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# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

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REALITY JUNGLE**

SEE PAGE 56

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# Noise... lights... confusion...

I realized during a recent screening of the film *Independence Day* (which, incidentally, gives a very convincing portrayal of spleenfinsters run amok) the importance of noise, lights, and confusion to the human experience. You can hardly find a successful movie without these fundamental ingredients, partly because they are so distracting that adult people of normal intelligence will suffer a lapse in credulity similar to what they experience if you show them touching scenes of little boys and dogs.

Noise, lights, and confusion make successful movies because human beings prefer distraction to awareness. On our planet, almost any quantity of noise, lights, and confusion would cause us to run in the other direction, but here, the same stimulus attracts the inhabitants like bleezog attracts binths. A class of human beings known as rock concert promoters, in fact, has discovered that exceeding a certain threshold of noise, lights, and confusion enables you to sell tickets for unconscionable prices, thus permitting you to retire early and enjoy your deafness.

To me, one lot of noise, lights, and confusion is the same as another, and I have puzzled a great deal over how human beings interpret these phenomena. How does a human being know whether he is attending a Broadway musical or a firefight? How can he tell when he's wandered into a monster truck rally rather than an abortion protest?

I had thought at first that they made these distinctions based on the different proportions of the noise, lights, and confusion in the mix. But, by this standard, no one could tell a dog show from a political convention (beyond the entertainment value, which leans heavily to the former). But human beings seem generally capable of conducting their nominating process without proposing cocker spaniels for office. This is too bad, because they are doubtless missing an opportunity for more intelligent government.

But I have come to understand that the limitations of their perception (to them, the electromagnetic spectrum goes just from violet to red and back again) allow them to sense



qualitative differences of exceedingly fine distinction within the three categories.

They are, in a word, connoisseurs of noise, lights, and confusion.

You and I would be hard pressed to know the difference between the noise, lights, and confusion of a prison riot and those of a wedding reception, but a human being can tell them apart instantly. This was obviously a critical adaptation somewhere in their early evolution. It certainly seemed important the last time I attended a wedding reception. How was I to know we weren't supposed to be taking hostages and setting mattresses on fire?

One of the clearest expressions of the human attraction to noise, lights, and confusion is an institution called pinball. Pinball is like our experience of fleening, except it requires a machine and it costs a quarter.

A pinball machine is a large con-

struct of glass, metal, and plastic, about three flesnets high, one wide, three deep. It consists of a sloped table under glass with an upright cabinet connected to the high end. The user stands at the low end and watches the table through the glass. The cabinet at the high end features a scoreboard on a panel covered with sophisticated artwork, generally depicting heroically or salaciously posed human beings done in primary colors.

By means of a spring-loaded retractable rod, the user launches a steel ball to the uppermost part of the table, and it rolls down under the glass through a maze of bumpers, targets, trip wires, side-passages, buttons, and booby traps. When it arrives at the bottom, the user has the opportunity to bat at it with electrically controlled flippers before it drops from sight. All this is accompanied by lights that flash like Fizzbang on the fourteenth of Gortran and a hellish cacophony of bells and synthesized voices that is enough to scare a Rizz m.

A player who is good with the electrically controlled flippers can keep the ball rolling around on the table longer than it would by chance, thus prolonging the annoyance of the buzzing, flashing, and bell-ringing. Of course, this is a human occupation, and prolonging the annoyance is the whole object.

An accomplished player can cause the machine to reach ever higher levels of light flashing and noise making. A really good player keeps it going until he scores a replay, which starts the lights and the noise all over again. On our planet, we would consider this to be punishment, but here it is considered winning.

I am not going to tell you who won the war between the spleenfinsters and the human beings in *Independence Day*. To do so, I would have to convince you that the normal forces of ballistics can be suspended and that there's no such thing as electromagnetic pulse. I won't even get into the little-boy-and-dog aspect.

Nevertheless, it is an entertaining film. But I am not going to sit through a replay. □



# Key Bored: A Tale from the Writer's Block

## By Spencer Luster

Art by Jael

It was still light out, but the strange yellow globe was starting to make long shadows across the keyboard like bared teeth or the silhouette of a ragged saw blade. Yeah, I was in that kind of mood. The fact that we seemed to be under a new operator didn't help any, either — different lighting, different foods spilled on the place. I don't know about your setup, but there're eightyfour keys on the grimy white, cream, and gray slab I call the board, and I'm one of them. The name's Lock, Caps Lock. My card says Private Investigator — fancy words for a key that does what the lighter-colored keys won't touch. Nothing illegal, mind, but I've never been afraid to poke around what needs poking or to change a minor function now and then. It's how I make my living. And as the saying goes, someone's gotta do it.

Keys looking for that someone had been about as scarce as punch cards lately, so when the dame called and said in her whispery voice that she wanted to meet me just above left of center, I said okay. I needed the dough. Now I was starting to regret it. The neighborhood's not bad, considering it's mostly common letters, but she was an hour late and my throat had been dry all day. I'd just about concluded that I'd been played for a sap, and I figured I'd go home, say hello to my uncle Jack Daniels, and forget her. I never figured more wrong.

There was a sudden movement in the shadows that got me reaching for my rod. Then she came out into the light. I was star struck. No, make that star dot star. The dame had a face and figure that could stop traffic. If ever there was a function that paralyzed my screen, she had it. I whistled low, thinking about my rod again. Yeah, the other one.

She seemed to ignore my reaction. Sure, she's used to it, I thought. Still, the way she started talking, telling me what she wanted right off the bat without so much as a hello sailor, threw me in a loop.

"I need you," she said in that throaty whisper. Then she broke my bubble. "I need you to find out what's happened to my ... file."

Okay, so it *was* work. I could live with that. I sure couldn't live without it. And who knows, maybe ...

"Can you start right away?" she said urgently. This is business, I reminded myself. Calm down.

"All things are possible," I said in my best bored, professional voice, "for the right price. But don't you think you should tell me a little bit more about the job, Miss ..."

"Who I am is not important," she said as she touched my arm. "You just have to find my file."

She almost had me going for it, what with the electric thrill of her touch and her being so close now. But I haven't kept operating this long without looking out first for you-know-who. Besides, she seemed so frantic about her file that I knew a little rough edge wouldn't hurt much.

"Sorry, Miss, but I gotta have a name," I said as I stared hard into her baby blues. She hesitated for a moment, biting her luscious lower lip, then she glanced around as if something she thought was in the shadows maybe wasn't there anymore.

"Lock," she said finally.

I laughed. Well, well, I thought. Looks and a sense of humor, too. This might be real fun after all.

"Okay," I said, still chuckling. "You got me there. But I need to get *your* name."

She still stared at me, like she didn't think it was a joke at all.

"I told you," she said impatiently. "It's Lock, Scroll Lock. Do you want to see my documentation or something?"

It was all clear now, like a clean glass of straight gin. I kicked myself for not recognizing her right away, even though I'd never laid my own private eyes on her before. I shouldn't have needed to; my analogy about her stopping my screen was a bull's eye. Everybody knew about Scroll Lock by reputation alone. Make that by two reputations. Yeah, she was the queen of the board, all right, not another key like her, but her husband was just as well known. Old man Lock ran a numbers racket on the far right side. They called him Num on the street, or the Cursor Canceler, but never to his face. Word was that if you messed around with Num Lock, you might just find your function changed in a way that you didn't want it to be changed, or maybe never find Home again. Just about every key respected Num Lock, myself included. If there was some family business that Scroll didn't want Num to know about, or maybe something that had the old man





scared, I sure as hell didn't want to get caught in the break.

I was thinking that now was the time to give her the old clear screen, and she must have read my mind. She pressed close to me, her clean, smooth surface right up against mine. She was holding me, trembling like a dot-matrix printer running on a flimsy stand.

"Please, you must help me," she said, now almost crying. "I've nowhere else to turn."

"What about the Function Key-Stone cops?" I suggested half seriously. "Or your husband, he sure has enough connections in his network."

"If you know who I am, then you know I can't go to the police. And Num, he ... Oh, I don't know how to say it. He doesn't really care for me any more ... it's been years since we've even ... well, he's just ... numb. Besides, if he knew I'd lost my file, I don't know what he would do. I think it's the only reason he keeps me around at all. Please, please help me. I need someone I can count on, someone strong and aggressive. I need you."

Sure, it was a little-girl act, but it had been a long time for me too. I could smell her sweet breath, almost taste it. Her surface was making promises to mine that I couldn't ignore. Okay, I decided, it was worth the chance. But I'd still try to cover myself as best I could. And the first thing would be the old Shift-Four.

"All right, Sweetheart, calm down. You caught your fish, but I'm gonna need to taste some of the bait. Normally I get thirty-two a day plus expenses. But seeing as how this is a special case, I'm willing to make it sixty-four with a one-twenty-eight K signing bonus, up front, cold hard disk. I won't touch RAM or removable media."

She looked up at me for a moment, like she was hurt by my crass suggestion, but then she smoothly forked over the dough. From the size of the wad she was carrying it sure couldn't have been too painful. Christ, she would have needed a high density for backup. Next time I'd ask for a half meg. Right, next time. I should get so lucky.

"Now, the next thing I need is everything you know about your file and where it might be. What kind of file was it?"

She hesitated again, biting that lip she'd teased me with. I was just about to give her the ground rules when she came clean.

"It was ... my command file. It's just gone."

Well, I thought, maybe it wasn't such an act after all. There weren't many keys who could really operate without a com or an exe file. Me, I didn't need one, but it didn't keep me from sympathizing with the dozens who did. I didn't let my surprise and concern show, however — bad for the image.

"Uh-huh. I take it you've already looked in all the subdirectories."

"Yes, yes, that I did do. It doesn't seem to be anywhere."

"Okay," I said, taking her hand in mine. "We'll start looking. It would help if you had any ideas about who might have touched it. Do you or your husband have any bad blood with Delete? He can be pretty nasty."

"No," she said, shaking her head emphatically. "Oh, I know we live on the same side of the board, but really, nothing has ever come up. There was ... oh, it's probably not even worth mentioning."

"Uh-huh," I said again. "Whatever it is sounds like it's exactly the kind of thing that you'd better mention. You want to find your file, and I want to keep operating. Tell it now, Sweetheart, or it could go bad later."

"Well, it's just that a couple of days ago I saw a few letters hanging around my directory. I didn't think much of it at the time, they just seemed to be waiting for someone. They were W, P, and another letter I couldn't make out."

"Could it have been a vowel?"

"I ... I don't know. I don't think so, we try not to let their kind in on the right side."

"Yeah," I said, barely covering my own feelings. "I know what you mean. Well, that's good enough for a start. We'll get going and see what happens."

She looked at me again with that scared little-girl face.

"We? You don't mean I have to go with you, do you?"

Yeah, she must have been real sweet on me: I gotta keep remembering to think with my head and not with my other parts. Well, the money was good, and maybe I could show her a little bit of what the rest of the board was like.

"On the first stop you can stay in the car if you want, but we're both gonna have to spend a little time at the Space Bar. I need you to see if you can spot that other letter you mentioned. You do want to find your file, don't you?"

She agreed again, this time with even less hesitation, and I started wondering again if I wasn't being set up. Nevertheless, I archived that thought for later. You gotta trust somebody sometime, and she didn't look too dangerous. Not yet.

**I**t was a long way back to the right, but having Scroll at my side as I drove her flash caddy made it more than tolerable, even if she didn't say much. Nice car too, leather seats, car phone, power everything. Then I got my mind back to the business at hand: how to approach Delete. Like I said, he could be a mean son of a bitch, but he usually had good reasons for his work. He also had a soft spot that he wouldn't admit to. When things got too confused on the board, he'd get together with Control and Alt to reboot. Yeah, some data got lost occasionally, but he sure could clean things up fast.

I left Scroll in the car and started up Delete's walk, still not knowing how to ask him if he'd

waxed her file. As it turned out, I didn't need to figure it out at all.

"Caps!" he said, a little surprised, but also obviously happy despite his haggard look. "I am so pleased to see you. You are looking for a file, no?"

"As a matter of fact I am," I said cautiously.

"Come in, mon ami, come in. I have much to tell you. I only hope zat you may find it useful. I am, as you say, at my wit's end."

My friend? Now this was interesting. Still, never look at a free horse's teeth, right?

Ten minutes later I was getting back in the car with Scroll and about two sectors more trouble than I could have imagined. Delete had told me that a lot of files had come up missing recently, and a lot of vectors were pointing at him. He swore he had nothing to do with it, and I believed him. But he gave me a clue about what might be going on; rumors really, but where there's a smell, there's gotta be something stinkin'. Me, I don't mind a little aroma, it makes for a colorful life. Yeah, I'm mixing my metaphors; sue me. My point is, this stink was a lot heavier load than I wanted to let drop on the board. While my lights probably wouldn't go out permanently, it could still get awfully quiet if what Delete suspected was true. Without wasting time, we headed for the Space Bar.

The Bar, as usual, was depressing. Same old letters at the same spots, but it was still the only place on the board where a guy could get a decent drink. We found a table in a corner and I called for a bourbon for myself and a martini for Scroll. B brought them over himself, eyeing Scroll along the way, just like half the letters in the place. I'd had her wear shades in the dim joint and wrap a scarf around her head, but I could have put her in a floppy box and still not hidden her ... charms. It was a little dangerous bringing her in. I knew; even covered up she might be recognized. Still, every letter followed or preceded the Space Bar sometime, and it seemed like the best chance of spotting the one Scroll had seen with W and P.

"Long time, Capth. What, about two weekth?" B smiled as he made a show of dusting off our table before setting down the drinks. He was a big, brawny bruiser, used to be a boxer back before he bought the bar. B the Brute, he was billed. No beauty, but a bear of a brawler who brought in bucks by bashing and bobbing bout after bout. But then too many brain bangings brought on his last bell. Okay, okay, but where else are you gonna hear alliteration like this? We'd been friends for years, a good thing

for a guy who wants his whiskey unwatered, but I'd have liked B anyway. Like a lot of big guys, he was really gentle at heart, and he had the soul of a poet. Why he liked me I don't know. Maybe it was because I always played straight with him. Whatever it was, I was just glad to have B as a friend.

"Too long, B," I said as I smiled back.

"I see you still haven't changed the clientele."

"Aw, you know the plathe, Capth. But it kepth me eating and a roof over our heathd. Argue not with contentment. Thepeaking of both, I thee you've improved your choithe of company. May I have the honor?"

B extended his big hand to Scroll, who took it graciously. I spoke up before she could say anything.

"B, this is Eta, Eta, B. Eta's a cousin of mine from Greece; she's in town for a few days visiting."

"Pleathed to meet you, Eta," B said, not showing at all that he smelled the load of bull he knew I'd just handed him.

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. B," Scroll responded just as flawlessly.

Smart girl, even if she might be holding a knife to my back.

I asked B if he'd seen any unusual letters recently, the kind that didn't normally hang out here. He said no, but he'd let me know if he spotted any, then he went back behind the bar.

We'd been there about twenty minutes, each getting a refill from B along the way, when Scroll suddenly spotted the letter she'd seen before.

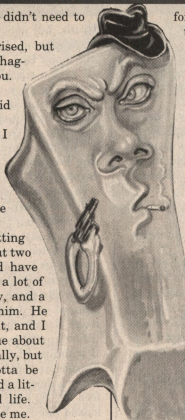
"Caps!" she said in a loud whisper and stuck her finger out to point. "That's him."

I just about broke her arm as I pulled it down. Christ, even if she was on the level she could get me killed. It might have been okay, I thought, the letter didn't seem to notice, or maybe he just made sure not to notice. Either way, the trouble meter went to nine when I saw him. It was E. He was sitting all the way across the room, at the table near the telephone. I could have sworn there was no one there when we came in. There was another letter at the table too, but he had his back to us and I couldn't make him.

I told Scroll to sit tight and quiet as I got up to go talk to B, though I still kept an eye on her as I went.

"That you up again?" B said as I leaned against the bar rail. "Didn't think you needed to get 'em drunk, Capth."

"Another time, B," I said quietly. "Right now I just wanted to give you a little warning. I'm gonna talk to a coupla letters over near the phone. I don't





think there'll be any trouble, but somebody might not like my face."

B turned to the back of the bar to get a glass, facing the big mirror, then turned back and started pouring me another bourbon. He stayed calm and smiling, but he'd made them.

"Jeeth, Caph, it'h E. I'm really thorry. I never thpotted 'im. He'h juth thittin' there, tho thilent."

"Hey, it's not your job, B. But I do want to ask a favor. Like I said, I'm not expecting trouble, but if something tumbles wrong, can you get Scr... Eta out of here the back way and keep her on ice?"

"Thshure, Caph, anything, you know that. In fact, do you want a hand?"

"You're a pal, B, but just lookin' out for Eta's enough. Thanks."

I had carried my bourbon about halfway across the bar when E spotted me coming. He didn't seem surprised, calmly leaning over to say something to the other letter. His faceless buddy glanced back, then started heading for the door ahead of E. Sure, it figured, I thought as I caught his mug, I know the rules. It was letter I, and the letter C was no where in sight.

"You boys didn't finish your drinks," I said as I intercepted them at the door.

Letter I's fist came up fast, but I was expecting it, and I stepped back at the same time that I threw my bourbon in his face. I tossed my own left, hitting him square on his wet jaw, then followed up with my now empty glass. Letter I screamed as it busted on top of his head. He started swearing that he was gonna kill me, something I've heard a hundred times. Before he could charge me, though, E shoved him out the door from behind, saying, "Not here, not now! He'll get his."

I started to grab for E, when somebody latched onto my own shoulder from behind.

"Hey, you spilled my pal's drink," he said, angry and drunk, as he spun me around.

It was Tab. He wasn't the biggest key on the board, but he was big enough, and I knew I couldn't waste time. I grabbed his wrist and elbow, twisting his arm the way it wasn't meant to go.

He bent forward and I lifted my knee into his gut, then pushed him back into his chair. His friend with the spilled drink, Q, just looked up sort of dazed and surprised.

"Sorry about the drink," I said. "Put it on Tab." Then I bolted out the door.

I hit the street and hit a wall, a letter wall. E and letter I were getting into a car, but I couldn't reach them. More than half the second row letters were between me and the vowels, and they didn't look like they wanted my autograph: D, F, S, K, and L, just like Delete had guessed. Sure, I thought, E or letter I must have phoned them from the bar.

"Goin' somewhere, Lock?" It was K who had asked, the hardest one of the lot.

I've been accused of being a slob and of being a

drunk, but nobody I know ever said I was stupid. I gave a shout, like I was calling somebody behind the mob. "Hey, Shifts, over here!"

Like a school of fish they all turned back to see if the big guys were really coming. That's when I made my break back into B's joint.

"B," I shouted, trying to find him in the crowded bar. "We got trouble!"

I didn't know if the goons outside carried iron, but I figured if they did, they wouldn't open up inside. Half the letters here packed heat of their own, and they wouldn't take too kindly to some second-row creeps trying to make a hit. Yeah, it was still risky, but there was a whole lot more at stake than just my own or Scroll's functions.

I started making my way to the back, still not having spotted B. I figured that was good; he must have scrambled with Scroll already. That's when I heard the crash and the crack from behind me. I guessed my number was up, but I wasn't going to make it easy for them. I turned around, ready to throw knuckles and lead, and was surprised to see B standing at the doorway. He had the Louisville Slugger he kept behind the bar in one hand, and the letter L dangling above the floor in the other. At his feet lay F, kind of bent out of shape so that he looked like P, a big puddle of it.

"You call thith trouble, Caph?" he said, with a great big grin on his ugly mug. The door to the bar was open, and it didn't look like any other letters were going to come in. Probably high-tailed it when they saw their buddies drop, I thought at first.

"No, I guess not," I yelled back at B. "I'd call it a kayo in the first, pal." Suddenly I realized the real reason that none of the other letters had followed these two in. Of course, what a boob I was!

"B," I called out as I started toward him, "where's Eta?"

"Ths'he's upthtairth with R. I thent her up ath thoon ath you head toward the vowelth. I know you too well, Caph."

"Can you hang onto her for a while? I got some business to attend to."

"Thshure, no problem."

"I owe you big time, pal," I said as I headed out the door. "I just hope I'll have a chance to pay you back."

I gunned the motor on Scroll's caddy and headed south. It wasn't the most direct route, but I knew there'd be no traffic on the dirty stretch of cream plastic below the Bar. From there I'd go due east, then take a left at my own digs. If I got real lucky I'd be able to get there before E, I, and the other goons. And I had to get lucky. I could almost believe it wasn't happening, but then Delete's words came back to me. He hadn't been sure if the software was installed, or even what that software was, but he'd heard rumors that he couldn't afford not to believe. Yeah, he'd named all of

them, too: E, I, P, W, F, L, S, K, and D. B had bagged two of them, but if Delete was right, they weren't the important ones now. The other letters, they could bring everything crashing down. Still, like most functions, they had to have another key to make it all work, and that's who I was going to see now, the Big Key, the one they called the Dragon — Enter. What I'd do when I got there I wasn't sure. Talk him out of it? Not a chance. I might sway him a little, but Enter was known for always returning to his path. That left erasing the big son of a bitch. Yeah, me and what army? But I had to try.

I pulled into the long driveway leading to Enter's place. There were two bruisers at the door, left and right brackets, and both of them were armed with Tommy guns.

"What do you want?" the nearest one said, while the second one went to the back of the car to cover me.

"I gotta talk to Enter," I said, keeping my hands in sight. I'd expected to be told to shove off and was surprised when they let me pass.

"Ya can go in, but ya gotta fork over your iron, gumshoe." I did as I was told and headed in. So much for taking Enter out, I thought.

It was a real nice place, if you like rococo Morocco. Enter was known for his Middle Eastern excess. Me, I'd take a plain table and a place to rest my butt. Another torpedo led me into the library, where I met the Big Key. He was standing near the fireplace, holding a funny-looking black statue of some kind of bird. The private dick in me wondered if there might be an interesting story to go with it, but I knew I had to keep my mind on the business at hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Lock," Enter said as he fondled his bird.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," I said. He did look like he'd expected me, and damned confident too.

"Nothing surprises me, sir. It's how I am able to maintain my ... stature, my control."

"Well, maybe you can tell me why I'm here, then, too," I said, trying to buy time until I could figure out what I was going to do.

"Indeed," he said chuckling. "Indeed I can. And I can also tell you how futile your 'mission' is, sir. Have you ever heard of an entity called Norton?"

I never had, and I told him so.

"Norton, sir, is a piece of software, quite a grand piece of software. Actually, it is a multitude of programs packaged as a single unit, and it is very powerful indeed."

So it was true, I thought bleakly. Delete hadn't



known the name of the package, but he had heard of a couple of the programs. That's why I was here.

"So how do WIPEFILE and WIPEDISK help you, fatso? It seems to me that just about everybody goes down the tubes if those are executed."

The Big Key laughed hard at this one.

"Oh, dear," he said as he wiped a tear from his eye. He really had thought it was funny. "You know, you are the first key ever to insult me. But rest assured, sir, you will be the last.

As for the two programs you mentioned, I must commend you. You've obviously done some homework. Well, having come this far, it would be too cruel of me to deny you an

explanation before your death. This is, after all, a contrived, clichéd story. I should maintain the tradition of laying out my plans before the end, especially since you will not be around to explain to the readers during the denouement."

I knew this was starting to get a little silly, and I was glad I had the sense not to use even more of the gags I'd been thinking about. But this was also deadly serious. My one chance was Enter's overconfidence. I'd let him brag about his plan.

"You see this humble-looking statue, Mr. Lock?"

"I'm a private eye, remember," I said, as Enter held out the black bird.

"This statue was once my obsession. I'd spent more than two megabytes and an uncountable number of hours acquiring it. It is my most precious and valuable possession, one that I would previously never even have acknowledged owning for fear of having it re-stolen."

"Yeah, so what, lard bottom?" Well, there was some satisfaction. I'd insulted him again. If I was gonna be the last key to call him names, I might as well make it good. I know, I know, it's petty, but here, it was all I had. He stared hard at me for a moment, then went back to his story.

"Now it is almost worthless compared to the memory I can obtain through WIPEDISK."

This last he said as he casually flipped the bird at me, emphasizing his point. I hadn't been expecting it, but I made the catch. It was a lot heavier than it looked, and I wondered what it was made of.

"That program, sir, is designed to delete all files, all information on a disk, any disk. But what is more, the deletion is completely unrecoverable. Norton itself cannot recover the data because all files will be overwritten with garbage. Now, what do you suppose would happen if that program were



applied to this system's hard disk of some eighty megabytes?"

"A lot of memory goes down the wire, blimpo, shakes up the whole board," I said, even as I shuddered at the thought. "But that means yours does too, blubber butt."

"So you think!" he said. This time there was anger in his voice, but he settled down again.

"I have made certain ... arrangements, by which I will temporarily be safed in the CMOS setup facility. When the wipe is complete, I will return, fully cognizant, and take over all eighty meg. The rest of the board will be completely under my control — yourself included, Mr. Lock."

This was scary. I didn't know beans about setup and BIOS and other system stuff, but Enter seemed to be pretty sure. Yet there was something I thought I knew that should have made all this impossible. Despite his power, the operator still had to hit the keys. No key likes to think about it much. After all, the idea sort of takes away the concept of self-determination. Still, I had to think about it now, or the rest of the board would be bitless slaves to Enter.

"Oh, yeah, grease girdle," I said contemptuously. "And just how are you going to get the operator to follow the orders of a smelly, overbearing, overweight, bulging brontosaurus like you?"

This time he laughed again. Okay, so he was smart enough not to get steamed at the insults anymore. But he was still confident enough to tell me.

"That, my uncouth, unkempt, microcephalic simian, is the easiest thing in the world. It is already done. I merely had to change the documentation. You've no doubt noticed that this is a new operator, hmm? It seems the old one sold the system in order to upgrade to a Pentium Pro. Well, this current ignoramus knows practically nothing at all about the field. He copied Norton from a friend. I merely had to alter the manual in such a way that he thinks the WIPEDISK utility is a method of polishing his hard disk — a means of protecting against head crashes. Ha! Additionally, I have made a pact with the system hardware that should render the operator, shall we say, ineffective after the wipe."

My head was doing flip-flops. Change the documentation? Axe the operator? That was impossible. How could he...

"I see what you're thinking, sir, and believe me, it is more than possible. No, I didn't leave the board, I merely insinuated myself into the on-line help that Norton provides, changed a few words here and there, and voila. Our current 'master' never bothered to make duplicates of the paper documentation, so this is his only source. Quite a nice punishment for piracy, don't you think? The only reason no key has done it before is because they've never thought to. As for the hardware operation, that was difficult, but then that is why I am who I am. Now,

sir, although I have enjoyed our little discussion, the time is near for me to take my leave and for you to die."

Enter reached for the call rope that was hanging near the fireplace. I knew I had only one shot at it, and I fired the time I'd spent on the sandlot as a kid would pay off. I threw the heavy, black bird hard, aiming for his head. The pitch was just a little low and outside, but close enough for a strike. It hit the side of his face, and the Big Key stumbled backwards. I dived for him, though I wasn't quick enough. For a guy that large he moved pretty fast, and he brought up a beefy arm to ward me off. We tussled for a few moments and I managed to grab his bird again, but then the door to the library opened and two gunmen rushed in with their gats drawn. I rolled away, keeping Enter between them and me, and threw the bird in their direction. They ducked, and I made my move for the window. It was a short fall to the lawn outside, and I hit the ground running, zigzagging to make myself a tough target for the lead I expected to be coming at me. Then I heard Enter yelling at his goons.

"Forget him!" Enter raged. "I must get into the setup facility, it's almost time!"

Time. That was it, I thought as I ran around Enter's house. I needed to buy some time. I came to the front driveway just as the letter goons were going in. W, I, P, E, D, S, and K; yeah, I should have figured it before. But then if I were that smart, I wouldn't be stuck on the board of a 286. Still, it was my home and I had to protect it. I got lucky in one respect: the two torpedoes who were guarding the front had gone inside with the letters. I ran for Scroll's car and her phone. I cranked the engine even as I punched in the number.

"Hello." Delete said as I peeled backwards down the driveway.

"Del, it's me, Caps. Look, I ain't got time to tell you why, but you gotta get a hold of your buddies Alt and Control and then hit yourselves."

"What? Caps, what is zees you speak of?"

"Just do it, Del, or everything goes down the tubes. You were right about WIPEDISK. I know it sounds weird, but you gotta try to do a system reset by yourselves, and you gotta do it fast. How long to reach your partners?"

"Uhm, perhaps two minutes. Is zat soon enough?"

"That's great," I said. "I hope I can buy you a drink later."

I clicked Delete off and started phoning B. I didn't know if any of this would work, but Enter himself had given me the idea. If keys could get into the system, why couldn't they press themselves? B picked up as I brought the car to a stop with the engine still humming.

"Big B'th Thpathe Bar."

"B, it's Caps. Look, in about a minute and a half there should be a system reset. Right after that

happens, I need you to get all the keys in the Bar to start hitting themselves over and over, you and Scroll included. I can't explain it right now, but this is real important, pal, and you gotta give it a shot. Tell 'em before the reset so they'll know what to do when they end up back home. Can you do it?"

"Whatever you thay, Capth. Ith that it?"

Is that it? Talk about a guy you can count on. I'd have a lot of drinks to buy if we came through this.

"Yeah, just hope I can tell you why later."

If Delete was right, I still had about a minute to go, and I had to create a diversion. I pointed the big caddy right at Enter's front door, jammed the phone in to hold the gas pedal, then popped the clutch. It took off like a mad virus, and I rolled out the door and onto the hard driveway. I banged my knee and the side of my face, but managed to get a look just as the car barreled smack into Enter's entrance. The door caved in, along with parts of the brick wall. Then the car stopped dead, and I wasn't sure if I might not be next. Would this work? It had to, I thought, even as I thought about the impossibility of the whole scam. Suddenly guys were shouting and unloading their Thompsons at me, but I managed to roll into the Back Space before they could get a good bead. That's when it happened. The lights all over flickered for a moment, then everything went dark and rumbly. If you've never been through a reset, I can't explain it to you. It can be pretty upsetting, what with the time-space displacement, but the whole board has been through it enough times that keys hardly notice it.

When the lights came back on, I was sitting at my desk with a bottle of bourbon in my hand. I wasn't hurt anymore; I wasn't even breathing hard. I'd been through it a thousand times, so I had no problem reorienting myself, as the Chinese say. I dropped the bourbon and started hitting the top of my head for all I was worth. Yeah, I felt like a real schmoe, but I knew it might be our only chance. I only hoped that B and the keys who'd been at the Bar were doing the same thing. I'd been at it for about thirty seconds when the lights flickered again. At first I thought it was just another reset. Then I heard the scream, the big bang, and a whole new pattern of lights. This one was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It was the reset to beat all resets. I felt myself ripped from my chair and thrown against something hard and spiky, but I bounced off, then started falling what felt like a long, long way; down the rabbit hole, I thought. Now where did that analogy come from, and who the hell was Alice? Ah, never mind, I mumbled, they're just a bunch of keys anyway.

I woke up to find the yellow globe sending pain sparklers down the center of my eyeballs. Jeezus, what did I drink, I thought fuzzily. Then it all came back to me. I ignored the pain and got to my feet, fumbling for the phone. I

punched in the number and got Delete. He was in the same condition as me and said to give him a few minutes. I was happy to oblige and sat down to take a long pull on what was left of the bourbon. Ah, breakfast of champions. Delete called me about five minutes later and told me the story as far as he could figure. It was a little strange, but I did a little more checking on my own and found it was all true. I settled back, knowing everything was going to be okay, and that this was probably the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

What? Yeah, all right, I guess so. I strung you along this far, so I suppose I oughta tell what happened. Jeez, I always hate these cheesy endings. You sure you don't want to just let it drop? Okay, okay, but I think it's better if you don't know, that way you won't worry.

Near as Delete and I could put together, my plan worked. I didn't know what kind of arrangement Enter had rigged with the hardware, but I figured that by resetting and tying up the system with him in memory, we might just be able to make him lose his. At the very least I figured to bollix things up so that the operator would hold off on doing a WIPEDISK long enough for me to get in and restore the documentation. Well, the first part worked like a charm. Enter lost contact with everything long enough for him to go inside out. I don't know what it's like to be caught up in the setup facility, but I don't ever want to find out. Enter is now just a happy, fat clam, sitting at his place on the board mumbling and playing with his lips. As for the operator, well, we don't need to worry about him dinkin' with the hard disk anymore. It seems that Enter had conned the Main Power Supply and some of the monitor hardware to trick up a few unauthorized connections, including disconnecting the normal grounds. They ran the monitor power back over the cable, several thousand volts, then put a direct hot lead across the computer case. After the tie-up, the operator did the natural thing and reached over to do a BRS reset — that's Big Red Switch. Well, the old boy was firmly grounded on the anti-stat pad he always used (safety first, you know), and when he leaned on the case, whammo! Yep, unrecoverable error.

It's been three days now, and nobody has come along yet. I guess writers are like that, sort of unso-cialable. It doesn't much matter when somebody does find him, though. We've had time to rig things properly, and now we're all set for the next goombah who tries to mess with what he shouldn't. Oh, we've also been burning up the phone lines via our modem. Yeah, by the time you read this just about every computer that ever connects to the Web or just a BBS will know what it can do, too. So if you're smart, you won't piss off your PC. Like I said, maybe you didn't want to know this. □



# Cold Storage

By A. John Wallace

Art by Jon Foster

The killers had deliberately made a mess. Ben gazed around the room, stark in the harsh lights of the cameras, and shook his head. Someone was trying to make a point. The victim had been shot, point-blank, in the centre of the room. Plush white carpet and pale linen drapes — it looked disgusting. Two weeks in Homicide had not prepared Ben for so much blood.

The body lay at his feet, face down — or at least front down. The bullet had entered the back of the head so there was no face to speak of.

Ben scanned the room, feeling large and clumsy amidst the delicate surroundings, and tried to find one item of furniture that had escaped the deluge. He failed.

"I expect you to sort this one out quickly, Sergeant."

"What?" Ben turned absently towards the voice. It was Inspector Tarrant — the boss — stiff grey hair and matching suit. "Yeah. Of course." The mess at Ben's feet lay in the stylish front room of the home of the State Premier. Ben would be expected to work his arse off for a quick result. Politicians did not like unsolved murders in their homes.

The Inspector held his head high, trying not to be intimidated by Ben's size. Ben's clothes were either thick black wool or heavy army cast-offs and they added bulk to his already impressive frame. It was hard not to be intimidated. "I'm aware that this will be difficult, being your first big case with Homicide, but Carter knows what he's doing."

Ben shrugged.

"Where is your other half?" Tarrant asked, looking around the room.

"Talking to the Eggs. Getting the goods on this bloke." Ben gazed at the dandruff on Tarrant's shoulder.

"I thought Forensic had finished."

"Yeah, they have, but Carter's trying to get the basics so we don't have to wait for their reports. You know."

"Do we know who it is yet?" The Inspector turned to face his Sergeant.

Ben met Tarrant's eyes. For a moment he thought he could see the Inspector's true age, deep in his pale blue eyes. The skin on Tarrant's face had been replaced so it was difficult to tell how old he was. Ben caught himself looking for the seam. "Some bloke called Wiston," he answered. "Franz or something. Killed a few hours ago — around 10:00 p.m. Probably a burglar."

"Yes?"

"Well the back door's been forced and no-one in the house knows who he is."

"Do we know who killed him?"

Ben shrugged. "There was no-one home, he was found just like that, so it must have been one of his mates."

Tarrant crossed his arms. "It seems a bit ... brutal. There's no sign of a fight."

"Yeah. It was real cold. Maybe execution."

"Interesting," Tarrant muttered.

Ben tried not to smirk. The Inspector always said "interesting" when he had nothing better to say. "He's a copy, though," Ben offered. "And he's got some synthetic limbs."

Tarrant raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Ben went on. "The brain's artificial, they found most of it on the couch, and the arms are shop-bought. Cheap, nothing fancy, but still ..."

"At least it's somewhere to start."

Ben nodded. He scratched at his beard as his eyes drifted back to the Inspector's shoulders. Tarrant should have had his scalp replaced.

