the next Batman. George Clooney, as flavor-of-the-month, won out over Val Kilmer, whose role in *The Saint* conflicted with the production schedule of *Batman and Robin*.

Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman has steadily increased its ratings to assure a new 22-episode order for the 1996-1997 broadcast season. John Jakes' *Mullion Empire* will make the leap this fall. Set in the 26th century, the story revolves around a corporate dynasty that will do anything to keep itself in business. Originally delayed due to arbitration problems, *Grimjack* is back on track. The writer of the comic book has decided to arbitrate the rights.

From big to small screen:

Stargate: The Series. Scheduled to be in production for the 1997 season, the series will focus on the *Stargate* that was found at the beginning of the film and the travelers who pass through it. As a bonus to *Stargate* fans, Eternity Comics will start publishing a comic-book adaptation of the film, followed by new adventures.



King Arthur?

George Miller's television version of *Mad Max* (he's writing, directing and exec-producing this time) will be ready to air for the '97 season. And Stephen King is doing it his way by writing a six-hour script for an upcoming television version of *The Shining*.

Role-playing card games have been big news for the past several years. Chameleon Games will bring out *The Babylon Project* game this winter, based on the hit TV series *Babylon 5*, which sources say has been renewed for a fourth season.

The Sci-Fi Channel has struck a \$20-million deal with Paramount to buy 140 existing episodes and 22 original hour-long episodes of the reality show *Sightings*. The original shows are scheduled to air starting in January 1997, with the reruns debuting the following year. This deal is one of the biggest for the relatively new Sci-Fi Channel.

On the animation front: The blockbuster *Jurassic Park* is now being turned into an animated series. Strange, when you stop to think that what made *Jurassic Park* so wondrous to look at was seeing "real life" dinosaurs. I would kinda think the series might lose a little of the bite in the animation process. Another series which industry sources predict will not have the flavor of the original is the new *Super Ghostbusters* series being readied for the fall.

The striking "dark" animation techniques used for the current *Batman* series will be used for the new *Superman* show, also being readied for the upcoming season.

And finally:

New pilots and shows for the fall: *I, Werewolf* (*Beauty and the Beast* meets *The Incredible Hulk*); *The Burning Zone* (a doctor tracks viruses that may have their own intelligence); *Phone Calls from the Dead* (a psychiatrist gets powers after a near-death experience); *Them* (a man and his nephew track aliens); *Bump in the Night* (*Ghostbusters* meets *Dragnet*); *Pretender* (*Quantum Leap* meets *The Equalizer*); *Enemy* (the subject of government experiments becomes the ultimate soldier); *Generation X* (a series based on the Marvel comic book); *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (a series based on the cult film). □

Ride to the Stars

By David Slusher

*As I ride my motorcycle home from work on a south Georgia autumn
night*

*Fetid with the smell of jasmine even in the frost of late
November,*

The moths swarm thick in the yellow beam of the headlamp.

They glow like tiny suns as I hurtle through them.

I forget the road and imagine that I am in the sky

Exploring the far reaches of a mysterious universe,

Painfully close to the speed of light,

Massive with relativistic effects.

Lost in my momentum the vision takes me.

*I speed through an immense galaxy far from the planet of my
birth.*

If men still live and gaze at the skies

They may see the flare of my ramjet in ninety thousand years

Having forgotten their fathers sent me on my journey

And wonder what manner of star I may be.

The void chills my fingers through the gloves,

Fresh air blows through my helmet,

The bump of micrometeors on my shielding feels like a soft rain

As I go HVA for repairs.

*The scoops maintain the balance between acceleration and a quick
death*

From high energy particles in the ether

Breaking my body at 0.998c.

The mercury lights of Americus break the spell.

I am back on Highway 19 and my bike needs gas.

*My vision is gone, but the reflected starshine makes the marshes
sparkle*

Like the eyes of an old friend.

An uninvited smile warms my face

As the pecan trees redshift away.

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Farewell Janice



After a decade and several hundred book reviews, **Janice M. Eisen** is giving up her "From the Bookshelf" column. Although she "loved doing it," she says it involved "simply too much reading," especially with the arrival of her second son Alexander in March. Janice's reader-friendly style elicited many letters over the years and she says she



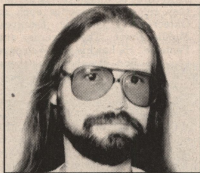
Janice M. Eisen

always appreciated *Aboriginal's* "very involved readers. It's nice to know they are paying attention and care enough to respond." And she is upbeat about the genre's future. "I think the literary standards in science fiction today are higher than they have ever been," she says.

You can still catch Janice's occasional reviews for *The Washington Post Book World* and she will continue her editing work for *Aboriginal*, but now she can go back to "reading science fiction for fun."

In "Walking Backwards through Death's Door" by **Karl G. Schlosser**, an old man tries to make his

dying grandson's final days special. Schlosser, who also wrote "The Motel 6 Fugue" (*Aboriginal* 37/38), quit his university tech support job and a consulting business in Los Angeles a couple of years ago and moved to Seattle. There he spent the first few months reading, writing, drinking coffee, and taking time out to throw snowballs on Mount



Clyde Duensing III

Rainier. He has a story in the *Midnight Zoo* anthology and is working on a novel.

"Walking Backwards" is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing III**, who has been working on some cards for Mayfair Games Fantasy Adventures. He is also getting involved in 3D computer rendering and animation applications. When I spoke with him he was celebrating his daughter Briana's fifth birthday and getting ready for DragonCon in Atlanta.

"Don't Dance," by **Beatrice J. Corry**, was inspired by an illustration (this issue's cover art). Corry penned the story about zombies cre-

ated by a science experiment gone wrong after seeing Jon Foster's provocative painting. This is Corry's first professional sale. She lives with her husband **Robert J.** in Massachusetts and is working on a novel.

Foster said he is "really thrilled" that his work inspired someone to write a story. He was following advice he had received to create art



Mark Wolverton

with an intriguing premise that would draw people in ... and it worked. By the way, the woman on the cover was modeled on his girlfriend, **Melissa Ferreira**, except for the muscles, which are a blend of hers and John's own.

The singles scene doesn't get any easier to navigate with the help of computers, or so we learn in "Love in the Silicon Age" by **Mark Wolverton**. The story was adapted from a Wolverton play produced in Philadelphia in 1987. He has had several stage and radio plays produced, some of them science fiction.

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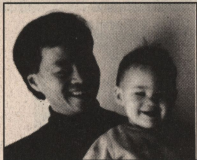
Karl G. Schlosser



Jon Foster



Charles Lang

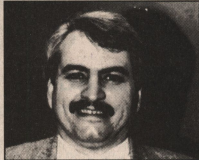


E.H. Wong & son

but this story qualifies as his first fiction sale. He has written a novel about atomic testing in the fifties, and some other short stories as well. A film buff, Wolverton had a letter published in *Premiere* magazine defending the film *Forbidden Planet* from "ridiculous and infantile criticism."

"Love in the Silicon Age" is illustrated by **Charles Lang**, who has been doing some covers for his wife **Wendy's** comic book about vampires, *Night's Children*. He just had art work selected for publication in *Spectrum*, an annual anthology that spotlights the best science fiction, fantasy, and horror art. Lang says besides being in the company of such artists as **Michael Whelan** and **Bob Eggleton**, his work is seen by art directors all over the country who are sent a copy of the book.

E. H. Wong returns to *Aboriginal* with "Endangered Species," a tale about hunters who believe the last members of some species should be trophies. Wong also wrote "Rescue" (*Aboriginal* 35/36) and has sold several stories to *Pulphouse*. Under "interesting thing you've done lately" he lists going to Chinese Cemetery Day. "Think of it as older immigrants clinging to ideas such as honoring ancestors and promoting superstitions mixed with the American-born generation usurping the occasion for socializing and gossip. Mix in firecrackers, roast pigs, incense, and burning



William Barton

play money offerings, and you get the idea," he says.

"Endangered Species" is illustrated by **N. Taylor Blanchard**, who got married last year and now lives in Boston with his wife Kathei Logue. Blanchard has been doing a lot of cards and a few covers for fantasy role-playing games such as *Gatecrasher*, *Galactic Empires*, *Middle Earth: The Wizards*, and *Pentacle*. He has his own Web page you can find at: <<http://members.aol.com/tblanchard/ntblanchard.html>>.

A man's life unfolds as the Space Age dawns in "Changes," by **William Barton**. Barton is the author of *Dark Sky Legion* (Bantam/Spectra, 1992) and *Fellow Traveler* (with **Michael Capobianco**, Bantam/Spectra, 1991). He has had short stories appear recently in *Tomorrow SF* and *Interzone*, and has served on the Nebula Jury.

"Changes" is illustrated by **Jael**, who just finished a cover for a book by **Terry Pratchett** called *Lords and Ladies*. She has some work appearing in a juried show called "Pavilions of Wonder" in Canton, Ohio, through the end of July. The model for the little boy in the illustration is a student of hers who she believes is an "artistic genius." She says he draws "remarkably clever, astute, thoughtful things. I told his mother to save everything he does."

In "Meritorious Windows," by **Stuart Palmer**, it is windows that



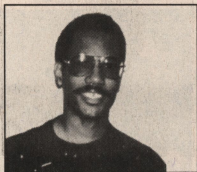
Stuart Palmer

hold the key to enduring entertainment. Palmer is a Brit, and this is his first sale outside the U.K. He has written a novel called *The Discontinuum Kitchen* and is working on another. Palmer, who has a degree in theology, says he spent a week with some petty thieves researching his new novel.

"Meritorious Windows" is illustrated by **Alan Gutierrez**, who just completed his tenth cover for the Pocket Books *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* series. This tenth one, by Ted Pederson, is titled *Space Camp*. Gutierrez also recently did the cover for *Popular Mechanics* magazine's December 1995 issue and the cover for *The Infinite Sea* by **Jeffrey Carver**.

Insensitivity and arrogance get their just deserts in "The Will," by **Stephen D. Haltom**. The man, also known as SF fandom's "token Republican," made his first professional sale to *Pulphouse* in 1992 and has written several short stories, poems, and a novel called *Kuskurza* since then. He lives in Texas and is a charter member of the Wednesday Weirdoes, a writers' group that meets weekly at **Patricia Anthony's** place.

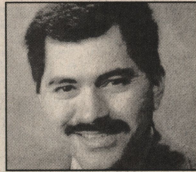
"The Will" is illustrated by **Peggy Ranson**, who has been doing covers and acting as a freelance art director for Alexander Books, a small press. She said she is enjoying the design work as much as the



N. Taylor Blanchard



Jael



Alan Gutierrez



Stephen D. Haltom

illustration because it gives her a lot more control over how she covers end up looking. Ransom has been nominated for a Hugo for the sixth time for fan art. She has won the Hugo once previously.

In "Burning Bright," by **K. D. Wentworth**, a human crew succumbs one by one to the call of an alien ecosystem. Wentworth wrote "Shore Leave" (*Aboriginal* 45/46) and "Due Process" (*Aboriginal* 30). The prolific Wentworth has three novels out by Del Rey Books: *The Imperium Game*, *House of Moons*, and *Moonspeaker* (see review this issue), several stories coming out in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and a story in the *Vision Quest* anthology. She has just finished two more novels, including an "alternate history Cherokee fantasy."

"Burning Bright" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**. When I spoke with him, he had just received the exciting news that he and Newell Conyers (a.k.a. **Tom Kidd**) have been nominated for a Chesley Award in the category Best Cover Illustration: Paperback Book for *The Printer's Devil* (Baen Books, 1995). The awards ceremony will be held at the WorldCon in Los Angeles over the Labor Day weekend. Cortney was last nominated for a Chesley in 1989 for work that appeared in *Aboriginal* 15, an illustration for Patricia Anthony's story "Eating



K. D. Wentworth

Memories."