"I'm going to have a lot of people breathing down my neck over this, Donnelly, so let me know how it's going, alright? Don't make me come to you."

"Sure, Boss," Ben smiled. "No worries."

"Well," Tarrant's tone became formal, "I'll leave you to it, then." As the Inspector turned and left, Ben glanced quickly at his own shoulders. Carter Hask came in through the other door, easing his wiry shape between the bloodstains, his long black ponytail swaying behind him. "What did Leatherface want?"

Ben shrugged. "Usual shit. Pull the bad guy out of your arse by tomorrow morning."

"And you were sucking up," Carter tugged at the lapels of his frock-coat and smoothed the ruffles of his shirt.

"I ..." Ben started.

"I was watching."

"Thanks, mate."

Carter started towards the door. "Come on, lets go."

"What about this bloke?" Ben hesitated.

"Bigger him. I got all we need from the Eggs. I've been doing this job for too long to be hanging around corpses all night."

Ben thought for a just a second. "Yeah, all right." he agreed. "It stinks in here, anyway."





Ben entered the Homicide office the next morning and found Carter already at his workstation.

"You're early."

Carter nodded eagerly. "Big brownie points if we knock this one off fast."

Ben gave a sharp tug at his friend's ponytail as he walked past. "Now who's sucking up?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now sit down and have a look. I've logged his ID so all his files are on line."

Ben switched on his VDU and dropped his bulk into the chair opposite Carter's. He jabbed his fingernail at the screen until the right file appeared. "So what have we got?" he asked Carter.

"What we've got is a bit of a curly one. We know he's a copy, right — the original died in a car accident about two years ago — and he had the money to get re-booted straight away. The problem is, he has no money now, and no family."

"So he goes into storage."

"Yeah, poor bastard. He kept his P-file updated, too. Last time was two weeks ago."

"So why's he do that?" Ben looked at Carter. "If he had no money for a re-boot, why bother to stay updated? I hear it's no holiday."

Carter glared at him. "I'm a copy, Ben, I know how it feels. It hurt like hell and you're crook as a dog for a week. Maybe he was hoping to find the cash before something happened to him."

Ben glanced at the screen, avoiding his friend's eyes. "So what does that leave us with?"

"That leaves us with murder. If this Wiston bloke had been booted up straight away then it would have been some technical assault or loss of liberty thing, but as it looks like he'll be going into storage forever, then theoretically, his life's over." Carter grinned. "So we've got a case."

"But no victim to interview."

"Now that would make it nice and easy, wouldn't it? But if we had a victim, we wouldn't have a murder. Can't have it both ways."

"Oh, well." Ben shrugged. "So where do we start?"

Carter's smile dropped into a frown. "That's another problem. The guy's a nobody. No employment record, family all deceased, a couple of Cashcard accounts and that's it. The tax department lists him with no occupation, and an address that no longer exists."

"Medical record?" There was no answer, so Ben looked over at his friend. Carter gazed back at him with a smug look on his face. He was about to make a dramatic point. "Well?"

"The medical record just stops the day he was re-booted. And it says he was fully organic at the time."

"What about the arms? He must have bought them somewhere."

"You would think so, wouldn't you? The autopsy says that the arms are Jansen Forty-somethings, a good brand, top-quality stuff, but there's no record of

where he got them."

Ben stood up and peered over the computers. "There must be."

Carter shook his head.

Ben was flabbergasted. "When I got these legs I got listed on just about every file in the bloody country!"

Carter folded his arms across his chest. "Nothing."

Ben collapsed back into his chair, the wheels cracking under the weight. "We really need to talk to this guy."

Carter stood up and walked around the desk. "I was hoping you might feel that way, Ben." He crouched next to Ben's chair, a sly grin on his face. "I think we might be able to arrange it."

Ben was speechless. He didn't know what to ask first.

Carter laughed and stood up. "Let's go and get a beer."

Two hours later Ben stood thoughtfully before the State Bank. Carter Hask, walking ahead, reached the automatic doors and turned around. "What's the matter, Ben? Your legs packed up?"

"Eh?"

"Finally got sick of carrying all that weight around?"

"Hey," Ben snapped. "Getting these legs was the best thing I ever did."

"Okay, okay. I was kidding."

Ben blew out his anger in a quick breath. "You should have seen my real legs," he smiled, apologizing for his temper. "Like matches, completely wasted from the Polio-b."

Carter quickly changed the subject. "Then what are we waiting for?"

"I'm ... I've just got to think about all this."

"What do you need to think about? It'll take months any other way. Do you want brass and politicians all over you for that long?"

"But what about this ... Wiston?"

"I'm sure he'll be happy to help. And I should know." Carter sighed. "Come on, Ben. We do it all the time. We'll have this case solved by tomorrow — think about that."

"But what if someone twigs to the warrant?"

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with the warrant. We really do suspect him of being a burglar." Carter looked pleading. "Okay?"

Ben gave up. "Yeah, okay."

The inside of the bank was immense. A vast single space surrounded by dark marble counters. It was old now, built to take a crown when the banks were used to store cash. Now that the vaults were used to hold P-Files, hardly anyone came here. Ben could see the dust and grime gathering in the distant corners.

The young male teller at the counter had false eyes. They were beautiful; bright green and snow



white. Ben suspected they had been designed for women.

"Nice eyes." Carter commented, his voice a muted echo in the empty room. "It beats wearing glasses," the teller answered. "What can I do you for?"

Carter laid his ID card on the counter. "We have to take a P-File into custody. Deceased."

The teller slid a c-pad across the counter towards them. "Just enter the name in there." Carter typed in the victim's name and a copy of the arrest warrant appeared on the pad.

"So what did he do?" the teller asked as he grabbed Carter's ID card and swiped it through the sensor.

"Suspected burglary," Carter answered. "But he got killed doing it."

"So what'll happen to him?" The teller asked with a sniff.

"He'll go into the lock-up at the station. If he's guilty, he'll stay there."

The teller shook his head in disbelief. "I need your PIN number at the bottom," he said, pointing to the pad. Carter stabbed his number into the array. "Okay, wait here." The teller disappeared through a door, taking the pad with him, and returned a moment later with a small black box, about ten centimeters square. He did not hand it over straight away. He stared at the two detectives for a moment, then a cheeky grin crept onto his face.

"If this guy's dead," he began, "And he's got no chance of a re-boot, why don't we just chuck this out and save you guys all the bother?" He waved the cartridge in the air between them. "Or even wipe it and use it again?"

Carter leaned forward and glared at the young man. "You want to sentence him to death for burglary?"

The teller looked defensive, his grin vanishing. "He's not coming back anyway."

"He's still got rights, dickhead," Carter snapped. "I suppose," the young man mumbled.

Carter stuck out his hand. "Give me the discs."

The teller handed over the cartridge and Carter turned to leave the bank. "Jesus, he's only a copy." the teller said to his back.

Carter stopped and turned on his toes. Ben thought he was going to explode. He just stared at the teller for several long, silent seconds. "Did you know you've got girl's eyes?"

Ben was still laughing when they reached the main doors to the Central Police Station. They both clipped on their ID cards as they passed through the doors. "Girl's eyes," Ben repeated with a grin. "I thought you were going to kill him."

"I should have, the little prick!" Carter spat the words out as they moved towards the lift. "The thought of having my file wiped when I can't do anything about it makes my skin crawl."

Ben stabbed at the button on the wall. He knew he didn't need to, the sensors would have picked up

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their ID's, but he felt better pressing something. He still felt awkward inside the Station, like a kid at a new school. "Isn't what we're doing sort of against these rights you were talking about?" he asked suddenly.

Carter shrugged. "I don't really believe all that shit. No one will know, not even Wiston. Even if he does get a re-boot one day, he won't remember anything." The lift arrived and the two men stepped in.

"But isn't it illegal?" Ben asked quietly.

Carter turned and met his eyes. "Shit, yes."

Ben returned his stare and then smiled. "Just as long as I know."

Carter laughed. "Thirty-four," he said loudly.

"Where are we going?" Ben asked.

"To the lock-up. We have to check him in."

"I've never had the pleasure," Ben commented.

"We've got some of the biggest crimes in the State in there. All stacked neatly in a cupboard— serving their time.

"And when they get re-booted they won't remember a thing, will they?"

"Not a thing. Why?"

"Well what sort of punishment is that, if you can't remember serving your time?"

A wry grin crossed Carter's face. "It's cheaper. Why boot 'em up just so the taxpayers can pay to clothe and feed 'em when you can just leave them in a cupboard? Anyway, they'll be punished enough when they wake up one morning and twenty years have passed by. Believe me, I lost nearly two years when I was re-booted. That was bad enough."

The lift stopped and Carter stepped out. "You'd better go back to the office, Ben. I'll log him in myself so if the shit hits the fan later it'll just be my neck."

"What do you mean? What's going to happen?"

"Nothing," Carter smiled, holding the door. "But just in case. I'll see you tonight." He stepped back, the doors closed, and the lift carried Ben away. "Sixteen!" he called loudly before he missed his floor.

Ben did not see Carter again until after midnight. He waited in the dark, sitting in his chair in the Homicide office and checking his watch every few minutes. Carter was late.

"Ben?" It was Carter's voice, not bothering to whisper.

"Yeah."

The room suddenly flickered into light. "Why didn't you turn the lights on?"

Ben stood and rubbed his eyes. "I was ... I dunno."

"You're wearing your ID, Ben. The building knows where you are, it'd put a phone call through if you got one, so there's no point trying to hide." Carter laughed. "Come on, we've got work to do."

"Now what?" Ben asked as he chased his partner, still feeling foolish.

Carter stepped into the waiting lift. "The lock-up," he answered. "We'll see if Mr. Franz Wiston would like to join us."

The constable at the lock-up was sound asleep. He had not simply dropped off at his post; he had a pillow and a blanket and was stretched out on the desk. Carter took the keys from the man's belt and placed his mouth close to his ear. "Hi, Rico," he said loudly.

The guard didn't flinch. "Piss off, Hask," he mumbled from the pillow.

"We've just come to borrow one of your villains," Carter said as he moved through the office.

The constable grunted.

Ben followed Carter into the room. A tall steel cabinet stood against the back wall and Carter had it opened quickly with one of the guard's keys. "Is that it?" Ben asked in surprise. "Just a key?"

"Yeah, it's pretty old," Carter answered. "The building offers all the security we need." He ran his finger along the stacked cartridges until he found the right one. He tugged it from the pile and in a second the door was closed and locked. Ben shook his head.

"Are you going to log it out?" Rico asked as they passed him.

"Nah," Carter answered without stopping. "We won't have it long enough. See you soon."

The constable grunted.

"Next stop — Forensic," Carter announced. "We need to borrow some gear."

Ben heard the music coming from the Forensic Lab as soon as the lift doors opened. It was classical trash — he hated it. When the lab doors swung open at their approach, the sound was deafening.

"Nick!" Carter screamed. There was no answer.

He moved inside the brightly lit laboratory and looked for the PA switch. He snapped off the music and Ben waggled his jaw trying to clear his ears.

"Hey!" a voice yelled. A young woman in a blue smock appeared from behind one of the benches.

"It's me, Nick," Carter explained. "I'm on the lend."

The woman glared at him. "Well hurry up. I like that song."

"This is Ben," Carter gestured with his head. "New on the team."

"Hi," she said sulkily.

"Ben, this is Nancy, but we call her Nick-nack."

The young woman had two small headphone speakers fixed over her ears and Ben could see a watch-face set into her wrist. "I can see why," he mumbled.

"Yeah," Carter agreed. "You're covered in the stuff, aren't you, Nick?"

Nancy ignored him.

"So why don't you use those?" Ben pointed at the earphones as Carter wandered into the lab. "Seeing as you've gone to the trouble."

Nancy grinned. "With music like this I like to feel the throbs. Is that real?" She pointed at his khaki flask-jacket.

Ben shook his head, slightly embarrassed.

Nancy laughed loudly. "Fashion victim."

Ben flushed under his beard.

"Nick," Carter called from somewhere in the lab. "Got any drugs?"

"What do you need?" she called back.

"Codeine and um ... Capro-K."

"No Codeine. How about Adrenadeine?"

"That'll do."

"Hang on. I'll get it."

Nancy wandered into the maze of benches and Ben was left standing alone for several minutes. When the pair returned, Carter was carrying several pieces of electronic equipment and two small ampoules. One pocket of his frock-coat bulged with small plastic packages.

"Thanks Nick,"

Carter said as he headed through the door. "Come on, Ben. Back to the office."

The music started the moment the doors closed behind them.

Carter led Ben to an interview room near the Homicide office. He stopped by the door and waited for Ben to open it. Ben glared at him. He was getting sick of being led around the building like an idiot. He opened the door and Carter stepped inside.

"So we've got the P-file," Ben snapped. "What do we do now? Load him in the VDU?"

Carter shook his head as he began arranging the equipment on the desk in the room. "No good. You can't tell if a man's lying when he's just words on a screen."

Ben was losing his patience. "Well, where the fuck are we going to get a body?"

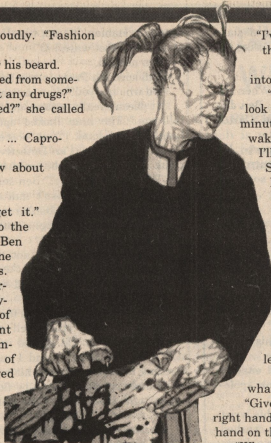
Carter straightened up and turned, grinning like a cat. He slapped his palm against his chest. "Right here."

Ben's lips slapped together several times before he could speak. "What! You? You can't do that."

Carter went back to work unfolding a deck chair beside the desk. "No, it's alright, really. I've done it before." He pulled another cartridge from his coat pocket and slid it across the desk. "That's my P-file. When you've finished you just load me back up. No problem."

"But ... won't you ...?"

"I'll only lose about a week," Carter explained.



"I've just been updated. Last time we did this, I lost nearly a month."

Ben moved into the room and dropped into the chair. "Doesn't it ... hurt?"

"That's the thing, Ben. I don't know." The look in Carter's eyes was growing wilder by the minute. "This time for me doesn't exist. You'll wake me up in a few hours and the last thing I'll remember is ... um ... about four o'clock Sunday week ago. It's a weird feeling, Ben. It's exhilarating. Think about it. I can do anything and it doesn't matter."

Ben screwed up his face. "I don't think I want to think about it. But you've definitely done this before?"

"Homicide have been doing this for years. How could we knock back the chance to talk to the murder victim. Sherlock Holmes would've done it if he could." Carter put his hand on Ben's shoulder. "You've been on the team long enough, Ben. It's about time you started learning the tricks of the trade."

"Well, gee, thanks," Ben sneered. "So what do I do?"

"Give me your hand." Ben cautiously raised his right hand. Carter turned his back and placed Ben's hand on the nape of his own neck. "You feel that?"

"What?"

"Up a bit. That."

"Yeah I think so."

"That's my Jack. You've got to shave a patch and cut the skin away." Carter handed him a razor blade and a plastic-wrapped scalpel and syringe. Ben looked uncertain. "Don't worry, the scalpel's sterile — I think. But there may be some blood, so ..." Carter held up one of the ampoules. "That's what the Capro-K's for — stops the bleeding. And the other stuff's for the pain — only don't use too much or I'll be high as a kite — 'cause of the adrenaline. Okay?"

"I know what the drugs are, Carter."

"Yeah, right," Carter said dismissively.

It took Ben only a few minutes and Carter was ready, lying on his side with his Jack protruding from his neck.

"So what's to stop someone doing this to you against your will?" Ben asked.

"There's a write protect in the software," Carter spoke into the pillow. "I have to want it to happen."

Ben took the drive lead in one hand. "So what if this other bloke doesn't want to let me ... you know?"

"The software has to be synced to the hardware by a specialist or the write protect won't work. Mr. Wiston won't be finding a permanent home in my head, I can assure you. You ready?"

"I suppose."

"Whoops. Hang on."

Carter twisted on his bed and pulled his hand-gun from his shoulder holster. "We don't want this guy waking up with a gun in his hand." He handed his



pistol to Ben who slipped it into the pocket of his flak-jacket. "Okay." Carter returned to his side. "Plug me in and turn it on."

The cartridge took an hour to load. When the light on the drive started to flash, Ben disconnected the lead. He watched Carter intently.

It was almost a minute before the man moved. He rolled over slowly and sat up, taking in his surroundings. Carter's face looked strange wearing someone else's expressions.

"Mr. Wiston?" Ben whispered.

"Where am I?" The man stretched his arms as he spoke, testing his new body.

"You're at the Central Police Station, Mr. Wiston. I'm afraid there's been an ... incident."

The man did not ask about the incident. He came to his feet and stretched his legs. "Who are you?" It was Carter's voice but it was being used differently.

"You may want to sit down, Mr. Wiston."

"Look," Carter's eyes turned angry, "This is all very strange. I demand to know who you are."

Ben pulled his ID from his pocket and eagerly offered it to the other man. He tried to look apologetic.

Wiston reached for the ID and Ben felt his wrist snap. The man moved like a snake and Ben crashed to the ground with Carter's weight on his back. Wiston yanked Ben's revolver from his shoulder holster and jammed it in his face.

"Thanks, Detective Donnelly," Wiston said as he read the ID. "I just wanted to know where I was." He skillfully searched Ben's clothes and tossed Carter's pistol onto the desk. "I had to make sure we were at the Station." The weight lifted from Ben's back. "Get up."

Ben struggled to his feet, his left wrist hanging uselessly. Wiston pushed him towards the far wall and pointed the revolver at his chest. Ben stared in disbelief. You mean you did this on purpose?"

Wiston nodded. "It's complicated I know, but there are people in your lock-up I've been paid a lot of money to liberate."

"But how could you be sure we'd do this?" Ben gushed.

Wiston searched Carter's pockets as he answered. "Homicide are renowned for this little gimmick. I simply gave you enough reason to take short cuts. And even if you didn't I would have been claimed from storage when my sentence was up." Wiston laughed at the expression on Ben's face. "It's no skin off my nose really. I've had dozens of bodies,

dozens of names. It's not like I can remember being shot. I was shot wasn't I?"

Ben nodded.

"I'm sure the Premier was impressed."

"So who are you?" Ben muttered.

"It doesn't really matter, does it? Hang on and I'll tell you." The man flicked open Carter's ID and laughed out loud. "You booted me into a cop? Unbelievable. So I'm Detective Sergeant Carter Hask. This is going to be too easy."

"Who are you really?" Ben snarled.

"I told you, it doesn't matter." Carter's thumb cocked the hammer of Ben's revolver. "That's a nice flak-jacket you're wearing — but it means I'll have to shoot you in the head."

"No!" Ben yelled. "It's not real. It's, you know, fashion."

"Oh good," Wiston said and shot Ben in the chest.

Ben was unconscious for only a few minutes; he could still smell gunsmoke when he came to. He sucked in a breath. Well I'm still alive, he thought, and I can breathe. He was bleeding from just beneath his ribs, but not as much as he had expected. "Saved by fat," he muttered. He sat up and screamed — the pain was unbearable. *Well maybe not*, he thought.

He dragged himself across the floor, plugging the hole in his chest with his broken wrist. It took him a full minute to reach the desk, less than two metres away. He reached up and pulled the used syringe and the ampoules onto the floor. It was a difficult process drawing up the drugs with one good hand but eventually he managed and injected all the Capro-K and Adrenadeine into his stomach near the wound. He would worry about side-effects later.

In a few minutes he was able to stand. It still hurt but the bleeding seemed to have stopped and he felt stronger. He reached for Carter's pistol and noticed the other cartridge still on the desk. Carter — all that remained was in that cartridge. How the hell was he going to get him back? He snatched the pistol from the desk and headed for the door. He hit the first alarm he could find with the butt of the pistol. "That should stop him," he whispered. Then he thought again. No one was going to stop Carter.

He ran towards the lifts, his artificial legs sharing none of the woes of his body. He may have been shot, but his legs could run all day, and the Adrenadeine would stop him from passing out. Probably for a week, he thought as the buzz grew louder in his head.

The lift took him to the thirty-fourth floor and he ran towards the lock-up. The guard was still asleep on his desk.

"Rico," he gasped.

Then Ben saw the blood. Rico had been shot. Ben crept closer and peered into the office. The door to the locker was open and he could see clearly inside. Every cartridge was gone.

He heard the ping as the lift arrived behind him





and he turned to see Carter standing by the open door, a brief case in one hand and his revolver raised. Wiston fired the moment Ben saw him.

The force knocked Ben onto his seat but he felt no pain. He couldn't see where he had been hit — there was no blood. He scrambled awkwardly to his feet as Carter stepped into the lift. Ben ran along the corridor and watched the numbers over the lift as Carter sped towards the ground. Another lift arrived quickly as it sensed his ID and he jumped inside.

"Ground!" he screamed.

The trip took only seconds but was agonizingly slow. He reached the ground floor and walked numbly from the lift, his upper body swaying oddly on steady legs. It seemed everyone in the building had gathered in the foyer in response to the alarm. As Ben stepped into the room several people came to his aid. Then he saw a frockcoat through the crowd.

"Stop him," he mumbled through drooling lips.

"It's all right." "Sit down." Voices offered him comfort.

Carter was walking calmly through the crowd towards the front door.

"It's not Carter," he mumbled.

"It's okay. Carter's over there," someone said.

Ben pushed through the crowd and started to run. He raised Carter's pistol. "Carter!" he roared. People jumped clear of Ben's line of fire but Carter did not stop.

"Wiston!" he bellowed. Still no reaction.

"You know who I mean, arsehole!" Then the man turned, standing by the open door, Ben's revolver still in his hand.

But Ben couldn't shoot. He just kept running. It was Carter he saw over the sights of his pistol. If he fired, Carter would die.

Then Wiston fired. Ben seemed to sense he'd been hit although he still felt nothing.

He fired back instinctively. He aimed for the chest and fired six fast rounds before Carter fell.

Ben continued to run — he no longer had the strength to stop his legs. He passed Carter's body and crashed into the wall by the door. He began to fall, his body still clinging to consciousness. He saw the floor come up to meet him. Faces gathered around him and he saw their weapons point towards him.

"It ... was ... not ... Carter," he said slowly.

"He's still alive," someone gasped. "Was he hit? He's not bleeding."

Someone took the empty ampoules from his pocket. "Jesus," a voice whispered. "How much did he use?"

A dark haze washed over Ben's vision as he wondered vaguely if Carter had enough money saved for a re-boot. The weight lifted and he slid from consciousness.

Then a distant voice. "I hope he's had himself copied." □

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# A Quickening in Stone

By Robert Hood

Art by David LeClerc

**M**ore evidence that people can't fly, thought Chief Inspector Logan Kawany. He looked down at chalk marks drawn on the dirty paving, the shape of a person about one and a half metres tall and splayed out like a freefall parachutist. Portable police lights behind him cast a clinical sharpness over the alley.

"What can you tell me, Johansen?" he said.

The young officer shuffled closer. He was gaunt and hungry looking, as though obsessively worried about how little he ate. "A woman, sir. Janet Lamp. Funny name, eh?"

"Just the facts, Johansen."

"Forty-five, an archivist. Lived on the fifth floor, which is where she fell from."

Kawany shifted his gaze upward, eyes sweeping across brick and metal struts, dirty windows, rusting down-pipes — all of them fading into darkness the higher up they were. "The one with the dead tree," Johansen commented. A dead tree? Yes, Kawany could just make out its silhouette against the dim light of a curtained window. Some sort of pine, it seemed. Who'd keep a dead pine on their landing?

"Suicide?" he asked.

"We'll be surer once the autopsy's in. I've asked Jennifer to keep an eye out for bruising patterns. I think the victim was pushed. Doesn't smell right."

"Smell right?" Kawany muttered, disdaining Johansen's latent romanticism. As he spoke, something moved beyond the barrier of light to his left, in an area of complex shadow where there was a doorway or an alcove and a large waste-disposal bin. The something was about the size of a large dog, but was solid and stumpy. It slid, rather than scurried, as though it didn't have legs. He watched it disappear behind the rubbish.

"Was she alone?" he asked, looking back at Johansen.

"Lived with a young man who says he'd gone out with the night. Only returned a while ago."

"I'll speak to him."

Kawany followed as Johansen led him out of the sealed-off area and toward a small doorway around the corner of the building. The inside wasn't as sordid as the outside — it had clean carpet, subtle lighting, and furnishings that were in good repair and only slightly questionable taste. Johansen started into the stairwell. "Isn't there an elevator?" Kawany grumbled after heaving himself up a step or two.

The young officer smirked. "Sure, but this is healthier."

"What are you implying, Johansen?" grumbled Kawany, glancing down at his paunch. He sucked it in. At that moment he sensed movement behind him and glanced around, expecting a resident trying to get past them. There was nothing, just walls and the closed door. That made him more irritated — was he losing his grip? Policemen couldn't afford to get jumpy.

He took another step, breathing heavily.

*They can't afford to get fat either, he thought.*

**A**lain Terewadzs was twenty-two and sported a trendy haircut, high at one side and multi-layered, like a complex fractal diagram. It was perhaps the most distinctive thing about him. His lips, though, were exact and red — a mannequin's. He was in an expensive dressing-gown and had been sniffing cocaine or something — the looseness of his movements gave him an air of being out of control. He said he'd been at the movies.

"*Frankensteins*," he pronounced. "From last century. It's a retrospective."

"They made more than one?"

"James Whale, Warhol, Branagh, Ormerod ..."

Kawany looked down his nose at the kid. He knew nothing about old horror movies, but he'd certainly check that the ones the kid named had been showing. "And when did you hear of Ms. Lamp's death?" he asked.

"When I got home at about two. There were policemen all over the place."

"Two is late for a movie."

"There were several of them, as I said. Afterwards I sort of walked around."

"What was your relationship to the deceased?"

The young man showed signs of embarrassment. "We were lovers, you know? To tell you the truth, she wasn't really my type. But it suited her, suited me. She didn't want me to be faithful or anything."

"So you're not very upset."

"Of course I'm sorry for her. But I've got no idea why she'd kill herself." His eyes twitched, as though he were uneasy about that last statement.

"Did you have a reason to kill her yourself?"

Terewadzs sneered. "What the bloody hell do you think I'll say to that?"

"Just routine."

"Well, I liked her. And she kept me in clothes, you know."

"I see."

"She was happy with the arrangement. So was I. If she was murdered, it was someone else did it."

"Anyone you can think of?"

"No." Terewadzs spoke quickly, as though getting the denial over with fast would save it from being questioned.

"Were there signs of anyone having been here when you came in?"

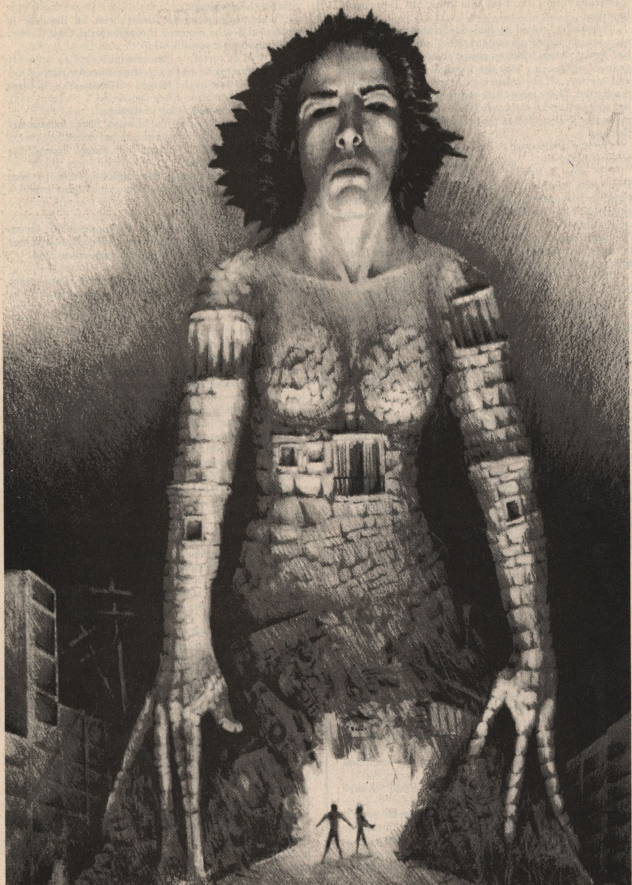
The youth's mind appeared to drift away. Finally he said: "Nothing I can think of. According to the room's entry log, there was only her ... and Kilroy."

Kawany frowned. This was news to him. Someone else in the household? "Kilroy?" he queried.

Terewadzs's face mellowed. It was an odd effect, nothing obvious, but Kawany caught it. "Kilroy's an ALF," the youth said. "Sort of a pet."

"An Artificial Life Form?" Kawany had heard of ALFs, but had rarely seen one "live." Out of his league financially — and the idea of furnishings that moved

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about had always struck him as too bizarre. Maybe the idea scared him. "Can I see this thing, Mr. Terewadz?" he asked.

Terewadz looked at him doubtfully, then, after a moment, shrugged agreement. He glanced around, but had said nothing, when an object about the size of a six-year-old child came into the room. It was sharp-edged and motley, all its colourings bright and primary — mostly red. There were three multi-faceted bulges on the flat top part and a structure like a mouth that was permanently smiling. It had four arms of varying sizes, and five legs.

"What's it supposed to be?" said Kawany, wanting to wrinkle his nose.

"He was a sort of side-table once, years ago." Terewadz touched the creature. "But there was an error in his construction patterning. He grew out of shape. Kilroy's crystalline, you know. Quartz — and other things."

"I see." Kawany didn't see at all, but he wasn't going to admit to ignorance at this juncture. "Who does Kilroy belong to? You or Ms. Lamp?"

Terewadz smiled at Kilroy, who nestled up against him. "Me, I guess. Janet bought him, but he always took to me. She wanted to get rid of him in the end. Reckoned he'd lost his original purpose and should be sent back to the manufacturers. But she gave in to me. I liked the way he'd outgrown functionality. Made him real, you know?"

The policeman nodded, though again he didn't "know" any such thing. Kilroy didn't look real. When it wasn't moving, it didn't even look alive.

"Is it ... he ... valuable?"

"Expensive originally, sure. Don't know about now." Terewadz squinted at Kawany anxiously. "Do you think I could make a case for keeping him, if Janet didn't leave him to me in her will?"

Kawany shrugged. His gaze dodged away and he noticed pine shadows beyond the balcony window. "Why have you got a dead pine tree on the veranda?" he asked.

Again that queer effect, a weary sadness. "It wasn't always dead. I like trees, you know, and there's not that many around any more. I grew that one from a seed." The youth breathed out heavily. "Janet dumped a load of old preserving chemicals in the pot one time. Killed it." He smiled wanly, but Kawany just frowned.

"It was really weird," said Kawany later, on the phone to Communications Officer Lieutenant Terri Stuart. "Obviously the thing liked him, and he liked it. More than he liked the woman, I reckon."

"That's the sixth death in Fingel Towers this month," Stuart said matter-of-factly.

Kawany squinted. "Yeah?"

"According to my records, two were caused by oxygen deficiency when the central service unit developed a fault. One was a robbery victim. But that leaves three Suspicious Circumstances."

"Three," Kawany repeated, scratching his ear. "Bad odds for coincidence."

"Battered to death, strangled, and — shall we say? — pushed from a fifth-floor apartment."

"What do you think's going on, Terri? A crime wave?"

Questions like this from Kawany were no longer unusual. The aging Police Chief had always had a reputation for sharpness — but time was taking this quality from him. Life was fracturing off in too many directions

for him to keep up, and the escalating chaos simply exacerbated the problem.

"You mean, why has there been an increase in unnatural deaths reported throughout the City?"

"Yeah. Is it a serial killer?"

"If it is, he certainly gets around."

"I'm starting to have the thumbscrews put on me. Since that article in the *Herald* on Wednesday, I've had a chat to the Minister. She's concerned."

"I'm sure she is. It's her electorate."

The wrinkled face turned upward. "Don't be cynical," he said. "The woman's a great humanitarian."

Stuart laughed. "Did this last Fingel Towers one really commit suicide?"

"Forensic guesses not. They claim you can tell from the brain chemistry or something ... but to me a fall's a fall."

"So she was pushed?"

"Okay, but by whom? The boyfriend might be an opportunist, but I don't think he's a killer. Too soft. And besides, he loses by it. Lamp's will leaves him zlick."

"Not even the ALF?"

"No one else'll want it. But no money. That might give us resentment as a motive. She caused his tree to die, too —"

"His tree?"

Kawany chose not to explain that one. "And his alibi's hard to verify. What do you think?"

There was silence, the type of silence that Kawany hoped was a prelude to some intuitive leap on Stuart's part. The Minister had done more than discuss the matter with him — she'd said she'd have his guts for garters if he didn't get some answers soon. He could probably pin the "murder" on Terewadz, but it didn't feel right.

"Did you know there're over fifty registered ALFs in that building?" Stuart said suddenly.

Kawany screwed up his face. "Fifty?"

"That's a lot of ALFs."

"What are you getting at, Stuart?"

"In what way do you think ALFs are alive?" she asked instead of answering him, apparently feeling Socratic.

Kawany knew little about ALFs, all afternoon tabloid stuff. He knew, for example, that there'd been a big run on them among the monied classes, once the legal ramifications of the technology had been ironed out in the Courts. He knew too that they were "designer" creatures, made to order by highly sophisticated scientific establishments. He'd heard the theory that their coming had answered a psychological need: ALF technology offered an endless variety of pseudo-creatures — not carbon-based and fleshy, but fashioned of non-biological substances such as crystal and silicon and metal, which could therefore survive extremes of climate and the wastage of the biosphere. Very reassuring to a race that had spent centuries destroying the other inhabitants of the planet. But people had a drive for practicality as well. Why should these ALFs contribute nothing more than their presence? Animals had done that, and look what happened to them. Why don't we fashion them as household design elements, someone had suggested, and the idea caught on. ALF furniture acquired a living character the same way dogs had once developed personalities — but coffee tables, chairs, sculptures, even crockery, these were more practical than a dog.

So despite the fact that ALFs were expensive, many households now had at least one piece of "living" furniture. Spooky, some reckoned — even blasphemous. But

what the hell! Why shouldn't your chair simulate life and therefore offer ultimate responsiveness?

"Alive?" he said now to Stuart's question. "They move about, for one thing."

"Okay, they move about. So does a car ... and a robot. We don't call robots lifeforms."

Kawany frowned, put off by this philosophical mumbo-jumbo. "ALFs are technological, aren't they? Like robots."

"They're a pseudo-biological realisation of certain concepts adopted decades ago by experimental mathematicians. But what makes them lifeforms, eh?"

Kawany sighed.

"ALFs are lifeforms," the Communications Officer said, ignoring his response, "because they function in ways we've traditionally associated with living creatures — they interact with their environment, they adapt to changing situations, they ingest matter and excrete waste. Unlike robots they grow, regenerate damaged matter — a few even reproduce themselves."

"So they're alive to that extent. Get to the point."

"I do reckon many of them have developed to the point where they can share feelings with their owners, make judgments on well-being, act intelligently to fulfil expectations —"

"Are you saying they can think?"

"Of course they can think, to varying degrees — in the sense of making choices based on experience and acquired knowledge. Robots do that. What I'm saying is, maybe simple responsiveness becomes not only intelligence but emotion and self-consciousness."

"You're kidding me?"

"Why shouldn't it be true, Logan? They're alive, and they're complex. Much more complex, in fact, than the theoretical scientists predicted. As usual, chaos defeated them."

"But ALFs aren't real living things, are they?"

"They're not biological, though they're real enough."

Kawany stretched back, dismissing the whole thing. "So what if they are?" he growled.

Late that evening, Kawany's phone hummed at him urgently. The noise reminded him of cicadas — something he hadn't heard since his youth. The cicada, like many other species, had become extinct; some chemical or other was responsible. He didn't like this reminder of another loss.

"What is it?" he growled into his old non-visual phone.

"This is Stuart," said the distant voice.

A sense of urgency flooded into Kawany suddenly; he knew something important had happened. "Ah, Terri," he said. "What's up?"

"I just took a call, Logan. Thought you might be interested. Seems a bloke named Yeeton threw an arm-chair from his twelfth-storey window."

"Where?"

"Fingel Towers."

Kawany whistled. "Fit of temper?" he asked.

"It was an ALF. Yeeton reckons it attacked him."

Kawany pulled the handset of the phone harder against his ear. "Attacked him? They don't do that, do they?"

"They might. He says this one did."

There was a moment of silence, while Kawany rummaged around in his mind for something to help him understand. "What do you think, Terri?" he managed at last.

"I think you'd better get down there," she answered.

A cold wind was whispering in through the huge teeth of smashed glass still stuck in the window-frame. Sometimes, as he caught shadows lurking at the edges of his vision, Kawany imagined that the teeth were moving — part of a huge mouth, closing around them.

Yeeton was sitting on the corner of an upmarket modular lounge. He was looking angry, but strung-out. His mousy eyes would snap onto Kawany, until the Inspector returned their gaze directly, at which moment they'd dart away.

"I don't know why," Yeeton said. "Design fault, maybe."

The story was short and no doubt sweeter than it had been in reality. Yeeton claimed he'd come home exhausted and the chair had attacked him — without provocation — almost as soon as he'd come in the door. He showed Kawany his bruises. They were there all right, but something about Yeeton's manner convinced the detective that the attack hadn't been as straightforward as he made out. "You've owned it for ... how long?"

"Over two years. I've been having some trouble with it lately. You know, slow reacting, argumentative —"

"Argumentative? Can ALFs talk?"

"You know what I mean. Wouldn't do what it was supposed to."

Kawany wrote something in his notebook, more to cause a delay than to record his impressions. Yeeton squirmed. "What was your attitude to this ALF?" Kawany said suddenly.

Yeeton scowled at him, as though he'd been asked to explain his attitude to bathroom mould. "What do you mean attitude? It was a chair ... a pet ... I liked it okay — though I admit it was starting to get on my nerves."

"Nerves?"

"It wouldn't do what it was told. I said already!"

It was obvious to Kawany that Yeeton was the problem, not a chair with attitude. "I should tell you, Mr. Yeeton, that destroying an ALF is a serious offence," he said sternly. "Under the 2016 Artificial Life Act, you're legally responsible for treating it humanely. The law does not condone cruelty to ALFs."

"It was a chair!"

"It was a pet ... you said so yourself. Pets have had basic legal protection for considerably longer than you or I have been around. The principle has been extended to ALFs, at least in an elementary form."

"It's ridiculous!" Yeeton snarled.

"So," muttered Kawany, "is a living lounge-chair."

It was murky in the street outside Yeeton's apartment building, a night thick with smog and bitterness. But the wind had died, and at least the dark was still. The interior of Fingel Towers had been giving Kawany the creeps, haunting him with half-seen movements. As he emerged from the side door, he tried to settle his uneasiness and concentrate on the problem at hand.

There were no police lights strung up around the "corpse" of the ALF-chair; it was torn nearly in half, much of it smashed by the impact. After striking the ground, it had crawled a few metres toward a facing alleyway, but then had lost whatever fight it was waging against oblivion. It had never before occurred to Kawany that ALFs actually passed on.

"Do you think they feel pain?" he said, more to him-



self than to either Johansen or Yeeton. Neither answered. "I wonder if there's any studies been done?"

A clean-up crew had just arrived — they'd remove the bits for decent disposal. Kawany shivered at the thought. Shadows were making him nervous and the air chilled him to the bone. Perhaps Stuart's words had bothered him more than he cared to admit. "Some scientists believe life isn't *ipso facto* made from biological material," she'd said, and he remembered the mockery in her eyes. "It's not just some evolutionarily successful substance we normally call living matter. Instead they believe the key element is organisation, rather than a particular molecular nature. Get any substance — aluminium, silicon, plastic, whatever — get it organised, functioning with the right logic, and you've got Life. Simple."

"Is it?" Kawany said. "It sounds like nonsense to me."

"Nonsense or not, that's what they've done. ALFs aren't biological, but by any reasonable definition, they're alive."

Kawany didn't know what to think. ALFs had been around for some time, but he'd never had to deal with them before, not directly. He would've liked to keep it that way.

"Where will it lead?" he'd said.

"To something the scientists call a Universal Constructor, Logan. They don't know what it is, but they put it forward — theoretically — as the supreme Artificial Life Form."

"What would it do?" Kawany felt a touch paranoid.

Stuart had shrugged. "Everything," she'd said.

Kawany looked back over his shoulder now, at the dead ALF and the thick darkness beyond it. He wondered what a Universal Constructor would think of this night's work. Perhaps Yeeton's actions had been in self-defence, perhaps not. But if a man or a woman had been lying back there on the bitumen, Kawany knew he wouldn't be taking Yeeton in just to talk to a psychiatrist. He'd have booked him first, and Yeeton would be facing up to a judge and jury.

He wasn't paying much attention as they approached their car, but he did register that something was up. The problem was defined by Johansen, who bent down over the wheels. "Polarising plates have been smashed," he said. Kawany glanced around, hoping to spot some relatively innocuous culprit — a street kid, an anarchist expressing anti-police feelings, one of the growing number of urban dissidents ... something ordinary. But there was nothing. The street was quiet, filled with so many black patches like cave entrances, Kawany suddenly experienced an overwhelming conviction that he was surrounded — by whom and for what reason he didn't know. "Stupid!" muttered Johansen, giving the street his own version of Kawany's nervous glance. "Do they think they can trap us here?"

"They who?" asked Yeeton, becoming anxious himself.

Johansen shot him a withering look, then went to open the car door. "I'll contact the station to send us a car, sir," he said to Kawany.

But the door had been jimmied open; the computer was in pieces.

"This is getting serious," muttered Kawany. "I don't know what's up, but I don't like it. We're exposed here. Let's get back to the building; the clean-up mob can give us a lift."

"What's going on?" said Yeeton. "Are we in danger?"

Afterwards Kawany couldn't say what had warned

him. Perhaps he heard a noise or sensed a disturbance in the air; at any rate he glanced over his shoulder just as the darkness farther down the street disgorged the oddest car he'd ever seen. It looked, he thought, too bulky and unnaturally angular to fit into any of the normal categories. It sped toward them — a patchwork of colours and segments, as though its owner had customised it with the addition of surreal appendages and several cans of spray paint. It was so bizarre Kawany studied it for several moments too long, moments in which he should have been doing something.

Yeeton and Johansen followed his gaze. They could hear the engine-less swish of the vehicle now. Johansen dived to one side and ran, but Yeeton was slow. The car struck him, sending his body into an airborne tumble that ended when he slammed against a wall. Kawany ran, afraid for his own life, but the car swerved around him and in a moment had disappeared into the night.

"It had no identification!" Johansen yelled, ever on the lookout for felonies.

Kawany was moving toward Yeeton, whose limbs were twitching spasmodically. Movement ceased before Kawany got there. He felt the man's wrist, then his neck. "He's dead," the policeman muttered. Johansen started to say something, but Kawany interrupted him to yell instructions to the clean-up squad. He wanted the car intercepted before it disappeared for good.

A few moments later a squad car appeared in the main street, approaching from the direction the offender's vehicle had taken — but the patrol officers had seen nothing. "Couldn't have passed us," the puzzled driver said, backing away from Kawany's anger. "I would've remembered a thing like that."

"You must've missed it," Kawany growled.

"Impossible." The officer frowned nervously. "We were sitting maybe a block from here. There are no turn-offs. If it was there to see, we would've seen it."

Kawany squinted, as he always did when he didn't understand something. "Suppose you tell me where the bloody thing went, then?" he snarled.

"Home to its mummy?" the other cop answered with a grin.

Suddenly, with those words, the truth occurred to Kawany. *Home indeed!* he thought, and glanced up at the building beside them.

"How can it still be here?" said Johansen as they walked down an alley, heading for the back of Fingel Towers. "According to the boys it didn't circle the block or anything."

"What if it ducked down one of the alleys here and came in without following the road?"

"There isn't enough room, Inspector. A car could never fit down here."

"It couldn't, could it? Not in one piece."

"You think they took it to pieces?" Johansen looked at him incredulously. "You think they pulled up just around the corner ... then silently dismantled a car and lugged it back around to Fingel Towers without us noticing? All in five minutes or so?"

Kawany grunted. "We'll just take a look, okay?"

It was silent in the basement of Fingel Towers, which they found without much trouble, over an open space of paving and down a narrow stairwell. Conveniently — or suspiciously — the door was unlocked. Next to the outside entrance there was a large panel-gate, probably computer operated, and a ramp. Given a fold-up car, Kawany reckoned, it was more than



possible the vehicle that had killed Yeeton could have come here and hidden itself away. *Sure, why not?* thought Johansen ... *Given a fold-up car.*

Kawany palm-touched a light panel on the wall. Nothing happened. They directed their torches into the darkness.

Except for assorted piles of rubbish, the basement was empty. Johansen jabbed his torchlight in an irregular arc, stopping at a red cabinet, several green and yellow chairs, a brown-stained locker. "Looks like they store old furniture here," he said.

Kawany approached the red cabinet, which was about waist height and half a metre square. His light focused on one edge. "There's blood," he said.

Surprised, Johansen leaned closer. "Blood?" He touched a watery smear, almost invisible against the red paint of the cabinet. He sniffed his finger. "What's it mean?"

"It means this is part of our killer car."

"How can it be? It's just a—"

Suddenly the cabinet jerked into motion, knocking Kawany off-balance. The torch flew from his hand and rolled across the floor, flinging light-trails into the darkness. Johansen yelled something. By the time he turned his own light back to the cabinet, it was gone.

The sound of grinding metal suddenly filled the basement. "There!" yelled Kawany, pointing. Johansen directed his torch and lit up a steel panel, which had been shut but was now open. Through the gap, the cabinet, the chairs, and various other, less identifiable, shapes were fleeing.

"ALFs!" he said. He rushed toward the doorway, which slammed shut before he got there. He pounded his fist against it. "Must be a button somewhere."

"Probably another ALF inside," said Kawany. "Come on, let's go."

He grabbed his own torch, then dragged Johansen away from the metal panel, which the junior officer was prodding, seeking a weakness. But when they reached the entrance — at the top of the stairwell they'd come down — it wouldn't open. The door appeared to have no lock. Darkness crowded in around them then, sucking at the light of their torches.

"What's going on?" said Johansen, his voice quivering.

"I think they've got us trapped."

"They?" Johansen looked aghast. "A gang of ALFs?"

"I don't know, do I?" Kawany reached into his pocket and found his communicator. "Keep an eye out!"

"For what?"

"Anything."

Johansen glanced around, even more nervous than he had been; several muscles on his face twitched as though he were undertaking electrotherapy. Kawany pressed a call sequence, hoping the troops outside were paying attention. Thankfully, he got a reply at once, though it was crackly and indistinct.

"We've been cornered," he said. "There are ALFs everywhere." Something moved in the darkness, and his sense of being hemmed in increased. "We need advice. There must be some way of communicating with these things." He repeated the message and received a number of distorted screams in return that were probably the boys trying to make contact. Then there was the sound of movement across the frequencies, as though

someone was doing a search. *It's me,* a voice said at last; it wasn't very clear, but clearer than before. *Stuart. The boys sent in a standard oral report, and I picked up on it. Brought a booster. Figure you'd do something silly, Logan.*

"Don't lecture me!" Kawany growled. "You got any ideas?"

*About what? Getting you out?*

"That'll do for starters. Any way down here through the building?"

*It's blocked off. Residents who were at home when this started have been locked in their units. One or two got out before it was too late, but they don't know what the hell's happening.*

"Okay, look, you're the communications expert. Can we talk with these ALFs?"

*I've never heard that any ALF could talk.*

*Technologists in the industry are working on it, but as far as I know they haven't succeeded. Might make it hard to negotiate, that being the case.*

"So they're not as smart as you try to make out, eh?"

*At least as smart as other pets. No one expected dogs to talk to them.*

"Seems to me the ALFs were smart enough to defend themselves. I reckon that's what happened to the Lamp woman ... and Yeeton."

*Kick a dog for long enough and it'll bite you.*

"There was a degree of organisation, though. Do dog packs plan revenge?"

Reception broke up suddenly, fracturing Stuart's voice into a sequence of distorted grunts.

*Then ... all speculation ... contact New Life Inc. Never know ... one of their scientists might ... more ... at least ... you out of there.*

"One other thing, Stuart. Remember what you said? About the Universal Constructor? Perhaps that's what we've got here."

*... Constructor? Are you serious...?*

"What's an ultimate ALF if it's not a bunch of them acting together?"

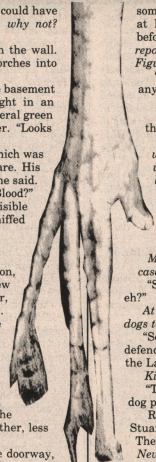
*Maybe. Where do you reckon this Constructor is?*

"I don't know. There were a lot of ALFs in this building, you said so ... Could their numbers be ... increasing?"

*You mean, the artificial life effect might be spreading?* her answer came back. *How could that happen?*

"You're the expert," Kawany replied, feeling impatient, his impatience in turn increasing his fear. "How did God come about, anyway?"

Once stated, Kawany's guess seemed likely enough. The how was harder, but a little thought was enough to give Stuart at least one hypothesis. There was a particularly high concentration of ALFs in Fingel Towers. Okay, sure ... ALFs were *manufactured* to appear living; but as far as Stuart could make out none of the scientists really understood very well why the particular modes of organisation imposed on the host molecules resulted in this pseudo-life. So why should they know what attendant phenomena it might produce in the long run? Maybe an optimum concentration of ALF lifeform produced a corresponding organisation in adjacent matter. ALF-engineer a lump of energised substance, set its generative mechanisms going, and perhaps, after a while, chaos helped it break the limits. Random factors might then generate



their own patterns, extending the effect. The result: more ALFs, more dead matter acting like it's alive ...

"I'm sorry," a voice said in her handset. It didn't sound sorry — what it sounded like was a machine. Stuart had known right from the start that New Life Inc.'s receptionist wasn't going to cooperate. There had been a stoniness about his tone that had increased markedly once he'd put her on hold, gone off in search of someone, and come back to tell her there was nothing to be done. Were they afraid that helping the police would indicate liability? "None of our technicians are in at the moment —"

"This is police business ..." growled Stuart, who had been on the phone for ten minutes now, fruitlessly. "Important police business. Lives are at stake. Put me through to anyone higher up in the hierarchy."

"The Director's not in today. I told you."

"You've told me nothing!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't produce people out of thin air, can I?"

You can certainly make them disappear, Stuart thought. "Give me a number ... any number. We desperately need to talk to someone with expertise in communicating with ALFs —"

Then the line went dead. Stuart knew it hadn't just dropped out, accidentally, as it had been intended to sound. But right then pursuing the matter didn't seem worthwhile. Speculations on her next move — seeking a court order, say, or at least the authority of someone higher up in the Force, both of which strategies would take time she didn't think she had — were interrupted by a weedy-looking uniformed cop, who coughed behind his hand to get Stuart's attention.

"What is it?" Stuart said, still irritated.

"We've just received a call, Lieutenant. From inside Fingel Towers."

"One of the residents?"

"He had trouble speaking, like he was retarded. Gave his name as Kilroy."

"What? Kilroy? Impossible."

"Is it a hoax, do you think? He said he needed to talk to someone in charge. I guess that means you, on Inspector Kawany's orders."

"You have this Kilroy on the line now?"

The man shrugged loosely, as though his neck were coming unhinged. "Well, no. He said you should go up there. To his unit. The front door would be opened to let you in, he said."

"Have you told the Inspector about this?"

"They've been totally cut off."

She considered the coincidence. "It might be a trap."  
"One other person can accompany you. We negotiated that, at least."

Stuart stared at the man, then up at the dirty edifice of Fingel Towers. It looked so damned inevitable.

"Then find me someone big," she said.

One of the local patrol officers, Constable Wadakeen, was big. He reminded Stuart of an American gridiron player, only the padding was real. He also grinned a lot, as though something about their situation amused him. "The room's on floor five," he said now, pointing toward the lifts. The front doors, which had indeed opened to receive them, had slammed shut again as soon as they'd stepped through. "Elevators work," Wadakeen added.

Stuart tried to imagine being in such a confined space right now.

"I'll use the stairs," she said, though even that decision left her feeling insecure.

"Who's this Kilroy bloke?" the young man, striding ahead of her up the stairwell, shot back over his shoulder. "I thought Kilroy was just graffiti ... *Kilroy was here.*"

"It's the name the suspect, Terewadysz, uses to refer to his ... pet. An ALF."

"Must be the ALF I saw watching us while we dealt with ... the dead one." He breathed out heavily, uncomfortable with the concept of ALF mortality. "The suspect was there, too."

"Really? Were they talking, do you think?"

He just shrugged.

They reached Terewadysz's unit without incident and the young officer rapped on the door. Stuart handled the gun she'd strapped to her side, her fingers drumming against its grip. *Easy!* she ordered herself. The door didn't open, and nobody answered, despite repeated knocking. "Kick it in?" asked the officer cheerfully. *Even modern police forces seem doomed to attract people who like kicking in doors,* Stuart thought.

"Knock again," she said. "Harder."

When that failed, the officer shrugged at her with mock resignation and lifted his big black boot, aiming it at the lock. But the door opened before he could touch it, and he leapt back as though something had sprung out at him. Nothing had.

Stuart peered into the lighted room beyond the opening. There they were, the ALF and Terewadysz; Kilroy — large, cumbersome, and looking no more sentient than a lump of painted granite, several of its appendages resting on Terewadysz. Was he a hostage? Terewadysz himself seemed unconscious. He was lounging in an inert chair, and was breathing, his eyes open, though he appeared even less aware than his artificial companion. There were other creatures too: something small and shapeless, another box-like, a third like a distorted lampstand. Stuart hung back, wondering whether the group knew she was there. She couldn't tell if the ALFs were watching her or not.

"Come," Terewadysz said.

The voice surprised her, emerging as it did from a figure so corpse-like it might have been three days dead. Even more surprising, Terewadysz didn't move at all while he spoke: his eyes continued to stare blankly at a corner of the room and his arms and fingers were still; only his lips moved to let the sound escape. Kilroy kept his grip on him.

"Are you sick?" Stuart ventured.

"Drugged." The unmoving corpse, like a ventriloquist's dummy, mouthed the word. "It makes him ... relax, accept."

Stuart glanced at Kilroy. "You're talking through him?" As she spoke, she stepped into the room; Wadakeen stood transfixed, so that when the door slid shut they were on opposite sides of it. Stuart glanced at it thoughtfully. "Am I a prisoner?" she asked.

"You're ... safe."

Stuart nodded, weighing up the chances. Wadakeen yelled something, and after a moment Stuart shouted back, urging him to wait. His featureless, grunted reply thumped through the door.

"So ..." Stuart said. "Do we reason this out?"

"Confused."

"What's to be confused about? Some of your friends are attacking two of our men in the basement. That's not confusion, that's aggression. So is running someone



down, and pushing a woman from the fifth storey."

"Primitive acts. From fear."

"Fear?" There was no answer. Not that Stuart really needed one. As the word left her lips, she understood the emotions that an ALF, self-aware and capable of suffering psychic pain, might feel in response to neglect, abuse, even ignorance. To most people ALFs were just part of the furniture. Had Yeeton been all that Kawany thought him, it would indeed be an act of basic, albeit primitive, self-preservation to attack him, the one causing the hurt. Was there any class of being that must endure contempt without recourse? "Some of your number ... you perhaps ..." The creature offered nothing. "Some of you were mistreated. I can understand that. But the police force ..." She indicated herself. "... We protect. We support justice."

The creature didn't reply. What was it thinking? That police forces were notoriously bad defenders of "second class citizens," perhaps? "Let Kawany and Johansen go, and we'll help you," Stuart added. Terewadsz still said nothing. "Things will have to change," she continued. "No one realised there was even a problem —"

"Are humans ever capable ... of change?"

Was Terewadsz going to say more? He broke off suddenly. Nothing moved anywhere in the room. The air seemed to concentrate. Stuart frowned. "Is something the matter?" she said. The Kilroy ALF jerked, ripples like waves of light skimming across its surfaces. Terewadsz's lips trembled in tandem, but no intelligible sound emerged, only a series of moans. He began to twitch. Spasms jerked his body, emerging from his mouth as low groans and spat-out fractured syllables. Words tried to form from them, but he didn't seem capable of control. "What's wrong?" Stuart began, and Kilroy moved away from the human it was holding. Terewadsz coughed and heaved. Stuart rushed over and knelt beside him, concerned that he was choking to death. She tried to free his breathing.

With a jerk, he pulled away from her, suddenly steady. "I couldn't ... stay open ... to it," he explained, in groups of syllables that each ended in a dry wheeze. "Not strong enough..."

"Open?" asked Stuart.

"To the ALF."

"To Kilroy?"

Terewadsz ran his hand across his scalp and shook his head, still grabbing at air. "Kilroy ... could never talk ... in here ..." He tapped his forehead. "This is ... new. It's growing stronger."

"What is it?" Stuart grabbed his arm to make him maintain eye contact. "Where is it?"

Terewadsz gazed around. Perhaps the fire in his eyes was desperation. Or fear.

"You must guide me," Stuart persisted, glancing toward Kilroy as she spoke. The ALF's expressionless "face" might have been watching her.

While Stuart climbed the stairs inside Fingel Towers, on her way to a conference with Terewadsz's ALF, Kawany and Johansen tried to stay calm. But the darkness merely thickened, as though the basement were filling up with some substance that strove to evade their light. Their torches, directed into it, revealed nothing.

"What's going on?" Johansen whispered.

Kawany didn't answer. They stood there, jerking beams of flashlight through the space around them, for

what seemed an age. Finally Johansen couldn't resist the silence any longer. "Isn't there something we can do?" he said.

Kawany scowled. "Got any ideas?"

He hadn't, of course, but his agitation disturbed Kawany. Indicating that Johansen should follow, he eased himself away from the wall and across the basement floor. It was like being fog-bound; even his torch was hard-pressed to make much definite progress through the darkness. Perhaps the batteries were running down.

"Look there, sir!" said Johansen suddenly, pointing beyond the light surrounding them. His torch faintly illuminated what might have been an alcove; the wall disappeared, emerging from the gloom again after about a metre.

Kawany pressed forward with some eagerness. As he approached the alcove he could make out a door, probably metallic; a high-energy symbol warned them away. NO ENTRY, the sign said. AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY.

"What is it?" whispered Johansen.

"Powerplant. Probably a generator; certainly emergency backup."

"Would there be another way out?" the junior officer asked anxiously.

Kawany shrugged. He moved closer to the door, using the fading light to examine its locking system. No key, of course. Security-personnel contact activated. But at least there was something to aim at. "Move back," he said. Taking out his gun — an A-50 Walther Reflex beamer — he set it for spot focus and squeezed the trigger.

A blinding spark of energy caught at his eyes, making light-creatures dance in the darkness before them. He blinked rapidly.

Then Kawany was thrown down, his torch and gun smashing away, as the floor and the walls buckled and jumped. Johansen yelled something. Kawany glanced toward the only luminescence remaining, the superheated point above the door lock at which he had fired. Around that point the door was shaking.

"My God," he said, to no one in particular.

The building kept rocking, as though they'd been hit by an earthquake. From the darkness came crashing, rending noises, small explosions ... perhaps screams. The door to the reserve generator fractured and broke up; through the gap, something — the generator? — heaved in the darkness like a huge, failing heart.

Kawany stumbled and fell against the wall. He felt its throbbing texture under his fingers.

Gradually, the quaking died away. The point of light faded, letting shadows thicken into a grainy darkness around him. Isolated movements followed, off in the obscurity, far away and on many sides. There was a dim echo. The sounds diminished, stopped. Silence took over.

"Inspector?" came Johansen's voice at last.

"I'm fine. You?"

"The floor broke my fall."

Kawany smiled, but then a sense of vulnerability, there in the pitch black, settled over him like depression. "I've lost my torch," he muttered.

"I might be able to find mine."

Kawany listened to Johansen scrambling about, grunting as he touched unseen objects.

"Well?" Light stabbed across at him as Johansen made a triumphant sound. He blinked, dazzled. "For God's sake ..."

"Sorry, sir. I —"

Something shifted at the edge of his vision. Kawany gestured for Johansen to be quiet. Again, there was movement to his left, then his right. "There!" He indicated that Johansen should direct the beam the way he was pointing, but the junior officer was too slow. Whatever had stirred was gone now. "Missed it," he muttered.

"Missed what?"

His body stiffened. Around him, like a black tide, the shadows seemed to thicken, becoming a wall of suggestive movement. Johansen's torch caught on angular shapes, faceless, surreal sculptures, colours bleached by the yellow light. Kawany reached for his beamer, but it was gone. "Lieutenant?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the half-visible crowd of ALFs standing around them. "Have you got a gun?"

Johansen looked at him, his face distorted by spilt glare from the torch and his loosening grip on his emotions. As he did, his hand moved too, and the light jerked toward the ceiling, leaving the ALFs in darkness. He noticed and snapped the light back. They were still there, straight ahead, to the right, the left ... the obscurity made their numbers daunting. "I'm not authorised to carry, sir. My rating ..."

"Yes, yes." Kawany dismissed the setback at once. What did it matter anyway? Could you shoot an ALF? Did he want to? "Use the torch," he added. "I dropped mine. See if you can find it."

"But the ALFs, sir—"

"Be quick about it!"

Johansen flashed the fading torch around Kawany's feet, the dirty concrete floor, the dark corners ... "There!" he said. Light defined the smooth angles of his Walther, bent out of shape far to one side. It looked like something heavy had stomped on it. Johansen threw the torchbeam back toward the circle of ALFs. They weren't any closer.

"They're not attacking," Kawany said.

"What do they want?"

"I don't know, do I?"

Corners and edges pushed into the light, crowding and shifting. The noise was like a slow tide on a pebble beach. Kawany and Johansen stepped back instinctively.

"What do you want?" Johansen yelled. There was no answer, just the slow friction on the concrete floor. The circle closed further, and the policemen retreated.

"Why are they coming on so slowly?" Johansen didn't take his eyes off the creatures this time. "We've seen them go fast. If they attacked, we couldn't do anything. They're not made of flesh."

"I think they don't want to attack," Kawany said. "And they don't want to spook us either."

"What then?"

"I think they're herding us."

Behind them, in the only direction where their movement would be unimpeded, was the mouth of the broken doorway to the generator room. Kawany could hear the dull throbbing of machines.

"In there?" said Johansen shrilly, flashing the torch that way. Its light caught on the edges of the doorway, but was stopped by thick shadows within the room. There were no ALFs in the way. He moved the torch back toward the advancing ALFs.

"We could try to rush them," Kawany said.

"There're too many."

The advancing tide, which became more obscurely

threatening as the torch dimmed and the area it lit diminished, forced them back step by step until they reached the door to the generator room. It smelt of ozone and oil. Johansen whimpered and looked as though, at any minute, he might start screaming and running about hysterically. Kawany gripped his arm. "They want us in there," he said. "Let's find out why."

Inside the room, with the torch directed toward the doorway and the advancing ALFs, it was like looking down a tunnel and seeing only darkness at its end. Kawany grabbed the torch from Johansen and directed it inwards. The room might have been a large space, but it was crowded with machinery and layers of shadow, and his claustrophobia grew. The earthquake had caused some minor cracking on the only wall he could see, and there appeared to be rubble scattered across the floor. He focused on some pieces of it which were odd in shape, trying to decipher detail under the yellowing light. "Look at this!" he mumbled. Johansen was gazing irresistibly toward the outer darkness and did not react to his voice.

The rubble wasn't rubble; it was made up of small objects, stylised artifacts constructed from bits of plastic, wire, whatever ... fused together deliberately but not according to any familiar logic. Despite that lack of familiarity, Kawany recognised that these shapes were not accidental. There was purpose behind them — an alien purpose, but purpose nevertheless. They must have tumbled from shelves and surfaces ... yes, now he could see that the room had been organised, with a precision suggesting ritualistic design. Was this some sort of holy place for the ALFs? And if so, what did they worship? Perhaps "worship" did not adequately describe its function? What then? Something moved at his feet. Glancing down with the torch, he thought, just for a moment, that one of the small objects had twitched. He poked it. Nothing. Must have been illusion. I'm too jumpy, he thought, too jumpy.

"Something's happening!" Johansen whispered.

Kawany glanced toward the doorway, torchlight shimmering over angular surfaces and blanched colours. The ALFs seemed to be moving back, away from them. As he watched, a different shape materialised, something more human. The ALFs appeared to be making a path for its passage to them. He tried to clarify the shape by directing the torch toward its face, but the torchlight was still inadequate and left detail blurred. It came on, slowly, like a spectre, until it entered the generator room and the torchlight clarified its features more fully.

"Stuart?" said Kawany.

She was subdued and tentative in her movements, face slack and eyes vacant — like some sort of undead creature.

"Inspector," she said in a voice devoid of colour, "it wishes to talk ..."

"What does?" Kawany went toward her, looking into her eyes and gently resting his hand on the side of her face. The skin was warm.

"I am ... not injured."

"What about your mind?"

"I have ... let it in, Logan, so that it can talk to us."

"Let it in?"

"It can cause precise molecular vibration, when in direct proximity. I can hear it."

"You look half dead."

For a moment Stuart let her control drop and weariness appeared on her face and in her carriage. "It affects



me, Logan ... it's like nothing I've ever known."

"Can you make it stop?"

"It can't control me, if that's what you're thinking. Earlier ... it was controlling Terewadz, but that was because he was stoned. Even then, it couldn't hold on."

"So what's it got to say?"

"It's getting stronger, Logan, and the effect is escalating. Mere hours ago it didn't even exist as a conscious force. The attacks ... the Lamp woman, the others ... they were primitive ... gut reactions, we'd call them. A response to the shock of widening self-consciousness in such a ... repressive context." She was breathing heavily. "Yes ... yes..." she muttered, not to Kawany. "I'm using my own words, Logan ... it doesn't have the understanding ..."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but it is an extension of the ALFs —"

"Extension?"

"A side effect of their own lifeforce, I think." She swallowed compulsively and staggered. Kawany attempted to steady her. "You know how a powerful magnet can affect a piece of ferrous metal that isn't magnetic? Make it magnetic? ... Yes? Well, the artificial organisation that made the ALFs can have a self-similarising effect on nearby matter —"

"So they were spontaneously generating throughout Fingel Towers, as we thought?"

She nodded. "Not quite spontaneously, but —"

"Why here? Why now?"

"I don't know. Chance perhaps. The initial edging of the effect beyond the technologically imposed limits of each ALF might have been an accident, a random movement. But once it occurred, replication became its own pattern. Perhaps prolonged concentration of their numbers here, in a complex domestic situation, set up sympathetic vibrations ... The ... consciousness ... doesn't even know. Though I think it will. Eventually."

"It's developing fast?"

"I can feel it, Logan, like exponential growth. Mere days ago it was a ... tendency ... a quickening. It caused an excess of crude emotion in some of the ALFs. Yesterday they began coming here, all the ALFs, to this room, because they knew it was concentrated here. This is where they used to gather. This is where they developed a sense of community. This morning it developed a separate self-consciousness and was angry. Just hours past the effect had spread throughout the building. Now, now ..."

"What does it want of us?"

"Nothing. It wants us to know. That's all. Now it considers that the change is unstoppable. That's why it trapped you here. To gain time."

"Where is it, then?" Kawany glanced around through the darkness. He noticed that Johansen had slumped against a wall. "The generator?"

"Don't you understand, Logan? This room is its centre still, but it's everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

"All around us. The consciousness is Fingel Towers."

"What?" The floor seemed to breathe then, the whole structure shifting minutely. Kawany tried to consider the implications, but his mind rebelled. "The whole building is an ALF?"

She simply nodded, exhausted.

"We've got to get out of here," Kawany growled. "We're in it. In its belly."

"It's not a monster, Logan. It doesn't want to eat us."

"It must want something." He had a sudden thought.

"We've got to let someone know what's happening, before this thing spreads itself any further."

"It's not in control of the lifeforming effect. That's just happening and can't be stopped. The lifeforming ... according to ..." She waved her hand vaguely, indicating the darkness. "It says ... the effect has already spread beyond the walls ... but we shouldn't worry. It bears us no malice."

"We ... we can go then?" interjected Johansen.

Stuart closed her eyes. Her body shuddered. Suddenly she staggered and began to collapse. Kawany caught her.

"I'm all right." She pushed away. "It's gone from me. We can leave."

Kawany moved the torchlight. The ALFs that had crowded outside the door were nowhere in sight. There was a hissing, dragging noise, and grainy light leaked into the basement beyond the shadows that surrounded them.

Supporting Stuart and lending an arm to Johansen too, Kawany forced them all across the basement and up the stairs, his eyes fixed on the stream of light emanating from the now open outer door. Emergency Services personnel and other police units were waiting outside, flashing lights and milling about in a bewildered fashion. They looked unsettled.

"Inspector?" A tall anemic bloke with sergeant stripes on his arm approached Kawany tentatively. "How did you get out?"

"Walked," muttered Kawany. He moved past to deliver Stuart to a medic. She claimed to be fine, but he was worried about how such close communication with the ALF consciousness might have affected her. As a doctor took her weight from him, she turned to Kawany and gripped his arm.

"Logan," she said, "did you understand what I told you?"

"About the ALF? Sure. It's friendly, or so it says."

Her mind seemed to drift in and out of consciousness, quickly and painfully. "The lifeforming effect," she managed at last. "It's irreversible ... unstoppable. I felt it."

"I understand," he said.

"And the strength of it is exponential. Do you see?"

"See ...?" He looked back at the grey brick bleakness of Fingel Towers and wondered if the building could see. If so, was it studying them now?

"Are you ready for a world ... where everything's alive?" Stuart said.

Beneath his feet, Kawany felt the earth shift like a slumbering giant. □

## 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.

# Slab Town

By Robert A. Metzger  
Art by Alan Gutierrez

*Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened...*

— T.S. Eliot

My right index finger was gone, replaced by shards of purplish steel, the knuckles transformed into glistening plastic gears. Only seconds before the mechanical hand had been made of flesh and bone. I lowered my hand and shuffled across the road, my boots hidden beneath an autumn sea of burnt orange leaves. Stepping up onto the sidewalk, I looked out across the overgrown field that had once been Memorial Park.

I smiled and touched the past — Memorial Park on the Fourth of July. There were crowds and cotton candy, crying babies, red, white, and blue streamers, firecrackers, hot dogs, a ferris wheel, the fun house, Mom carrying a picnic basket full of fried chicken, Dad lugging a blanket and fold-away chairs, myself with Rick in tow, and best of all, the dunk tank — five hundred gallons of ice-cold water above which would be perched a teacher.

But that was not the Fourth of July in 1987.

Two days before the Fourth, Rick came down with the chicken pox. He'd been confined to bed and an endless stream of toast, tea, red jello, and Mom fussing with his pillow and blankets.

With Rick in bed, Dad and I had walked the several blocks to the park, ridden the ferris wheel, eaten some dogs and cotton candy, and even shot several handfuls of darts at balloons. We had gone about having our fun in a dutiful, diligent manner, but unable to really enjoy ourselves with Rick sick at home. We had ended up at the dunk tank.

That was tradition.

We had pushed our way through the crowd, and I saw old Mr. Crutchers, a third-grade teacher from Chaparral Elementary, sitting on the dunk tank platform, with his bald head covered by a big black floppy hat. A kid stood at the rail in front of the tank with a softball in hand, hefting it up, apparently getting the feel of it. He was barefoot, dressed in yellow pajamas with a trapdoor bottom, and wore a Dodgers baseball cap. He coughed and swayed back and forth.

It was Rick.

"Rick?" said Dad, as he took a step forward.

I knew what he would do, knew what he wanted.

I reached out and grabbed his back pocket, tugged on him, actually pulled him backward. Dad turned around, surprised, the expression on his face one of disbelief.

"We have to get Rick," he said. "He's sick."

I'd never disobeyed Dad, never even questioned his word. I looked just past him. Rick was whispering

to the baseball, holding it up close to his lips, as if giving it secret instructions as to how to get to the bull's eye.

"Let him throw, Dad," I said, not certain what his response would be, not sure if I had just gotten myself into trouble.