The Martian crust hides a wonderful archaeological treasure, and perhaps something more, in **Molly Barr's** "Into the Labyrinth." Barr is an airline pilot who began writing serious short stories as part of a correspondence writing course. This is her first professional sale. She is busily writing more, including some "old West" type stories.

"Into the Labyrinth" is illustrated by **Charles Lang**.



Cortney Skinner

P. J. L. Hinder writes of an executive facing the tragic end of his career in "Growing Higher." Hinder is a Brit who considers this his first professional sale. (He doesn't count the \$4 (roughly) he received from a British magazine in 1990.) He has written several stories for semi-prozines and a novel for the *Dr. Who New Adventures* series.

"Growing Higher" is illustrated



P. J. L. Hinder

by **Robert Pasternak**, who has been working on cover art for a collection of short stories by fellow Canadian **Phyllis Gottleib**, and art for several Canadian playwrights. Pasternak said he is starting a card and poster company, though he won't disclose the name yet.

The poem "Carl Sagan Says" is by **Jeremy Gadd**, an Aussie who graduated from the same school, The Australian National Institute of Dramatic Art, as Mel Gibson. He has more than fifty published poems, twenty-five published short stories, and three professionally produced plays to his credit. He recently completed a novel titled *Goodbye Barrier Reef*, which has an environmental theme and is set in Queensland and Papua New Guinea.

The poem "Ride to the Stars" is by **David Slusher** and marks his first professional sale. For several years he has hosted a radio show in Atlanta called "Reality Break," which features SF, fantasy, and horror, and he is currently pursuing a graduate degree in computer science at the University of Western Louisiana. He also just won a NASA fellowship. David lives with his wife **Darlene** in Lafayette, Louisiana. □



Peggy Ransom

Aborigines



Molly Barr

Aboriginal Science Fiction -- Summer 1996



Jeremy Gadd

Burning Bright

By K. D. Wentworth

Art by Cortney Skinner

I surprised Phil Ferguson at the bend of the sluggish green river. He looked up, his cheeks shimmering with iridescent fire; at some point in the last week, he had obviously stopped taking his preventative.

I didn't know what to say. The Survey manual was crammed with protocol about avoiding contamination by native life-forms, but it didn't say a damn thing about idiots who sought it like a form of salvation.

"The colors, Reese." Ferguson's voice had a doubled quality, as though he were providing his own echo. "They were here all the time!"

Something high and shrill screamed in the monotonously gray jungle. "Yeah, right." A couple of small, snout-faced krel padded around us on their way to drink. Overhead, Sabat's Star glared down, an orange-yellow engine fueling the rain forest steambath. I blotted my forehead and tried to think through the hundred-twenty-degree heat — at least Ferguson still recognized me. If I could get him back to the research station, it might not be too late. He'd been missing for nearly two days, each of which was longer than Earth-Standard by ten hours. He already looked as though he'd been out in the jungle for a year, mud-spattered, his tan uniform ripped in a half-dozen places.

"I'm hungry." I reached for the stunner holstered at my side. "Let's go back and grab something to eat."

"To the station?" He flinched. "That place stinks, Reese!" He dove into the jumble of vines and trees, burrowing like a native mudrat.

Gun drawn, I stared at the ragged hole he'd made in the glossy gray-green vines. Seven down, only three of our Survey team left. I wasn't about to follow him. I wanted to see Earth again.

Martina looked up from the jump-sled engine she was adjusting as I entered the clearing around the station. She was dark, tall and lanky, eleven years older than me with a stretched-out intensity that seemed closer to snapping every day. I nodded without meeting her eyes.

"You found him." She followed me into the airlock.

"What was left of him." I let my rucksack clunk to the metal floor, dogged the hatch, and hit the cyclor. The fear and weariness etched into her lined face reminded me too much of my own.

"Then you should have brought him back." Her

sunburned lips tightened as the humid, rot-scented air was replaced with drier filtered air. "We could have run him through decontamination procedures. It might have worked!"

"Yeah, or he might have wound up like Fackler — foaming at the mouth and very dead." I leaned my aching head against the cool metal wall. "I don't think I could go through that again."

"You couldn't go through it!" Martina's voice vibrated with anger. "This isn't about you. It's about them."

"This wouldn't have happened if they hadn't stopped taking their barazine," I said. "They all made their choice."

"Nobody chooses to die like that!"

I reached past her sweat-sheened neck to undog the inner hatch. "They're not dead, except for Fackler, and that was our fault."

"Well, I'd rather be dead than live like that!" Martina's hands clenched as I stepped into the air-conditioned dimness of the common area.

The couches and chairs were scattered with tapes and shirts and a dozen other things their former owners would never need out there in the gray jungle. One whole wall was plastered with keepsake pictures to remind us of home. I stared at the lost faces of my teammates and thought of my assistant, Sasha Migarevya, as I'd last seen her, naked, squatting on her muddy haunches beside a vine-choked stream, her red hair a matted tangle, her cheeks alive with a pink-blue-silver luster that shifted in the sunlight.

"I'm staying in here until the ship comes back." Martina jerked out a chair from the card table. "I'm not going to end up like that."

Faye Schmidt, the sole remaining med-tech on our team, sauntered through the doorway, out of uniform, her eyes sleepy. Obviously, she'd blown off her scheduled assignment — again. "Fine with me." She ran her fingers through her tousled gray hair. "That leaves only a two-way split when Reese and I crack the Translation bonus. That is" — she bared her teeth in a feral smile — "if he can resist the call of the wild."

Martina whirled on her. "Shut up!"

"Both of you shut up." I punched in the dispenser code for chilled iced tea with lemon. "Quit squabbling like two-year-olds." Their fear beat at me and harmonized with my own. "I'm senior now, and we're going to keep to our schedule. Either work or I'll



dock your pay."

Martina massaged her temples with her fingertips. "Face it, Reese. This assignment is pointless. Even if we could communicate with the kreeel, they're too far down on the developmental scale to be worth studying. They couldn't think their way out of a paper bag."

"Well, I think the little bastards are cute." Faye curled up in a chair. "I bet they'd make great slaves."

The next morning, Martina accompanied me down to the scattering of badly thatched conical huts. We tramped around charcoal gray trees that soared three hundred feet into the air, the only sound our footsteps and the distant hooting of small black four-winged flyers. The dense, relentlessly gray jungle made me feel like I was trapped inside an endless cave.

A small moon-faced climber leaped onto a gnarled branch, then chattered wildly as the branch swayed under the weight. Martina ripped a handful of gray leaves off a low bush and shredded them as we walked. "Why do you think they stopped taking their barazine?"

"They were stupid, or lazy, or just plain careless." I kept my eyes on the overgrown track.

"One of them, maybe, or two, but not seven."

She was right, and that only made me more afraid. I walked faster.

I had been working with a kreeel who characterized itself as either "Fee" or "Zo," according to some pattern I had been unable to discern. The words could have indicated names, or feelings, or any of a hundred other things. It was impossible to tell, and that was only one way in which the kreeel were puzzling. They had teeth adapted for both tearing meat and grinding vegetation, but consumed only fruits and nuts. They produced no artifacts except their ramshackle huts, were rarely seen in groups of more than two, moved around very little in the daytime and not at all at night. Although obviously arboreal, with hands, feet, and tail adapted for climbing, they built homes on the ground.

Martina set up the recorder while I stooped beside the doorless opening and waited. The little velvet-hidden natives were shy. As nearly as I could tell, the unwritten rules for contact seemed to be: you squatted and waited. If they felt like trading meaningless sounds with you, they would come out. If not, they'd stay inside, and there wasn't a damn thing you could do about it.

A slender gray snout poked through the opening and snuffled. I opened my rucksack and unwrapped a peeled orange section. The creature, no higher than my thigh, crept out on all fours, its short ears folding against its elongated skull.

"Hello, Fee," I said softly.

It sat back, weaving its tail, then, quick as a poker player retrieving his winnings, its delicate clawed hands seized the moist orange. It ate with tiny, swift bites. The surrounding brush rustled as

the pungent orange-smell spread.

I crossed my arms. "How are you today, Fee?"

The bright red eyes gazed wistfully at the rucksack. "Zo."

Martina scuffed her boot in the dirt. "This is so stupid! You can't have a conversation with an oversized mouse. There isn't anything in its head to communicate."

I watched orange juice dribble down Zo's chest. "Then who built the ruins?"

"I don't know, someone else, something else." She hugged her arms around her sweat-soaked ribs. "You'll never convince me *they* did it."

That thought had been occurring to me a lot lately — usually in the middle of a sleepless night — that the Survey had dumped us off here on Sabat Four on the proverbial fool's errand. Even though the mind-numbingly primitive kreeel compared poorly to the average Terran dog in intelligence, at some distant point in the past a spectacular city of soaring white columns had been built into a bluff just across the river.

The little kreeel stuffed the last of the sticky orange pulp into its mouth and looked at me hopefully.

"Zo ..." I held up the rucksack. "Sack?"

It scabbled at the slick material with one hand, then gazed at me with red, mournful eyes.

I copied the motion with my hand. "Sack?"

The small native sat back on its haunches and wrapped its long tail around its gray-furred body. I took out another orange section. It sniffed, then reached for it with small, spider-fingered hands. I pulled it away. "Orange?"

"Fee!" it said in its tiny squeak-voice, then fastened its needle-like incisors in my hand.

More shocked than hurt, I dropped the orange section. Zo, or maybe Fee, I was losing track at that point, snatched it up and disappeared into the leaning hut. My eyes fuzzed. The ground smacked the back of my head.

"Goddammit!" I was lying on the ground, my arms outstretched. Martina crouched on her knees beside me, swabbing my hand with disinfectant.

I pulled away. "What happened?"

She grabbed my hand again and sprayed it with a sterile bandage. "We'd better go back so Faye can give you a barazine booster, just in case."

"In case what?" I put one hand to my head and sat up.

"In case that bite infected you, idiot." She was staring at me.

I thought she'd lost her mind. "What bite?"

Holding my arm, she peeled the bandage off. Underneath, the skin was smooth and unmarked.

That was really stupid," Faye said later as she set a plate of steaming ham casserole in front of me. "Personally, I never let the little buggers get within an arm's length."

"Leave him alone, for God's sake. It was just an accident." Martina chewed her food as though it had offended her.

"I think you're both cracked — nothing happened." I took a bite and almost gagged on the strong taste of overcooked meat and salty vegetables.

Faye reached for the pepper. "I saw Ferguson and Hamilton today."

"Yeah? Where?" A twitch started above my eye. I dumped my plate into the disposal chute.

"They were up in a tree about twenty feet off the ground. She was naked as a baby, but Ferguson still had on his shirt. I tried, but I couldn't get a clear shot with my stunner."

I shoved the dirty plate into the sonic cleaner. "Did you at least note the location in the daily log?"

"What for?" Faye blinked at me over her fork.

A red fog simmered behind my eyes. "We're still transmitting a request for emergency assistance. It's just possible we can take them home for treatment — if we have some idea where they are when help comes, or are you too stupid to think of that?"

Faye folded her arms behind her head. "Reese, by the time the ship gets here, all three of us will probably be sitting in some tree next to them, drooling all over ourselves."

Pain speared through my temples. "Shut up!" I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, fighting a wave of nausea.

"Jesus, Reese, you look terrible." Martina's voice had a hollow ringing sound as though she were inside a barrel. "You'd better go lie down."

Without answering, I opened my eyes and fumbled along the wall to the room I had formerly shared with Ray Fackler. The air was much too cold, and smelled off somehow. I pulled the blanket over my head. "Turn the heat up," I mumbled as I fell asleep.

Soaring white spires shivered in the breeze, singing a hundred different songs, each of them exactly right. I hung on the edge of a milk-white parapet and looked down into a jungle full of vibrating colors — reds that tasted of scorched desert sun, blues that smelled of arctic ice, golds as warm on your skin as melted butter —

I cracked my head into the wall and came awake. The sheet was twisted around my legs and drenched



with perspiration. My mouth tasted like an illicit chemical dump, and the room felt like the inside of a freezer. I decided the temperature had been turned down instead of up.

Shivering, I groped for the light. My watch said it wouldn't be dawn for another ten hours. I was so cold that my thoughts seemed to freeze half-formed and settle to the bottom of my mind. All I knew for sure was I had to get warm.

Cursing, I stumbled out through the common rooms and closed the airlock door behind me. The cyler took forever to work. I was shivering so hard

by the time the outer lock opened that I could barely breathe.

Outside, the night was warm as bath water, sweet-smelling, filled with sighs and rustles. I knelt and rubbed my hands over my chill-bumped skin. Above, the star-littered sky winked in and out as the treetops swayed in an upper level breeze. I could feel the research station behind me, a cold black hole still sucking warmth from my body. I gritted my chattering teeth and stumbled down the path we had worn to the native huts.

The night seemed lighter than usual, even though Sabat Four has no moon, so one night is like the next. The vines shimmered a soft green, the trees an intense cobalt blue. Everywhere I looked, the jungle radiated color. I detoured the bulging tree roots and thickets with an accuracy I had scarcely bettered during the day.

The area outside the huts was alive with kreal, more than I had ever seen before. Still shivering, I stopped behind a thick root and watched the little climbers. Their coats glowed a strange electric blue in the darkness; their eyes were hot red coals. The slim, sleek bodies wove in and out in complicated patterns — a ritual of some sort, moving in twos and threes, leaping high into the air. Their small voices hummed some sort of song.

It hit me so suddenly I almost fell down: they must be nocturnal. After months studying them, we should have known that, but in all the times we'd stationed recorders in the trees above the huts, we'd never recorded any nighttime activity.

Join them, something whispered inside my head.

Over by the huts, the humming shifted into a lower register that vibrated into the ground and quivered up through my feet.

Come, the voice said, *they know you remember now.*

"Remember what?" I asked.

The kregel stopped their dance, sorted themselves into a half-circle. Their long, fine whiskers twitched. They seemed to be waiting.

Without knowing why, I stepped forward. Their red eyes gazed expectantly at me. Memories flickered through my mind ... *the kiss of the yellow-orange sun rising above the jungle in the first seconds of dawn ... the flare of tenderness when the young rise from the river nurseries ... the slickness of cool white stone between my fingers as I shaped it into soaring white columns ...*

Fear gripped me low and hard; my nails dug into my palms. I turned and fled back to the compound.

The next morning, I felt stiff and desiccated, like something left in the freezer too long. I was still cold, my eyes ached with a sullen ferocity, and my teeth hurt. That was what came of running around in the middle of the night, I told myself, even though I must have slept eight hours after I came back.

Faye had already left to gather specimens. Martina was waiting for me in the kitchen, the recorder packed. She held out the strap; it was my turn to back her up.

Her mouth quirked downward. "Jesus, I thought you were never going to get up."

She smelled of black coffee and sweat; her skin glowed a hot orange-pink. I rubbed my eyes. "I guess I overslept."

"Hurry up and eat so we can go."

My stomach twisted at the thought of food. "I — I'm not hungry." I picked up the recorder.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Outside, it was raining, soft and musical. The air lapped against my skin like warm milk. The leaves brushing my face tasted like cinnamon-apple pie, the raindrops like lemon custard. I wondered that I had never noticed it before.

Martina walked in front of me. "Why are we even bothering with this?" Her voice was tight and scratchy with tension. "None of it means a damn thing."

She was right. Our efforts to translate the kregel were never going to get anywhere. I could see that as plainly as the wet shirt plastered to her shoulders. "Let's skip the village and go down to the ruins," I said.

She twisted around to stare at me. "You want to go sight-seeing — Reese, the guy who figures duty schedules in his sleep? The same man who won't even take a crap unless it's his turn?"

Before I could answer, twigs rained down on our heads. Martina cursed and dodged behind a tree. I looked up. A red-haired woman whose cheeks gleamed with rainbow colors clung to a swaying branch with her toes and gazed back.

"Sasha!" Martina reached for her stunner. "Come down from there!"

The woman cocked her head and waited. I felt

her anticipation sheeting at me in waves. The tree bark cried out for my fingers. I yanked off my boots.

"Reese, don't be a fool!" Martina seized my arm. "You'll never catch her that way!"

Sasha laughed, low and throaty, then climbed higher, her bare flanks showing the first sign of the paler color of aging.

I watched her shimmy upwards, lithe as a snake. A fierce, quivering pain skittered along my nerves. I wrenched away from Martina and leaped onto the twisted trunk of the tree.

"Reese!" She grabbed my ankle.

I kicked her loose and dug my toes in, climbing past creeping vines and curtains of leaves, all the way up into the whispering shade. Sasha's bright brown eyes drew me as the flame draws a moth. She knew ... understood.

When I reached the fork in the trunk where she had wedged herself, she grazed my cheek with one shimmering finger. The morning exploded into bright mint-flavored sparkles —

EsSheeli ... I remembered a sea of triangular rainbow-colored faces dominated by cinnamon-colored eyes ... golden days of succulent fruit and crisp brown seeds ... long sweet nights lying entangled in ivory pavilions open to the trees and the stars ... vibrant blues and reds and yellows and greens that swam apart and then melted back together —

I blinked and found my face pressed into the rough bark of the trunk.

Sasha laughed. "Come," she whispered, and scrambled along the interwoven branches as though they were a highway.

I tested the limb with one foot to see if it would hold my greater weight.

"Reese!" a voice called from below.

I glanced down.

On the ground, Martina aimed a stun gun with both hands and caught me dead-square in the chest. My legs stiffened, and I tumbled backwards into icy darkness.

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The air was thick with cold and the bitter tang of plastic and metal, as hard to breathe as freezing water. I shivered uncontrollably under a heavy layer of blankets.

"I think he's a little better." A hand touched my forehead, then withdrew, leaving behind an after-taste of cold salt.



"Hell, he's no better! We should have started decontamination procedures as

soon as we brought him in. He's already turning colors like the rest of them."

Clothing rustled. "I don't know. We could just keep him in here and wait for the ship. I don't want to hurt him."

"Fackler's better off dead and you damn well know it!"

"Maybe."

I could hear them breathing, loud and raspy. I wanted to protest, but the icy air numbed my lips.

"Let the distress call run for a few more days. If they don't answer soon, we'll start."

"All right."

I heard the door slide shut. I forced my eyes open and stared at the garish green metal ceiling. If I spent another day in this arctic hell, I knew I would die. My eyes sagged shut again.

A giggle rippled through the darkness and roused me from a shallow sleep. "Reese?" The voice was curiously twinned, a low huskiness overlaid with a higher note.

Warm mint-flavored fingers touched my forehead.

Someone dug at the blankets. "Get up!"

I pried my eyelids open. Two faces hovered above me in the dimness.

"Come on, Reese!" Sasha's red hair brushed my cheek, tasting faintly of chocolate mint.

Shivering, I tried to uncurl the fetal knot my body had made of itself. Ferguson took my arm and levered me out of the bunk.

"Why are you still here?" His doubled voice was a hickory-scented whisper in my ear.

"It's — the cold!" I forced through clenched teeth. "I can't move."

"Once you get outside, you'll be all right." Sasha rubbed my arms; the touch of her palms on my bare skin intoxicated me with the taste of sweet liquid fire.

They supported me between them, easing through the common room in the darkness. I heard a rustle from one of the other bedrooms, Faye's, I think, but then we stumbled into the outer lock and closed the door.

Sasha hit the cycler while Ferguson cradled me against his warm naked chest. Memories flashed through my mind — *slim, wriggling shapes cutting through rushing water ... the crystalline kiss of starlight on my forehead.*

The cycler finished. Sasha opened the outer hatch, and Ferguson hauled me across the threshold like a sack of feed. Outside, the night flowed over me like warm soup, full of nourishing sounds and scents. I breathed slowly as the shivering receded. After a moment, I straightened up and stared at my shimmering hands.

The rest of them came out of the forest then, Jacques and Armand, Britta and Rachel, their skin alive with iridescent fire. I could feel their gladness, their joy in being free and together. I stepped toward them.

Sasha stopped me. "One more thing ..." She tugged at my pajamas.

I looked down and realized the soft material reeked of metal and plastic and scorched food. I started to unbutton the shirt, but Sasha and the others ripped the cloth and threw the shreds aside.

"Now," Sasha said, "to the City."

They took to the trees, helping me at first. Still stiff, I hobbled as best I could while they flashed ahead of me, climbing and singing. They reminded me of otters playing in a stream back on Earth, except their stream was the tree tops.

Tall, elegant, golden-haired Britta, who had never given me the least notice, dropped back and fed me a handful of apricot-flavored leaves and a juicy red-orange fruit. After that, I was stronger and made better time.

We reached the river just after dawn. A hint of expectation rode the warm air currents rustling

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through the leaves, a sense of returning order. A few krel wailed at the edge of the lazy green water, their noses twitching.

Sasha knelt on the bank and scooped water up to her mouth. I had a sudden flash of the day my first brood had risen from the river nursery to sample the air, their elongated heads breaking the smooth gleam of water. I had been here before — in another life, another body.

"Come on!" Ferguson waded from the center of the shallow river, thigh-deep, his legs braced against the current.

I waded in after him. The water kissed my naked skin with a mustard-and-honey sweetness. I felt whole, complete, refreshed.

On the opposite shore, I followed the others to what remained of our City on the bluff. They fell silent as we walked past crumbled walls and dry fountains. Remembering, I ran my hand along the toppled translucent white columns that had once soared above the tree tops — we had built for the sheer beauty of it, not for shelter or privacy or greed or any of the other human reasons for such undertakings I could dimly recall. We had created our City to be one with the rain and the sky and the flyers and the creepers and the stars, and so it had stood from the time we built it until now.

But where once it had held our dreams, it now held our bones, long-bleached and scattered.

EsSheeli ... the name bubbled up to my lips as I wandered past arches and broken pillars and curving tiers of steps. I felt frightened; something terrible had happened here.

I squatted beside a stream running through a sinuous milk-white canal and stared at a skull with long tapering jaws and a bulging forehead.

The *EsSheeli* had once lived here and played here — and died here. There was nothing left of them, except for, in some way, us.

A ginger-flavored hand touched my shoulder. "It's so sad." Britta leaned back against the steps. Iridescent fire danced across her cheeks in the sunlight. Her cropped blond hair gleamed with threads of pink and gold and blue.

I stared at a hollow cut into the bedrock and lined with seats, remembering the shrill harmonies of our lost songs and the long sweet nights of ritual. "It's all gone now."

"Except for us," she said.

The memories were there, spiced like a dish of off-world food, alien, yet hauntingly familiar. "But I was born on Earth."

"Most of us were." She stretched her arms over her head, arching her spine. "But we're not just human anymore."

"Then what are we?" I ran my hands down her shimmering sides, sampling her textures like a banquet ... banana — saffron — pepper — olive oil — cinnamon.

She wrapped her slim legs around me, drowning me in the taste of gingerbread. "What was left —

after," she breathed hotly into my ear. "And what will be."