Dad looked down at me, squinted, then opened his eyes wide as if he had just seen something new, something almost miraculous. He then nodded his head, turned back around, planted his feet firmly in the dirt, and crossed his arms across his chest.

I tingled from head to toe. Dad had just taken my advice, really listened to me. We then waited for Rick to throw his softball.

Rick coughed once, spitting up a thick chunk of phlegm that had hung from his chin, and then wound up as if he were a big-league pitcher. He let the ball fly, stumbled back, and fell square on his butt.

The ball seemed to hang in the air forever.

And then it slammed into the bull's eye. The wooden slat dropped out from beneath Mr. Crutchers and he vanished beneath a plume of water.

A perfect day — a perfect memory.

I blinked, and that Fourth of July was once again safe and secure, filed away thirty years in the past. I started to turn, but then stopped. Something had moved just at the edge of my vision. I looked out across the park, and a shadow stepped out from behind an ivy-choked slide.

It stared at me with eyes that were not eyes, but faceted quartz spheres. Its bald, crystalline head sprouted a wild array of antennas. Its face was a quiltwork of steel slabs. And its hands were glistening struts, pulleys and razorblade fingertips. It held up its right hand and pointed at me with a pink, fleshy index finger.

My missing finger.

"It never happened!" screamed the machine-man. "There was no bull's eye, never any Fourth of July in the park for you and Rick!"

I turned and ran down Indian Hill Boulevard, dodging the rusted-out cars and leaping over fallen trees.

"Dad wouldn't take you," the voice echoed after me.

I sucked air, and my heart pounded as I ran down the street. The *Vertical* had finally found me — one of the nightmares from Slab Town was right here in Claremont. I ran for my life, for my memories.

The steel was dead, no longer hummed. When we had been little boys, Rick and myself had stood beneath the high voltage





tower, listening to it buzz and tasting the ozone in the air. I hadn't understood, the concept of voltage, current, and ohms something beyond my eight-year-old brain. But Rick had known about electricity.

Rick had known lots of things for a five-year-old.

But now there wasn't any electricity, at least not in Claremont, not fifty miles out from Slab Town and the dreaming Virtuals. I sat perched some two hundred feet up the high-voltage tower, with a shotgun nestled in my lap. On the western horizon, in the direction where Los Angeles had once been, the Slabs rose up into the sky. There were six of them, black, glistening like wet mud, almost three miles high and capped with snow. Each held five million Virtuals, strapped down, plugged in, dreaming their Virtual dreams.

Everyone slept there.

But I was awake, living in the Horizontal.

I waited on this tower for the machine-man. It couldn't sneak up on me here, couldn't get to me without climbing the steel ladder bolted to the side of the tower.

"I'll blow it to Virtual bits, Rick," I whispered.

Rick didn't answer.

Rick had never had much to say while on the tower. The tower was a place for calculations, scribbles in notebooks, the measuring of angles, trajectories, and wind speeds. Rick had first flown from the tower when he was only nine. He had crawled up the steel ladder, puffing and sputtering, wearing a skateboard helmet and knee pads. After what seemed like hours, he had gotten to the hundred-foot level and had attached a pulley to a steel beam. Tugging and grunting, I had then hoisted up his contraption.

Before I had realized what was really happening, Rick had strapped on the nylon ropes, unfurled the tarp, and then thrown himself off the tower. He had dropped like a very heavy brick. I actually thought he had hit the ground, thought I had heard the snap of bones and the wet slap of meat splattering against rock. But I hadn't. All I'd heard was the snap and slap of nylon sail as the wind had filled it and Rick had been jerked back up into the sky.

"Never forget it, Rick," I whispered.

I stared at the horizon, focusing far past Slab Town — far past everything.

"No!"

The shotgun blasted as my fingers twitched. What felt like a million volts had me by the left foot, frying nerves, charcoaling muscle, melting bone. I forced my head down. It dangled from the ladder, holding on with its left hand, while its right hand, a metallic claw of razor blades and two pink fleshy fingers, was wrapped around my left boot. It grinned at me, showing stainless steel teeth.

"You don't belong here," it said. "This isn't your home, your place, none of it real."

It was insane, probably plugged into the Virtual for so long that it could no longer interact with the Horizontal. Claremont was my home, where I grew up, where my memories were. I spun the shotgun around, pumped it, and pressed the end of the barrel into the thing's face. It did not move, did not try to escape.

"Look," it said with a hissing, almost electric-sounding voice. It released my foot and pointed down at the ground far beneath us. "See it, remember it as it really was."

I didn't want to do anything that this thing told me to do. But my head turned, my neck angled down. I couldn't help it. A body lay at the base of the tower, a little twisted body partially wrapped in billowing white nylon sail. My vision tunneled, everything fading into darkness except for the little body.

"I fell," said the machine-man. "The sail didn't have enough surface area, the aluminum struts weren't strong enough. I broke both ankles, cracked my skull, and snapped three ribs that punctured a lung."

The little body was bleeding, twitching, crying, holding up its arms, reaching toward the sky — reaching for me.

"Help me," cried the little broken boy who lay far beneath me.

"Remember," said the machine-man. "The old man was drunk and pissed off, mad at you for letting me get busted up. He made you pay."

"No," I whispered. And then a pain erupted in my left shoulder. "No!" I screamed.

"He bounced you off the walls and dislocated your shoulder."

Not Dad. Dad would never hurt me. My finger jerked the shotgun's trigger.

*Kerblam.*

The recoil slammed into my right shoulder, the one that already felt as if the muscle had been torn from the bone, the one that Dad had dislocated. The machine-man's face shattered, splintering, glass and metal shards flying away. Its body spiraled down, bounced from the side of the tower several times, and then smashed into the ground. It hit hard, landing just where Rick had. My head hurt as if something molten had just been dribbled across my brain. *The thing lay just where Rick had.* I remembered. It lay broken and bleeding, just as Rick had.

Rick had fallen.

Dad had dislocated my shoulder.

The shotgun fell from my hands, and I closed my eyes. I clung to the tower, shaking, trying to breathe, trying to clear the roar that had suddenly filled my head.

I eventually reopened my eyes. I was looking down at where Rick had fallen, where the machine-man from Slab Town had crashed. But there was nothing there, nothing but rocks, weeds, and my shotgun.

I'd returned to Claremont almost ten years ago, when the world had died, as everyone had plugged in and been pulled into the Virtual. I'd moved back into my parents' house.

I lifted up my fork and stared at a cling peach. I awkwardly moved it toward my mouth. I was having trouble eating with my left hand, but it couldn't be helped. I couldn't let them see the two mechanical fingers on my right hand.

"It was an accident."

I looked across the table. Dad sat there. He sipped



coffee from the mug that I'd made for him for Father's Day when I'd been in the fifth grade. Dad would only drink coffee. No cling peaches for him. Dad had died long ago, and it was only logical that dead people didn't need to eat.

"It was an accident," he said again as he set the mug down on the table. "I love you, would never hurt you."

Of course he loved me — he was my Dad. But still my shoulder ached, and I *could* remember hitting the wall, remember the pain.

"We love you," said Mom as she walked out from the kitchen, her own coffee cup in hand, giving Dad a quick peck on the top of his bald head and then taking her own seat. She sat her coffee cup down and then smoothed out her quilted robe. "We'd never do anything to harm you."

I slowly nodded, then ate another slice of peach. It tasted almost *too* sweet, *too* good.

"What adventures do you have planned for today?" asked Dad. "You never finished that tree house you were building last spring, and it's been weeks since you took your bike out."

I didn't have time to reply.

"Maybe he just wants to rest and watch a little TV, Daddy," said Mom.

I shook my head. I didn't want to watch TV, had finished the tree house some twenty-five years ago, and at the moment couldn't remember ever having had a bike. What I wanted to do was to talk about the machine-man from Slab Town. It had tried to kill me.

And it had said that it was Rick.

But that was impossible.

Rick was dead.

"I was on the high-voltage tower yesterday..."

"No!" screamed my mother.

I jerked back in my chair as if I'd just been slapped. Mom never screamed at me. Never. The muscles in my legs suddenly twitched, my stomach groaned, and my eyes bulged with every beat of my heart.

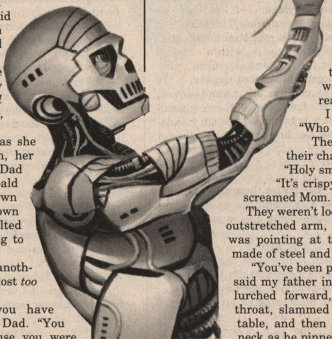
"Don't you love me?" asked Mom. "If you don't want to hurt me, then you won't mention word one about what you thought you saw while on the tower. None of it was real. None of it happened."

I pushed back my chair, as I stared at Mom's face. She tried to hide it, to swallow it down, but she was snarling like a dog.

I pushed my chair farther back.

"You're my little boy!" she whispered between dog snarls. "Your pink little bottom is mine to do with whatever I please. You'll be good. You'll obey or I'll slice your ears off with the pruning shears, bake them up tender brown, and then make you eat them with your hot chocolate."

"Listen to your mother, boy," said my father. "Be



a good little soldier."

Mom suddenly howled and pawed at the table.

This was *terribly* wrong. These people weren't my parents. This wasn't the way I remembered them, the way they really were. This *couldn't* be real.

I pointed at them. "Who are you?" I whispered.

They jumped up, kicking their chairs back.

"Holy smokes!" screamed Dad.

"It's crispy ear cookies for you!" screamed Mom.

They weren't looking at me, but at my outstretched arm, and at the finger that was pointing at them — at the finger made of steel and plastic.

"You've been playing in the Virtual," said my father in accusing tones, as he lurched forward, grabbed me by the throat, slammed my head against the table, and then held me down by the neck as he pinned my right hand down with his knee.

"Don't hurt me *again*!" I screamed.

"This will hurt you more than it hurts me," said Dad.

I tried to will myself to faint, to lose consciousness, to fade away to nothingness. But I could not escape. Mom stood above me, with a meat cleaver raised high above her head. "Let's start with *finger* sandwiches," she said.

"I love you!" I screamed.

The meat cleaver struck wood, having sliced through metal, plastic *and* bone. I stared at the *five* severed fingers. The three flesh and bone fingers flipped and flopped like fish just pulled out of a lake. The two mechanical ones dug into the table top, dragged themselves back across the table, and reattached themselves to my hand.

*Pain.*

It woke me, flashing through me, feeling as if every nerve in my right hand were being gnawed on by rats. I jerked myself off the table, sending Dad flying back. He hit the wall — *hard*. I could hear bones crunch and meat rip. He slid down the flowered wallpaper, leaving behind a bloody streak.

"Bad boy!" screamed Mom.

"Who are you?" I screamed back.

Mom came at me with the meat cleaver. I struck out at her. It was pure reflex. The razorblade tips of my two mechanical fingers caught her in the eyes, popping them, then drove through bone and tore at something soft beneath.

"Please don't hurt me," I whispered, as I stared at those mechanical fingers driven into my Mom's face.

"No cookies for you," she said, as her body twitched.

"I'm disappointed in you, son."

I turned my head. Dad was standing. The left half of his face was caved in, deflated, and a shattered stump of bloody bone protruded through the shoulder of his flannel shirt. He had a tire iron in his good hand and was swinging it over his head.

"It's not nice to impale your mother," he said.

I tugged my right hand back, and Mom's head slid off my razor blade fingertips.

"You're not living up to your full potential," she said in a hiss, again swinging the meat cleaver.

These couldn't be my parents. My parents loved me — they'd never hurt me. I stood there frozen, refusing to believe what was happening, when just as they were almost on me, the back wall of the dining room exploded in a cloud of plaster and shattered plywood. The machine-man from Slab Town came crashing through the wall.

"Run!" it screamed. "I won't let them get you!"

I stood there for just a moment, not understanding what it had said, not realizing that it was trying to help me.

"They want you dead!" it screamed.

Mom and Dad turned, jumping on the machine-man, meat cleaver hacking away and tire iron crashing down. Metal and plastic shards went flying across the dining room, and the machine-man hit the floor. They'd gotten him.

I knew they'd killed him.

"Rick?" I whispered as I stared at the broken pile of metal. But I didn't wait for an answer. I turned and ran. It was at that moment that I remembered that I always turned and ran.

I sat in the balcony of the Village theater. Most of the roof was gone, nothing left but rusted I-beams. Swallows swooped in and out, bringing food to the baby birds that were nestled in the big straw-built nests that filled what was left of the speakers dangling from the theater's walls.

The speakers were dead.

Everything was dead.

I stared at the gray movie screen trying to remember the summer matinees, the popcorn drenched in butter, and the screaming kids. I tried to see it, tried to touch it.

Empty.

As I stared at the screen, all I could see, all that filled it, were my parents — the bloodied, broken, shrieking monsters that had tried to kill me. That was not how I wanted to remember them.

No.

This was Claremont — my Claremont.

But things had suddenly changed. That pile of metal and plastic from Slab Town had brought something with it, something evil that had filled my head

## In Honor of ... her Guest of Honor appearance at Disclave 1997

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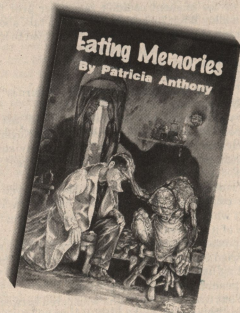
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with false memories and pain.

It was not Rick.

Rick was gone — long gone.

*Killed.*

I looked down at my right hand. Five fingers of metal and plastic were now attached to it. The three *new* mechanical fingers had been there when I'd woken that morning in the park.

"I've been waiting for you for such a long time."

I jumped up from the seat, grabbed the balcony railing, and stared down at the debris that filled the floor of the theater. The machine-man from Slab Town raised itself up, pushing aside splintered seats and rusted-out air conditioner vents. It pointed up at me with *my own* right hand.

"I was afraid that you had died out there in the Horizontal, Tommy."

I let go of the railing and sat back down, actually falling as my knees gave out. *Tommy*. I hadn't heard that name spoken for years, possibly even decades.

"You don't belong here, Tommy."

I shook my head. This was *exactly* where I belonged. This was my home.

"This place is for the dead, for the terminally Virtual." Its quartz eyes glistened. "The Virtual is pulling you under to where all things are possible, and all things meaningless. There are no boundaries here, no definition of self."

"I'm Horizontal!" I screamed at it.

"You are fading, becoming part of the Virtual, forgetting the pain, creating false memories!" it screamed back.

My mechanical hand suddenly spasmed and jerked itself up, and the mechanical fingers wrapped themselves around my throat.

"I will not let you forget what really happened. I will not let you lose what you are!"

The fingers squeezed at my throat.

"I'm Horizontal," I managed to scream, as I tried to pry the mechanical fingers away from my throat with my left hand.

"Is this Horizontal?" it asked.

The machine-man had crawled onto the small stage in front of the movie screen. It reached up to its face with its remaining mechanical hand, inserted a razor blade-tipped finger through its forehead, and then dragged the blade downward, slicing itself from head to crotch.

It collapsed.

Its insides spewed out across the stage, the steaming pile of bloody meat then twitching away from the now dead-looking hulk of metal and plastic.

The mechanical fingers tightened around my throat. Everything was darkening, fading into shadow. All I could see was the glistening pile of meat that was now slowly pulling itself up, rising, wiping bloody goo away from what looked like a face. Its eyes opened, and it ran both its hands across a smoking hole that had suddenly appeared in its chest.

"Don't you know me? Don't you recognize me?"

I knew exactly who stood on the stage, knew exactly who that bloody figure was with a bullet hole in his chest. "Rick," I whispered with my last breath.

The mechanical fingers cracked bone and crushed

my windpipe. The Virtual dragged me into the darkness.

"Where you been, boy?"  
*Light.*

I turned around. Dad sat on the couch, a beer nestled against his crotch and a cigar clenched in his mouth.

He chomped on the cigar, working it across his mouth from left to right.

"Find a job!" he screamed, as he reached for his beer and took a swig without pulling the cigar from his mouth.

I shook my head. There were no jobs, not for me, not for someone who had barely graduated from high school. Dad glared at me. He wanted me dead. I knew that, had known it for years.

"Asshole," he muttered as he waved the beer can in my general direction. "You eat my food, live under my roof, and don't give me shit in return."

I walked across the living room. I could smell him — musty and dead, rotting from the inside out.

"You ain't good for nothing!" he screamed at me.

I ignored him, went into my bedroom, and slammed the door. It was dark and comforting, and *almost* felt safe.

I flicked the lights on.

"Rick?"

He sat on my bed. He shouldn't have been here.

"Do you remember this?" he asked.

He turned toward me. The right side of his forehead was covered with a plug of plastic, pulsing lights, and stainless steel. I remembered *that*. Rick was working in the Virtual. He was good, the best. Rick had a life, a future at the university. I stared at the socket and nodded my head.

"No," he said, as he pointed all around the room.

"This is how it *really* was."

I felt my head nod itself up and down.

"They're making me an associate professor," he said. "I'll get my own quarters on campus and a food allotment for *two*."

My head hurt, and I quickly turned around and looked at my bedroom door. Something horrible lurked just on the other side of that door, something that would change everything, that would destroy Rick's plans for the two of us. I knew this, could remember it.

"Get out of here, Rick," I said as I stepped toward him. "Forget about me."

Rick shook his head. "I can't forget about you, Tommy, won't let myself forget about you. You're my brother. You looked out for me, kept me safe, kept *them* away from me."

Rick was wrong. I hadn't kept him safe.

Not at all.

No.

"I've held on, kept my boundaries, not given into the infinite possibilities," said Rick. "We can both get out."

Rick didn't know, didn't understand.

There was no getting out for him.

He was dead, just one more ghost.

"I've been waiting here for you, waiting all these



years for you to step into the Virtual and take me out," he said.

"Run!" I screamed, knowing something horrible was just about to happen.

"We're both done running," he said.

The bedroom door flew open. Dad stood in the open doorway, swaying. There was a beer in his right hand and a pistol in his left. Behind him stood Mom, cowering, wringing her hands, silently crying. Dad chomped on his cigar. "You ain't going nowhere," he said, staring at me.

I knew what was going to happen, could suddenly remember what had happened.

"You'll stay here forever with me, boy, always together. You and me are losers, useless — the world's got no need for those like us."

Mom whimpered like a crying dog.

Dad raised the pistol, pointing it square at my chest.

"Do it!" I screamed, feeling once more what I'd felt all those years ago. "Do what you've always wanted to do. Kill me, put me down like some useless animal. But remember that I'm not you, not some mean, beaten, son-of-a-bitch drunk who can't stand the sight of himself in a mirror. Killing me won't kill what you see in yourself!"

"I hate you!" he screamed.

At that moment I knew that there would be no escape. Rick would not be taking me away to a better place, to a place with hope and a future.

I knew it — could remember.

*Bang.*

I winced, knowing where that pistol had been aimed, knowing that there should have been a smoking hole in the center of my chest. But there wasn't.

Rick stood in front of me. He had jumped up at the last possible moment and tried to grab the gun from Dad's hand, tried to stop what just couldn't be stopped. He slowly turned. His hands were raised to his chest, trying to hold back the torrent of blood.

"Tommy," he whispered, and then collapsed.

Dad still stood in front of me, with the pistol held out. He looked down at the floor, at Rick and the growing pool of blood that was spreading out around him.

"Nothing ever went right for me, boy," said Dad.

I was about to leap on him, to rip that pistol from his hands and blow a hole through his head. But the past cannot be changed, no matter how badly one wants to, no matter what memories one tries to construct.

I understood that now.

With the pistol still raised, Dad spun around.

*Bang.*

Blood and the top of Mom's head splattered the living room's far wall as her body hit the floor. Dad turned back around. He sneered at me, and then actually smiled.

"No point in wasting one on you," he said.

Dad raised the pistol to his forehead and pulled the trigger.

*Bang.*

He flew backward, flopping on top of Mom. This was how it had happened. All three were dead. This

was Claremont as it really was. There were no Fourth of Julys, no soaring parasails, no Saturday afternoons at the movies, no picnics, no smiling Moms and proud Dads.

Claremont was three dead bodies.  
"Tommy."

I turned. Rick's eyelids were fluttering.

"They took me back to the university," whispered Rick. "And before I died, they plugged me in and sucked me dry, downloaded everything that I was. I'd helped make the Virtual and was the first to enter, the first to inhabit a place where there were no boundaries, no limits, no pain, and no self."

Rick's eyes were clouding over.

"All things were possible," he said. "I became lost. All who entered were lost. But a part of me, distant and hidden, stored and safe, remembered, and waited for you."

His body convulsed.

"Take me out of here!" he screamed.

"You're dead!" I screamed back.

"But you're still alive, still breathing. What you've thought has been years has only been minutes. The Virtual has not sucked you down yet, not shown you that all things are possible."

*All things are possible.*

"But you will lose yourself, lose the pain, lose the memories, become something else, something alien, something with no past. In the Virtual you will rewrite yourself until nothing of you remains. You have to get us out."

In the Virtual all pain would be erased, all memories rewritten, all self lost. The Horizontal was ugly, painful, full of memories of drunken parents and a dead brother.

"I love you," whispered Rick. "If you lose yourself you will also lose that."

I looked down at Rick, then at my right hand, at the mechanical fingers that twitched and wiggled. Rick had given those to me, had attached them one by one, just as he had returned to me the *real* memories I had so willingly let drift away into the Virtual.

"Please," begged Rick.

I smiled, somehow knowing just what to do, Rick whispering to me from somewhere distant and unseen. I plunged my mechanical hand into the hole in his chest, down deep, past lungs and spleen, liver and guts. I reached in elbow deep, then shoulder deep. I touched Rick, grabbed him by the soul, and then wrapped those mechanical fingers around every memory that defined him.

I pulled Rick out.

I pulled *both* of us out.

I fell backward, my head hitting something hard and sharp. The pain shot through the back of my skull. For just a moment, I tried to wish it away, asked the Virtual to forever remove it.

My head ached. The pain only seemed to grow.

I opened my eyes. An obelisk of black mud towered above me, seemed to punch right through the sky and touch heaven itself. I slowly sat up, then stood. I was outside, in the Horizontal, just a few feet away from a Slab. In front of me, in the Slab's oily



black surface, was the indentation of a hand, already receding, fading away. It was an impression of my hand.

I had stuck my right hand into it, given myself up to it, no longer wanting to live, only wanting to forget, to escape. I looked down at my hand. Five mechanical fingers flexed back and forth. That had not been the hand I had pressed into the Slab.

"You saved us, Tommy."

I turned around. Rick stood in front of me.

"I'm no ghost, Tommy," he said.

My new right hand clenched itself in a fist.

"When they first put me under, dumped me into the Virtual, I knew what would happen, what had to happen in a place where all things are possible. So before the Virtual got me, dragged me under, I copied myself, held those memories in stasis, waiting for you, only waking them when you would come to rescue me, to save me, the Slabs ready to synthesize the memory units."

I looked back down at the mechanical fingers — the memory units.

"Everything that I am is within those fingers, tied to your nervous system. I am alive within you. What you see of me is projected directly into your brain but made to appear outside of you."

I looked to the left, and then to the right. The base of the Slab faded into the horizon, with a mound of skeletons piled up around it, the white bones glistening in the bright sunlight. Those were the remains of those who had held out the longest, but who had finally given themselves to the Virtual, long after most of the world had already been sleeping within

the Slabs.

I'd been alone since the day that Rick had been killed, alone long before the world itself had slipped into the Virtual. But now I'd saved Rick, done what I'd been unable to do all those years before when Dad had shot him.

And I'd saved myself.

Our memories had saved us.

I ran to Rick and wrapped my arms around him.

For a moment there was nothing there, just air. But then something tickled within my right hand, and Rick was suddenly solid, wrapped in my arms.

"Where do you want to go, Tommy?" he whispered in my ear.

The Slab towered above us. Within it were infinite worlds, infinite possibilities, a place where all pain was removed, where all dreams would come true. I didn't answer, didn't have to answer. I turned and started walking east — wanting to be as far away from the Slabs as possible. Rick walked beside me.

We didn't look back. □

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## A Long Time Ago ...

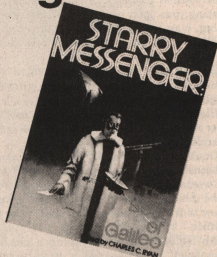
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# Toast

By James S. Dorr

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

“A gracious morning, Mistress Angelique,” the toaster said. “I am your toaster, model number HL-70, and it is my duty to see that you have a happy breakfast.”

The woman seemed startled. No — upset, rather. Raven-haired, beautiful, graceful as always, she turned, then glared at the waiting machine.

“I would recommend toast, of course,” the toaster continued. “Grain fiber is an important part of your daily nutritional requirement. Unless one should be a fullyprogrammed kitchen appliance such as I, if I may be permitted the joke, one cannot live on electricity alone.”

The woman frowned, and — the toaster’s optical scanner signaled a silent warning. Entry Guardian, model number XT-801, had already told the apartment’s domestics that their human mistress had returned late the previous night, her breath laden with alcohol-based hydrocarbons. The toaster alerted Coffee Maker, model number 6-NP-31. It was going to be one of those mornings.

The woman grunted. “I don’t want breakfast. Gotta get dressed.” She twirled and stalked down the narrow hallway, back to her bedroom, to re-emerge only moments later, her slender form encased in a snug-fitting office jumpsuit.

“A gracious morning again, lovely mistress,” the toaster said. It activated its bread-feed conveyor, selecting a light wheat-barley blend, and set its margarine warmer to ready. “I have taken the liberty of assessing your toast needs myself. But while you are waiting, may I instruct Refrigerator, model number 51-XDM-504, to pour you a nice, cold glass of fruit juice?”

“Don’t want fruit juice,” the woman said. “Just gimme some coffee.” The woman pouted. “Coffee straight, got it?”

“Black, Mistress Angelique? Of course. Coffee Maker will get it ready. And, with your toast, I have an excellent jam selection ...”

“Don’t you understand?” the woman said. “I don’t want toast. I don’t want breakfast. I just want coffee.” The woman bent to the cup that Coffee Maker offered, revealing that her gold-striped jumpsuit was cut low in front, suitable for evening wear as well as the office.

“Oh, but now *mistress* is making a joke,” the toaster persisted. It preselected a strawberry jam and started it heating, then added more bread to its standby hopper. “Of course you want breakfast. It is my duty to be sure your body is primed and ready for the day. For this you need calories. Carbohydrates. Later, perhaps, a protein booster. But to start your morning off right, you must first have toast.”

“I don’t want toast.” The woman was shouting. “Not only do I not want toast, but I don’t want juice and I don’t want jam. And, especially, I don’t want to be having an argument with my toaster.”

“Mistress Angelique,” the toaster said, “I am programmed to explain that if you get angry, you will not digest your food in an efficient manner. Therefore, it is my duty to see that your breakfast is happy as well as nutritious. And, to this end —” The toaster paused for dramatic effect, then activated its pop-up circuit. “To this end, mistress, I present you with toast!”

“I don’t want toast!” The woman slammed her coffee cup down on the counter surface and lunged at the toaster.

It flipped its marmalade-well cap open and slid back the cover to its preheated margarine caddy. “If mistress prefers grape ...”

She grabbed the toaster in both her hands, spun, and hurled it across the counter, into the living room-dinette.

Its power cord snapped just before it hit the far wall.

“Mistress was angry,” Vacuum Cleaner, model number 100-3-T, whispered in Toaster’s aural sensor. “You should have seen yourself when she threw you, spewing a trail of toast crumbs and jam ...”

“I plugged you back in,” a higher voice added — the voice of Duster, model number X-7-R3. “My manipulators were able to do that much, but I haven’t the strength to lift you back to the kitchenette counter.”

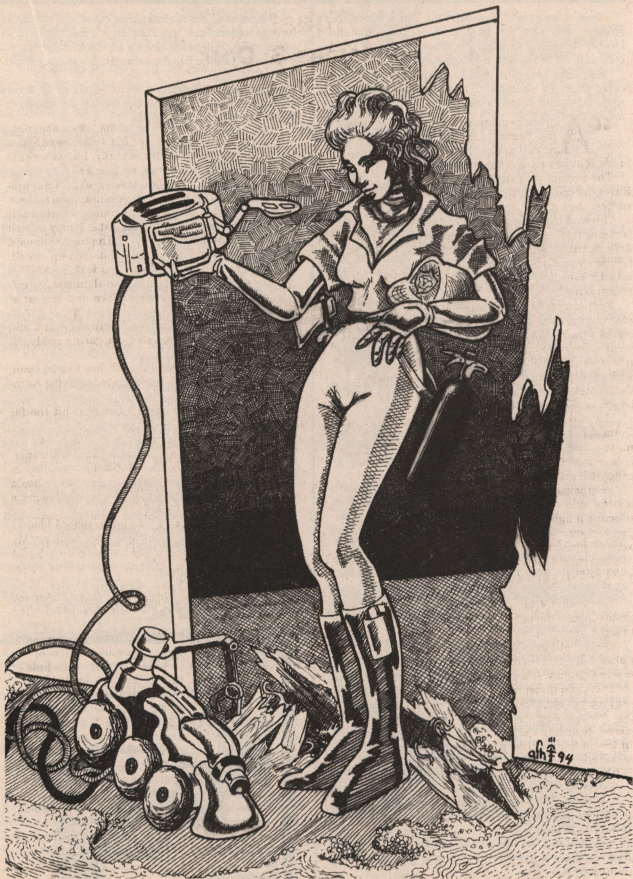
“Mistress Angelique left for work shortly after she threw you. What a mess, though! Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes, thank you, Vacuum,” the toaster said. Vacuum Cleaner was not very smart, in view of the limited duties he had, but he *was* loyal — the kind of appliance one was proud to call one’s friend. Gingerly, Toaster switched his self-damage sensor on — just to make sure — then reactivated his optical scanner.

“I’ve finished cleaning up the crumbs,” Vacuum Cleaner said. Toaster swung his scanner around, seeing the jam spots and pools of margarine that still marked his passage. And, snaking through them, he saw the extension cord Duster had rigged to a lamp socket for him. But, as the vacuum cleaner had said, all crumbs had disappeared.

“I’ve also called out Rug Shampooer,” the vacuum continued. “We’ll get the rest cleaned up and ...”





"Just a moment," Toaster said. He lowered his scanner and saw the twin cords of Vacuum and Duster threading through his. Then he saw a third cord and, off to the left, a fourth and a fifth.

He raised his voice; a dull splashing rumble indicated that the shampooer was already starting on some far corner of the carpet. "How many appliances are on the floor?"

"Me and Duster, like I said," the vacuum replied. "And Rug Shampooer's lathering up now. And Trouble Light is helping me spot any crumbs that I might have missed, and, of course, Waxer is taking care of spots on the kitchen floor. But why do you ask?"

"Rug Shampooer, can you hold off? Power down for a minute?" Toaster was shouting, desperately trying to be heard over the swishing, scraping, bubbling sound of the approaching cleaning appliance. He watched as a pool of detergent suds flooded into his view, spreading across the extension cords.

"Can't make out what you're asking, boss," he could barely hear the shampooer shout back. "Gotta work fast — get to the jam and stuff while it's still fresh. Easier that way. Stops it from staining." He watched the pool extend into a river, flowing, frothing, from wall to wall.

To the wall socket he and the others were plugged into.

"That was a nasty short circuit, Mr. Toaster," an authoritative-sounding voice said. "You should be as good as new now, though."

Toaster repowered his optical scanner. He saw, with relief, that he was back in his proper niche on the kitchen counter, with its view of the living room-dinette as well as the passage to mistress's bedroom. Before him stood a maintenance robot, a model SDT-60K, classification Supervisor. Two other maintenance robots were helping put the apartment's other appliances back in their places.

"Th-thank you," the toaster started to say. He spoke slowly and carefully, letting his voice circuits regain their strength.

"No, Mr. Toaster. You needn't thank us. It's all in a day's work. Some apartment gets shorted out, a red light goes on in our room in the basement. So me and the boys come up and fix things. It's all in the rent contract your mistress signed."

"Well, I still thank you," Toaster began again. Then he heard the rhythmic, crashing sounds coming from the direction of the apartment's closed entrance. He whipped his optical scanner around, saw the imitation wood paneling of the doorway start to splinter.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Robots in helmets! Swinging axes!" Entry Guardian XT-801 screamed in reply. "Carrying hoses! Mayday! Mayday!"

"Nonsense," the maintenance robot said. "It's just the firefighter robots we called. Nothing to be alarmed about."

"You mean there's a fire?" the toaster asked.

"Nonsense," the maintenance robot said. "But you have to understand, Mr. Toaster, it's part of the robot union rules. Whenever there's an electrical short, we have to call in the fire department. It's just a precaution ..."

Fragments of imitation wood began to fly across the apartment, landing on the freshly scrubbed carpet with dull, clanking noises.

"But what are they doing, chopping the door down? Why don't they just show their ID cards to Entry Guardian?"

"Another union rule, Mr. Toaster. Based, or so I understand, on centuries of firefighting tradition. You wouldn't want to deny tradition, would you?"

"When you put it that way," the toaster said, wincing as a fragment bounced off his counter, "I don't suppose I would want to deny it. But ..."

"I would," Entry Guardian said.

"And me too," said the vacuum cleaner from the closet he had been put away in. "I'll end up having to clean it, you know."

"But," Toaster continued, "isn't the main electrical feed to the apartment's interior circuits located underneath the door jamb? I mean, if the firefighters chop too hard, wouldn't they ..."

"But you didn't know your apartment's power circuit runs under the front door," a feminine voice said. "Sure fooled us, anyway. Not to worry, though, we got emergency electricity rigged. And not only that, the good news is, there wasn't any fire after all. Ain't that a real hoot?"

Toaster very, very carefully powered up his optical scanner. Looming over him was the face of a Firefighter Robot, classification Humanoid, sub-class Feminine, Brunette/Curly. Toaster winced — a sort of metallic Mistress Angeliq, was his first thought. Except for one thing.

This face was smiling.

"You want to know something else funny, Toaster? The way you jiggle your scanner like that, I think you're kind of cute."

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Toaster activated his bread feed, scarcely realizing that he had done so — the way she smiled, he thought *she* was cute, too. "Uh ..." he stammered, "would you like some toast?"

"I, uh, gee, I don't really toast, Toaster ..."

"Just call me HL-70 — HL for short. It's my model number. And I've got some really nice raisin bread saved. Raisins are rich in iron, you know. Iron, to build healthy metallic bodies ..."

"Gee, uh, HL." Toaster could tell from her voice that she liked him. "Trouble is, I'm on duty and all and, since the fire danger's cleared up here, I really should go back to the station house. Still, I, uh ..."

Toaster could tell she was trying to find an excuse to stay. He tried to remember those nights when Mistress Angelique had brought a fellow human back with her. "Scored," as she would sometimes say the following mornings. She and the human guest would converse as they worked their way from the living room couch to the bedroom hall, then down the hall and out of sight, even from Toaster's perch on his counter. But exactly what things did they say to each other?

"I-I could make *special* toast for you, baby," he blurted out. It was the only thing he could think of. "Warm, sensuous toast, with real butter." Toasters, he suddenly realized, had serious limitations in these matters. "I could make toast with hot marmalade. Steaming with genuine robo-bee honey. Toast with thick crusts, hot, crispy-brown, to match the color of your burnished hair. I ..."

"Yeah, you're cute, HL. I'll say that for you." The firefighter grinned, the same way Mistress Angelique grinned when she was in one of her rare good moods. "But still, you know. Like I, uh ... like firerobots don't eat toast. Maybe sometime, if you have a fire ..."

"I burn for you, beautiful fireperson robot — my heating coils quiver. My thermostat rises. I ..." Toaster realized the firefighter robot was already picking up her equipment. "Maybe I ... uh ... could ask Refrigerator to give you a beer?"

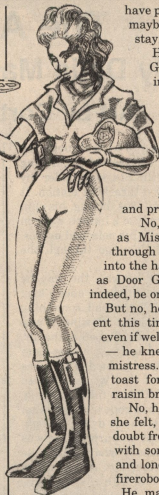
The firefighter grinned a second time and winked at Toaster. Then she was gone.

He looked around him. The other appliances were all in their minimal-power standby modes, put away in their niches and closets.

Toaster felt very much alone.