Long, sun-soaked days passed, warm as heated honey, soft as the Mother River's embrace. We gamboled in the swaying treetops as the memories flickered on and off in our minds like a shorted circuit. Sometimes it seemed I had long tapering jaws and a doubled alien tongue that gave my words a sibilant hiss. I learned that when I touched a female, the taste/pleasure was great, but my mind was fogged for a long time afterward. I foraged with my fellow males and took to watching the slim, mysterious females from a distance, waiting for them to come into season. Sometimes I scouted the sandy river bottom for a place to construct a nest.

I was climbing high near the top of the forest with Ferguson one afternoon, searching for succulent blackfruits, when a dull white ship marked in green thundered down through the sky.

"They've come back!" Ferguson swung down.

The ship cut its motors and landed with an impact that rattled my teeth. I clutched the tree trunk to keep from falling and peered down through the silver-green leaves at the trail below which led to the research station. I heard voices, loud and arguing.

"How could you let things get so out of hand? The odds are against successfully recovering your personnel at this point."

Five strangers, three women and two men, walked into sight. Several carried cases marked with a green Patrol logo that glowed even in the daylight.

Faye trailed a few steps behind them, her gray hair neatly combed, her demeanor businesslike. "We've kept a log of all sightings. They mostly alternate between the trees and the ruins. Once you get your equipment set up, we should have them all in a few days, then we can get out of this hell-hole."

I waited until we couldn't hear them anymore, then turned to Ferguson. "We'll scatter and hide in the jungle until they go away again."

His face wrinkled sorrowfully. "Leave the City?"

In my own head, I felt the same wrenching sense of dislocation at the thought of running away. The translucent white City was our center; we knew nothing else. I remembered then the manner of our passing ... the relentless sickness that seized us by the throat and would not let go ... how we had fallen in each other's arms, tasting of our sweet differences one last time ... how some might have survived if we could have borne to be alone, even for a few days ... but we could not.

Ferguson whimpered. I touched his shoulder and tasted his familiar hickory. "Find Jacques and Armand and the females and tell them about the ship."

He nodded, then climbed up to a higher level and set off toward the City.

I waited for a long time after that, thinking. We could not go back to that chill, pallid existence where there were no true colors and we lived shut away from the sky and the trees and the sun, but Ferguson and Armand would never leave the City, nor the females. Along with the wonder and beauty of my new existence, that knowledge was written in my head in fire. It was not in the range of our possible behaviors. If it had been, then we might not have died in the first place.

I shivered, even though the air was mild and welcoming. The humans would all be at the research station now, gathered in their frigid rooms, plotting to steal us away. I knew they would never leave without us. Inside their heads it was written that abandonment was wrong, that change was not acceptable, that sickness had to be cured.

I worked my way toward the station, keeping to the tree paths that served us so well. Down below, the krel emerged from their crude huts and sat back on their haunches, gazing up at me. Their ears flattened against their long heads. I knew they understood what was at stake because they remembered the dead past in the same way I did.

The whispers in the back of my head had explained it all — how, when the Sheeli died, their microscopic symbiotes, the Es, had sought partnership with a lower lifeform in order to survive. The krel were a good species, simple and honest, but they lacked the genetic equipment to speak more than a few simple sounds or make anything but the crudest of artifacts. Partnering with them had been acceptable, but it would not be satisfying for another thousand years.

But now we had come — another promising match. Together, we were more than the sum of our parts. In time, the EsSheeli could live again, if the humans left us in peace. But they would not go unless they understood we were content, and I had to make them listen.

I motioned to the krel. They swarmed into the trees and followed me to the clearing around the station. I watched from the crown of the closest tree as the strangers fiddled with a device, trying to calibrate the settings.

I worked my way down, then dropped from a low hanging branch to the ground, landing with flexed knees to muffle the sound. They did not look up until I was quite close.

"Reese!" Martina whirled, her face a glaring white-pink under smoldering black hair.

One of the men leveled a stunner at my midsection.

I turned my empty palms up. "I won't hurt you," I said, hearing the doubled note in my voice. "I've come to explain."

An older woman, soft around the neck and jowls, held her hand out to me. "You're going to be just fine, son. Come over here so we can take care of you."

I stopped short of the clearing. "We intend to stay."

One of the other women, a stern-mouthed creature with small, dark eyes, jerked a medical device off her belt and took some readings. She turned to Faye and Martina. "Do they all show the same symptoms — the change in skin texture, the higher body temperature, the altered coloring?"

"We're all the same," I answered. "And we're not going back."

A square-jawed man edged closer to me. "That's just the infection talking. You'll feel differently once we get you cleaned out."

"If you 'clean' me out, I'll die, just like Fackler."

"Don't worry about that. We're old hands at this."

He motioned with his stunner. "Don't make this any harder than it has to be. Come inside the station."

I glanced up at the interwoven branches overhead. The leaves rustled. "Go away and leave us alone."

"Reese, you know we can't do that!" Martina started toward me, her eyes bright with tears.

"Then," I said softly, "you'll have to stay too." The krel leaped down from the branches, at least a hundred strong, their blue bodies shimmering, the sunlight glinting off their sharp little teeth. They swarmed the humans, nipping them, binding them to us and this place as only the Es know how to do.

The rain spatters down through the leaves, cool and silvery. We males wait by the rocks at the edge of the chattering river. We have dug our concave nests in the soft sand under the shallow green water. Our noses tell us the females are almost ready to spawn.

Soon we will have young ones to tell about the beauty that once was and will one day be again. Their heads will be longer than ours, their jaws more tapered. They will have a clearer memory of the past.

And with each succeeding generation, the EsSheeli will more nearly live again. □

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Into the Labyrinth

By Molly Barr

Art by Charles Lang

I'm an old woman now; as old as the Martian crust, some would say. I've been a resident of Mars for a long time. I've seen first footfall, and I saw city hall go up. I've lived through countless Darkenings, and have grown to love the long periods of solitude they bring. I was a lonely young woman. Now I'm an old woman alone, but rarely lonely.

I've made a few good friends in my time, and I remember them all well, but there is one they talk about still. Only just the other day a grizzled old scapolite miner climbed out of the Labyrinth and told me he had seen the glint of sun on gossamer wings deep in the pink canyon mists. Through the years there have been several such sightings, and each time I think of Jefferson.

It was many years ago — the Wave of Darkening was just around the corner, perhaps only a few months away — when I first met him. I was sitting against the wall, my chair tipped precariously on its back legs, when the airlock at Tharsis Base IV Ranger Station hissed and slammed shut with a thud. He entered the operations office with his helmet tucked under one arm and a canvas bag slung over the other. His name was Jefferson Winfield, but he looked like an Elmer Philpot, or maybe a Silas Rosenthal. His spacesuit hung on his small frame in folds, its sleeves hiked up with garters to prevent them from drooping over his hands. The stiff neck of the suit bunched up to his ears, and his scrawny head poked out like a startled turtle from its shell. He looked very young, except for his eyes — they were ageless.

Hack Cherny was sitting behind the desk, his feet crossed on top of it, a mug of coffee in one hand. "Been expecting you, Winfield, what with the Darkening almost here," Hack said. He guzzled the remainder of his coffee and swiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

The Darkening reaches us here at the Equator in midsummer and takes a month or more to pass. In early spring, as the northern polar ice cap begins to recede, the winds in the region build up and spiral away from the pole, moving south, picking up sand and speed as they go. Through the distant telescopes on Earth this phenomenon looks like a great shadow. It crawls across the surface of Mars, cleansing all in its path, until it finally dissipates in the southern hemisphere. Those caught in its path who survive never forget

the experience. Wind velocities reach as high as one hundred miles per hour, totally obscuring all in sight. The sand, powder fine, permeates everything, making it impossible to operate even the hardest machinery.

Hack waved the cup in my direction. "This here's Sandy Troubadour, one of my troopers," he said to Jefferson Winfield. Hack was the chief ranger back then, and responsible for the land management of the entire Tharsis Plateau — some 16,000 square miles.

"I came for supplies," Jefferson said.

Hack dropped his feet to the floor and leaned forward. "Mister Winfield." He emphasized the "Mister" with slow deliberation. "I can't authorize more supplies for you until after the Darkening."

"The Weather Bureau believes that I have two months at least," Jefferson said.

"The Weather Bureau!" Hack spewed. "Those jackasses can't predict the sunrise! Every summer, in spite of all warnings, some squirrel finds himself stranded when the Wave gets here ... and he dies. Get that, Winfield? He dies!"

Apparently unfazed by Hack's outburst, Jefferson pulled off his heavy gloves, retrieved an envelope from his bag, and placed it on the desk.

Hack snapped the paper open in his large hands. "Shit," he said, and shoved it in my direction.

The MARTIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSEMBLY letterhead spoke loud and clear. The Assembly carried a lot of weight, though I'm not sure why. To date, nothing of archaeological import has been found on Mars.

"So be it," Hack said. He rifled his fingers through stone gray hair, a thoughtful frown on his dark face, then added, "Sandy, you better go with him."

"Wait just a damn minute —" I began. The legs of my chair nearly slid out from under me. I eased them to the floor.

"Now, Sandy, don't give me any guff over this. Just keep an eye on him for me, will you? Make sure he gets back in plenty of time to dig in for the Darkening."

The next morning we loaded Jefferson's supplies into a Mars Ball and began the trek east to Noctis Labyrinth. The



Labyrinth heads up the massive complex of canyons called the Valles Marineris. It's not as deep as the Valles Marineris which, in places, goes down nearly 28,000 feet, but it's impressive all the same. Eight hundred miles across, it drops into the Martian crust south of Tharsis Ridge, looking like crumpled tinfoil. Parts of it remain unexplored to this day, and many a prospector or explorer has entered its maze, never to return.

The Ball, unfortunately, was the best mode of transportation for most of my travels. It was an all-terrain vehicle designed with the varied surface of Mars in mind. It consisted of four inflatable tires and two axles with a control cab slung beneath. The tires were made of individually inflatable segments and stood nearly twenty feet tall, fully inflated. The inflatable compartments in each tire were manipulated by computer-controlled air compressors in each hub which kept the vehicle upright and moderately level over the most strenuous terrain.

With perverse pleasure, I steered the vehicle over a cow-sized boulder. The huge amoebic tires engulfed the rock and spewed it out behind. We jounced alarmingly, our seats swaying in their brackets. Jefferson's Adam's apple popped up above the neck of his suit, then disappeared again. His bony hands gripped the sides of his seat until they marbled. Riding a Mars Ball is like riding a cantankerous camel. Maybe worse.

I turned the wheel, avoiding an enormous rock too large for the tires to handle. One tire slid up the side of the rock's surface, then flattened against it. I gritted my teeth.

The Martian landscape crawled by, red and dusty, but strangely seductive. The tiny sun, weak and ineffectual, was rising in the east. Mt. Olympus, the highest peak on Mars, loomed large to the north. Even at this distance, it dominated the horizon, rising into the sky beyond the three volcanos that made up Tharsis Ridge. A plume of white clouds swept from its jagged peak sixteen miles above the plateau like a smoke signal.

The Ball sidled down a gully and began to lumber up the other side.

"Just what is it that you're looking for in the Labyrinth?" I asked, making conversation.

"Nothing," he said, "I've already found it."

The land began to ripple around us. The Ball bucked and hissed, its tires deflating and inflating in uneven rhythm. Down we went — into the Labyrinth. Red walls of ferrous rock rose, then towered, above us. The Labyrinth frightened me, though I had on occasion been required to venture into parts of it.

I was sagging from exhaustion when we finally stopped on a peninsula that jutted out into a

deep ravine. Jagged peaks surrounded us, pink in the setting sun, their shadows growing across the ground like stalagmites.

"This is a helluva place, Jefferson," I said. I was unimpressed. It was beginning to get cold; the heaters in my suit kicked in, whining in my ears.

"There's a cave about halfway down," Jefferson said, indicating a winch and pulley with a cable that extended over the abrupt edge of the peninsula. A rusty motor sat near the assembly covered with fine, red dust. I inched up to the cliff's edge, resisting the impulse to crawl on my stomach, and peered into the abyss. It went down, seemingly forever, and disappeared into the darkness.

"I discovered the cave quite by accident one day when I was over on the opposite escarpment," he said, waving his arm towards the ravine wall several miles away. Jefferson started the motor, and the cable began to move. A flimsy platform, attached to the end of the cable, ground to a halt at our feet.

The motor chugged weakly, the cable squealed over the pulley, and we dropped slowly downward. Gripping the cable with stiff hands, I noticed that I could see the depths of the ravine through the cracks between the planks I was standing on. I took a deep breath and stared blankly at the rock face sliding by. When we stepped from the platform, a dull light glowed from the depths of a cave in front of us.

Jefferson stopped and looked up at me, his face a black hole behind his visor. "You're the first to see this," he said. "You mustn't tell anyone."

I hesitated.

"Promise me!" he insisted.

I was cold and tired — a lethal combination. Peevishly, I toyed with the idea of smashing the little guy and getting it over with. "Oh, what the hell," I said, squelching my irritation, "I promise."

What I saw, gently illuminated by a large glow lamp, left me utterly speechless. I could understand why Jefferson enjoyed the strong backing of the Archeological Assembly. I doubted, however, that he had informed them of the full extent of his discovery.

We were in a great cavern that vaulted overhead perhaps fifty feet. Jefferson's environmental tent, in the center, gleamed in the light and brightly reflected the cave's red walls. With its airlock attached to the side, it looked like an igloo. A compressor stood next to it.

One wall of the cave rose, sheer and straight, from floor to ceiling. A scaffold climbed its face and criss-crossed in front of what, at first glance, appeared to be a painting. It was partially exposed, most of it hidden from view by a layer of rock several inches to a foot thick.

Jefferson's tools — tiny brushes, delicate drills, and chisels — were arranged on a bench near the scaffolding. I pictured him painstakingly chipping away at the rock to reveal the treasure beneath.

Upon closer examination, I saw that it wasn't a painting, but something entirely different. The brilliant colors were etched, or burned, into the wall of the cavern — much like a tattoo.

The colors flowed and blended on the stone — like a window into another world. A young woman, almost ethereal in her delicacy, stood on a bluff. Her hair was translucent and floated about her head like a cloud. She beckoned to a little girl who ran toward her in graceful bounds. Mount Olympus pierced the azure sky behind them.

"My God, Jefferson!" I said. The implications of the etching were staggering, its age incalculable.

Jefferson touched the face of the Martian woman — a lover's caress. "I've named her Josephine," he said, "and her child, Daisy."

In Jefferson's tent that night, I leaned back on my elbows, my feet crossed at the ankles, and watched the play of light on the silver material. I thought about Josephine, of the story she told, moving and fading, blending one event with the next in a continuous flow on the cavern wall.

"Sandy," Jefferson interrupted my reverie, "what brought you to Mars?"

I was silent for a moment, then decided to give him a truthful answer. "Well, Jefferson," I said, "I'm a large, homely woman, and I've never taken well to authority. I didn't fit in on Earth."

"Then," he said, "I believe we have something in common after all." He raised himself on one elbow and looked at me. "Sandy?"

"Yes?"

"I don't think you're homely."

It was nearly a week before I returned. When I did, Josephine was in trouble, and Jefferson was working feverishly through the night.

In the etching, the Labyrinth was alive with movement. Delicate people floated from sharp

precipices. They had shimmering wings attached to their backs, tethered at each arm and leg like flying squirrels. They were laughing. Their wings flashed, and their bright faces glowed in the sunlight. I spotted Josephine and Daisy, high on the cavern wall. They were with a man who hovered over them protectively.

I was enchanted.

Jefferson raised his hammer and brought it down on the head of a chisel. A small sliver of rock fell to the floor. "I used to dream about flying like that," he said.

Then out of the sky, meteors began to fall, and the people fled in chaos. Some of the meteors were so large that they blotted out the entire sky. They plowed into the ground, obliterating enormous areas. The man was no longer with them, it was just Josephine and Daisy now, running for their lives. Olympus began to smolder on the horizon.

Jefferson's chisel rang in the cold night air, his eyes dark pools of sadness.

And so the weeks went by. I became nearly as obsessed with Josephine and Daisy as Jefferson was. I divided my time between work and the cave ... and I haunted the Tharsis Plateau Weather Station. The Darkening was coming. It was moving faster than usual this year, they said.

One day when I arrived at the cave, Jefferson was waiting for me, sitting on the ledge of the cavern, his feet dangling over the edge. He had a large needle gripped in his clumsy, gloved hands. A swath of bright metallic material was puddled in his lap. I settled near him a safe distance back from the drop-off.

"I've seen them, you know," Jefferson said. He pushed the needle through the material and pulled it out the other side.

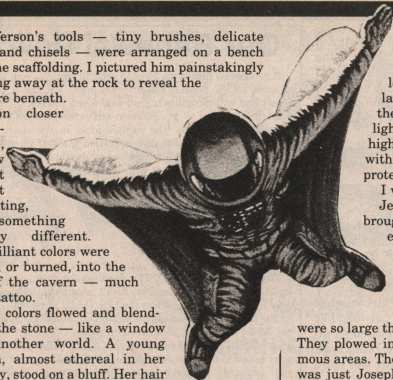
I didn't have to ask who.

"Down there. Quite often, actually. I can see the sun reflect off their wings."

I peered over the edge. The sheer canyon walls faded into pink mists far below. I wondered what Jefferson was making with the silver material.

Josephine and Daisy were completely alone now. Together, they hiked through the maze of canyons seeking refuge. Fire spewed from Mt. Olympus, and several lesser volcanoes sprouted on the plateau. Torrential rains poured from black skies, and the river running through the Labyrinth became a torrent.

I returned reluctantly once again to my work. As Hack would say, it was time to batten down



the hatches. Reports began coming in: first sign of the Wave had reached as far south as Alba Patera, a huge crater north of Mt. Olympus. I went up to the Ascraeus Station, which was next in the Wave's path, and closed it up. The wave of sand was nipping at my heels when I returned, and I was worried sick about Jefferson.

The air was thick with red silt, and the wind howled and buffeted the platform as I lowered myself down to the cave.

I found Jefferson hunched at the base of the etching. Lifting his chin in my hand, I saw that the inside of his face-plate was misted with tears.

Josephine and her child had reached temporary safety in a cave partway up a cliff. The water was rising below and would soon spill over into the cave. There was nowhere for them to go.

Josephine gathered the frail little girl into her arms. From her pocket she took a pill between her thumb and forefinger and gently placed it in Daisy's mouth. Then Josephine rocked Daisy back and forth, singing her a lullaby, until the child was dead.

I awoke with a start, my heart pounding in my ears. The cavern was dim with first morning's light, and puffs of wind filtered in, ruffling the sides of the tent.

Jefferson was gone.

I hurried into my environmental suit and snapped my helmet in place. Shadows, thrown from the scaffolding, made a cross-hatch pattern in the dust at my feet as I crawled through the airlock. Perhaps Jefferson was up early packing, but somehow I didn't think so.

A metallic flash caught the corner of my eye, and I rushed toward the front of the cave where the winds of the Darkening raced down the ravine, howling and lashing at the face of the cliff.

Jefferson stood silhouetted against the dust-laden sky at the cave's entrance. His arms were outstretched, and attached to his white suit, at the wrists and ankles, was a pair of silver wings. His head swiveled inside his helmet, and he glanced over his shoulder at me. A tiny smile touched his lips, then he leaned into the gale, stepped over the edge, and vanished.

Many years have passed. Josephine's etching remains the most significant discovery on Mars; Jefferson Winfield's name is in all the history books. As for me? I return to the Labyrinth each summer just before the Darkening. I know that one day I will look down and see the glint of sun on gossamer wings. Perhaps, then, I will join them.

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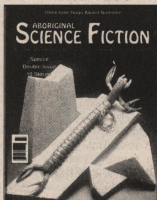
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Growing Higher

By P. J. L. Hinder

Art by Robert Pasternak

In his dreams, he flew above the mountains. Pale blue in the earthlight, they seemed to heave below him, like the ghost of an ocean. He could feel sickness rising in his stomach, but there was no end to the waves: the crests piled up ahead of him, each layer higher than the last, until they were a vertical shield, blinding silver under the midday sun. The suit rushed him on towards the light, but he got no closer to it. Air alarms shrieked. Red lights blinked in the visor, and his brain became thick from lack of oxygen. But still he was getting no closer. In the surface below, white cracks opened, like an eggshell breaking from inside — and the fire was streaming in ...

Sewa Singh awoke, shaking and sweating, and instantly remembered where he was and why he had dreamed that particular dream.

They would be here today, almost for certain.

He sat up, letting the sheet fall, and examined the black hairs that were turning to gray on his chest. Eighty-two years. His great-great-grandfather wouldn't have considered it a bad span of life, he thought bitterly. He swung out of bed, slowly so as to avoid disturbing the young woman sleeping next to him. The air was warm, and the carpet was soft on his feet. He padded through the half-darkness towards the shadow of an ebony cabinet, opened a small drawer, and took out a golden control bracelet. Tiny keys glowed in the dark, made from emerald, lilac amethyst, ruby, sapphire, diamond. They no longer controlled anything; the bracelet had been offline for forty years. Primitive, he thought — like me. But he put it on his right wrist anyway.

Pushing aside the silk curtains of the doorway, he stepped up into the mainroom. The sudden steely light sent stabs of pain through his eyes; he blinked, put out an arm to lean on the doorway, looked around. Black and silver stools were scattered like tall spiders across the moon-dust-coloured carpet; in their midst crouched a low table topped with white Imbrian stone. Beyond, the room curved gently away to the kitchen, a pattern of gray squares and green vines. The shape of the room was intended to imitate the torus in an orbit station; the style had been fashionable half a century ago when the unit had been built. Singh had always meant to do some alterations, bring it up to date a bit.

Well, it was too late to worry about that now.

"The possessions of the deceased, Sewa Singh,

were sold at auction today ..." he muttered. He wondered where he'd left the whisky bottle.

A floor-to-ceiling screen on the outer wall, several metres long, was set up as a false window; at present it was showing the view above on the Surface, a flat landscape with a short horizon. The lunar rock glared like concrete in the noon sun. Metal rails ran across the ground, surrounded by dull orange coil guides. A couple of black slits near the horizon indicated the sites of landing ports.

Nothing moved.

Four months ago (a time of innocence, Singh thought sadly), silver packages had rushed along those rails, red lights flickering as the cargoes accelerated towards orbital velocity. Trolleys loaded with grit had rolled up to the dumps. Shuttles had grumbled in and out of the ports every minute, sending a deep, soothing vibration through the floor of the apartments. Singh had liked that sound; in his more fanciful moments he had used to think of it as a heartbeat, a living beat, as if the Port, the Base, the entire mine System with all its machinery were part of a living animal. And he had watched the lines of red-lit cargoes receding and seen arteries pulsing with red blood, moving the digested substance of the Moon to other parts of the body of the human race, where they would be built into new, living worlds ...

It occurred to him that he ought to ask.

"System," he commanded.

The house system indicated that it was ready, by means of a small chime.

"Any flights due in?"