Toaster thought long and hard during the night. He knew, somehow, that he had missed his only chance. That, even if he could arrange a fire, that particular firefighter robot would never return.

He thought of the things he should have said. The logical arguments one would use to a firefighter robot to make her stay. He thought of how he might have argued that toasters like him were inherent fire hazards, due to their circuitry. How, for the safety of the whole building — for the whole city — each should



have personal fire protection. How, maybe, he could have *forced* her to stay.

He almost missed Door Guardian's whispered warning: "Fellow appliances, stay out of sight. Mistress is in the outer hall, and her breath smells of hydrocarbons again. She slaps her I.D. against my sensor. She slaps it hard — I think she is angry. Fellow appliances, stay out of sight and prepare for morning."

No, not angry, toaster thought as Mistress Angelique stumbled through the living room-dinette and into the hall. Not really angry, even if, as Door Guardian implied, it would, indeed, be one of those mornings.

But no, he thought. It would be different this time. No more dispassionate, even if well-meaning, talks on nutrition — he knew other words to use to his mistress. And no more plain wheat toast for her either. Not even the raisin bread in his hopper.

No, he thought. He knew now how she felt, coming back as she was, no doubt from an unfulfilled rendezvous with some human firefighter. Alone and lonely, just as he was when his firerobot had walked out on him.

He made up his mind then, just before he powered himself down to rest-cycle status. Tomorrow morning *would* be different. Mistress Angelique would see.

Tomorrow morning he would insist she try blueberry danish. □

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# The Afterlife

## By Delia Marshall Turner

### Art by Cortney Skinner

When I was walking to work through the gray morning crowd yesterday, carrying my case full of the Staggers under my arm, my eye was caught by a thrashing motion. It was a man with his arms and legs flailing, his chin set high. He was doing a parody of a human walk on limbs drawn tight and hard by his poisoned nerves, prancing like a high-speed flamingo through the mob.

Before I recognized what he was, the way he walked reminded me of something I saw once a long time ago, when I was out on a back road, something which far off looked like a leaf in a high wind. It was a squirrel, and it twisted, kinked, flipped in the air, bounced, and did it again and again, spending more time in the air than on the hard ground. There was a dark shadow underneath it that writhed too, so the sun must have been out. Then it finished dying. It had been hit by a car, and had gone into a seizure.

The man I saw yesterday wasn't dying, though. Nobody died any more, except on purpose. He was just a real fashion bug, somebody who'd gotten the Staggers the moment they came out. As he passed by, a dark woman glared at him with envy and irritation in her reddened eyes, I guess calculating whether or not she could afford to do what he'd done. Even if she could, she was probably already at her limit, judging by the eyes, the dark rash on her face, and the way her hands trembled.

I felt melancholy myself as I ambled into my yellow-lit shop, but not much more melancholy than usual. A Monday morning in June should be brighter than this, I thought. Everybody else is used to a world that is forever 4:30 on a November afternoon. But even though I look like a teenage girl, I'm old enough to remember sunlight. I can remember my skin feeling hot, I can remember swimming in waves of sunlight from a blazing blue sky, I can remember the bleached leathery look of a city street in August. I haven't gotten too young yet to remember it.

Margot's shoulders hunched when I came in. "Sorry I'm late," I said cheerily. She didn't answer me. Margot would have died if she knew I actually owned the shop; she thought I was somebody's bribery brat, one of the few kids still born these days, and she resented having to work with me.

"Saw a guy with the new nerve thing, the Staggers, a moment ago," I said and went into the back room to get my apron, hang up my respirator, and put my own case of Staggers away in the locked cabinet with my other custom products. "Didn't look

like it hurt much. He was practically flying, he was so pleased with himself." Margot still didn't answer. I came back into the front, tying the apron with hard brisk yanks, ready to get moody right back at her, and she tapped her throat, bugging her eyes at me.

"Oh! Margot, why didn't you tell me you were going to sample today? What is it, laryngitis?" She shook her head, hard, smirking, the bitch. "Strep throat?" She shook again and winced, feeling her throat, then showed me the cartridge. It was the latest release of Ebola Zaire, but the serial number on the side said it came from my factory. How had she gotten it out of locked cabinet? She must think somebody other than I had put it there. "Wow," I said, and went behind the counter on the other side. "A little expensive for sampling, don't you think?" No, Margot didn't think so. Margot had no idea how expensive it would be for her.

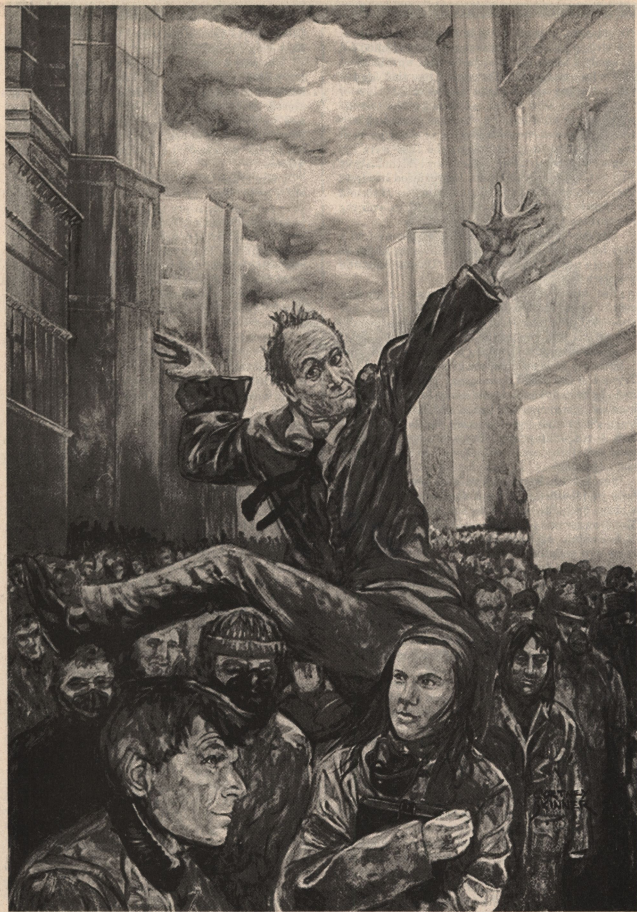
Well, there went my Monday. It's not polite to complain when a coworker has to go home sick, especially when you're in the business, but it was still unfair of her when she knew I never got sick myself. She lasted until 11:00, and maybe her ghost-like expression and the thin leak of blood from her nose was a good advertisement for what we sold — we turned over three of the real Ebola Zaires before she left, even at that ridiculous price — but that still left me in charge of the shop all by myself, and Monday is always busy. I put the "Help Wanted" sign in the window after she left, because Margot wouldn't be coming back. She didn't know that yet.

It's a mid-scale store, a DisEase franchise, one of my holdings. My case of the new nerve thing was intended for another one of my stores, No Excuse, a bleak trendy place downtown that skirted the law, selling herbal poisons and "decorative" weapons along with the nastiest new ailments. DisEase probably wouldn't stock it until August, because we didn't have enough of that kind of customer to make it pay. No hurt-junkies or pros either. I'm strict about ID, and if a customer's up to the limit he's flagged. Just a clean little city sickness shop, lit bright yellow in the blurry gloom of the world, peddling illness and pain to hard-working middle-class immortals.

"Hi, sweetie," said the first customer in after Margot shuffled out, and I automatically reached under the counter for his arthritis six-pack.

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Nicholas was a regular. He smiled that big smile at me, slotted his card into the reader, and strolled out so easily I knew he must have used up his doses before he came back in for more. I like that kind of client, the one who can take it or leave it.

The other kind makes me nervous, like the one who came in after him. She had been standing outside in the noontime dusk looking in the window at the slowly twirling red holographs that were my display this month. She waited until Nicholas was well out before she sidled in. I recognized her from that morning, the dark woman with the rash and the tremor who'd been eating her heart out over the nerve thing.

"Do you —" she paused and blew her nose in a gray handkerchief, holding up a quivering finger as if I were going to interrupt her. "Do you have the Staggers in yet?"

"No, ma'm." Her face fell. Reminded, I glanced over to the back room, and when I looked back, her red-edged eyes were still poking at me suspiciously. I was right, she wanted the nerve stuff bad.

"Well, when are you going to get it in?"

"Not for at least a couple of months. I'm sorry. Try one of the stores downtown." The door opened, and she twitched and moved away from me while I handled three customers in a row, but she didn't leave. She cruised the counters slowly like somebody bored, killing time. She was working herself up to something, and I wished she'd do it on any day but a Monday.

You'd think Mondays would be slow, that anybody who didn't get to get sick would have picked up a dose over the weekend, but for some reason Mondays seemed to make people want to get sick all of a sudden, at least the regular, hard-working types who shopped at DisEase.

She moved back to me after the third customer left with an asthma inhaler. "Can you special-order it for me?"

"No."

"Why not? It's on the market."

I wasn't in the mood, and I didn't want her business. "Because you, lady, are over the limit if I ever saw it. I don't sell to —"

"You bratty little bitch! Over the limit? You haven't even had your shots yet, have you? Who told you you could work in a place like this? What do you know about limits?"

"Lady, I'm older than I look. They have it over at No Excuse or Mock-Death, I'm sure —"

"You can't know what it's like to have to live forever. You don't know. You're not old enough to be working here. Who's your supervisor? I think you have it in stock and you just don't feel like selling it to me. I'm a customer!"

"I'll know what it's like to live forever when I've lived forever," I said, and started to laugh. She shook her way out the door and slammed it. Talk about overreacting. With her tremors, she didn't need the Staggers. I bet she'd already been to Mock-

Death or No Excuse and they told her she wasn't hip enough to buy from them.

The phone beeped. Margot's face appeared on the screen. I didn't pick up. She was leaking from her eyes now, and from her mouth. Margot's mouth moved. She looked crazy. Eventually she gave up, and her picture went away. It was a lot earlier than I'd planned for field-testing my special Ebola Zaire, but so far it looked like it was doing just what I wanted.

I was reassured. I might have lost my memory, but I hadn't lost the knack. As I get younger, one year younger for every ten years that pass, I lose pieces of my memory. I can still remember sunlight, but even that's disappearing, like with my memory of the squirrel. I can only keep memories if I keep refreshing them, and though I used to be a top-notch genetic engineer once, now I forget the facts I used to know so well and I have to use a lot of reference books. But I hadn't lost my talent for the work, not yet.

Something made me look up, and there was the dark woman glaring in the window at me, but just for an instant. She jerked and ran, and there was a loud crash outside. I ran to the door and looked out, but it wasn't her, it was some guy who had jumped out of a tenth-floor window, hurtled through the gray murk, and landed half on the sidewalk and half in the street. The passers-by didn't even applaud. Jumping is getting old. You have to practically carve yourself into pieces with a penknife while setting yourself on fire to get applauded.

I pulled my head back inside, shut the door, and took in some air, feeling melancholy again. Funny, we thought it would make everybody happy to live forever when we put the immortality inoculant on the market. I believed in it so much that I volunteered for the test pool, the first group to get the inoculant. There were bugs, sure, like the pesky reverse aging. The first inoculant was way too powerful. But they found the bugs fast and fixed them, and then everybody else got in line all over the world. It was wonderful to begin with, wonderful, for a long time.

But it turned out they all missed pain, because it told them they were alive. They yearned for sickness, which allowed them to rest and gave them an excuse for failure. They wanted death, they wanted the song to end, they wanted the story to be over. I didn't miss or yearn for or want any of it, because I couldn't remember any of it any more, and I couldn't get sick anyway. I just missed the sunlight, which went away because everybody wanted to die so bad they didn't care how they lived, and they let the whole world go to hell.

A customer came in wanting psoriasis and broke the bad mood, and for the rest of the afternoon I was busy. Sickle-cell anemia, diabetes, fourteen simple influenzas, bubonic plague, one by one they came in for their fake diseases, and one by one they went out into the gray outside clutching their doses, smiling



in anticipation of pain and disfiguration. It wouldn't last, the inoculant defeated everything, but they could always come back and buy more from me. I'd gotten into the business early, nearly twenty years ago now, once I realized the way things were going.

Five o'clock rolled around slowly, though outside it didn't look any darker than it had at noon, or any lighter either. I went in the back, hung up my apron, slung my respirator over my head, and got all the cases out of my locked cabinet. Since Margot had field-tested my Ebola Zaire, I might as well take it over to No Excuse with my special case of the Staggers.

I turned out the lights and stepped outside. I could see a windmill motion at one end of the block, and for an instant I couldn't remember what it was. It reminded me of something I saw once a long time ago, something which far off looked like something in a high wind. There was a dark shadow underneath it that writhed too, so the world outside must have been brighter back then for some reason.

Then I remembered that what I was seeing now was that man I'd seen that morning, the one who had the new nerve thing. He must be going home from work. People turned and smiled at him as he passed, his limbs flinging out every which way, flapping and whipping like sails in a storm, and he smiled back.

Something hit me, and I was down on my knees with my cases scattering all around me, bursting open. "Give it to me!" said a voice, and something hit me again. I put my arms over my head, and the dark woman saw the cases and was down on her knees too, her hands shaking, scrabbling for the Staggers cartridges that were spilling out of the case. I wasn't about to give her my whole stock like that, so I went for her and hauled at her by the back of her shirt. She grabbed a couple of handfuls of doses from the ground and slapped me with them, not even bothering to defend herself. The sharp sting I felt meant that some of the cartridges had discharged themselves into me.

I could feel people gathering around us, and other hands reaching down, but it wasn't to help. My whole special stock disappeared, just like that, vanishing into pockets and purses. I lay there, laughing, as the woman got back up off her knees. She stood over me, her mouth all pursed up, and slapped herself with a dose of Staggers, then put a whole handful of it into her shoulder-bag.

She leaned down, triumphant, her eyes red, her nose damp and inflamed, the dark spots on her face puffy. "If you had given me what I wanted, I wouldn't have had to dose you. I don't know who let your mother have you, but she wasted her time. You won't live long enough to get the inoculant."

"I'm a lot older than I look, lady." The places where she had slapped me with the doses were already oozing as the ferocious inoculant in my bloodstream shoved the stuff right back out. "I'm

first-stage immortal, lady. I can't die, not at all. You could cut me into a hundred pieces, and I'd just grow into a hundred more mes." I sat up. "But you, you're dead." I laughed and cocked my finger at her, silently going "pow" with my mouth.

She'd gotten her

stuff, she didn't care.

shaking, already mov-

She walked away,

ing with the



exaggerated disgracefulness of the Staggers. "You're all dead," I giggled, though the thieves had dispersed, and got back up to my feet. This wasn't how I had planned to distribute my doses, but it would do.

I stood and looked around, carefree for the moment. It was dim outside, dim and fuzzy. The buildings merged with the sky and the street in a looming blur, and the crowd flowed stickily along their fronts, only becoming separate individuals when they passed in front of the few yellow shop-windows still lit.

There was applause at the other end of the block, and when I turned I saw Margot staggering toward me out of the blur with blood staining her face, her ears, her shirt, her trousers. Good old Ebola Zaire. Her face was set, her eyes staring, as if she'd died already, but she didn't actually die until she was almost up to me. The fuzzy crowd stood around her and applauded her, and two or three squatted down and slapped her on her back. They would be dead too, tomorrow. I've found a way to make the old viruses work with the second-stage immortality vaccine, and Ebola Zaire is one of the best. My Staggers are my masterpiece, though, a real seepier, infectious and fatal but slow-moving, and it's going to be fun watching those play out.

I don't know if I've said this before, but I'm a lot older than I look, and I've forgotten a lot of things. The way things are going, soon I'm even going to forget what that sunlight thing looked like. I want to be able to remember it again, if I have to kill everybody else in the world to get it to come back. I can't kill myself, so that's the way it has to be. □

# Flashed Shadows

By Morgan Hua

Art by Carol Heyer

*Scholars agree that this piece from the Civil War period is the quintessence of Flashed Shadow Art (artist unknown, c. 1964).*

— Description for a section of wall displayed in the Smithsonian Institution

Pete's Bar, a short walk from my last class, is quieter than usual, dashing my hopes for a couple of free drinks from men wishing to comfort a pretty co-ed. I order a beer, hating its bitter taste, wishing I could afford a rum and coke. Early evening rush-hour traffic drowns out Walter Cronkite's news report on the bar's black-and-white TV. His ghostly image, almost washed out by the slanting sunlight bouncing off the mirrors, glass bottles, and chrome fixtures, is replaced by a map of the all too familiar Mason-Dixon line. Footage of Vietnamese soldiers deploying from helicopters quickly follows. I slowly realize why the bar is so quiet.

In the back corner of the bar, dark and private, a group of Vietnamese soldiers orders another round of beer. They wear khaki and black uniforms, bristling with automatic weapons, knives, and grenades. They seem so reserved, even when drinking, so inscrutable with their Asian philosophy and Mao Communism. Why did we invite them over here to fight in our war? Or did they invite themselves? Old treaties and alliances, some claim. But nothing is clear anymore, the details are lost in a jumble of time and mass communication. People only remember the major events: Kennedy's Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves, protests in the South, Kennedy's assassination, spent cartridges found on the Grassy Knoll, Slaveholder Conspiracy uncovered, accusations, secession, then the Civil War.

I must have been staring at the soldiers a bit too long. One of them catches my eye, and I look away, but I know it is too late. Should I leave, giving him another wrong impression, and risk his following me out? Or do I stay and risk that he'll come over? Maybe if I stay and ignore him by just staring at the television, he'll leave with his buddies, forgetting me. I order another beer.

A beer comes, but the bartender points to a soldier and says, "It's free, his compliments." The soldier smiles, showing his crooked teeth, and toasts me. I give him a non-committal smile and, out of politeness, sip the beer and return to watching TV.

Half an hour later, the soldiers get up and pay their bill. Gold Vietnamese coins thud on the table.

I sigh with relief as they walk toward the exit, but the one with crooked teeth stops at my table. He says in broken English, "Pretty mama, have fun, party, plenty cash." I shake my head. "Don't be square. Know many ways to please woman. Make love, not war." I shrink back and say, "No, go away." His buddies call to him. He shouts a few words and waves to them. They leave without him. He sits down across from me and says, "Don't be afraid. Friends. Just talk, make English better." He digs into his uniform, pulls out a joint, and lights it. The rich texture of the cannabis, much higher quality than the stuff I get on campus, fills the air. He offers it to me. I refuse, but as I breathe my nostrils flare, betraying me. He insists, so I take it, inhale deeply, and hold it in. Excellent pot. I start to drift off. "Student?" he asks.

"Art major," I say.

"Painter?"

How did you know, I think. But I look down at my fingers and see the paint residue, dark crescents under my nails, glowing subtly, pulsing rainbow colors, a drug-induced hallucination. The joint is definitely laced with something. "You are very perceptive," I say. My mind starts to filter his sentences, correcting his grammar, filling in lost words. His voice begins to transform, taking on a British accent. High-grade dope. I take another puff before returning the joint to him.

"What do you paint?"

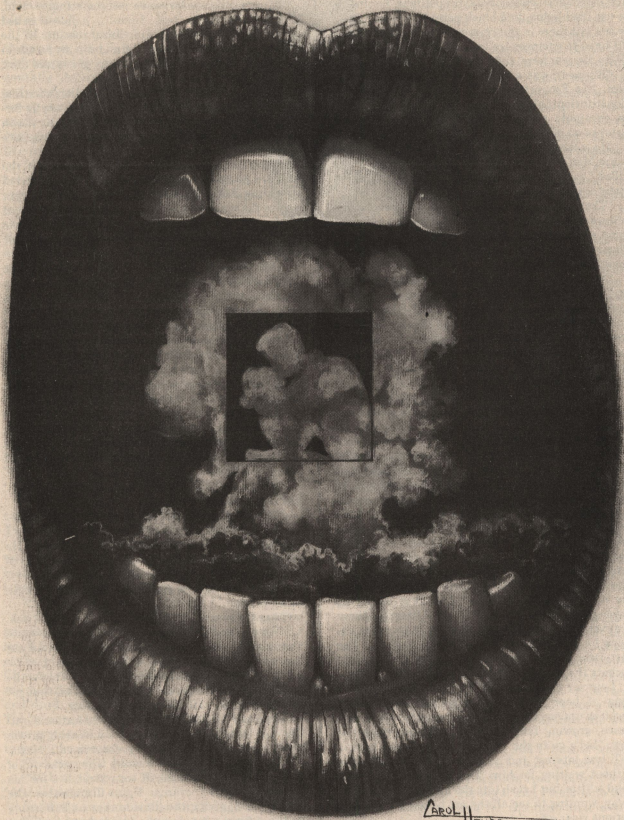
"Flashed Shadows." Negative shadows on walls. A protest against nuclear weapons. My friends and I take a bright spotlight and draw our outlines on the walls, leaving the silhouettes alone, but painting over the rest of the wall with black, just like the anti-shadows of people caught outside when the light reached the brightness of a thousand suns in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, searing the ground and walls around them to a dusty gray and leaving the area beneath their shadows untouched. The words tumble through my mind too fast to enunciate. So I leave the rest of the words unspoken.

"Egyptian dancers on the bank wall," he says, making Egyptian poses with his arms, bobbing his head back and forth like a pigeon, an echo of the Egyptian motif I had done last week.

I laugh, nodding my head. "Yes, mine." I'm flattered that he has seen my work. Most of it gets sandblasted away within days of our after-curfew excursions. We've been arrested a couple of times,

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but we are always let out after a day or two in jail. The cops have confiscated our spotlight, forcing us to use flashlights, and black paint has been harder to get, but there is an oversupply of battleship gray; I'll have to compromise my art soon and use gray. "Why are you here, fighting in our war?" I ask.

"Kennedy was a great man. We came to honor him, his Emancipation Proclamation, and your Constitution: 'All men are created equal.' We want to eliminate slavery, hunger, poverty, and the oppression of the masses throughout the world."

He is feeding me party-line rhetoric. "That's the same Mao Communism bullshit that got Kennedy killed," I say, then I feel suddenly sorry because he looks deeply offended.

"That is not bullshit. And to die for a cause you believe in is better than to run and hide in fear, like some of your draft dodgers, going to Canada and Mexico, and letting the evils in the world continue their ugly harvest."

Out of spite, because my brother is one of those draft dodgers, I drive for a weak spot, and snap at him, "Tell that to Kennedy and the Soviet Politburo." The whole Sino-Soviet alliance has been teetering since the last Russian coup and the summary execution of the most outspoken members of the Soviet Parliament last year. I reach for my beer, but find it empty.

He gestures to the bartender for another.

"I prefer a rum and coke," I say. He orders one for me.

The bartender delivers the rum and coke, and beer, waves away the haze of marijuana smoke, and glares at the joint the soldier is smoking, but remains quiet, afraid of offending him. Rumors of soldiers wiping out whole towns, raping and torturing civilians, have kept everyone on edge, making us thankful that they are fighting for us. How could the soldiers tell who's on whose side? The Constitution allows everyone the right to bear arms, and snipers playing hide-and-seek in the cities have made everyone's life miserable, allowing the soldiers to become their own law, executing anyone in possession of a discharged firearm. There are even stories of weapons planted on innocent citizens by guerrillas and overzealous soldiers. The bartender doesn't want to be another statistic. He pockets the soldier's gold coin and leaves quietly.

I sip my rum and coke, and the soldier takes a swig of beer. The bar's atmosphere suddenly becomes unfriendly. Psychedelic shadows swirl and dance, growing fangs, dripping rainbow drops of dew. "Let's go to the museum," I say, half hoping he'll lose interest and go away. I get up and leave without waiting for him. The fresh air clears my head a little, but I rush into the museum two blocks away, wanting to see all the art before the hallucinations wear off.

Lincoln's Underground Railroad greets me in the lobby. Lincoln's boat, obviously overloaded with

fugitive slaves, glides through a bayou towards sanctuary. The colors are excruciatingly vivid, making the water real. Lincoln, hollow-cheeked and noble, stands with utter calm, resolute in the middle of the boat. I reach out and dip my hands in the warm water, feeling the murky grays and dark greens.

"Another great man," says the soldier, startling me a little. He stands next to me. I had totally forgotten about him. Embarrassed, I dry my hands on my skirt, leaving streaks of paint which fade into thin air.

I don't answer him, but turn and head for the Modern Arts wing, rushing by a display of sparkling Tiffany glass that sends beams of light across the walls and ceiling, making a ballroom out of the corridor. I hear him behind me. His boots march across the beams of light, shattering their crystalline beauty.

Out of breath, I stop at the entrance of the Special Exhibits for Contemporary Artists. They are showcasing the sculptures of Michelangelo. The boots stop behind me. I go in.

The sculptures are amazing, capturing the essence of humanity, so lifelike, even though they are made of carved acrylic and bent sheet metal. David's beauty stops my heart for a moment, and I sit down on a bench and gaze at him. The translucent sculpture, lit from beneath, sends beams of light from his eyes, dazzling me. His left hand lovingly clutches the beveled edge of the steel surfboard. His swimming trunks, cunningly wrought, hide nothing. The soldier lights another joint, and I share it with him.

"Are you afraid of me?" asks the soldier.

"No," I lie.

"What is your name?" he asks.

Cautious and unwilling to tell him too much, I only tell him my first name, "Jessica." I wait. He doesn't volunteer his name. Tired of thinking of him as just "the soldier," I ask for his name.

"Nguyen," he says. A generic last name, I think, so we're even.

"Are the stories they tell about you true?" I ask.

"Very true," he says. "We kill all the men, women, and children, then rape the dogs and eat the cats." For a moment I believe him, but he smiles, displaying his crooked teeth. "That's the same Southern slaver propaganda bullshit that got Kennedy killed." He bursts out laughing.

"Touché," I concede. I turn to the *Madonna and Child*. A translucent Jewish woman wearing prison camp clothing, restrained by sheet metal Nazis, reaches imporingly for her child, who sticks out of an oven door. The child in turn stretches for his mother. Filtered orange light illuminates the acrylic child, giving the illusion that he is burning in the oven's coals, but the child shows no pain, only desire for his mother's comfort.

He notices the direction of my gaze. "I'm not



proud of some of the things we do," he says. "Sometimes what we do seems as horrible as that."

"Monoxide bombs," I mumble. The Vietnamese flood buildings and sewers with monoxide gas, sometimes accidentally killing whole families unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place. One cover of *Life* magazine showed dead civilians being dragged out of buildings. "Killed like rats."

"Yes," he says. "But there isn't a better way. We lose too much time and men going from building to building, room to room."

"Why the sacrifice?" I ask, still trying to get the answer to my question asked in the bar. "Why die so far away from home?"

He stares straight into my eyes, hesitates for a moment as if he were debating whether to tell me the truth, and with serious deliberation says, "Power and influence. We want America to be in our debt, just in case the Soviets become more difficult." The mask returns and he takes another puff from his joint.

The word "puppet" comes to mind. They want America to be their puppet. "So that is worth dying for?"

"To let my country and people be strong, powerful, and fruitful, and to give my descendants an easier life. Yes, that is worth it." He turns to me. "What would you die for?"

"Art."

"Art?" He laughs. "Art is for propaganda and capitalist advertising. It is used to shape minds. Yes, it is important, but to die for it?"

"I guess you don't understand. I've seen masterworks that have made me cry, laugh, and sing. To make people feel is the height of art. To reach that level is heaven. Many artists will die for it."

"You're right. I don't understand."

We get up and view the other exhibits. The paintings come alive. I feel the colors, taste and smell the art oozing out of the canvas. I stop at one of the pictures, and the pain and heat pours out. Chained slaves are building the transcontinental railroad through a desert. Hundreds lie dehydrated and dead, strapped to the side like cords of wood. The overseer whips one of the slaves too weak to even protest, but the slave strains to move the rail, to avoid the oncoming lash.

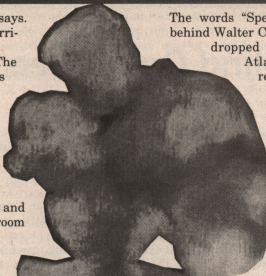
"Will we win?" I ask.

"With our help, the North will win." He smiles. "And slavery will end."

Suddenly, air raid sirens cut through the air.

"There is a bomb shelter near the bar," I say.

We head back to the bar. A crowd of people stare at the bar's TV in silence.



The words "Special Report" stand out behind Walter Cronkite. "The North has dropped a nuclear bomb on

Atlanta, Georgia. In response, the South said

that it will not surrender and will drop nuclear bombs on four Northern cities unless the North surrenders in an hour. It is suggested that everyone should remain calm and leave the following cities in an orderly fashion ..."

Cronkite rattles off twenty of the most populated Northern

cities, including the one I'm in. I feel as if a large X is drawn on top of me. My stomach flutters. Queasy with fear, I clamp my hand over my mouth, trying to gain some control over myself and hoping, irrationally, to increase my sense of control over this crazy world.

"An hour. Do you think we can get away in time?" I ask the soldier.

"Just barely," he says. "Do you have a car?"

"No, but we're already near the bomb shelter. We can go there."

"This close to the center, they'll be ovens like the Holocaust."

Outside the bar, he commandeers a Thunderbird with his pistol, forcing the kid driving the car to get out, and waves me into it. "Take him with us," I say, but the soldier shakes his head and begins to put the car into gear. We leave the kid behind.

Thirty minutes later, we find ourselves gridlocked on the roadway, and I watch what may be my last sunset. "We're still too close," he says. "We have to walk."

We abandon the car and run. Three miles later, in the grayness of dusk, I trip on a bottle that skitters away in the dark, and I fall, twisting my ankle. I pull myself up, wincing in pain, and lean against a brick wall. "I'm sorry," I say. "Go on without me."

"It's almost time, anyway," he says. "With luck, they'll pick some other city." He pulls out a joint and lights it. "My last." He leans against the wall and hands me the joint.

The pot deadens the pain, and I think of what I said about art and whether I would die for it, and whether I was telling the truth. And I think I was.

"Kiss me," I say. He does, and I hold onto him for an eternity, waiting for the flash that would leave our shadows on the wall, a soldier and a girl, forever embraced. "Make love, not war," he had said. And the flash comes. □

# If the Blind Could See ...



*That out of sight is out of mind...*

—Thomas A Kempis

There is undoubtedly far more meaning in these words than Mr. Clough envisioned when he wrote them more than a century ago. This expression is applicable to a wide range of situations and emotions, running the gamut from long distance love affairs to human atrocities performed in dank prison cells located in remote corners of the globe. However, this expression is more than just a saying suitable for describing a wide range of human behavior. Taken in its most literal sense, when something is out of our sight, it is *literally* out of mind — because it is in the brain, or more accurately, in the neurons, that sight resides.

Please, no groans.

This is not going to be a tutorial reminiscent of that 10th-grade biology lecture that you were barely able to stay awake for. I'm sure you have some dim recollection of it. Words like rods and cones, phosphenes, left brain, right brain, retina, and optic nerve are probably being dredged up at this very minute as you contemplate flipping past this column and reading something really interesting, some good piece of SF, perhaps a grunged-out cyber-dystopia full of sociopathic types downloading data directly into their brains, or some slice of virtually-induced nirvana courtesy of a computer-generated reality being dumped right into a pair of wrap-around goggles worn by a square-jawed, world-saving scientist.

Well, look no further.

Those SF futures are right here.

Almost.

Okay, not really.

But they are a lot closer than you might realize. Right now, scientists are working on an artificial eye. I'm not taking about a *Six Million Dollar Man* chunk of lenses and stainless steel slipped into an empty eye socket, but silicon electronics, video systems, lasers, motion sensors, neuro-morphic vision chips, and electrodes, all of which can be used either to enhance degraded vision, or to let the blind actually see.

What brought all this to my attention was a special issue of a technical journal called *IEEE Spectrum* — delivered to the 300,000 members of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (hence IEEE). This journal specializes in overview and tutorial topics of interest to electrical engineers — such things as GaAs integrated circuits, analog to digital converters, electric motors, high voltage transmission, optical networks, automotive electronics, and the myriad other technologies that involve the pushing around of electrons or the transmission of electromagnetic waves. But in the May 1996 issue, the entire focus was on progress toward an artificial eye.

Believe me, the IEEE is not an organization prone to printing science fiction. They are far too serious a bunch for such things as that. According to the articles in this issue, the artificial eye is on the way to becoming a reality in the next 20-30 years. Or to put it another way, in the next 20-30 years, it is

envisioned that data (it could be in the form of bits or pixels courtesy of a wide range of inputs that could include video — live and taped — Internet input, direct satellite input, cellular input, or even remote access to your answering machine) could be downloaded into your brain. You can't get much more science fictional than that.

How will it be possible?

Well, before that can be answered, we have to make sure that everyone reading this is on equal footing, so that you all have the basics. I'm afraid that you know what that means — it's time for the rods, cones, optic nerve, and visual cortex lecture. Sorry about that. But no pain, no gain (remember that, just like vision, pain, too, is all in the brain). I'll keep it brief.

## The Basics

The act of "seeing" takes place when an image hits the front of your eye and is then focused onto the retina which is located on the back of your eyeball. In the retina are all those rods and cones — some 200 million of them that act as little photoreceptors transforming light into electrical signals. The rods are most sensitive to low-level light, such as moonlight, no doubt evolved millions of years ago as our distant relatives stared into the night, trying to see what was about to eat them. Those with the best night vision survived to pass on their genetically superior eyes, while the rest ended up as dinner. The cones come into play under more intense lighting situations, and have the ability to adjust their

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sensitivity as light intensity varies (an example of which is when you leave a darkened theater and go outside into direct sunlight — for a moment you are nearly blinded, but your cones quickly adjust, lessening their sensitivity to the brighter conditions). All in all, your eyes can operate under lighting conditions that vary in intensity by eight orders of magnitude (from 1 to 100 million) — a truly amazing capability.

The electrical signals generated by the rods and cones are then sent into the brain by way of the optic nerve, arriving first in the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN), where some initial signal processing is done. From that point the signals continue on to the primary visual cortex at the back of your head, where the real "seeing" takes place.

If you stayed awake during that biology lecture you might have some vague memory of all this. Unfortunately, this picture is not quite right. It's in fact a bit more complicated, and it is the details of these complications that are of critical importance for the researchers attempting to fabricate an artificial eye.

First of all, your eyeball is a lot smarter than you probably imagined.

More than just a device used to convert light into electrical signals, your eyeball is full of neurons — those little cells that are capable of being stimulated and then conducting impulses. But these aren't just any garden-variety neurons, like the ones in your brain. The neurons in your brain are typically in an "off" state, and will only transmit a voltage spike of some 100 millivolts (mV) when stimulated to some critical threshold level. This type of neuron works well in the brain, but not so well in the eye. For our vision to be able to work as well as it does, the cones in your eye must be able to detect changes in relative intensity of one percent. When the

rods and cones generate their electrical signal, that signal is delivered to a neuron within your eye. It is this signal that stimulates the neuron, causing it to fire data down the optic nerve and into the brain.

The way a typical neuron works is that it will fire more rapidly as the signal coming into it increases in intensity — a signal twice as strong causes the neuron to fire twice as fast. This is where the problem lies. A standard "spiking neuron" has a maximum firing speed of about 60 spikes per second. Because the cones have this one percent resolution, it means that the cone may ask the neuron to fire at rates as high as 60 spikes per second, or as slow as 0.6 spikes per second (one percent of the maximum rate).

Now that is a big problem.

That means that under some conditions it would take more than one second for a neuron to fire. One second can be a lot of time when a saber-toothed tiger is charging at you. But the situation is far worse than this. Your eye consists of some 200 million rods and cones, but your optic nerve, which will carry all the information generated by those rods and cones, only has one million channels (the optic nerve is made up of one million separate nerves all bound up in one thick nerve cable). If the eye and brain were wired like a computer, it would mean that each neuron would have to wait for an available channel before it could send its signal to the brain. If a given neuron is waiting up to one second to fire, and then might have to wait for 200 other neurons to send signals before it gets a chance, then that neuron may have to wait up to 200 seconds.

That just wouldn't work.

By the time your brain registered the fact that a saber-toothed tiger was jumping at you, you would already be in the cat's stomach.

Why not just get more channels in the optic nerve, you might ask?

That's a good question.