A list appeared on the inner wallscreen; there were four entries. At the head of the list was the UN Administrative Support Ship *Diversity* — "Special Run," due in at 07:15.

Ten minutes.

"Passenger list, number one," he rapped out.

The screen responded.

Akimboola, Joshu. 79.

UN Peace Corps, Senior Officer.

Cleomides, Aristo. 35.

UN Peace Corps, Sergeant.

Singh felt his stomach heave. They were really coming. He really would be taken to Earth, put on trial; certainly found guilty. Given "socially useful



work" to do. Planting trees. Helping the irreversibly senile to use the lavatory. Burying the dead.

And, whatever he did, in Earth's crushing gravity he would age. Muscles would lose their tone, cells would die, irreversible decay would occur in his own blood vessels and neural tissues.

It was something that he had come to think would never happen to him. He had had a good job and plenty of money. Antisenility drugs — low-gravity replacement organs — and perhaps he would last until the day when people started to live forever. But not now. Now Sewa Singh was going to die, like all the rest of them. He fingered the golden control bracelet, watched a date form in ruby letters on the gold.

"Four months ..." he muttered.

Four months ago, he had been facing this same inner screen, confirming costs with a client in Osaka, when the news had come. There had been a world called Kuppam, newly built by the Yamoyata company in high Earth orbit. It had been the largest, newest, and best of its kind: the flagship of the makers. A steel and glass spheroid almost thirty kilometres across, filled with air and light, had rotated rapidly in order to generate a lunar-like "gravity." Inside there had been woodlands, hills, rivers, bridges, small towns with open-plan houses. Thousands of people had come to live there, to escape the heavy, dusty, corrupted Earth.

On the outside of Kuppam, in order to protect the delicate fleshshell from radiation and meteoroids, there had been a stationary casing of lunar rock; the junctions between the moving and the static shells had been supported by light alloy bearings. Four months ago the supposedly impossible had happened: one of these bearings had sheared. That on its own would not have been serious, since the system was partially redundant, but within ninety seconds a second bearing had failed, and then a third. The inner shell had started to topple wildly, slammed into the casing, and breached in several places. Air had rushed out, laden with fragments, widening the breaches; within a few minutes the shell had disintegrated. Fifty thousand, five hundred, and ninety-five people had died.

Sewa Singh had been the person responsible for the safety of the light alloy used in the failed bearings.

"I see we'll have visitors soon," Singh jumped at the voice, looked up, and saw that the girl had come into the room and was looking at the inner screen. She had washed and patterned; a wide stripe of purple decorated with silver stars ran across her black skin from shoulder to hip, and a light jasmine scent filled the air. Before he could speak she had crossed the

room, pulled open a wallset, picked out a metal bowl and a wooden scoop.

"Perhaps I'd better make them some breakfast," she commented.

Singh opened his mouth, but it took a few seconds for him to make any words.

"They're coming to arrest me — take me away forever, destroy my life — and you want to cook a meal for them?" He tried to laugh, but could only make a kind of choking sound.

She glanced at him. "I'm quite serious." From another wallset she scooped out oats, soft lentils, dried apricots and began to mix them in the bowl. "If we all eat together, it will reduce the tension between us."

Singh felt sick. She was only nineteen. But even at that age, surely —

"This isn't a quarrel at a children's party, Bernadette. Psycho-social techniques from Copernicus College aren't going to do any good in this situation. Perhaps you should go."

She took the bowl to the sink, filled it with water, placed it on a hotspot on the gray-topped hob, fitted the lid into place. Then said, as she scrubbed in the wallset for cutlery, "You'd better wash and dress."

He watched her for a moment, as she walked past him with her arms full of wooden bowls and metal spoons, laid the table two-handed, fetched glasses and a jug of lemon juice. The movements of her swift young body were as implacable as steel.

"Go and wash," she repeated levelly, when he just stood there.

He turned slowly, walked back towards the bedroom.

Bernadette Faraddin watched the man leave the room from the corner of her eye, then linked the electronic part of her brain to the house cameras to follow his progress. She saw him walk into the poolroom and to the scented water, felt him key an instruction to the system. The Jacuzzi began to whirl. Meanwhile Singh crossed the green tiles to the lavatory and urinated.

Bernadette grinned. Obviously he didn't think she was watching him. He often forgot about the capabilities of her implants.

It was an old person's mental stiffness, she thought. At times it was hard to believe that Sewa Singh was eighty-two, with his childish jokes, his temper, his party nights, his wild-bull lovemaking. But then — at other times ...

She'd once suggested that he have an implant fitted for himself. His reaction had amazed her: he'd almost exploded with anger, his eyes popping from their sockets. "Bloody hell, Bernadette! I'm not having a machine doing my brain's job for it! I want to stay alive — I, not some bloody computer!"

He had rarely mentioned the Kuppam disaster to her; he had attended Company hearings, she knew, and one infamous press conference. But all he would say in private was, "There is nothing to be done. I am a lamb to their slaughter."

Bernadette had made her own plans, nonetheless.

She switched off her link, turned to the hob, sniffed at the vapour that was rising from the hotpot. Vegetal, but a little bland: it needed spice, she decided. She walked past the machinery of the kitchen, following the curve of the room to an area thick with plants. Some of them had been here when she arrived — decorative things like damsel roses, silverbells, blood orchids, blue ferns — but she had brought others, mostly herbs in pots, from her student's digs at Copernicus. The plants wore in and around each other in the broad shafts of piped sunlight, growing higher than they ever would on Earth.

Bernadette set about gathering what she needed. Parsley, lemon verbena, stick bay, gingerleaf — she balanced the flavours in her mind, watched the predictive pH traces on her visual cortex display, imagined likely reactions and possible side products. Infographics and schematics of chain polymers filled her eyes. For a moment she was back at school, learning the basic uses of her implant's encyclopaedic access states. Even the many-angled sunlight was the same, the smell of green, the humidity. Slowly, she relaxed.

When she returned to the mainroom she found Singh standing by the table, wearing a strong spicy scent and a neck-to-ankle pattern of primrose yellow decorated with gray crescents. She put her bundle of leaves down on the hob, smiled at him.

"I've picked these to flavour the breakfast."

He stared at her as if she were a stranger, a thief broken into his apartment. She realized that there was a tumbler in his hand, and that part of the scent about him was whiskey.

"I'm trying to help," she said uncertainly.

He turned away, refilled his tumbler from a decanter on the table. Took several swallows.

His voice was slurred when he spoke. "I've just seen their ship come in. It was beautiful, you know, just beautiful. Like a seed: a silver seed drifting down to Earth — to the Moon, I mean — to bury itself in the soil and reproduce." He laughed, banged the palm of his free hand down on the table, turned and winked at her. "Don't worry, Bernadette, I'm not drunk. I won't spoil the party. I'm just overcome with emotion at the prospects for my wonderful future."

She walked up to him, making an effort to write a smile on her face, searching her memories, onboard and remote, in search of the best thing to say.

"SYSTEM!" bawled Singh. Bernadette jumped; stress readouts blinked in the corners of her eyes.

"SYSTEM!" He bawled it again, without giving the machine a chance to respond. There was a huge physical anger in his voice. He caught Bernadette's arm, gripped it so tightly that the bone hurt.

The system chimed.

"I want to see a tiger. Sabre. At Khadri." Singh's breath came in rapid snorts. His grip on Bernadette's arm tightened further, so that columns of red damage report readouts on her display added themselves to the whining nerves: she shut off both so that she could concentrate.

In front of them, the wallscreen had become a window on Khadri, the orbital tiger reserve. Moist green leaves hung over dark soil. To the left, apparently behind the kitchen, was a still white pool. The scene was three-dimensional, the illusion so complete that the soil looked only a small step down from the carpet. After a few seconds there was a faint rustling, a whisper of breath, a sense of presence ...

A tiger stepped out from the foliage. He walked past them without pausing, so close that Bernadette could feel the heat radiating from his body. When he reached the pool he stopped, sniffed the air, looked over his shoulder. His eyes were enormous, water-green, aware. Bernadette's stomach tightened.

"He knows we're watching, doesn't he?" she whispered.

But Singh still ignored her. He stared without a blink into the animal's eyes. After a while he said in a soft voice, "Ah, that's my tiger."

With a grunt, the tiger turned to drink from the pool, and Singh told the screen to revert. He released her arm, muttering, "Sorry, Bernadette." He fiddled with a gold bracelet on his wrist. The device beeped faintly, like a tiny metal animal lost in a maze.

Singh turned and looked at her, his eyes solemn.

"I'm going to take a final look at the surface," he said. "If our visitors should arrive, give them some breakfast and tell them I will be back soon." He carefully placed his half-empty tumbler in the centre of the table and strode out through the doorway leading to the airlock.

Bernadette stared at the gray curtain swinging behind him, listened to the clicks and hisses as he suited up. She was glad he was going out; if he stayed away until after the UN people had arrived, it would make it easier to do what she had in mind.

For a moment she did think he might be trying to escape, but then dismissed the notion as ridiculous. He couldn't make a move without their knowing it. If he tried to take a shuttle, or even a buggy, the base System would have instructions to refuse

it clearance. A picture came to her head: Singh walking across the mountains in his old red Aztex suit, destination unknown, the true twentieth-century science-fiction hero. She grinned.

Singh had been gone less than five minutes when they arrived. Bernadette ran down the stone stairs leading from the mainroom to the street door, arriving just as it opened. Two figures stood there, wearing white Earth suits with blue armbands and blue UN badges on the lapels. Behind them, the wide street was crowded: Moon people in patterns and dayskirts, Earth reporters in thick, dull-coloured clothing. Flycameras buzzed and clattered around the lemon trees, their long snouts pointing, lenses dark.

"Ms. ... Faraddin?"

She focused on the speaker: an old man. Senility had made nets of creases on the charcoal-coloured skin of his face, and his woolly hair was gray white.

"I am Joshu Akimboola, of the UN Peace Corps. This is a Sergeant Officer, Aristo Cleomides. May we come in?"

She stepped aside. "We thought you might be here soon." She paused, smiled. "I have some breakfast for you, in case you weren't able to eat on the ship."

"That would be kind," said Akimboola at once. "Thank you."

He didn't seem surprised, which Bernadette had somehow expected him to be.

In the mainroom, Bernadette gestured for the two men to sit at the table. Akimboola sat down with his back to the kitchen, moving with the easy grace of one long used to many kinds of gravity; Cleomides, seemingly curious, walked over to the main wallscreen and peered out at the motionless landscape. Looking at the sergeant for the first time, Bernadette saw that he was brown-skinned and puffy-faced, with a typical Earth person's heaviness of build. Unlike Akimboola, he moved awkwardly in the light gravity; when he sat down he grasped at the edge of the table while he pulled up his stool, as if he were still in freefall and expected to float away. Obviously he was new to space. Bernadette wondered if that fact might be useful.

She turned to the kitchen, signalled open a valve on the cooking pot: a jet of hot steam rushed out, smelling of bay and ginger. There was a robot hot-hand mounted on the oven; she linked to it, bent it down to remove the pressure lid, waited for the steam to clear. Released the link, took the wooden handles of the pot in her own hands, and carried it to the table. The aromatic steam rose in front of her eyes as she walked; beads of condensation tickled on her nose and chin.

Akimboola spoke. "Mr. Singh is out, then?"

Bernadette nodded. "He said he wouldn't be long. He wants to have a last look at the surface."

"Of course," said Akimboola. "We quite understand."

Cleomides gave his superior a swift glance, as if he were puzzled by this exchange. Bernadette wondered if there was some sort of disagreement between them on policy. A generation gap, perhaps. If so, that might be useful too.