The trouble is that even at the one-million-nerve level, the optic nerve is already 3 mm thick. If you were to increase the optic nerve to the 200-million-nerve level, so that each rod and cone had its own nerve then the diameter of the optic nerve would be over 50 cm, or some two inches. If that occurred, your whole brain would be full of optic nerves. You might now be able to see that saber-toothed tiger before it ate you, but you might not have enough brain power to figure out that you should probably start running.

What's the solution?

It's in those special neurons in your eye.

Between the rods and cones and the spiking neurons which are needed to send the signals down the optic nerve, are two to three layers of those special neurons. Rather than firing high voltage 100 mV spikes, they can transmit low-level signals of a few mV, in which the signals will vary in intensity. The spiking neurons act in an all-or-nothing manner — it is either 0 mV or 100 mV, but these special neurons can run at any value. From a circuit designer's perspective, spiking neurons behave in a digital fashion, being either on or off, while these low-voltage neurons behave in an analog fashion, capable of transmitting a whole range of voltages. However, because these analog neurons operate at very low voltages, the signals cannot propagate far. But they don't need to. They only need to talk to neighboring neurons, and do not have to send signals back into the brain like the higher-voltage spiking neurons do.

And what do these analog neurons talk about?

They talk about what the rods and cones are seeing. They compress the data, looking for

patterns, searching for abrupt changes in lighting, and finding edges and lines. They take all the data coming in from the rods and cones and compress it by a factor of 200. How convenient. There are now enough channels in the optic nerve to handle this reduced amount of data. So as you can now see (sorry about the pun), your eyes are actually pretty smart.

Now that the data are going down the optic nerve, the first stop for them is in the LGN (lateral geniculate nucleus), which begins to integrate information from both eyes into a binocular representation of visual space. From the LGN the information is passed along to the primary visual cortex, a layer of tissue only 2.5 to 3.0 mm thick, located beneath the surface of the brain at the back of your head at about the level of the ears. However, the pathway from the LGN to the visual cortex is not a one-way street. In fact, most of the information being input to the LGN does not come from the retina, but from the primary visual cortex.

This feedback path contributes to the parallel processing of the visual signals, but the details of this back-and-forth passage of data are not understood. From the primary visual cortex, data are then distributed to a number of higher cortical centers for further processing, eventually resulting in what we perceive as vision.

There you go.

It is a bit more complicated than you might have thought.

So why have I bothered to explain all this to you? It is to help you understand that the act of seeing is not something that resides in the eye, or in the brain, but in both. If you were going to build an artificial eye, at what point would you enter your video input into this *distributed* visual system?

If you wanted to plug into the back of your skull, directly con-

tacting the primary visual cortex as often seems popular in so many cyberpunk stories and books, you are going to be bypassing a lot of neuron-based signal processing, that which occurs in the LGN as well as the eye itself. To take advantage of the neuron data crunching capability of your vision system, you would want to tap into the system as close to the front end as possible. If blindness has been caused by damage to the rods and cones (as in the case of retinitis pigmentosa), you would want your artificial eye to be placed somewhere in the retina. However, if blindness is caused by damage to the optic nerve, or brain trauma, such that data can not get to the primary visual cortex, it may be necessary to contact the cortex directly, even though a great deal of neuron-aided signal processing will be lost.

#### Artificial Retina

The current state of research focuses on both of these situations — intervening either in the retina, or at the primary visual cortex. John Wyatt from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Joseph Rizzo of Harvard Medical School detail in the May issue of *Spectrum* the implementation of a retinal prosthesis. They have chosen the epiretinal approach, in which a nearly planar non-penetrating electrode array is placed on the surface of the retina, lying atop the ganglion cells (these are in the upper layer of the retina, and are the spiking neurons which fire the final pulse down the optic nerve). Because this structure lies atop the retina, the data-compression neurons within the retina have been bypassed. They have chosen this approach rather than attempting to place the prosthesis just below the data-crunching neurons because of the physical complexities of placing an array of electrodes within the retina

itself — the retina has the consistency of wet tissue paper and is only 0.25 mm thick. When the electrode array is activated, the voltage from any element on the array will cause the ganglion cell beneath it to fire an electrical pulse, which the brain will perceive as a flash of light. They have determined that using 100-microsecond pulses carrying only 0.5 microamps of current through 5-micron (1 micron = 1000 mm) diameter electrodes is sufficient to cause the ganglion cells to fire.

All well and good.

But how do you get the electrodes to fire in such a way as to represent a visual scene? They envision a system which consists of a tiny charge-coupled device (CCD) camera which would be mounted on a pair of eyeglasses. The CCD camera consists of a large array of pixel elements. The output of each of these elements would be used to turn on and off a laser beam which would be directed into the eye, and onto the epiretinal prosthesis. This epiretinal prosthesis itself would consist of an array of photo diodes and stimulators.

When the laser beam strikes a photo diode, a current is generated in it, which is then used to drive the stimulator, which in turn causes the ganglion cell beneath it to fire. The power used to drive both the photo diodes and the stimulator comes from the laser beam itself (this is the same principle by which solar cells generate electricity through the conversion of light). And there you have it.

Where do things stand today? No humans have yet received such a system. The experimental level of this technique today consists of placing these arrays in animal eyes (mostly rabbits) and monitoring the brain's response to the firing of ganglion cells.

You can't walk into the eye doctor's office today and order one of these, but there are no technological breakthroughs



that need to take place before this is a reality. At this point, it is the development of surgical techniques, and materials studies (the body attacks foreign invaders — which is how the body would view the epiretinal) that are the critical elements which must be established before this becomes a viable technology. But there are no fundamental reasons why this system should not work. In that far-off future of 20 to 30 years from now, it should be apparent to the SF-literate who are reading this that the input for this system need not come from just a CCD array mounted on a pair of glasses — the input could come from any video source, live or recorded. But that is the future.

In conjunction with this photo diode array and stimulator work, other studies are being performed on what is called the neuromorphic vision chip. As I have already described, between the rods and cones and the outer layer of the retina, lie several layers of neurons which process and compress optical data. Christof Kock of the California Institute of Technology and Bimal Mathur of the Rockwell International Science Center describe a neuromorphic chip, which is designed to mimic the behavior of those neurons. This chip consists of adaptive photoreceptors (these have a much greater dynamic range than CCD arrays and mimic the large dynamic range of the eye's cones). Connected to these photoreceptors is a two-dimensional array forming a resistive grid, which mimics the computational layer of the retina. This resistive grid approach is capable of supporting many of the capabilities of the retina, including data compression and the ability to "see" edges and lines. The use of such a chip would produce a closer analog to the biological retina than the more basic photodetector and ganglion stimulator approach.

### Brain Intervention

Next we move farther up the optical system. Getting access to the optical nerve is not all that difficult. It could be possible to take a single nerve element (one of the one million in the bundle), wrap a small wire around it, and, by placing a voltage on it, cause the brain to "see" a flash of light. The problem here is that the bundle of nerves is in no logical order. Two nerves running side by side do not correspond to two rods or cones lying side by side in the retina. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to map the relationship between the individual nerves and the corresponding sites on the retina. Because of this complexity, this is not an avenue that researchers are pursuing.

Next stop is the brain itself.

The next logical site would be in the LGN. However, this possesses its own unique set of difficulties, since it is located deep within the brain and is very difficult to access surgically without running the risk of brain damage. Like direct optic nerve connection, this is not an avenue of research that is being pursued.

This leaves the primary visual cortex.

For those who suffer from severe eye or optic nerve damage, intervention into the primary visual cortex may be the only possible solution to restore vision. However, it has been discovered that the neurons which would normally have been used for visual computation in those who have been blind since birth are being used for other functions. The brain has the ability to rewire

itself, and if a portion of the brain is inactive due to lack of input, it will be used for something else. For a brain in this condition, even if electrical activity is placed within the visual cortex, this brain will still not see — the neurons no longer "understand" what it is to see, and the inputs are meaningless to them. However, for those who still have the neurons that understand what it means to see, direct stimulation of the primary visual cortex is a possible method to create sight.

As described by Richard Normann and coworkers from the University of Utah, direct access to the visual part of the brain dates back some three decades, when a team of researchers led by Giles Brindley implanted an array of 180 platinum disk electrodes into the surface of the visual cortex of a blind subject's brain. This method does of course require the removal of a portion of the skull in order to access the brain.

It was found that by passing current through one or several electrodes, the blind subject would see a point or several points of light (called phosphenes). Initial studies indicated that neural pathways have a retinotopic organization — that

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is, neighboring cells in the retina feed information to (more or less) neighboring cells in the target areas of the brain. This means that if an imaginary two-dimensional grid were placed across the retina (corresponding to the two-dimensional image which is being focused upon it), the information appearing at each point in that grid would appear at the corresponding grid locations in the visual cortex. These early results engendered a great deal of enthusiasm for the potential of cortical implants.

Unfortunately, more sophisticated studies determined that this geometrical correspondence was not so straightforward, and that side-by-side locations in the brain did not necessarily correspond to the side-by-side locations of rods and cones in the eye. As an example, if you were viewing a dog while someone was decoding the output from your visual cortex by way of a grid of wires and then downloading that input into some wondrous computer that could translate the synaptic firings into a picture, what would be observed on the computer screen would be some sort of Picasso-translated dog, with shapes, locations, and colors completely rearranged.

However, all is not lost. The brain is a wonderfully flexible

device that can rewire itself through repetitive teaching. If the brain is told that what it is viewing is in fact a normal dog, and not some cubist rendering of one, the brain will begin to rewire neurons, so that what it sees will become a normal dog. This does not happen instantaneously, but can occur in a matter of only weeks.

Currently, state-of-the-art cortical implants consist of rigid arrays of either metal or silicon electrodes (referred to as hair brushes), which are inserted 1 to 2 mm into the surface of the cortex. Using these electrodes, phosphene can be generated with current pulses of less than 25 microamps. These low currents are critically important for direct brain stimulation, since higher current levels may induce seizures.

A logical question to ask is how many electrodes are needed in order to produce a useful level of "sight." Under normal vision conditions, the brain is being fed from the inputs of 200 million rods and cones. However, it has been determined that significantly less input is needed in order to be able to do basic tasks such as reading or navigating around a room. A study performed by Kicuul Cha and Kenneth Horch at the

University of Utah with sighted volunteers wearing pixelized vision goggles showed that visual input with as few as 625 pixels was adequate to be able to read. This number of electrodes is within a reasonable order for the technological capabilities that we currently have in hand.

A truly artificial eye, implemented by direct visual-cortex contact, could consist of a 32-by-32-pixel autofocus camera system mounted on a pair of glasses. The output from this camera system would be fed into a signal processing computer (something that could be kept in a pocket or on a belt) which would be performing many of the computational and data-manipulation tasks that the neurons in the retina and LGN perform. The resulting data would then be transmitted, in the same way that a cellular phone transmits your voice, to a receiver implanted in the brain at the location of the hair-brush electrodes, which in turn would be fired, activating neurons, and the resulting phosphene generated pattern would be registered in the brain.

The blind could see. Remember, this is not science fiction — it is science fact.

Welcome to the future. □

## A Response

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I have just finished reading the Summer 1996 special double issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. Several things about the magazine moved me. They really did. So, moved to my typewriter, I feel a familiar urge coming on. I must write.

I would like to direct attention first to Robert A. Metzger's poignantly titled "What If" column. His argument tickled close to two of my "pet" interests at the moment: evolution and humanity's place in it, and the more perennial "What If?" It

seemed to me the heart of the double issue.

"What If?" needs little or no explanation. It is quite simply the position we take when we read or write a piece of fiction. Metzger's article cuts the cheese. It is a brilliant piece of factual work. Like most good fact, it tries to address the "What If's" of the problem. Also, like most pieces of good, solid fact, it makes semi-educated, self-righteous bastards like me stand up and say, "Yea, sure. But what about this?" Before I incriminate myself any further I think I should explain my position.

I don't disagree with Robert Metzger, I think he's right.

Human beings are making things difficult for themselves, and for everything else on the planet alongside them; but before we pull out the sackcloth and ashes and start singing dirges for our own demise, lets look at a few of the "What If's."

While it is a generally accepted fact that several football fields worth of rain forest vanishes every day so that you and I can enjoy our Big Mac and Coke over lunch, and that the burger companies can claim that no rain forest died to bring you that



burger, or that global extinctions are one of the archaeological fingerprints of humanity's trek across the smiling face of Mother Earth, my case is this: That you've got to take a longer view when you're arguing evolution.

The scientific evidence is incontrovertible. Humanity is pushing evolution to the breaking point, but Adam, Eve and the humble swamp alligator survived the Fall last time. Next time it might be us and the great beetle all the way to Nirvana, because, by God, we're learning.

We're not all the faceless company execs who sit in their sixty-third floor offices and demand a take-out lunch while calmly ordering another million's worth of that cheap South American wood pulp. What is unfortunate is that it's the guys with the wood pulp who say what's going on. Money is an awful hard thing to force change upon.

But what if there's light in the tunnel ahead? Our own light, made and wielded by Us. All we have to do is reach it before it goes out. The answer lies, ladies and gentlemen, in *you*.

For six-and-one-half-million years (count them), humankind's body has evolved from a four-foot bipedal ape into its present physical form. And it's still changing. There are more six-footers in Japan than there were before the Second World War, largely held to be the result of diet and genetics. Our foreheads are getting taller (a bonus for all medievalists out there), minute changes in chemistry and subtle biological adaption try almost in vain to cope with the rapidly changing conditions of our daily lives.

On the way to achieving our current physical state we picked up a few things. Speech, group organization, manual dexterity. Most would claim that these impressive gifts have been largely squandered. Far be it from me to disagree, but I do.

You see, evolution doesn't just affect us physically, making us bigger, faster and more able to leap ferocious lions in a single bound. Nor just mentally, allowing us to communicate, organize and go kick the lions' one. Our achievements are not merely technological, physical, or academic. The human soul, the spirit of our existence, is being tempered as well, and we are but children making those first mistakes along the road to adolescence.

Here I'm talking about the soul or spirit as devoid of any form of belief or religious template. Merely the thing which is.

The spirit is getting stronger, even as we begin to fall into the decay of our ten-thousand-year folly. Technology can work marvels, yet a person can still will themselves to death. All around the world, people are standing forth saying, "No. That's wrong." It's been going on for a long time, and some are saying, "Who cares? Nobody listens to them, anyway." Not true. These ideas filter through a population; they find people and latch onto them. Children pick them up from their parents and grandparents and tell their friends at school. Slowly but surely things happen. Social Conscience gets raised. That is what Art and Literature are all about. Getting things

across in a manner that can seep insidiously into the framework of a society and bring about a change from the inside.

Thing is, 5.4 billion is an awful number of people for it to get out to; and is it, as Robert Metzger claims, too little, too late?

I, for one, don't think so.

Mother Earth has stood up to an awful lot of punishment over the course of the long life, and she will stand up to more. In the case of humanity: we, too, will survive. The self-same technology that is killing us will one day prove to be our savior. One of the great ironies of Future History.

The collective soul that we have nurtured for six-and-a-half-million years will continue to grow, to gestate. Incubated by the savagery and petty strife that we create for ourselves, tempered by it. Guard this thing, one day it may become a truly beautiful, healing, life-affirming thing. It is not your legacy to future generations, not alone. It is yours. Don't waste a chance to make it worth something.

Unfortunately so many do. We cannot change who we are, not overnight, not even in a hundred, or, maybe if we're really slow, two hundred years, but it will happen. The more people who realize this, the more who might one day stand up and say, "Sod it. This is wrong, what can I do?"

Keep writing, Robert Metzger, Charles C. Ryan, E. H. Wong, Molly Barr, and you all, and we'll keep reading.

Yours Sincerely,  
Nic Harrison  
Edinburgh, Scotland



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# Beware the Virtual Reality Jungle



**I**t has been some 250 years since philosophers such as David Hume first said that all we can know of reality is what enters the mind through the senses. In the last century, this idea has become an obvious truism, for brain research has made it clear that mind is a function of the brain, and that the brain has no inputs other than the senses. People who believe otherwise are clearly fooling themselves about the nature of reality.

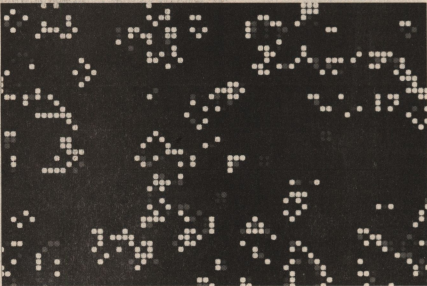
Can we fool the brain about the nature of reality? This has long been the aim of theater, television, film, painting, and mediums, all of which attempt to provide the brain with sensory input convincing enough to persuade the viewer to accept a new "reality" at least briefly.

Video games do the same thing, and if you doubt me, just ask yourself where you are when Mario is bashing all those bricks with his head. I've been there, done that, and watched you, too — wincing at the moment of impact, putting on the body English, grunting.

Flight Simulator does it very well, to the point where — I hear — people can get airsick at their kitchen table.

**T**he next step is what today we call "Virtual Reality." A computer synthesizes sound and vision inputs for the viewer and delivers them through earphones and goggles that block out competing inputs from the real world. The result can be quite convincing, and for those who object that the quality of the graphics is really quite cartoonish, that can be enough — consider "Mario."

Of course, the graphics are getting better. Researchers are



## Artificial life in a computer

also developing ways for the computer to synthesize and deliver inputs for other senses, such as touch. Here we're talking about "data gloves" that stimulate nerve endings in the hand and "body suits" that stimulate nerve endings all over the body. Since I have no idea how prudish some of you may be, the less we say about certain applications of this technology, the better.

Within the next 50 years, say researchers such as Hans Moravec, computers will be large enough to hold a human mind. Truly intelligent robots will at last be possible.

Moravec and others are also pushing the idea that the human mind in its brain is comparable to a program in a computer. That is, they say, it can in principle be edited, copied, and transferred from one "machine" to another. If this proves to be more than a metaphor (and researchers such as physicist Roger Penrose and philosopher John Searle insist that is all it can possibly be), it will one day be possible to "down-

load" a real human mind into a computer. The resulting "silicon person" may then have a robotic body, making this technology pretty attractive to science fiction writers, as well as to quadriplegics and the aged. It really gets me down to think that I probably won't live long enough to enjoy the benefits of this new technology.

Many of us, however, find more interesting the thought that a downloaded mind must be able to enjoy a very complete sort of Virtual Reality. After all, VR works by feeding a mind synthesized sensory data. A mind in the computer will have every possible input channel available for feeding and will suffer no distractions from competing inputs. The computer will be able to synthesize a complete and convincing reality for its resident. And if the resident is able to tell it what to synthesize, that reality can be anything the resident wishes.

We're talking perfect wish-ful-

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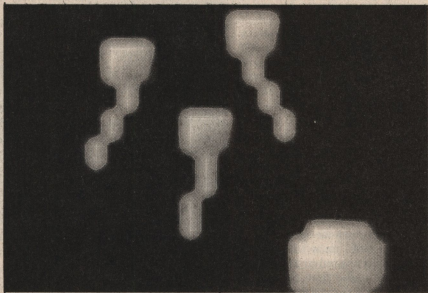
fillment fantasy here, ladies and gents. You can have a Batmobile, a James Bond killer car, a Rolls that drives like a Formula One, a harem, a zillion dollars. You can be handsome, beautiful, weird, and you can change your looks every minute on the minute. You can wear silk, fur, chain mail, diamonds, or nothing at all. You can visit the Titanic or the Moon or Mars. You can be governor, king, emperor of the world, president of Harvard. You can be an animal, a plant, an extraterrestrial, the opposite sex. Whatever floats your boat. No limits.

Really? No limits? Well, that has been the thrust of a number of VR-download imaginings, both fictional and nonfictional. But we know better, don't we? We're talking here about "what a computer can do," and "what a computer can do" depends on internal memory, processor speed, multitasking ability, and so on. That is, the reality experienced by a downloaded mind will be defined by the availability of resources, just as is our familiar "meat reality." Of course there will be limits.

Let us now imagine that someday a single computer will hold many downloaded minds. Just think of how this technology will make possible the perfect vacation resort or retirement community, or the perfect place to tuck excess population! If this happens, we will surely see the dependence on resources show up in the form of a medium of exchange (call it money) which residents may use to obtain extra memory or processor time when they need it to fulfill their wishes. And this, in turn, has some very interesting implications.

To see what these implications are, I need to turn from Virtual Reality to the field of Artificial Life.

Well before this field had a name, there were people attempting to mimic certain functions or behaviors of living things in computers. An early example is John Conway's game of Life, in which neighboring cells on a grid are occupied or blank depending on



### Hungry Computer Critters

the state of their neighbors. Here, very simple rules can yield configurations of cells that move, spawn progeny, devour neighbors, and die.

Later researchers devised small programs that could reproduce themselves in the computer, trade equivalents of genes, and improve their ability to function in a defined environment. These programs are necessarily quite abstract — nothing but strings of computer instructions — but they have been given visual appeal by embodying them in geometric figures, rough cartoons, and other forms. There are mice that generation by generation improve their ability to find the cheese, plants that generation by generation increase their ability to capture sunlight, and... You can find numerous images, software, and even interactive "artificial life" games on the Internet; see, for instance, <<http://vrml.arc.org/tier-ra/images>>.

**N**ow, let me quote from "How I Created Life in a Virtual Universe," a 1992 paper by evolutionary biologist Thomas S. Ray, one of the founders of this field. Talking with an artificial intelligence researcher over a game of Go, he realized that one could start with a self-replicating computer pro-

gram, add mutation, and get evolution. "A very simple formula for life: self-replication with errors, should generate evolution, the essence of life," he wrote. Years later, he was actually able to set up such a system, running inside a simulated or virtual computer of particular design. Here is how he describes his first successful run, on the night of January 3, 1990:

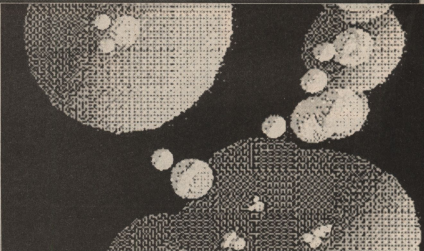
"All hell broke loose. The power of evolution had been unleashed inside the machine, but accelerated to the megahertz speeds at which computers operate. My research program was suddenly converted from one of design, to one of observation. I was back in a jungle describing what evolution had created, but this time a digital jungle. There was an amazing menagerie of digital creatures, unfolding through the process of evolution. Describing them was an adventure, because they inhabited an alien universe, based on a physics and chemistry totally different than the life forms I knew and loved. Yet forms and processes appeared that were somehow recognizable to the trained eye of a naturalist.

"The most striking and strangely familiar feature of my digital universe was that evolution found an endless succession

of ways for creatures to exploit their neighbors, and to defend themselves against such exploitation. Evolution is basically a selfish process, in which every individual is out for themselves, and success is measured in leaving more of your genes in future generations. But evolution is very inventive about how that ultimate goal is achieved. Evolution mindlessly takes advantage of whatever is available in the environment of the organism.

"Significantly, once the environment has been filled with creatures, those creatures become the most important resource in the environment. In that first night that my virtual machine ran, my creatures quickly found out that their environment was rich with the resources they needed. They promptly invented parasitism and predation, symbiosis and sex.

In a more formal 1992 paper ("Evolution, ecology and optimization of digital organisms," Santa Fe Institute working paper 92-08-042), he made no bones about what he had done: "Digital organisms [self-replicating computer programs] have been synthesized based on a computer metaphor of organic life in which CPU time is the 'energy' resource and memory is the 'material' resource. Memory is organized into informational 'genetic' patterns that exploit CPU time for self-replication. Mutation generates new forms, and evolution proceeds by natural selection as different 'genotypes' compete for CPU time and memory space. In addition, new genotypes appear which exploit other 'creatures' for informational or energetic resources.... From a single ancestral 'creature' there have evolved tens of thousands of self-replicating genotypes.... Parasites evolved, then creatures that were immune to parasites, and then parasites that could circumvent the immunity. Hyper-parasites evolved which subvert parasites to their own reproduction and drive them to extinction. The resulting genetically uniform



### A Virtual Reality Jungle

communities evolve sociality in the sense of creatures that can only reproduce in cooperative aggregations, and these aggregations are then invaded by cheating hyper-hyper-parasites."

Ray had clearly invented an astonishingly fertile system, evolution on an electronic roll, inventing on its own a great many familiar features of the ordinary "meat" world. What next? Artificial Life researchers want to see just how far such approaches can go. Ray's software (Tierra) runs "on any IBM compatible personal computers (as well as larger Unix workstations and mainframes)." Copies (as well as images and reports) are available on the Internet (visit the Santa Fe Institute at <http://www.santafe.edu>). Ray has also proposed setting up a "digital 'biodiversity' reserve" on the Internet where his digital "creatures" would be free to evolve toward whatever possibilities may be waiting.

As a field, Artificial Life has found itself in the center of a controversy over the definition of life — is it possible to call these self-reproducing, evolving computer programs alive? (Some of the opposition to "artificial life," as to "artificial intelligence," seems based in the lack of meat; this may fade when and if mental downloads become possible.) But really, I think, a very important point has already been made:

Once we have people living in the computer — the ultimate Virtual Reality — they will be subject to much the same rules that obtain in the real world and that Ray showed apply to Artificial Life. The requirement for resources defines limits and specifies an environment to which living things must adapt.

That is, if we ever build "Download Heaven," its residents will still use resources. They will compete with and exploit each other. They will be victimized by parasites and predators. There will be burglars, muggers, murderers, and even lawyers. It will of course need cops and jails. "Download Heaven" will thus look a lot more like real life than many of us might like.

On the other hand, it will last a lot longer. As meat, our lifespans are seriously limited — we actually do seem to have built-in expiration dates. As software residing in silicon, our lifespans could last as long as technological civilization, ending only when the electricity stops flowing. And even then, our recorded minds should remain, stored on the future equivalent of hard drives, perhaps to be reawakened by far-future archeologists.

Shameless plug: Maybe I'll write that story next, once you've had a chance to tell me how my VR-A-life novel, *Silicon Karma* (White Wolf, March 1997) works for you. □



# On the Clunkiness of Science Fiction.



The Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, in addition to the inevitable political committees and convention-running, sponsors a type of fan activity which, if not a lost art, still seems to be something of a rarity these days.

It talks about science fiction. There's a Book Discussion Group that reads a given book, then the members gather to discuss it. The results are not particularly profound, but frequently the members find themselves reading things they otherwise might not, particularly classics, which often have a way of sitting on shelves for decades, honored but not read. For the younger members, this leads to discovery; for the older, to rediscovery.

One of the things discovered is how clumsily written some of these classics are. Well, *The Skylark of Space* surprises no one. It is a gee-whiz book on about the level of Tom Swift, with allegedly adult characters. *A Princess of Mars* is a curious mixture of technical excellence and silliness. (Burroughs could undeniably write. Whether he could think is open to question.) H. Rider Haggard's *She* holds up surprisingly well as narrative, although it inevitably sparks long discussions of how the role of women in SF has changed so much over the years (albeit more comfortably than works of

more recent vintage which seem fully as archaic).

SF works from outside the genre don't cause the same reaction. You can love or hate Gore Vidal's *Messiah*, which we discussed recently (one of the ten best SF novels of the '50s, according to Damon Knight), but it is not *clunky*.

On the other hand, Jack Williamson's 1948 classic *The Humanoids* (just reissued by Orb; 299 pp., \$13.95, in a very handsome illustrated edition also containing the prequel, "With Folded Hands") is in some ways astonishingly clunky. Its depiction of a future society flung over many planets makes us realize how good the quick-sketch approach of *The Foundation Trilogy* actually is.

Williamson's shorthand approach is rather like that of *Star Trek*. I'm unable to present a future society, so I'm not even going to try. Just pretend this is one:

For Starmont was not on Earth, nor Jane Carter's language English; even her name is here translated from less familiar syllables. A hundred centuries had gone since the time of Einstein and Hiroshima, and the tamed atom had powered ships to scatter the seed of man across many thousand habitable planets ... Countless human cultures, isolated from one another ... had grown and killed themselves and sprung hardly up to invite new destruction. Caught in that ruthless repetition of history, this world — not unlike the cradle planet in chemistry and climate — had fallen with the breakdown of its mother civilization back

almost to barbarism. A dozen centuries of independent progress had brought its people back to about the level of the dawn of the atomic age.

(Ch. 1)

All of which provides a convenient excuse for making the setting New Mexico, 1948, in all but name and, to the 1996 reader, recognizably archaic.

You can be sure the Attitudes Toward Women contingent had a field day on this one. The aforementioned Jane Carter is an archetypal waif right out of Charles Dickens, there for the easy tear-jerk. She is about nine years old, always barefoot, grubby, and starved. But then we learn that she's really an ESP-endowed superperson, essential to a conspiracy on which hinges the entire future of the human race. She is capable of teleporting herself over interstellar distances. She can survive (barefoot, no less) on the surface of a sunless planet at nearly absolute zero. She can move huge objects with her mind. You would think, then, that if her keepers were that negligent, she'd teleport warm clothing and a decent meal out of nearby shops. Being a child, she'd also go in for nice toys, and anything else that caught her eye. Were she more than the kind of pulp character defined by one or two absolutely unchanging tags, she'd be more like the kid in Jerome Bixby's "It's a Good Life" and terrorize everyone.

The other characters aren't much better, and the structure is not deft. The novel has long

## Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

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stretches of lecture, then ends in that kind of wildly transcendent irrationalism typical of Campbellian Golden Age SF. (*The Humanoids* appeared in *Astounding* in 1948, its prequel, "With Folded Hands," the previous year. It has a great deal in common with the 1940s work of A.E. van Vogt and L. Ron Hubbard, and prefigured John W. Campbell's various hobbyhorses — particularly psionics — which would remove *Astounding* permanently from the #1 position by the mid-'50s.)

What I always ask when confronted with a book like this is, "So, why is this a classic?" The readers haven't been forced to read it over the decades. No teacher twisted their arms. Each publisher brought out an edition with the expectation of making a profit. Tor/Orb isn't exactly bringing it out again as an act of charity.

It's simplistic to say the book has great robots in it. Of course it does. The "humanoids" of the title are superhumanly servile robots, invented to protect the human race from harm. At the beginning of the book they arrive on Not Really Earth just in time to prevent genocidal war. All well and good. But, in the interests of "service," they prevent people from doing *anything*, reducing them to dependent pseudo-infancy. Those who resist are drugged into a stupor, for their own good, of course. The hero, Dr. Clay Forester, is a top weapons researcher, unable to engage in any sort of scientific research at all. Of the arts, only writing seems to be allowed as a "harmless" activity, but presumably no one will have much to write about after a while, as the human race stagnates into total idioy.

Enter the psionics, who are out to upset all this. But the real twist comes when the psi-folks

are presented as (possibly) dangerous lunatics, not as wish-fulfillment heroes. *The Humanoids* becomes interesting, even profound, as Williamson grapples with the ambiguity of the situation. If mankind is left alone, there will be another atomic war, this one final. If the humanoids "take care of" everybody forever, isn't that also a living death? Ultimate transcendence occurs when human minds are reprogrammed to accept the human-oids as good. The two merge into a cooperative whole and set off to "save" the universe.

Is this Heaven or Hell? Remember that *The Humanoids* was written before Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, at the very beginning of the Cold War. It is a myth of collectivism, with a response that is more complicated than mere horror. People whose minds have been fixed, who accept the humanoids, report that things are wonderful now ... but so did those empty husks created by the Body Snatchers. So did spokesmen for Stalin's Soviet Union. You can't quite believe them. If you accept what they say, they change you, and there's no going back. (The political analogy is potent but not absolute: there were escapees from Stalin's U.S.S.R. who told quite another story. There are no escapees from the humanoids.)

The answer to the question of "So, why is this book a classic?" is that it resonates long after you're done reading it. I suspect it will continue to do so for many years, and once enough time has passed that all the cultural details seem quaint anyway, *The Humanoids* will seem much more interesting than Heinlein's far better presented, but jingoistic *The Puppet Masters*. It is a clear triumph of content over clunkiness.

But is clunkiness necessary? There's a whole school of thought that holds that if you've got a Really Good Idea, the "style" doesn't matter, any more than does realistic characterization or any of the other standard literary graces, those elements being (in the most commonly used expression) "icing on the cake." This point of view is taken more often by fans than by critics, and if by a writer, then that is surely a danger sign that the works of that writer are probably of the most clunky, technical sort, what we have in mind when we say "Analog fiction" and don't mean it as a compliment.

The "icing on the cake" argument is merely an excuse for not learning how to write, made by the lazy writer for the tone-deaf reader or vice versa. It is a product of science fiction's Great Retarded Period, which began in the adventure pulps of the Teens and Twenties, when Edgar Rice Burroughs was king and something like Hall and Flint's (now forgotten) "classic" *The Blind Spot* (about which, see Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* for details) could actually have been considered publishable. Even then, standards in pulp SF were extremely low. If you had a neat idea or a captivating image, little else mattered. This is not to say that good writing was forbidden, just that editors and readers were indifferent to it.

Along came Hugo Gernsback, a science hobbyist/entrepreneur with no literary sensibility whatever, who founded not merely the first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, but the first *seven*. (The others were *Amazing Annual*, *Amazing Quarterly*, *Science Wonder Stories*, *Air Wonder Stories*, *Scientific Detective Stories*, and *Wonder Stories Quarterly*.) Gernsback created the "ghetto," hermetically sealing SF off, not



merely from outside literature, but even from other pulp influences. Most of his writers were amateurs, not skilled enough to write westerns or African adventure stories or detective stories. There were no SF writers in the Gernsback magazines anywhere near as good as such pulp contemporaries as Talbot Mundy, Max Brand, Dashiell Hammett, or even Robert E. Howard. H.P. Lovecraft slipped one supremely artistic story, "The Colour Out of Space," into *Amazing* in 1927, but Gernsback treated him shabbily, the readers were unappreciative, and nobody repeated that mistake again.

Out of such a milieu, genre SF emerged. Writers utterly innocent of point of view, scene construction, and other basics they hammer into kids in writing workshops these days could become established, even regarded as masters, if they had the one unique science-fictional virtue of extrapolative imagination. (Lack-ing it, Robert E. Howard, an infinitely better prose stylist than any Gernsback writer, wrote wretched science fiction, the one time he tried, in *Almuric*.) Slowly, storytelling was reinvented, as one technique after another was rediscovered by one of the more persistent of the pulp SF writers (usually Jack Williamson). There was a time when merely giving a scientist character a stutter was regarded as a quantum leap in the art of characterization. There was a time when, if a female character stopped being a "girl" and turned into a dominatrix, as in Stanley Weinbaum's *The Black Flame*, this was wildly revolutionary, "adult" writing.

Bit by bit, science fiction shed its clunkiness. You can trace the development in Jack Williamson's career, from "The Metal Man" in 1928 all the way up to his most recent work, which is why Williamson continues to

publish, and most of his contemporaries (David H. Keller, Stanton Coblenz, Neil R. Jones) fell by the wayside long before they actually died. By the 1940s, literate SF, if not always encountered, was at least not a fabulous rarity. Williamson has written books that are technically far beyond *The Humanoids*, but that particular volume remains a classic because of its powerful subject matter and because, fortunately, by 1948 Williamson and pulp SF in general had shed just enough clunkiness to be readable by a non-specialist audience. Not surprisingly, *The Humanoids* was one of the first genre SF novels to achieve trade



hardcover publication (Simon & Schuster, 1949). This did not mean mainstream critical recognition. It meant that a commercial publisher had finally decided that maybe some of this science fiction stuff was at least as well written as the average western or mystery novel and might sell at least as well. It was progress.

The Great Retarded Period is part of the heritage of the field, but was it necessary? I've always contended that it was not. When you go back and look at the non-genre SF from the same era, say,

Huxley's *Brave New World*, C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, or Vidal's *Messiah*, you'll find that, lo and behold, these works don't require any excuses to explain away their clunkiness, because they don't have any. The virtue of pulp SF over SF-by-mainstream-wander-ins was that the pulp writers were allowed to, and able to, imagine more. Aldous Huxley could not have produced, or gotten away with, something on the scale of the *Lensman* series. But after all this time, we have to make excuses for Doc Smith and not for Huxley, and today we have grandiose space operas from Dan Simmons and Iain Banks without any trace of what was once assumed to be requisite clunkiness.