The proper etiquette was to serve the older man's portion first. She spooned the sticky green mash into Akimboola's bowl; he held it still for her whilst she did so. Looking down at his face, she noticed that he was wearing a discreet blue eyeshadow of the kind that had been fashionable for men about ten years ago. Obviously he liked the effect; Bernadette decided that she liked it too. And its very out-of-dateness made him seem less official, more human and accessible. She smiled at him.

Turning to Cleomides, she spooned out his portion. He didn't hold the bowl for her, continued staring out of the wallscreen.

Still, thought Bernadette, I'd better try to relate to him.

"You are from Europe, Mr. Cleomides?"

"No. Green Saharan. West Kebir. My father's parents were Greek."

"So you're a colonist, like us. A maker of new territories." She smiled as she said it, making eye contact, but Cleomides's reply was abrupt.

"Not quite like you. Our territories are on Earth. We are contributing to the ecosystem, not taking things away from it." He began attacking his mash with his spoon.

Bernadette bit her lip. No joy there. Better concentrate on Akimboola.

She served herself a small portion of food, then returned the bowl to a warmspot on the hob to keep the remainder for Singh when he came back. Returned to the table and sat down.

Akimboola took a mouthful of the food, chewed and swallowed, nodded approvingly.

"The herbs are fresh?"

"From the garden." She indicated the tangled greenery, just visible around the curve of the kitchen.

The old man smiled.

"A very civilized way of living."

Bernadette grinned to herself; that had clearly been an implied rebuke to Cleomides.

She decided that now was as good a time as any to start the action.

"Will the trial be on Station?" she began, addressing the remark to Akimboola.

He flicked his eyes up to hers, and down again to the table.

"On Earth."

"The gravity will be difficult for Sewa and me." She didn't stress the "and me." *Let the other person feel their own surprise* — she could almost hear her Psycho-Soc teacher speaking.

But to her disappointment, Akimboola showed no sign of being surprised.

"We will provide a support suit for each of you, and time to acclimatise. And the necessary permits for you to travel with Mr. Singh will be no difficulty in the circumstances."

From the corner of her eye, she noticed a puzzled expression flicker across Cleomides's features, though his gaze never turned from the window. Good. She had surprised him, at least. She took a sip of lemon juice.

"Even with the support suit, the gravity could kill Sewa within a few months." She kept her voice calm and level, made eye contact (*maximum influence that way*).

"Isn't it possible to have him tried here on the Moon — and punished, if he has to be, up here too? Wouldn't it be easier for everyone?"

She waited, but Akimboola only chewed stolidly.

"Can't be done," said Cleomides, turning to face her for the first time. "Earth people want to see him tried on Earth. Lunar colonists have been getting away with too much. Going too fast." He put a knuckle to his mouth for an instant, glanced up at Akimboola. "That's just a personal opinion of course."

Bernadette looked from one to the other of them, Akimboola eating, Cleomides playing with his food, both of them avoiding her eyes. She wondered if they knew something about what was being planned.

Well, now was the time to find out.

"There are friends of mine at Copernicus" — she mentioned some names, senior Tutors, SystemOps, academics — "who think that the Moon should be allowed her own jurisdiction in this case, rather than following the conventional UN process. They've formed a committee —"

Cleomides interrupted her.

"Which way did Singh go?"

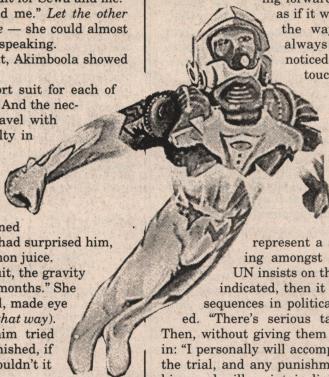
She frowned at the sergeant, irritated.

"I don't know. West, I should think."

"Can you make this thing look west?" He gestured at the wallscreen.

She did so, using her link, without a word. The new view showed square stacks of cold furnaces, white gaping quarries surrounded by rubble-heaps, and, behind, the smooth domes of the eviscerated mountains. There was no movement.

Cleomides got up and stood by the screen, lean-



ing forward and peering out of it as if it were a glass window, in the way that Earth people always did. Bernadette noticed that he had hardly touched his food.

She turned back to Akimboola.

"Our committee feels that this is a show trial, that Earth just needed a scapegoat for a disaster that wasn't really anyone's fault. In this they

represent a strong current of feeling amongst lunar citizens. If the UN insists on the policy that you have indicated, then it could have major consequences in political terms." She hesitated. "There's serious talk of independence."

Then, without giving them a chance to take that in: "I personally will accompany Sewa throughout the trial, and any punishment that is allotted to him, and will maintain liaison for publicity purposes with —"

She broke off. Akimboola and Cleomides had exchanged a glance across the table, and something in that glance had made her shiver.

Without conscious thought, she linked her eyes to the camera in the airlock. Singh's red Aztex suit was missing from the rack. She counted the foil-packed air bottles on the floor beneath and looked in the dusty outer chamber to check that the emergency unit was still there. Yes. He'd only taken the suit. Half an hour's air.

He'd been gone thirty-five minutes.

She linked in to Base Traffic, checked for his suit tracer. It wasn't logged.

The electronic part of her mind seemed to act on its own. With frightening speed, she had accessed the Base System. An overview of the area around the base appeared. Beacons were green; radar blind spots were shadows. A broad blue shield, spreading like a flood over the landscape, indicated the places Singh could have reached in a light suit in the time available. There were three places where the blue and the radar shadow overlapped. She logged the coordinates, felt her way through the smooth interface of Emergency Shuttle Dispatch, at the same time connected to manual BaseCom to obtain the necessary authority ...

"Wait." Akimboola's voice, and a stop message appeared on her display, too, in pulsing blue with the tag UN/AUTH.

"There is something that needs to be explained." Akimboola went on, speaking slowly,

carefully. "Shortly after we arrived at the port, I had a conversation with Mr. Singh. He stated that, rather than face the trial and the slow death from senility that would probably follow, he would prefer to take his own life now, with dignity. I indicated that we would not stand in his way."

Bernadette stared at Akimboola for a moment, then stood up. She was oddly conscious of the fact that she felt none of the things she should feel — fear, anger, desperation — only the necessities of the moment.

"You can't stop me from trying to save him," she said. "There's still time." And she already had the line open to the duty officer at BaseCom.

Akimboola went on eating placidly enough, but Bernadette found that her communications were cut.

"Mr. Singh also specifically requested me" — he pained, blinked once; Bernadette had the curious impression that he was trying to stop himself from crying — "to ensure that you did not interfere with his wishes."

Bernadette shouted.

"He wanted you to let him die? You expect me to believe that? You think that *anyone* will believe it?"

Akimboola gave a slow shrug.

"I don't know. It is the truth. We have to hope it will be believed. No one has been killed in war for eighty-seven years." He paused, let the remark and its implications enter Bernadette's consciousness. Then continued, "You know that we cannot let it start again now."

The BaseCom display faded. Bernadette became aware of Singh's whiskey glass, still standing on the table, incongruous in the middle of breakfast. She sat down, feeling heavy, as if she were in a shuttle at takeoff.

"... wasn't a criminal." Her jaw felt heavy, too, as she spoke. Stiff. A unit of machinery that needed greasing. "He was just a romantic. A careless fool. He wanted to live — forever. He wanted everyone to live forever. Growing higher. Growing up to be gods." She looked at the old man. "Is that where you think we're going, Mr. Akimboola? Or aren't we going anywhere? I mean, what's the point in going anywhere if there isn't — if he isn't, if there's no spirit left in us —"

She wasn't crying. She wanted to, but she wasn't crying.

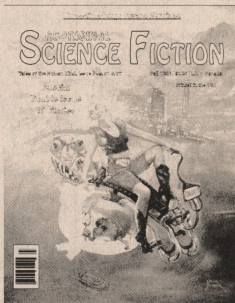
Akimboola reached out and laid a hand on her arm, just below the place where Singh had bruised it. His touch was gentle, dry, sexless.

"You are young," he said, "and from what I hear about the new treatments that are available to you, it seems likely that you will always be young." He let go his hand. "It remains to be seen what price you will pay for that."

He stood and joined Cleomides at the screen.

Bernadette swallowed, got up, gathered the empty bowls. Her legs felt weak, as if Earth's huge gravity had reached out and was pulling her down. She carried the bowls and the glasses across to the kitchen, placed them in a steel basin on the worktop, lowered the gray ceramic lid. There was a hissing sound, and a thin trail of steam emerged from a vent. She watched it for a moment, then went and stood behind the others, staring over their shoulders at the empty horizon.

At last Cleomides spoke. "How much air did he have in that suit?" □



Our Next Issue

The Fall 1996 issue of *Aboriginal SF* will feature a return visit for D. G. Grace with "Just Like Moses," plus a slew of stories by newcomers to *Aboriginal*: "The Afterlife," by Delia M. Turner; "Flashed Shadows," by Morgan Hua; "Cold Storage," by A. John Wallace; "Cat Got Your Tongue," by Joshua Mertz; "Silent in the Cities," by Mary Soon Lee; "On a Distant Wire," by Martin Lambert; "Toast," by James S. Dorr; "Chromosome Music," by Craig De Lancey; "Lasuta," by Nigel A. Brown; and "A Quickening in Stone," by Robert Hood.

Next issue we will also introduce a new book reviewer for *Aboriginal*: Mark L. Olson, who has done a regular review column for NESFA's *Proper Boskonian*. Plus we'll have all of our usual features.

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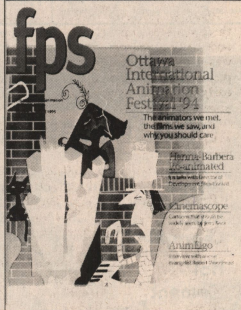
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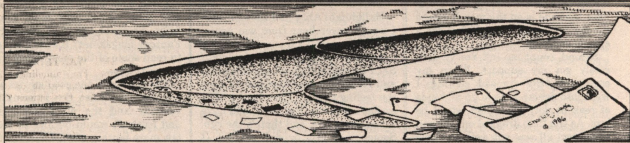
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Dear Mr. Ryan,

Great to hear that *Aboriginal* is back to press! I was immensely gladened when I saw #47-48 in my mailbox and, now that tax time is over, I can think about things that are really important, like renewing my subscription!

I understand quite well the trials and tribulations of producing written material with little spare time and limited funds, and I don't fault anyone at *Aboriginal* or 2nd Renaissance for any of the delays. Having my own mother battle a serious illness just last year gave me at least an understanding of the prob-

lems you have faced recently. I hope "Miracle Momma" is doing better.

The latest issue was received just prior to Balticon XXX and I was half expecting to see you or another representative hawking *Aboriginal* in the dealer's room. Maybe next year. If you have any questions about Balticon 31, please let me know. As with this year, I will be handling the publicity for the convention.

All the best,

Thank you, thank you, thank you,

Paul Loeschke
Columbia, MD

(Thanks for your support. Doing this part-time and on a limited bud-

get makes it hard to get to every con we would like to go to, and Balticon is one of those we'd like to attend. Maybe in 1997? — Ed.)

My Dear Mr. Ryan,

First I must tell you that my heart goes out to you and your mother in this time of her illness. Having watched my own father go through terminal cancer, I can imagine your distress through this time. You did absolutely the right thing to concentrate on her well-being to the exclusion of other pursuits.