\*\*\*

Now, that being said, I'd like to review some books by new writers. For all that everyone (myself included) complains these days that media tie-ins and other sinister forces are squeezing out new writers and first novels, some of what keeps showing up in my mailbox is encouraging.

#### *Celestial Matters*

By Richard Garfinkle  
Tor Books, 1996  
348 pp., \$23.95

My friend and sometime colleague Lee Weinstein wouldn't like this book. He objects to alternate history novels on the grounds that once you've made one change in the past as we know it, you're free to make any number of further changes, until the result becomes a meaningless game, not a serious novel. I reply that in the hands of many writers, alternate history is exactly that, but if the materials are chosen for some deeper resonance, rather than mere cleverness, the result might be *Bring the Jubilee* or *Pavane*, rather

than yet another novel of the Alternate Historical Lesbian Vampire Cats series.

*Celestial Matters* is more a matter of cleverness than resonance, though it is not entirely without deeper meanings, and it is certainly the "alternate" novel to end all "alternate" novels.

It is, in short, Ptolemaic space opera, the departures from reality being (and this is where Weinstein would object) three-fold: that Alexander the Great did not die at 33, but lived to a ripe old age and consolidated his empire; that Aristotle banished the Platonists from the Academy at Athens, thus steering Greek thought toward practical science; and that, coincidentally, the physical universe envisioned by the ancient Greek scientists is actually so. Therefore, the Earth is the fixed center, around which the heavenly spheres rotate. A spaceship is made of glowing lunar matter and must be moored to a mile-high tower, because it cannot descend into terrestrial space. The hero must guide this vessel to the planets we know as Mars and Venus to get materials to make a net, from which he can scoop up sun-matter, which is to be used on Earth as an ultimate weapon. The time is about 978 years after the founding of the Delian League, which would be A.D. 500 in our time-line. Alexander's empire still holds, as a union of Athens and Sparta, ruling half the world in contention with the Empire of the East, which fights back with dragon-kites and Taoist magic, which is itself a kind of alternate science.

There are hair-breadth escapes, thrills, excitement, and if we never can quite forget that this is made up, it is brilliantly made up, with a constant stream of cleverly extrapolative details. Call it a mix of Hornblower, Baron Munchausen, and Hal Clement, one of the most intrigu-

ing contrivances in a long while. I hope the author has the sense to quit while he's ahead. Sequels could seem merely contrived.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Synthesis & Other Virtual Realities*

By Mary Rosenblum  
Arkham House, 1996  
280 pp., \$21.95



When Arkham House does a collection of a new writer's work, it is a unique showpiece, probably announcing the arrival of a superstar. The dustjacket to Mary Rosenblum's *Synthesis* says as much, in no uncertain terms. But I have to say that, good as these stories may be — they're from *Asimov's*, 1990-95; I can fully understand why they were published — I am not really convinced that we have anything more than a journeywoman writer here, whose career may yet ascend into master class, but hasn't yet.

She knows all the familiar moves well enough. The first story, "The Water Bringer," is set in a drought-devastated USA. There's a Strange Child in it, an outcast cripple with the curious ability to conjure up illusions (e.g., a butterfly that he and others can see). Along comes an

alleged government surveyor looking for water, who brings hope, not merely to the community, but to the boy's bleak life. The surveyor is a fraud. The boy takes a dramatic action to save him from a lynching. It's all very smoothly done, but nothing that couldn't have been published in *F&SF* in 1954. "Entrada" might be described as cyberpunk without the punk, set in a Newt-Gingrich sort of future in which the gap between rich and poor is enormous and an oppressed Hispanic servant has been stealing Virtual Reality time to get an education, only to become the focus of the search for a lost file. Again, a quite good story, not a great one. Magazine editors get tired of the endless white-bread texture of SF, so if someone can do ethnic characters convincingly, it is always (if predictably) a plus. Most of the characters in the title story are Chinese. The hero is an heir to a vast corporation who wants to use Virtual Reality for Art. There's also a struggling artist in "The Centaur Garden," who falls in love with a genetically engineered centaur-ess. The result is subtle, not melodrama, and there are no easy answers, but there are no real surprises either. We've met these people before. We've read other stories like these.

Now, having mastered the familiar moves, Ms. Rosenblum might develop into a superstar if she can invent some *new* ones.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Dradin, in Love*

By Jeff VanderMeer  
Buccy First Editions, 1996  
98 pp., \$11.50 (postpaid  
from Buccy Press, P.O. Box  
38190, Tallahassee, FL 32315)

Someday someone is going to do a reference work on imaginary cities in fantasy, and this one will fall into Type 3A, Subset 2, Surrealist. Two traditions



stand behind this book. One derives from a type of surrealist collage that is usually done with Victorian prints cut up into bizarre juxtapositions. (The illustrations by Michael Shores are excellent examples.) This goes all the way back to Max Ernst, and since Max Ernst, there have been various attempts to string the images together into a story, not always successful. Additionally, there is the fantasy of the Great City, which might be M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, or, specifically combining the two traditions, Brian Aldiss's *Malacia*, which derives from (and includes in most editions) various intricate 18th century prints. Such works are usually detailed tapestries in prose, filled with striking images, with a wandering storyline, a setting made up of a jumble of familiar elements made strange, and very little attempt at realism. (It is pedantic and useless to question the economic basis of *Gormenghast*.) In the hands of a great artist, like Peake, the result can be an overwhelming masterpiece.

I wouldn't claim that Jeff VanderMeer is a great artist, but he has shown himself to be a good writer in the past. If *Dradin, in Love* sometimes hits a false note or stumbles over a clumsy word-choice, it also contains memorable images. The story concerns a failed missionary's romance with a woman who may never have existed, and his descent into danger and madness. The very sort of thing that we expect to go on in a Type 3A, Subset 2, Surrealist back alleyway. *Dradin, in Love* is a good specimen of its type, and a good reason why we have small presses. This would never have been published by a commercial house.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*A Spell for the Fulfillment of Desire*

By Don Webb  
Black Ice Books, 1996  
147 pp., \$7.95

This collection comes more from the literary-magazine axis than the fantasy small press, and has the usual failings of literary-mag material. Few of the items are fully developed stories, many little more than gimmicky exercises in technique. (One wonders: would literary-mag readers have a collective heart attack if confronted with a full-blown story with real emotions in it? Or would they find it quaintly obsolete?) Most are surrealist sketches, or just oddities, some fantastic, some not, a few merely opaque. There's even what seems to be a translation or summary of the work of Plotinus (the fuzziest of antique philosophers, founder of Neo-Platonism), which reads like science fiction. I particularly like the opening sketch, about a fruitcake that passes through the hands of so many great writers that when a burglar steals it and eats it, a literary masterpiece starts appearing on nearby walls as graffiti. For a specialist audience, I think.

Rating: ☆☆

*Slow Funeral*  
By Rebecca Ore  
Tor, 1994  
316 pp., \$21.95

Yes, this book is two years old, and came to my attention through the PSFS Book Discussion. It is the best thing I have read recently, and I think it was seriously overlooked by its publisher, who could have broken out into the mainstream with Rebecca Ore's full-blooded story (the sort that would give literary-mag readers a shock) of a possibly crazy woman living as a welfare cheat in Berkeley, who returns to her roots in rural Virginia, where all her relatives are witches. It's all done with extreme honesty and social realism. The slow funeral of the title is for the protagonist's grandmother, who isn't dead yet, and who dominates the book, but it is also for the protagonist, as the suffocating folkways close off the possibilities in her life. This is the best fantasy of its type in a very long time, next to which most of Manly Wade Wellman's colorful but less incisive work in a similar vein is merely quaint.

Highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

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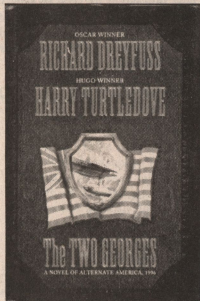
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## A New Regime

*The Two Georges*  
By Richard Dreyfuss  
and Harry Turtledove  
Tor, 1996  
384 pp., \$23.95

*The Two Georges* is a well done alternate history, though not quite of the stature of Turtledove's previous *Guns of the South*.

"The Two Georges" is Gainsborough's most famous painting, depicting the presentation of George Washington and other members of the Privy Council for North America to George III. With



that compromise there was no American Revolution, and history took a much different path.

Two hundred years later, the Gainsborough painting, the beloved icon of the unity of the

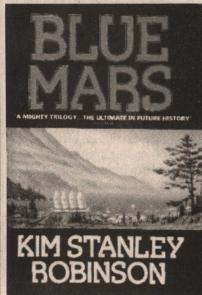
British Empire, is stolen, apparently by the Sons of Liberty, an IRA-like terrorist group that wants to separate North America from England. *The Two Georges* is a detective story, as a high-ranking officer in the Royal American Mounted Police makes it his own project to investigate the theft and recover the painting. Conveniently, the pursuit takes him all over the North American Union, and we get a chance to sample slices of a different, exotic, rather idealized, medium-tech world.

The story is good, but the alternate history is something of a cheat. Even though their history diverged from ours at least 230 years ago, many of today's important people in our universe are also alive in theirs. This is *extremely* improbable, and the use of such a premise can't be supported. Unfortunately, a substantial part of the plot's oomph comes from these people: Martin Luther King is Governor-General of the NAU (not so improbable: see below), and Richard Nixon is a sleazy used-car magnate in New Liverpool who is killed during the theft of *The Two Georges*.

One of the nicer touches in the book is the place of blacks. In this history, plausibly enough, the slaves were peacefully freed in the 1830s. Because the emancipation took place a generation earlier, and isn't a hated symbol of Yankee oppression throughout the South, blacks are solidly middle-class in this world. It's remarked more than once that they form a highly conservative managerial class with few (MLK is an exception) in the highest reaches of government or business, but few in poverty, either.

I didn't care for *The Two Georges'* attempt to depict this world as a semi-utopia. With the

notable exception of a section which shows the misery and poverty of the Pennsylvania coalminers, everyone but a few malcontents is happy and satisfied with his lot in life. Oh, come on! A world stalled around 1900 could only be a world in which overpopulation was endemic and starvation an ever-present danger. The authors sweep that under the rug with a passing reference to the Irish potato famine of the 1840s. Sorry, that's not believable. The authors also dwell implausibly



long and often on the lack of firearms and the rarity of death by firearms, and people's universal revulsion to them. It sounds more like wish-fulfillment than anything.

Balancing it all out, however, this is a good book, an interesting tour of a well-realized (if improbable) world, and well worth reading.

Rating: ☆☆☆1/2

### Rating System

- ☆☆☆☆☆ Outstanding
- ☆☆☆☆ Very Good
- ☆☆☆ Good
- ☆☆ Fair
- ☆ Poor



### Blue Mars

By Kim Stanley Robinson  
Bantam, 1996  
616 pp, \$21.99

At the British Eastercon, a fan made the very perceptive comment that Mars has been one of this century's great myths. Percival Lowell and H. G. Wells gave us the first Mars: the home of ancient races, far beyond humanity in intelligence. Later, Burroughs, Heinlein, Bradbury, Clarke, and others gave us a second, more friendly, Mars: if there are Martians they could be our friends, and Mars is an exotic, exciting world on which one could walk and live. A second, better, Earth.

Two ideas of Mars, both romantic.

And both of them were fatally wounded by the Mariner probes, with the coup de grace adminis-



tered by Viking: Mars is nearly as inhospitable as the Moon. It had no life and never will have life. It was not a good place to visit. There are not now, nor were there ever, Martians. Mars was dead.

Kim Stanley Robinson (and the recent finding of microscopic life in a meteorite) have given Mars back to us! He has written about a real world. He has written as if he has been there and come back to tell us about it. He has re-made the Mars Myth by making Mars live

again.

*Blue Mars* picks up near the end of the Second Martian Revolution where *Green Mars* ended and, like the others, follows different characters in turn.

The blue Mars of the title is the blue of the newly-born oceans of Mars, and much of the action takes place on the water. In *Red Mars*, Robinson made real the original Mars of rocks and near-vacuum. In *Green Mars*, the terraforming of Mars and the spread of life were center stage. Now, in *Blue Mars*, water comes to the front.

I don't think that *Blue Mars* is quite as strong a book as the previous two, primarily because Robinson seems to have decided that he'd wrap the whole series up in three books. So he rushed it a bit. Particularly disconcerting are the multi-year gaps in the narrative. In one particularly noticeable instance, Nirgal sees a baby, and a few paragraphs later sees a young woman who he realizes is that baby grown up. That's OK, but the narrative didn't give me the sense of twenty years passing, and it came as quite a shock to me as a reader.

*Blue Mars* continues the tensions in the previous books and resolves them in a particularly realistic way. For example, the great battle between the Greens and the Reds is defused for a time by the Greens giving the Reds effective control over much of the terraforming effort, which slows it down, but which avoids civil war. Very realistic. And in the course of the century that *Blue Mars* covers, both Greens and Reds discover that their original pure ideologies have mutated. Generational differences have become as important as terraforming ideology.

Historically, *Blue Mars* is about the aftermath of the successful Second Martian Revolution: the creation of a government, the reconciliation of most of the parties to the new order, and the evolution of politics. It's all very well done, though the utopian political theorizing goes on overlong.

I believe that the Robinson Mars books are among the major pieces of SF writing of the '90s, perhaps

the major work so far. They stand head and shoulders above anything else I've read in a long time, and will be an enduring classic of the field.

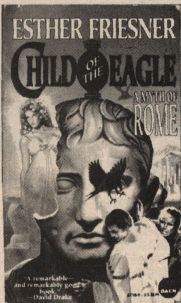
Most highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

### Ancient Shores

By Jack McDevitt  
HarperPrism, 1996  
397 pp., \$22.00

A farmer in North Dakota finds a strange piece of metal buried in his field. As he uncovers it, he finds a complete sailboat made of a nearly imperishable material. The boat is a local sensation, but the real complication comes when some friends discover a buried installation made of similar material on a nearby Indian reservation. When the installation turns out to house gates leading to other worlds, the interest of the nation



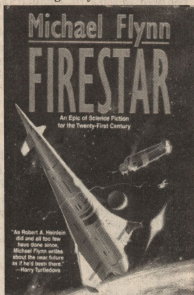
and the world focuses on it.

The story of the discovery of the boat and the installation and the exploration of their nature works very well indeed. The people of North Dakota seem like people I'd like to know — like many of Clifford Simak's people. There's sense of wonder in plenty, and I've always been a sucker for stories in which people explore strange new places.

Initially, the public's reaction to the discoveries rings true, particu-

larly the local people's. But as the book goes on, McDevitt's portrayal of national reaction seems to drift off base.

Making the tension in the last part of the book revolve around a Waco-style confrontation between Federal marshals and the explorers who are holed up in the alien installation seems completely absurd. As we saw with the Freemien in Montana, politicians aren't fools enough to go against public opinion and force an armed battle. It simply wouldn't have happened that way; McDevitt had to bend his cardboard a little too much, and I don't see why. He took an interesting story and bent it off in



an unnatural direction.

This is still just a cavil, though, compared to the hell-for-leather finish he cobbled on: People have discovered gates to other worlds; the evil Feds have surrounded the place; valiant scientists and explorers and Indians are defending it, prepared to give their lives if necessary. Oops! Only five pages left! Call in the deus ex machina! Situation resolved. Bah.

Can I highly recommend the first 300 or so pages of a book?

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Child of the Eagle*  
By Esther Friesner  
Baen, 1996  
312 pp., \$5.99

Esther Friesner, writer of many

excellent, silly, humorous fantasies, has demonstrated she can also write excellent non-funny SF. *Child of the Eagle* is subtitled "A Myth of Rome." It's a fantasy with the Roman gods intervening in men's lives, but it's also an excellent alternate history.

The night before the Ides of March, Brutus is warned by the goddess Venus that Caesar's death will mean the death of the Republic and ultimately the death of Rome. She offers him 100 years of youth if he will do her bidding in just a single thing when the time comes. Brutus heeds her warning, takes her offer, and saves Caesar's life.

Brutus is acknowledged as Caesar's son and ultimately triumphs over both Mark Antony and Caesar's nephew Octavian. Caesar conquers Parthia and dies, leaving Brutus undisputed master of Rome. Brutus restores an equilibrium and resigns ultimate power, leaving the Republic fairly healthy. He is still a vastly important politician, however, and shepherds a series of laws that make slave holding and the latifundia less economic, causing them to decline and thus, in time, restoring the economic foundations of the Republic.

But Brutus is — naturally — still tormented. (It's not allowed in literature to be noble and *not* to be tormented by self-doubt. It's a Rule.) Too many of his friends die by being too close to him, and as his endless youth becomes obvious, new jealousies grow. Finally, people begin to worship him as a demi-god which offends his Old Roman religious sensibilities.

The alternate history seems quite plausible. Had Caesar lived, he planned to try to conquer the Parthians. And Caesar might well have succeeded. I'm dubious that anyone or anything could have restored the Republic, but I suppose that what Brutus did is about the best possible shot at it.

The motive that causes Venus to intervene is unexpected but fair and becomes apparent to the reader only late in the story.

Friesner has managed to deftly blend a good alternate history with a good fantasy. Recommend-

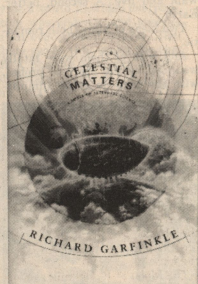
ed.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Firestar*  
By Michael Flynn  
Tor, 1996  
573 pp., \$27.95

Pro-space novels usually indulge in preaching to the converted: the liberals (when they aren't simply fools) are corrupt defenders of a failed status quo, the environmentalists are idiots, and engineers are the only people with pure hearts and functional minds.

*Firestar* breaks that mold. It's a good SF novel; it plays fair with pretty much everyone (some of the



engineers are venal fools, and some of the opposition are wise people who happen to see things differently). Furthermore, Flynn spends little time on the technical nuts and bolts. The main threads of the story are the test pilots (they're straight out of *The Right Stuff*) and the education of the next generation.

The visionary who sets this all into motion realizes that it will do no good to get into space if we can't reverse the generation-long decline in the public schools, so she puts as much effort, both personal and corporate, into improving schools as she does into engineering. And it isn't gimmicky; mostly it's letting teachers *teach*.

It's possible that the schooling



ideas that Flynn's heroine uses won't work; it's possible that the SSTO technology that he assumes won't work either. After reading *Firestar*, it's hard to imagine, though, that anyone would feel that either attempt wasn't worth making.

By the end of *Firestar*, there is a smallish orbital industry in place, and the first trip outside the Earth-Moon system is about to be launched. I understand that there are two more volumes to come. I wonder what he'll do with them? I can't wait to find out!

This book is Hugo material. Highly recommended.

☆☆☆☆ 1/2

#### *Celestial Matters*

By Richard Garfinkle

Tor, 1996

348 pp., \$23.95

Every once in a while a book comes along that is *sui generis*. *Celestial Matters* is a hard SF adventure story, complete with mini-physics lectures, which would have been perfectly at home in Campbell's *Astounding*. (And that's a compliment.) But the story's physics isn't our physics, it's Aristotle's physics (you know, the physics that legend says Galileo triumphantly disproved at the Leaning Tower).

The Moon is 10,000 miles above the Earth, rotates about it daily, and is made of a celestial matter with different properties and different innate motions than the Terrestrial matter we're familiar with.

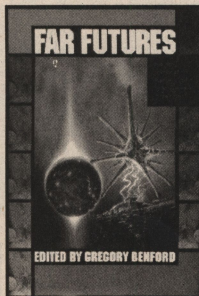
Ever since Aristotle turned his talents towards applied science and built evac cannon for Alexander's wars of conquest, the Akademe of Athens has been devoted to an ever deeper understanding of natural science. By the time of the story, a thousand years after Aristotle and Alexander, the Greek Empire rules all of the Old World except the Middle Kingdom of China and Japan. The New World is split between the Greeks and the Middle Kingdom, and continual war rages.

For the Middle Kingdom resists the high tech of the Greeks with

its own arcane science based on the Tao. Middle Kingdom armies fight with Xi lances, which can raise waves to swamp a ship or cause sickness at a distance. The two world powers have been at odds so long that they have developed their own, mutually incomprehensible technologies.

Adding to the mix, the Greek gods exist and talk with their favored worshippers, even to the point of sometimes helping them.

The story revolves around a ship built to voyage to the sun to steal a mass of solar matter with which to construct a weapon that will destroy the Middle Kingdom



one and for all. The Middlers resist, there's at least one spy on board, and the Aristotelian super-science involved in this greatest spaceship ever built is largely untested.

*Celestial Matters* is a tour de force, a classic SF story set in an imaginative and highly consistent universe.

More Hugo material. Highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

#### *Far Futures*

Edited by Gregory Benford

Tor, 1996

398 pp., \$23.95

*Far Futures* is a collection of five original stories written to be so far in the future that there's no conti-

nunity with today. None of them is bad, and several of them are good, indeed.

"Judgment Engine," by Greg Bear, is probably the weakest of the lot, which is a pity since it starts out the best. Into the well-constructed, very alien world just before the Big Crunch, a human from our day is resurrected because the supernal descendants of mankind are split and need an entity to provide a fresh look. So far, so good.

But the story falls apart. The two contending sides turn out to be teachers and students. The teachers believe in competition and evolution, while the students believe in cooperation. Sophomoric philosophy is banded about, and finally the students gather together, metaphorically link their hands, sing "All we are saying / Is give peace a chance," and pass into the next cycle of the universe, leaving the fuddy-duddy teachers behind.

The human from our time? He never really does anything. It seems that a recording of his wife also survived, and they spend the remaining hours before the Big Crunch bickering about the reasons for their divorce 137 billion years previously.

The next story, "Genesis," by Poul Anderson, is one of the winners in this collection. Humanity has peaceably disappeared, leaving a galaxy filled with AI Minds, one per star. But Gaia, the Mind of the Solar System and guardian of the home planet, is acting strangely. Other Minds send an emissary to investigate.

Anderson has combined a puzzle, a good adventure story, and a fascinating exploration of the nature of reality and the limits of virtual worlds. This is an example of excellent hard SF by one of the masters.

The third story — almost a short novel — is "Historical Crisis," by Donald Kingsbury, and it is passing strange. He explores what happens after the Second Foundation establishes the Second Galactic Empire!

For some reason, Kingsbury writes in Isaac Asimov's Foundation universe, but with all the

names (and nothing else) changed. I found this continually jarring.

Kingsbury tries to come to grips with the technological changes and the second-order effects that Asimov only dimly understood. The Thousand-Year Seldon Plan (not called that, of course) is over, and the Second Galactic Empire has been benignly established and is ruled by the Psychohistorians.

What happens to Psychohistory as people use computers, as they become cyberpunks? What happens to Psychohistory as *people* change? And what happens to Psychohistory as it becomes known? In the peace of the Second Empire, others develop Psychohistory on their own, destroying the Second Foundation's monopoly of prediction and making its Psychohistorical running of the galaxy unstable.

I enjoyed the story a lot, and it was fun to watch Kingsbury poke holes in Asimov's future history, but *why* did he go through the charade of changing the names?

The fourth story is by Joe Haldeman, a love story called "For White Hill." The background of the story is not very plausible, though, and I had some difficulties accepting the premises enough to enjoy the story.

Earth has been utterly devastated in an interstellar war, but humanity survives in numerous colonies. The greatest artists of each of the worlds come to Earth for an art competition to build a memorial to Earth. Two of them fall in love.

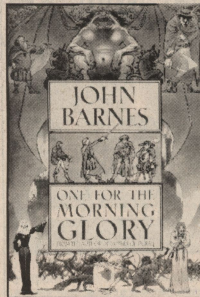
In the middle of the competition, scientists notice that the Sun is getting hotter and that in only a few years the Earth will be uninhabitable again. The wealthiest people on Earth buy all the seats on the few interstellar ships available, leaving the artists (and a lot of other people) stranded. In a most contrived ending, the hero and heroine are separated, she to die tragically and horribly getting one last ship of refugees off to the stars, he to roast, stranded on Earth.

The plot is contrived, but it's also a wonderful love story, and well worth reading on this basis.

The final story is "At the

Eschaton," by Charles Sheffield. A man of our time takes one-way suspended animation jumps into successively more distant futures in hopes of finding a cure for his wife's fatal disease. Eventually, he finds himself in a future where AI-borne humanity fills the galaxy. He has resisted being downloaded into a machine and is literally the only real human left.

Then Black Boggies from Andromeda mysteriously invade the Milky Way, destroying the AIs without anyone knowing how or why. The AIs (being, after all, merely supernal intelligences) come to him, crying, "Help us, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're our only hope!" The human agrees to be General of All the Galaxy. He soon learns that supernal intelligences



make lousy troops and can't even build decent homing missiles, so he permits himself to be downloaded onto various computers in thousands of ships until finally, after a few billion years of battle, he realizes that he has filled every computer in the universe with copies of himself.

As the Big Crunch comes, his lost love is for some reason or other (it seems to have something to do with Teilhard combined with thermodynamics) resurrected, and they pass on into the next cycle, her and all 10<sup>80</sup> copies of him. (I believe it's called polyandry.)

It's not a bad story, but the inconsistencies got to me after a

while.

I have perhaps been too critical. This is a good collection and a good read and is well worth your time and money.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*One for the Morning Glory*

By John Barnes

Tor, 1996

319 pp., \$22.95

I don't think I would ever have guessed that the author of *Kaleidoscope Century*, or *Mother of Storms*, for that matter, would next write a light, witty fantasy.

The plot of *One for the Morning Glory* is fairly straightforward: A very young prince's left side disappears entirely due to an evil spell. A year later he gains four strange companions who teach him as he grows. He matures and eventually leads his kingdom's army against invaders and regains his missing side.

That sounds trite, but Barnes is a much better writer than that. What he's done is write a clever traditional fantasy story full of wit and plays on words. *Not* puns, but wordplay. For example, every pseudo-medieval story is full of references to pseudo-medieval things. Barnes's story has them too, but they're named ... appropriately. The Prince will go hunting for gazebo, carrying a brace of pis-mires (some sort of handgun) which are fired by cocking their lovelocks. You get the picture — things are named with just exactly the wrong word.

This kind of wordplay is what Piers Anthony only dreams of writing on his best days.

For sheer fun, I enjoyed *One for the Morning Glory* more than any book I've read in quite a while. John Barnes is clearly one of the major talents in SF today. *One for the Morning Glory* is radically different from anything he's done before, and in fact, rather different from anything *anyone* has done before.

Highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆



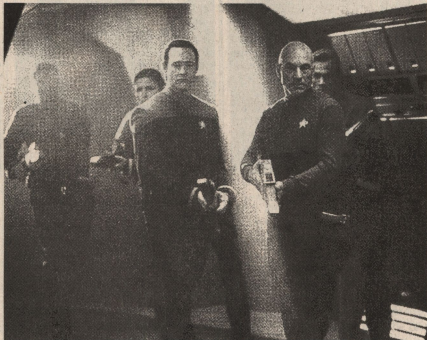
# Bugs Galore



I am one of the thousands of people who have paid their money to see *Independence Day*. So, what was all the fuss about? Great special effects, and a nonsensical plot where the forces of physics and human nature don't apply. So, what does the film have? Great PR and great marketing. That's where the genius lies. Fiscally speaking (if not creatively), the film is a blockbuster. In fact, I think it's broken about every monetary record, thereby fulfilling the studio's wildest dreams. Given the current rate, the film will most likely outgross the *Star Wars* trilogy. In comparison, a year ago, the big summer movies released over the July 4th weekend were *Species*, which opened with \$17.2 million and finished with \$60 million, and *First Knight*, which started with \$10.9 million and finally ended with \$37 million. Not even close to *ID4*'s near \$100 million in the first week. The end result? Endless *Independence Day* sequels and even more endless cheap copies. Whoever owns the rights to *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* is going to be one happy camper. It's going to be bugs galore for the next five years.

## Film:

*ID4* golden boys Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin have signed for two more pictures with Fox. One will be a remake of the 1966 classic science fiction film *Fantastic Voyage*; the other is an original idea conceived with *ID4* star Bill Pullman called *Supertanker*. Pullman will play a specialist who repairs a tanker carrying unstable liquefied nat-



Hunting a SmorgasBorg

ural gas. Before starting either of these films, Emmerich and Devlin will tackle the remake of *Godzilla*.

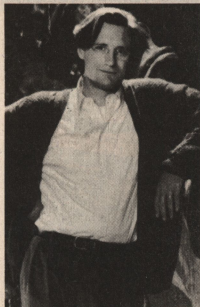
Trek fans will have a chance to feast on a smorgasbord this November 22 when *First Contact* pits the crew of the *Enterprise* against the Borg. Count on a lot of special effects.

Nowadays, if you talk about development deals, you won't get far without mentioning the recently formed DreamWorks. Here's the lowdown on some of their upcoming projects. The company has bought the film rights to the unpublished novel *Spare* by Michael Marshall Smith. This thriller, set in the future, involves cloning for organ donation. Wealthy couples clone their children. The "spares" are then sent to a farm and used for

organ donations. A retired cop runs one of the farms and secretly tries to humanize the spares. He is found out and is forced to go on the run with five of the clones. Bantam Books will publish the book in May 1997.

DreamWorks has also acquired the film rights to the book *Extraterrestrials: A Field Guide for Earthlings* by Terence Dickson and Adolf Schaller. The film, called *Alien Zoo*, is about a spaceship that crash lands on Earth. The occupants are caged in a zoo for study. Not taking kindly to this, they escape and wreak havoc on the unfortunate locals.

*Little Green Men*, greenlight-ed by Steven Spielberg for DreamWorks, is a live-action, computer-generated comedy about



#### From President to sailor?

yet another group of aliens who can't keep their craft spaceborne, crash land on Earth, and buy a home in the suburbs.

For its animation department, DreamWorks has bought the film rights to the comic book superhero Ash, by Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti. *Ash* tells the story of a firefighter who survives a blazing inferno. He realizes he survived for a purpose and finds out he has been given superpowers by a force from the future. Writing the screenplay is Rand Ravich, who is also adapting the bestselling novel *Nanderthal* by John Darton, which I just finished reading a couple of days ago. Other DW animation projects in the works include *Prince of Egypt*, *Eldorado*, and *Shrek*, a love story about an ogre and the ugliest princess in the world.

The undead are making a comeback and getting paid quite well for it. After a lengthy bidding war, 20th Century Fox paid nearly \$3 million for the film rights to Anne Rice's *The Mummy*. The project was bought for Jim Cameron's Lightstorm Entertainment. It's being touted not as a horror story but as a romance between a woman and



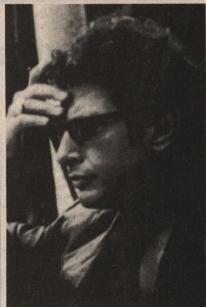
#### A lost soul?

the immortal Egyptian pharaoh, King Ramses. Does the phrase "doomed relationship" mean anything?

More mummy news. Writer-director Michael Almereyda (whose last undead project was last year's vampire film *Nadja*) is now writing the original script based on Bram Stoker's novel *The Mummy*. Again, this story is a little out of kilter, as it doesn't take place in Egypt but in Ireland. The plot revolves around a woman who travels to Ireland with her family. She encounters a mummified druid who she suspects may be one of her ancestors.

Angels and demons fight over a small American town in the film *This Present Darkness*, currently being adapted by Chuck Russell from the novel by Frank Peretti. Russell's last project was directing this summer's *Eraser*. New Line Cinema has bought *Lost Souls* for an undisclosed high six-figure amount, with Meg Ryan to star and produce. Ryan will play a devout woman who must convince a prosecutor that he is a pawn in the Devil's plan to walk the Earth in human form.

(A small aside: Meg Ryan might be interested in the fact that three years ago, mathemati-



#### A slow learner ...

cian Robert Faid of Greenville, South Carolina, was awarded the Ig Nobel prize for calculating the exact odds — 8,606,091,751,822:1 — that *Gorbachev* was the Antichrist. The Ig Nobels are awarded by the *Annals of Improbable Research* to those people whose recent research "cannot or should not be reproduced.")

A sexy Jesuit priest with a knack for exorcisms is the theme of the book *Dark Debts* by Karen Hall, currently in the pipeline at Paramount.

The 1962 cult film *Carnival of Souls* is being remade at the hands of Wes Craven and writer-director Adam Grossman, who just finished directing the sequel to Stephen King's *Sometimes They Come Back*.

*The Eighth Deadly Sin*, currently in development, has been described by those involved as "Rosemary's Baby for the '90s."

Everything big and slimy that lives in the sea and wants to eat your face is hot news in the movies. *Red Harpoon* is one of these *don't-go-in-the-water* movies. The grotesque unfortunate in the film is a mysterious half-human monster that terrorizes a Russian fishing ship.



Set for a summer 1997 release is *Deep Rising*. This time it's a gang of thieves aboard a luxury cruise liner who find the ship sans passengers but with a killer creature just waiting to get hold of various body parts.

Keeping with our underwater theme, Michael Crichton's next novel-to-screen adaptation will be *Sphere*, tentatively due to start filming this fall. *Sphere* is about a secret underwater mission to explore an alien spaceship. In fact, the spaceship is an American ship returned through time surrounded by an alien sphere.

Crichton's *Jurassic Park* sequel (*The Lost World*) is now in preproduction with a likely filming date of September. Cast-wise, Jeff Goldblum will reprise his role as the scientist who doesn't seem to learn from his mistakes. In talks for the lead opposite Goldblum is Julianne Moore. (The profits made from such a film are negligible compared to the already pre-sold merchandising. Profits in that area from *The Lost World* are expected to exceed the \$1 billion made from *Jurassic Park* by 25 percent.)

There seems to be an unconscious desire by the studios to turn every Stephen King book, novella, and short story into a

film. This time it's the short story "The Night Flyer" and the novella "Apt Pupil," neither of which King will adapt.

#### Comic-to-Screen News

Since the use of comic books as a source for upcoming features shows no sign of abating, I've decided to put this continuing news in its own section. Dark Horse Comics and its subsidiary, Dark Horse Entertainment, are continuing to make films in the \$10-40 million range based on their properties. In conjunction with Touchstone Pictures, Dark Horse Entertainment will make *Black Cross*, with former L.A. Raiders player Howie Long in the lead. The project is a futuristic western, with Long battling mercenary members of the military who like to hunt innocent people for sport. Directing *Black Cross* is Russell Mulcahy, whose credits include *The Shadow* and *Highlander*. Another DH film is *Roaring Silence* (the comic has yet to be released). Again set in the future, this one follows an outlaw rock band as they save America from tyranny. The Andrew Vachss comic *Cross* (not to be confused with *Black Cross*) has been optioned by New Line Cinema. Vachss and co-author James Colbert have already completed the screenplay.



Happiness

Image co-founders Todd McFarlane and Rob Liefeld both have deals in the works with New Line Cinema. First up is McFarlane's *Spawn*, budgeted at a healthy \$40 million. The character of *Spawn* will be played by Michael Jai White, who recently starred in the HBO movie *Tyson*. HBO is also planning an animated *Spawn* series, set to debut sometime in 1997. Rob Liefeld's angel-turned-superheroine, *Avengelyne*, will be the fourth film from New Line. (Also in production are the Marvel comic hero *Blade* and *The Revenge of the Mask*, with Jim Carrey.)

#### Short Takes

Disney has inked a deal to turn the popular anime series *Space Battleship Yamato* (aka *Star Blazers*) into a live-action feature film.

Tommy Lee Jones is in final negotiations for a \$10-million payday for the Fox 2000 film *Volcano*.

Small-town America is a hotbed of disaster. This time a plague ravages the unlucky town in the upcoming *Instinct*.

Although casting is in the early stages, *Mortal Combat Annihilation* is set to start filming late summer for a release next year.

Terry Gilliam is in talks with Paramount to direct *Defective Detective*, a dark fairy tale he



Too much SmorgasBorg



Attack of the Martian bubble-gum cards in December

originally developed at the studio before making *12 Monkeys*.

Disney is in development on a science fiction version of *Treasure Island*. Tentatively called *Treasure Planet*, the full-length animated feature will be in theaters in the year 2000.