There is a special bond between mother and son that would make your efforts on her behalf especially

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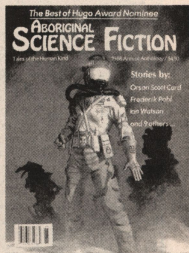
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meaningful to her. How glad I am to hear that she is on the mend. Please convey to her my best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Second, count me in!! You've definitely got my support. When my copies of *ABO* stopped coming, I went into denial. I made up all kinds of reasons why the issues would be late. As the time dragged on, I began to suspect all was not well, so I carried my last issue around with me resolving to write you a letter and ask what was up. Finally, when it was November 1995, I carefully filed the last issue away with all the others I've got, right back to the first. I just didn't want to know if the magazine had folded. If I didn't know, it wasn't true.

And it worked!!! There in my mailbox last week was a white letter with the old familiar return address with the distinctive black *ABO* lettering. I grinned from ear to ear! How I've missed that great selection of stories. What made *ABO* the best for me was the stories. I read science fiction for entertainment, and that's what your stories provide in abundance. They are clever without becoming so convoluted I can't follow them. They are clean and crisp with great people and plots. And none of that dark stuff that leaves me depressed after reading; though there's always some that leave me pensive; make me think. And at least one that makes me chuckle.

Those are my favorite. The artwork is indeed beautiful and I've learned to spot several science fiction artists from seeing their work in *ABO*, which is great fun. (Blamire and Eggleton are my favorites, I think.) But, oh, it's the stories I love.

Here's my filled out order form. I've renewed for 12 double issues. You can either tack that on to what I had left on my subscription or just start me over again, whatever suits your pocketbook. I've also included a \$50.00 contribution to the 2nd Renaissance Foundation as a separate check for tax purposes.

You've got my promise of an annual donation in December every year. Thanks for hanging in there when other folks might have given up. You've got one of the best editorial eyes in the business, as far as I'm concerned. Welcome back!!!!

Marcia Russo
Sunrise, FL

(Thanks for your continued and enthusiastic support — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan:

Hallelujah! Ah! I had thought that I would never hear from you again, and I am so glad I was wrong. Being overjoyed to read a new *Aboriginal SF*, I promptly dug out my collection and reread my favorites just to keep the feeling going. I have been a subscriber since the first issue, and have saved every one, and there's the rub. Somehow I lost or did not get (I moved sometime in 1993, which may explain its lack) Issue Nos. 43 and 44 — devastating! Are there any left anywhere? I hope so.

I am enclosing a check for \$50. If there is a copy of that missing magazine anywhere, please send it. The balance is a donation to the Second Renaissance Foundation. If the magazine is unavailable, the Foundation gets the whole amount.

Will the next issue have my EndSub number on the mailing label? I can't remember when my subscription ends, and I don't want to lose another issue. Just to be safe, I am enclosing a second check for \$19 for 4 issues.

As a side note, I am a Respiratory Therapist; one of those people who manage ventilators. I have worked in enough ICU's to appreciate just what a miracle your mother represents. My best wishes to her, to you and to the rest of your family.

Sincerely,
Christina Blazer
Sidney, MT

(Thanks for your understanding, support, and good wishes. #43-44 is on its way. — Ed.)

Dear Charles Ryan,

I have been with you since issue #1, and am very glad you're back!

I'm on the staff of the Ridgefield Public Library, so if there is any interest in exposure of your ventures in that area, let me know.

We used to carry *Omni* and I'm anxious to get some SF publications in circulation, especially for the younger patrons.

Thanks,
George P. Lohman
Ridgefield, CT

(Thanks. We'd like to see Aboriginal in every library in the country. — Ed.)

Dear *Aboriginal SF*,

I really enjoy the magazine. I have been reading some novels, but there aren't any new books out so I miss not having yours.

I was also wondering if there are any plans to run any more issues from England, or European SF-Fantasy magazines? It's kind of neat to read some of the story types from across the sea.

Thanks for all the good stories and articles, they keep the imagination working and the mind wondering and fresh. It would be nice to see a few more fantasy stories, but I'm not complaining.

Terry Leber
Lincoln, NE

(There aren't any swaps planned in the immediate future, but we're always open to suggestions. — Ed)

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I would like to congratulate you for continuing on and not giving up through troubled times. I've subscribed long enough to know that you continue to persevere throughout and the gaps are worth the wait.

I also want to ask you to continue with the printed press, since not all of us have easy access to the Internet. My job involves a lot of travel, so it is nice to be able to bring magazines to read.

Becca Schuyler
Beaverton, OH

(Thanks. We hope to keep publishing Aboriginal in print for a long, long time to come. — Ed.)

Dear readers,

A great many of you who responded to the mailing we did to announce our reappearance after an absence of nearly two years offered expressions of sympathy and understanding. The mailing had explained that our absence was due in considerable part to the serious illness which my mother suffered in June 1994. As I explained then, the magazine is done in my spare time, after my full-time job and in addition to the normal family duties. When my mother went into a coma for ten days and then intensive care for four months, it destroyed all the spare time I had, and then some.

After she was stricken, the family maintained a 24-hour watch at the hospital, hoping that she would emerge from her coma. At the time, the doctors and neurologists offered us little hope, essentially stating that after someone has been in a coma for three days there is a less than five percent chance of recovery. When she finally opened her eyes on the tenth day, my sister started calling her "miracle momma."

Even then, the doctors and neurologists cautioned us that she might never regain her memory, might never regain movement of her limbs, and probably would be hospitalized the rest of her life.

Anyone who has been there knows that medical insurance, not the patient's condition, dictates the level of care a patient receives.

Even though she was still severely ill, the hospital discharged her from ICU, transferring her to a "sister" facility allegedly better equipped to treat her. The sister facility turned out to be an old hospital which had just been purchased by a national chain and only recently converted into a long-term care facility.

She was supposed to have been transferred to a new medical intensive care unit which had been placed on the hospital's ground floor, but when the actual transfer went through she was placed in an older unit on the second floor. The hospital claimed there weren't enough

patients to warrant staffing the new ICU.

My mother nearly died at this facility after a month of mediocre care. We had to transfer her ourselves to a larger hospital in Boston. The mediocre hospital never even suggested a transfer. As it turned out, we had barely moved her in time.

At Tufts New England Medical Center, the ICU staff nursed my mother back to reasonable health until that Labor Day weekend when she developed a pneumonia which then became complicated by septic shock, an infection which ultimately

shut down all of her major organs, except her heart.

The ICU staff cautioned us that when that happened, particularly to someone in our mother's weakened condition, the survival odds were less than one percent.

We prepared for the worst, and kept a long, painful vigil over the holiday weekend. The ICU staff did everything they could, putting my mother on dialysis because her kidneys had shut down. Gradually, she improved, and her liver, stomach, and other organs began to function again. Within a month, she was healthy enough that the hospital

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and September, 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*.

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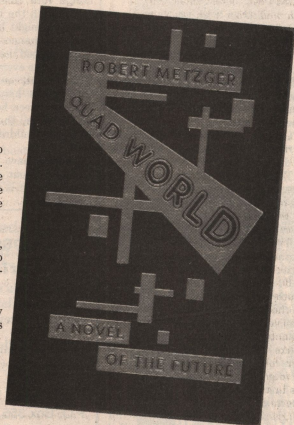
Satellite-based lasers fry anyone who moves too fast, and each day the speed limit becomes slower ... John Smith died, or thought he had, but then he awakes and is thrust into a bizarre future where nothing makes sense, and he, strangely, knows more than he should.

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talked about transferring her to a long-term care facility.

In October 1994 she was transferred, and then began a long, slow process of weaning her from the respirator, getting her to exercise limbs that hadn't moved since her attack in June, and, eventually, getting her to try solid foods again.

Near the end of 1995, she was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital for some physical therapy, and from there (for insurance reasons, again) transferred to a medically-equipped nursing home which could care for someone with a tracheotomy tube.

One of the biggest obstacles we faced was a combination of hospital policy (based on the preventive premise of avoiding anything for which it might be construed as having a liability) and an understaffed therapy department that was so professional it refused to do its job.

My mother had been bedridden from mid-June to mid-October when she arrived at the new hospital. Physical and occupational therapy were expected to get her up and about. The key phrase is: "supposed to."

My mother had no short-term memory, a side effect of the heart attack — which was a blessing because she didn't remember all of the suffering she had been through. But she also couldn't remember that she was in a hospital, or why, or — even more important — why she needed to exercise.

Usually, when the therapists arrived, they'd ask if she was ready to do her therapy.

Three-quarters of the time, she'd say no. She didn't feel like it. She was too tired, etc.

As far as the therapists were concerned, that was it. No therapy.

The family repeatedly argued, signed waivers, had meetings — all to no avail.

Eventually, two floor nurses, with more brains and compassion than the entire rest of the hospital staff, listened to us and coaxed my mother into performing some of the basic exercises she desperately needed to return to health. One nurse in particular had tremendous success and had mother up, using a walker, eating solid food. These seem like trivial, simple tasks but are vital for recovery. And all the other so-called experts failed to get her to do any one of them.

Because of these two nurses, my mother was able to get well enough to leave the critical care facility and go to a hospital specializing in physical therapy. Fortunately the therapists at that hospital knew what they were doing, and more important, what *had* to be done, and my mother improved more. But that drastic increase in improvement was cut short — again by a decision made by the insurance companies — and she was transferred to a medically equipped nursing home, where we had to nearly start from scratch, with family members coaxing her to perform the exercises.

Medical facilities that let insurance companies make medical decisions and let fear of lawsuits cripple their own medical practices are not only counterproductive — they're unhealthy for patients who need real medical care and people who are unafraid to provide it.

On the weekend of June 21, 1996, almost two years to the day after she entered the hospital, my mother returned to her home for a weekend visit.

The visit was a test, to see how she would fare outside of the nursing home, with the hope that if she did well, we might be able to bring her home permanently.

She passed the test with flying colors. She ate every bit of food she was given at her meals. She managed, with some help, to navigate the stairs between her bedroom and the living room, chatted with children and grandchildren, and generally did well.

We still have the problem of providing 24-hour supervision to surmount, but it is an obstacle which is within reach.

While my mother's physical health has come back nearly 80 percent, the original heart attack inflicted some brain damage, limiting her ability to retain short-term memories. She recognizes family members, can carry on an alert conversation, and is as intellectually sharp as ever. She just can't remember the things that happened several hours earlier. She basically can only live in the present, which, in truth, is all any of us do, no matter how much we try to plan our futures and remember our pasts.

It's the family's hope that she will manage to come home permanently by the end of the summer, just before we go to press with our fall issue.

Thanks again for all of your support.

Sincerely,
Charles C. Ryan
Editor

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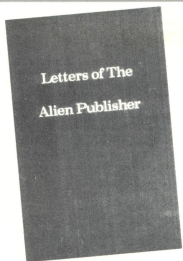
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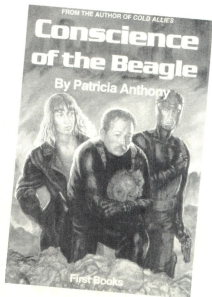
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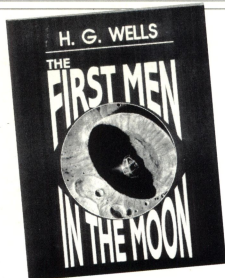
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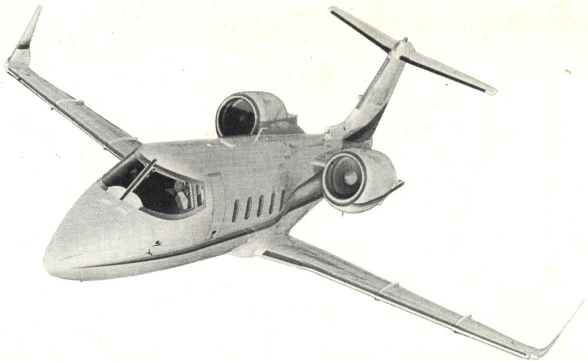
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