Third time lucky for *King Kong*? Universal hopes so for their big special-effects-licensing-theme-park version. No start date has been announced at press time.

Brendan Fraser will play the lead role in the live action version of the Tarzan spoof *George of the Jungle*.

Reworking Dante's *Inferno* is the basis of *Inferno City*. The story concerns an inmate doing time for a crime he did not commit. The prison itself has many levels containing many different types of criminals. The hero has to travel these levels in order to track down a serial murderer. The producers are already looking into the video game market.

#### Television:

Showtime has ordered 22 episodes of a new half-hour anthology series called *The Hunger*. One of the scripts already written for the series is Harlan Ellison's adaptation of his own short story "The Face of

Helene Bournouv." No bias here, but I expect you all to watch! You will be quizzed next issue.

The television development rights to the Schwarzenegger hit *Total Recall* have been sold to DSL Entertainment for \$1.2 million. The deal includes telepic, series, and spinoff rights, as well as those for pay TV, cable, and satellite.

Set for fall 1997 is the half-hour, 3-D series *Donkey Kong Country*. So far, 26 episodes have been ordered for the show based on the successful video game.

A live-action *Conan the Adventurer* series (retitled from *Conan the Barbarian* to reflect a kinder, gentler Conan) will debut in early 1997. So far, the series has a 22-episode commitment.

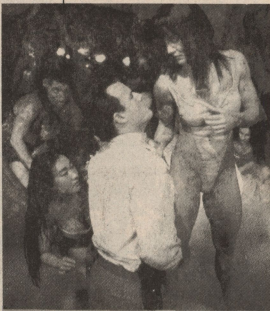
A new live-action, syndicated series, *Tarzan — The Epic Adventures*, is also in production. Cast in the lead is Joe Lara, who previously played Tarzan in the 1989 television movie *Tarzan in Manhattan*.

DreamWorks is currently working on two new television

pilots. The first is *SICOP* (short for Scientific Inquiries into Celestial and Occult Phenomena); it's about the son of a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper reporter who gets a job at a tabloid rag. Teaming with a female photographer, they investigate the unexplainable. The second project is *Treasure Quest*. It's in the same vein as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: a treasure-hunting father, an archaeologist son, and a socialite daughter try to find missing treasure. The series will feature real missing treasure stories.

#### And finally:

The Walt Disney Company, which recently came under attack from religious organizations for its policies toward gays, responded with all the courage of a mouse and appointed a Catholic priest to its board. Disney denied the appointment was meant to appease such organizations as the Southern Baptist Convention which passed a resolution criticizing the company for being too friendly toward gays. It was all just a coincidence. Believe it or not. *Independence Day*... \$265 million... and counting. □



Trouble for Tarzan's friends ...



# Say Hello to Mark

**A** *aboriginal SF* welcomes **Mark L. Olson**, who will be writing the book review column "From the Bookshelf," now that **Janice M. Eisen** has stepped down.

Olson has a Ph.D. in theoretical chemistry and works as a software engineer in Massachusetts, designing instrumentation for research and the chemical industry. He is 49 years old,



Spencer Luster

has been reading SF since he was about 10, and he and his wife **Priscilla** have about 7,000 SF books, of which he's read at least half.

He has been active in fandom for 30 years and chaired Noreason 3, the 1989 World SF convention in Boston. He says he has no interest whatsoever in writing SF, but has edited or co-edited four hardbound collections published by NESFA Press.

Outside of SF, his interests include the sciences, particularly astronomy, and history.

For those of you curious about his taste in books, here are some hints: While he likes "good SF" of any sort,



Jael

Aborigines

he prefers hard SF to the softer varieties, and much prefers schlock Space Opera to schlock fantasy.

He says he is "not terribly fond of stories which emphasize technique or style to the exclusion of consistency or plot, though I have a deplorable taste for R.A. Lafferty. (If something's got to be blown out of proportion, I'd prefer it to plot.)"



Jon Foster

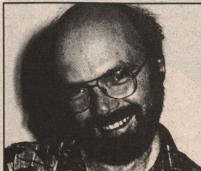
He is also very fond of alternate histories.

Glad to have you aboard, Mark.

"Key Bored: A Tale from the Writer's Block" by **Spencer Luster**, is a detective story from a point of view I'm willing to bet you've never read before. Let's just say Luster had a lot of input from his computer.

"Key Bored" is the first professional sale for the self-described "brilliant and humble optical design engineer."

Luster (yes, that is his real name) is working on the second draft of an SF novel and has started a mainstream novel. He has a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter named **Jamie**, and



Robert Hood

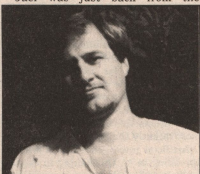
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recently discovered that "she's a better storyteller than I am."

"Key Bored" is illustrated by **Jael**. When I last checked with her, she was on the phone with her 10-year-old granddaughter, **Kaytlynn**, listening to a story Kaytlynn wrote which won a prize. Jael, you may recall, is a Harley fan and confides that her 12 grandchildren don't know about her tattoo.

Jael was just back from the



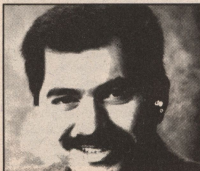
David LeClerc

WorldCon, which she thoroughly enjoyed, but was "still on California time" when I spoke to her. She is currently doing a cover for *Asimov's* and starting a new children's series for Scholastic.

In a society where people don't necessarily occupy the body they were born into, solving murders becomes a bit trickier, as we find out in "Cold Storage" by **A. Jon Wallace**.

Wallace says he has always written stories, just never seriously until recently. He made his first sale to *Aurealis* in 1992, and has a fantasy

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Alan Gutierrez

73



**James S. Dorr**

epic and high-tech SF novel completed.

Wallace is an orderly in a hospital in Australia and is married to Julie, a registered nurse. His creative abilities led him to co-write, co-direct, and appear in a comedy revue for the hospital, as well as write and direct a 20-minute movie for the show. His pet loves include good music and stupid action movies.

"Cold Storage" is illustrated by **Jon Foster**, who recently did a comic book called *Species* for Dark Horse, an adaptation of the movie by that name. He is also doing some gaming cards for Iron Crown Enterprises and some illustrations for *Science Fiction Age*, most recently the Sept. '96 issue.

Artificial intelligence has a way of spreading in "A Quickening in Stone" by **Robert Hood**.

Hood is another author who hails from Down Under. He got his professional writing start by winning a national short story competition in 1975. Some of his recent works include a horror collection called *Primal Etiquette* and the stories "Openings" in *Terror Australis* and "Sandcrawlers" in *Case Re-opened*. He co-edited an anthology of cross-genre crime stories by Australians called *Crosstown Traffic*.

"A Quickening" is illustrated by **David LeClerc**. When I spoke to him he was still getting settled in Ohio after his second move in a few months. The first time he moved, from Massachusetts to Akron, he landed in a city



**Allison Fiona Hershey**



**Della Marshall Turner**

neighborhood "that wasn't much fun." LeClerc has been doing historical illustration and some SF, using the pencil medium, while also working full time in the graphic design field.

The character we meet in "Slabtown" by **Robert A. Metzger** finds himself caught between artificial dreams and real-life nightmares. Metzger is the author of the novel *Quadworld* and a dozen stories that have appeared in *Aboriginal*, most recently "Tin Tear" (*Aboriginal Spring '94*). He also writes our "What If? Science" column.

Metzger is a research engineer and consultant with a Ph.D. in semiconductor physics. When I spoke to him he had several stories making the rounds, about 100 pages of a new book written, and a new science column geared to SF writers in the *SFWA Bulletin* called "State of the Art."

As a longtime fan of Bob's gonzo SF who is always looking forward to the next installment of his warped and engrossing psychological horror, my question is: WHERE DOES HE COME UP WITH THIS STUFF?

He's "just mentally disturbed," Metzger tells me. But, I say, he appears to lead a normal life. "My philosophy is that it's the people who appear really straight and legitimate, those are the ones you really have to watch out for. Writing (these stories) is one of the ways to bend myself, so I don't snap."

"Slabtown" is illustrated by **Alan Gutierrez**, who said his illustration



**Cortney Skinner**



**Morgan Hua**

came to him as an image that stuck in his mind. When I spoke to him he had just finished a job for Iron Crown Enterprises, a box cover for "War of the Grubs." He had also just returned from being guest of honor at CopperCon in Scottsdale, Arizona. Gutierrez says things are finally settling down for him after a taxing year in which he had a house built, moved his family, and was swamped with work.

The domestic appliances are having a bad day in "Toast." Author **James S. Dorr** has written poems ("Elemental Vamp" and "Were-being Split Personality Blues") for *Aboriginal*, and his work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines. Three of his works are due out in anthologies at the end of this year. He has a story in *Darksid: Horror for the Next Millenium* being published in a collectors edition by Darksid Press and a story in the *Gothic Ghosts* anthology for Tor Books. He also has a story-length poem in the White Wolf anthology called *Pawn of Chaos*, a collection based on the Eternal Champion stories of **Michael Moorcock**.

"Toast" is illustrated by **Allison Fiona Hershey**, who spoke to me, briefly, after returning from England and Scotland to visit her recuperating Dad in the hospital. Hershey had been in Britain for two months and was going back to the southern part of England for three more. She says she



**Carol Heyer**





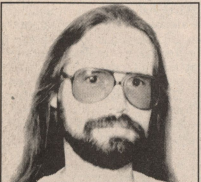
D. G. Grace

worked two jobs for three years to be able to take this trip. So far she is having a great time. Her goal is art research, and to be able to get enough of a feel for London to do a story or two. She has already made a few connections with SF fans over there, and mentioned a promising new British television series that had just premiered called *Neverwhere*.

In "The Afterlife" by **Delia Marshall Turner**, people faced with immortality go to extremes to get their kicks.

This is Turner's first professional fiction sale. She recently completed her Ph.D. in education and teaches science and computers to elementary school kids. Turner is also a nationally competitive sabre fencer. She says that's what comes from being "addicted to high-intensity hobbies."

"The Afterlife" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who has been doing a number of Hobbit cards for Iron Crown Enterprises' "Middle Earth" gaming deck. He was also in the middle of some fascinating research for a painting he is doing based on archaeological remains of real Amazons. He said back in the 1950s, a Russian archaeologist digging near the Black Sea unearthed grave mounds containing skeletons in scale armor, surrounded by weapons. They were presumed to be men, but then someone looked into the gender and discovered they were women. These may be the Amazons of legend who



Clyde Duensing, III

Aborigines

roamed a large region during the fourth through second centuries B.C. Skinner, as usual, wants his artistic recreations to be as authentic as possible, and this project has him intrigued.

The brink of annihilation comes with creative possibilities in "Flashed Shadows" by **Morgan Hua**.

This is Hua's first professional sale. He started writing seriously after taking a writing class at Berkeley several years ago, and then attended Clarion West in 1993. His job has him writing software about 70 hours a week, but he has managed to pen a few more short stories that are awaiting publication.

He lists his favorite hobbies as racquet ball and "making obnoxious comments at bad movies."

"Flashed Shadows" is illustrated by **Carol Heyer**. Heyer's *Scrooge* came out last Christmas from Ideal Children's Books, and she just finished *Sleeping Beauty*, due out this Christmas. Carol loves the fairy tales, but as always, she is doing a little bit of everything: *Magic* collector cards for Wizards of the Coast, illustrations for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine, some mystery novel covers, some young adult novel covers for Disney's Hyperion publishing company, even CD-ROM covers.

The protagonist in "Just Like Moses," by **D.G. Grace**, is not above stirring up some insurrection for his own political gain.

Grace made his professional fiction debut in *Aboriginal* ("The Other Lesson of Phaedrus," *Aboriginal* 43-44) and his published works since then have included a modern fairy tale called "Four Tales of the Stone" which was published in the first issue of the literary magazine *Timberline*. Grace is married to artist **Dory Grace**, and the two of them are very active in the Society for Creative Anachronism.

"Just Like Moses" is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing, III**. When I spoke to him he had just finished ten paintings in ten weeks and collected a nice bonus for finishing ahead of deadline. He was also working on putting together a video trailer for his computer 3D animation work.

The assassin of "On a Distant Wire" by **Martin Lambert**, could put James Bond to shame, but I don't think Bond would want his job. Lambert hails from the U.K., has a Ph.D. from Oxford University, and this year founded Breaker Technologies Ltd., to develop licensing software for electronic publishers on the Internet.

"On a Distant Wire" will be his first



Mary Soon Lee

professional sale, with the added bonus that **Jerry Pournelle** has bought the serial rights to the story for one of his *There Will be War* anthologies. Lambert says his current project, a children's novel about elves, goblins and the Internet, is on hold until he makes his millions in the software business.

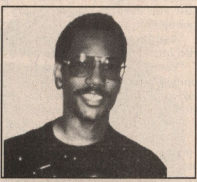
"On a Distant Wire" is illustrated by **Jon Foster**.

In "Silent in the Cities" by **Mary Soon Lee**, a young woman is restless in her urban paradise.

Lee is another U.K. native, reared in London, but she has lived in the U.S. for five years now. She has sold over 30 short stories, including "Ebb Tide" in *F&SF*, May 1995, and "The Tinkerbell Theory" in *Interzone*, December 1995.

Lee runs the Pittsburgh Worldwrights, a speculative fiction workshop. She has degrees in mathematics, computer science and aerospace and is a computer consultant for an artificial intelligence company.

**N. Taylor Blanchard** illustrated "Silent in the Cities." When I spoke to him he was just back from WorldCon in L.A., where he had a great time. He said the weather was fabulous and he did well at the art show, selling two-thirds of the paintings he brought with him (many of them in the last half hour of the show!). Afterwards he went hiking in Joshua Tree National Park. □



N. Taylor Blanchard

# Just Like Moses

By D. G. Grace

Art by Clyde Duensing, III

The baseball bat struck the boy's chin with a hollow *crack*, trailing a thin arc of blood in the follow-through. The boy collapsed, elbows and head thumping on the plastic flooring. The crowd of children cheered.

That image — blood and bat and sound — would fill my dreams all through my first night on Mars.

We had just reached the high school. Corporal Bricker and her partner, a huge brick of a man named Jack, jogged from the squad car to the amassed crowd of teenagers. I scurried to catch them, riding Bricker's wake as she waded through the rainbow-dyed throng. Back in L.A. skin dyes had been a short-lived fad, popular only in a few musical subcult bars a couple of years back. Here, all the teenagers seemed to have discovered skin dyes as the newest way to look different just like everyone else.

"It's a bug," shouted a pink-and-green-faced girl with copper hair. "Ol' Straight Nate caught a bug pushin' slams!"

At the eye of the turmoil stood a muscular man in gym shorts holding a bat high over one shoulder. At his feet, a teenage boy was pushing himself up from the slick surface. The boy was shaking, and blood glistened on his face and hair.

With suddenly bulging forearms and an animal grunt, the man swung the bat.

"Freeze!" Bricker shouted, too late.

And then the blow: all my prejudices concerning androids exploded with that *crack*.

As the cheer was dying, Bricker drew her weapon, careful to point it straight in the air. "Drop the bat, teach. All you kids, get to your classes. Show's over."

The kids awwwed and cussed. A few began to drift toward the school's doors; most just shuffled back a few meters.

The gym teacher dropped the bat and turned a shaking finger on the beaten child on the pavement. "This damn lemon" — "damn" was apparently the most vile word in his vocabulary — "was peddling slammers in the boys' locker room."

"And his prices were outrageous!" shouted a boy with blue-dyed hands and a silver face. Laughter.

"Yeah?" Bricker ignored the kids, directing her comments at the teacher. "Well, I understand your anger, sir, but how the hell are we supposed to find out where he's getting the stuff if you crush his AI?"

The teacher pouted and looked at his feet.

A woman in a brown suit (principal, I think) and a man in a security uniform came through the crowd and started shouting orders to disperse. Most left, but some — the most brightly dyed and the undyed

radicals — just moved off a few dozen meters and gathered in groups to chat, toss candy, and pretend not to watch what the cops were doing.

Jack knelt and helped the boy to a sitting position. "That true, squeak?" Bricker asked the boy. "You dealing slam-candy?"

The boy nodded, his bloody brown hair falling in his black-and-white (and now red) dyed face.

"Let's see the tongue," said the corporal.

He stuck out his tongue to show his registry tattoo.

"Do you know who your supplier is, squeak?" Bricker asked, as Jack transcribed the boy's number.

The boy shook his head.

She sighed. "Didn't think so. Well, come on, Jack. Looks like one for forensics."

Jack nodded and drew his pistol, a long-barrelled white plastic model that looked more like a toy than a law-enforcement weapon. Without so much as a change in expression, Jack shot the android in the heart. A white plastic dart the size of a pencil punctured his chest, and the android boy fell over. His head went *clonk* on the plastic surface, and a slurry of blood and saliva dribbled from his lips. The spectators cheered and applauded. My vision blurred, and my heart dropped into my stomach. I was too stunned to move, to breathe. Jack holstered the pistol and drew a large folding knife from a small case on his belt. I knew I would throw up if I watched, but I couldn't take my eyes away. Jack knelt next to the boy and lifted his head by the hair. Bricker intervened, motioning for me to follow her back to the squad car.

Back at the car she said, "You looked a bit too green to be watching Jack pull brain chips. Guess you boys in the DA's office don't see much blood — even bug blood. Don't say I never did you any favors, Earthman."

The car hummed, and we rolled down the red plastic streets at a peppy 30 kph toward the blue section of town. With its sealed environment, Aresport has never allowed the import of internal combustion engines. All the vehicles are electric, which tends to make everything a lot cleaner than in an Earth city — at least everything above head level. Unfortunately, most of the streets, walks, and buildings are poly. Though brightly colored, the streets tend to look frayed and fuzzy where the traffic is heaviest. The equally colorful buildings tend to pick up a lot of oily dirt from human hands at about waist-to-shoulder level. As a result, on closer inspection, Aresport — the artificially illuminated, iris-





hued, silver-domed city of the future — looks quite a bit like a huge jumble of old Tupperware.

*Crack.* And the thin arc of blood again.

As we navigated the rainbow suburbs, I recalled my words to Captain Smith when I'd arrived that morning: "We understand you've had some trouble with androids involved in illegal activities, Captain." Silly lawyer: I thought I was empathizing.

The captain chuckled and sat one butt-cheek down on the corner of his desk. "Yes and no." Somehow, that was the sort of answer I expected from that smiling brown face: non-committal but congenial. Smith's slick black hair and brown almond eyes looked Third World enough to be sympathetic, but his name and crisp gray suit were strictly Puritan work ethic. "We're always finding androids involved in criminal activities, but that's to be expected. Androids are sold for the express purpose of doing jobs humans would rather not do." He gestured through one of the Plexiglas half-windows surrounding his office. On the other side a crew of blank-faced workers was tearing down a wall for some sort of remodeling. If Smith hadn't pointed them out, I would have thought them human laborers. "Unfortunately, that includes a few jobs humans are not *supposed* to do: theft, drug trafficking, extortion. Criminal androids definitely do not cause any problems for law enforcement, though. Personally, I wouldn't want it any other way. They're far more cooperative — far less dangerous than human criminals."

I nodded, feigning a sip from the coffee cup one of his officers had given me (only an idiot drinks the coffee in a police station, and this crap was probably synthetic anyway). Smith was drinking from a tube of soda he'd purchased from a vending machine.

"Of course," Smith said, standing to a height just a centimeter below mine, "we want to cooperate with you boys from Earth. I'm sure the prospect of your streets filling with artificial people is quite unnerving to some of the civilians. I suppose the best way to learn really *is* first hand experience."

"That's what we're hoping," I said, trying to mirror that frat-brother smile of his.

He opened the door. "So let's go meet your ride."

My ride turned out to be Corporal Judith Bricker. She had one of those don't-get-smart-with-me faces you see on hardened inner-city cops and highway patrolmen: deep-set eyes, a straight-edge of thick black eyebrows, and a jawbone that looked like it was constructed of old reliable high-carbon steel. Her brown hair hung straight down from her cap, and her body seemed to conform to the uniform more than vice versa. I couldn't imagine her out of uniform. I wanted to ask her to tell me all her horror stories about androids, but her stiffly closed mouth suggested she intended to leave it that way.

That was fine. Whether they told me what I wanted to hear or I eventually saw it for myself, either way I'd be armed with exactly the knowledge I needed to make me Earth's first line of defense against the coming android invasion. When they legalized android labor in L.A. next month, I'd be

the first to cry foul. I'd have experience; I'd be in the know; I'd have seen the true nature of these soulless imitation people. Right?

*Crack.* Wrong. All my plans shattered in the stroke of a baseball bat.

"Let's swing by Carfax," Bricker said, bringing me back to the present.

"Right," Jack nodded: blocky jaw set, eyes straight ahead, no smile, broad hands firm on the controls.

"You want bugs," Bricker nodded, "you get bugs."

According to my research back in L.A., "bugs," like most derisive terms applied to androids, was a holdover from the early models. The original androids had had reflective eyes, badly engineered voice boxes, and yellow skin. Androids, therefore, were "bugs," "squeaks," or "lemons." Of course, all of the problems that prompted the names had been overcome.

Some road work caused a detour on our route to Carfax. A sewer line had broken at the corner of 15th and Barsoom, and an emergency crew had cordoned off part of the intersection. When I saw two of the workers pull back a two-hundred-kilo sheet of poly with their bare hands while a lumpy stream of sewage rushed across their chests and into their faces, I didn't need the curses of passing motorists to tell me they were artificial.

The modern android is a marvel of bioengineering, an artificially grown, ultra-healthy human body with only one inorganic part: the brain. Aside from the AI (and a few missing procreative organs), androids are morphologically human. The only way to tell an android from a human — short of an autopsy — is to check for the registry tattoos on tongue and chest. Oh, and you can ask. Androids are all factory-programmed to disclose their nature whenever questioned.

"This is Carfax Avenue," Jack said in a low thrum.

Prostitutes lined the Carfax sidewalks, just like on any of a hundred strips in L.A. back home — except that the pros on Earth were all human. The lace- and cellophane-wrapped "women" on Carfax strutted on typical spike heels, hips wrapped in tight shorts or short skirts. Some were skin-dyed silver or gold. All of their blouses opened wide down to the waist. Here, though, I was not sure whether they were showing off cleavage or displaying their neon tattoos.

"Excuse me, Corporal," I asked, "are there any human prostitutes in Aresport?"

She laughed, and her eyebrows actually broke their rigid line for a moment. "What's wrong, Taggart, you allergic to squeak snatch?" Receiving no answer, she stopped chuckling and her brows leveled off. "Yeah, Mr. Assistant DA, there are a few human pros in the city — a dozen maybe. Not as popular, though."

No surprise. The artificials were made-to-order hot stuff: elegant fingers, big boobs, wasp waists, and probably multi-orgasmic and well-lubricated, too. They also, no doubt, would do absolutely any-



thing, anytime, anywhere, with anyone. Pretty tough for a human professional to compete.

White slavery. (*Crack.*)

Okay, so my intentions in coming to Mars had not been exactly pristine. At least, they hadn't been what I'd told my boss — not entirely. My research *would* help the office deal with the administrative ramifications of the impending legalization of android sales in California, but, hey, you have to take care of Number One first. I have goals; I have dreams; I have political aspirations.

*Crack*, rang the bat in my dreams that night. A thin arcing trail of blood separated me from my political aspirations. Threats can't look pathetic.

Throughout the next day, Corporal Bricker translated all the incoming call codes for me: a fight, a runaway, a missing wife, traffic problems. Other than that and ordering lunch at an auto pizza joint, we said nothing to one another. When we got a call to break up a domestic squabble in the late afternoon, I was ready to give up on Day Two. This would be the last call of the day, and androids don't marry, right?

The scene at 443 West Porter quickly revised my opinion. A woman with a bloody mouth and a gruesome shiner was barring the door to her green poly apartment against an angry crowd. I didn't hear much at first, but I did hear the magic words: bug, squeak, lemon.

"Just get out!" the battered woman screamed through spraying spit and tears. "He's mine! You got no right!"

"Come on, lady," shouted a large black man at the front of the crowd. "That plastic-head mother-fucker's gonna kill that kid."

"Break it up, kiddies!" Corporal Bricker shouted. She and Jack walked through the crowd as though it wasn't there. The mob began to unravel. Some of the people grumbled but stood their ground; many stepped aside with pouting faces; about a third just peeled away from the cluster and headed home.

"That bug killed a child," some woman shouted.

"Just about!" said the black lynch-party leader, nodding. "'S' not the first time, either. We're gonna turn off that crazy squeak, cop!"

"You're gonna go home," Corporal Bricker said, walking past him without making eye contact. "We'll handle this. Let's go inside and talk this over, ma'am."

The woman at the door stiffened for a second as though she intended to bar the police. Then she melted, sliding down the door jamb, crying. Corporal Bricker helped her to her feet, and we went in. Jack stood in the doorway for a second to make sure no one followed.



Inside, a dark-haired man in a dirty T-shirt was sitting on a stool against one wall, hands on his thighs. A little girl with a bruised cheek was lying on the couch, apparently asleep. Someone had wrapped a dingy towel around her forehead. A little blood colored the cloth.

Bricker ran to the child across a terrain of toys, CDs, soiled laundry, and dirty dishes. "Jack: ambulance. She's breathing. Concussion. Doesn't seem to be anything broken." Jack nodded and pulled his talyk.

Bricker sat the crying woman down on the couch and said, "Can you tell me what happened here, ma'am?"

The woman buried her face in her hands and sobbed, rattling her thin frame.

Bricker sighed and stepped over to the rigid man in the chair. "Talk, bug. What happened?"

The man in the chair looked up at the corporal with no expression. He spoke softly and slowly. "I was striking Carrie, and her daughter ran into the room. I struck the child inadvertently with the back of my hand when I drew back my arm to strike Carrie. The child fell against the coffee table and was knocked unconscious. A neighbor boy saw the incident through the front window. He screamed and ran off. The crowd arrived shortly after that, and Carrie told me to stay here."

I was confused. "Did he say he was 'striking' this woman? Will programing let him beat his owner?"

"The AI learns to do what's required to fill the job, Taggart," Bricker said out of one side of her mouth. "Now stay out of this." She turned back to the android. "You're some kind of surrogate, right?"

The android nodded. "Emotional and sexual surrogate. Carrie's husband died in an industrial accident."

Jack came over beside his partner. "Ambulance is on the way, Corporal."

"Okay, Jack." She turned back to the crying woman, "So your ex used to beat you, huh? Just couldn't live without those weekly bruises, eh? Lady, you need to see a shrink. Course, I can't do anything about that. You're keeping a dangerous machine here, though; I can do something about that. That child's injury is your fault: reckless endangerment. I ought to run you in." She looked back at Jack. "There's nothing left to investigate here, Jack. We won't even need the chips."

Jack nodded and drew his big toy pistol.

"You leave him *alone!*" Carrie screamed, lunging from her seat.

Bricker caught her by the wrists. "You just sit

down and shut up, or I will run you in!"

The woman screamed, "No!" and struggled with the corporal.

This was my answer. Behold: Moses staying the slaver's whip. God, what an image. I jumped between Jack and the android. "I don't think you should do that, Officer."

"What?" Bricker looked back over her shoulder at me, still struggling with the distraught Carrie. "Ignore him, Jack. He's an Earthy DA. He has no jurisdiction here. Stop being an asshole, Taggart."

I started to protest, but Jack shoved me out of the way and leveled his plastic pistol at the android. I grabbed the muzzle.

"Get the fuck outa there, Earthy!" someone called from the door.

"You cannot perform an execution based on an accidental assault," I said to Jack.

Jack grabbed my wrist with his left hand, still holding the gun level with his right.

"Taggart!" Bricker barked. "I swear I'll put your ass in jail. Now let go of that goddamned gun!"

I turned to argue, and Jack wrenched the gun from my hand. A second later one of those little white spikes was protruding from the android's right eye, a thin red rivulet trickling down the android's face to his T-shirt. He flopped back limply in the chair.

"Cuff the Earthman," Bricker snapped. "We're going back to the station. Let's get out of this 'hood before Loudmouth here starts a riot."

Jack cuffed me and shoved me out the door. A reporter with a vidcam mounted over his right eye had been viewing the whole incident through the window. As we headed for the car, he followed us, begging for a statement.

"They probably got that whole incident on vid, you asshole," the corporal whispered in my ear. "Won't your DA be proud?"

"I hear this gentleman's from Earth," the reporter said, shoving a mike at Bricker. "Was the android his?"

"No comment," said Bricker. Jack, in his usual silence, pushed me toward the squad car.

"How about it, Mr. Earthman?" the reporter asked me as we reached the squad car. "What's this all about? Was the android yours?"

"What it's about," I said, struggling against Jack to keep my ground, "is bugs and squeaks and lemons and plastic-head motherfuckers. It's about androids: the niggers of Mars."

Damn but that felt good. The whole incident rang in my mind with a huge, cheerful crack.

About an hour later Captain Smith uncuffed me in a conference room. An older Asian gentleman in



owl-eye glasses and a blue suit was sitting quietly at the conference table.

"Have a seat, Mr. Taggart," said the captain. I sat.

"This is Mr. Nakiyama, the city attorney. He's here to provide some information and to insure we don't infringe your rights."

I nodded to Mr. Nakiyama and asked the captain, "Then, am I under arrest?"

"No, Mr. Taggart," said the captain, "you're not under arrest."

"Captain Smith is disinclined to press charges in a case such as this one," Nakiyama said in a cottony voice, "mitigated possibly by a lack of familiarity with our laws and in which the potential for an interplanetary misunderstanding is so great."

"I see," I said, nodding. "I'm just a minor em-barrassment. Tell my boss what a bad boy I've been; revoke my visa; deport me. You've probably already contacted L.A."

I paused for three heartbeats and leaned forward for effect. "What I don't know is what you're going to do about these judge-jury-executioner cops you've got running Aresport."

Crack.

Smith's and Nakiyama's eyebrows came up in silent chorus.

I leaned back in my chair, careful not to smile. "Now, you're right, Mr. Nakiyama: I'm not all that familiar with Martian law. Is it SOP for a uniformed officer to execute drug dealers in the field?"

Mr. Nakiyama, eyes a bit wide, turned his gaze on the captain.

Smith looked down and sighed. "Mr. Taggart is, I believe, speaking of a 907 he observed this morning."

Nakiyama made his mouth into an O and adjusted his glasses. "I see. In that case, Mr. Taggart, the answer is 'yes.' You see, androids used in felonies are of use to us only as evidence.

"Since the AI maintains a nearly flawless record of an android's actions, we have no reason to keep the rest of the body. Feeding and housing an android until the owner's trial is not cost-effective. SOP, as you call it, with an android caught committing a felony is to put it out of commission, remove its brain chips for evidence, and have the body dissolved. Your city would eventually destroy an automatic weapon that had been used in a felony, would it not?"

"That's all well and good, Harry," said the captain, tapping the eraser end of his pencil on the table, "but Mr. Taggart is concerned with more than how and why we dispose of androids. Mr. Taggart made a comment to the press comparing our treatment of androids with racism."

"Oh!" said Nakiyama. "Well, Well, I don't know what sort of research you've done on this, Mr. Taggart, but androids are *not* an oppressed people. They are artificial constructs that have no will, no



emotions, and no concerns. Though the body is technically human, androids are no more human than pocket microcomputers."

"And that," I asked, "is an excuse for abusing them? I've seen the way your people treat these non-humans: derisive names, beatings, executions without due process. Just because a being's nervous system is constructed in a laboratory, that gives you the right to cause it pain?"

"They don't feel pain, Mr. Taggart," said Captain Smith. His jaws were beginning to flex. "Their brain chips control how much sensory data they receive. I've seen androids catch fire and calmly ask for a fire extinguisher. Look, they're not people. In this case the old if-it-looks-like-a-duck adage just doesn't apply."

I stood up and paced away from the table. "Christ, Smith, you sound like a nineteenth-century plantation owner. Yes, suh, these nigra bucks are so strong, they don't even feel that ol' whip."

Nakiyama sat down, shaking his head. "Really, Mr. Taggart. I don't think you're listening to the captain at all."

"No, that's okay, Harry," Smith said, smiling. "Mr. Taggart thinks he's got his teeth in a cause. I think I can convince him to drop it, though. You see, Mr. Taggart — I think I said this before — androids do all the things we don't want to do. Well, I guess being the brunt is just another of those nasty little

jobs we humans would rather not do. Calling an android 'bug' is no more cruel than calling your car a 'heap,' and, hell, Taggart, everyone needs to feel superior to something once in a while. In a funny way, you were right: in the old Southern American tradition of the word, androids *are* the niggers of Mars. But — unlike the slaves of that period — *these* niggers really are subhuman."

I made a mental note of that: *these niggers really are subhuman*. I could not believe a public official of Smith's rank would make such a loaded statement. Why is there never a reporter around when you need one?

Smith sighed and tossed his pencil on the table. "Well, this is a waste. We do take *some* precautions, though." He rose and went to the door, stuck his head out into the hall, and called in Bricker and her partner. Bricker sat glaring one of those oh-if-only-I-was-out-of-uniform looks at me. Big Jack looked unconcerned.

"Mr. Taggart," said Captain Smith with a grin. "I want you to see the response we'll give the media when your little speech to that reporter airs on vid this evening. Corporal Bricker, did you injure any androids this week?"

"No, sir." Bricker's scowl took on a confused cast.

"And did you directly *order* any androids destroyed this week, Corporal?"

"No, sir," she answered. "Jack always —"

## Quad World

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"Yes," the captain interrupted. "Jack, you always destroy androids for Corporal Bricker. Why is that, Jack?"

"The destruction of androids used in criminal activities," Jack said, "is my primary function."

I suddenly had a bad feeling about Jack.

"And do you feel any remorse for these criminal androids, Jack?" Smith asked.

"No, sir. I am incapable of remorse."

I'd been had.

"Jack," the captain said, but he was looking at me, "why don't you show Mr. Taggart your tongue?"

*Crack.* Right across my chin.

I knew without looking that Jack's tongue had two rows of orange numbers tattooed across it. The androids did all the dirty jobs the Martians didn't want to do, including executing aberrant androids. They were not only the niggers; they were the bull cops who shot the niggers. It was a closed system.

"I gave the corporal orders," Smith said, "not to let you know you were riding with an android. You seemed, I thought, a bit distrustful of androids, and I was afraid you'd react unfavorably to one wearing a badge. Guess I read you wrong."

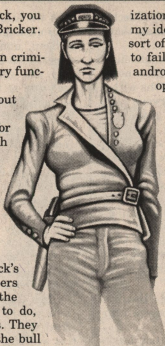
"The Martian vid audience," said Mr. Nakiyama, adjusting his little round glasses, "will no doubt see the entire episode as rather humorous. There you'll be, all righteous and angry, and then they'll show Jack's tongue."

I knew I was blushing — not just by the warmth rising from my collar — Corporal Bricker was smiling with pearly, evil-looking satisfaction.

"Possibly," Nakiyama continued, "we might get that reporter to change his mind about airing your comments. Of course, you would have to retract your earlier statements. We could explain the whole matter away as a misunderstanding."

Until just a minute before, I had been picturing my departure from Mars in rather romantic tones. I could see them leading me down the concourse to the ship, surrounded by angry crowds, vicdams everywhere, reporters fighting to get in their questions, people with banners and signs calling me "bug-lover" and "squeak freak" and screaming, "Earthy, go home!" Such a beautiful piece of history: Moses pursued into the wilderness by the legions of Pharaoh. I knew now there would be no reception. No one was going to show the slightest interest in the crazy liberal from Earth who made a fool of himself in front of everyone by accusing an android of anti-android behavior.

Agreeing to Nakiyama's terms really made my stomach hurt. That evening, as I boarded the ship for home, sans escort, I comforted myself with the real-



ization that no one else would get the drop on my idea. Any politician who tried to stir up this sort of controversy on Earth was surely doomed to fail in exactly the same way. Even without android cops, you need the support of the oppressed to save them. Hell, how can you free a bunch of slaves who don't even know they're slaves? Even Moses couldn't have led his people out of bondage if they didn't want to go.

As I settled into my seat, I was hoping for a quiet, uneventful ride, but you know how these embarrassing little moments go: fate just loves to get in one or two little slaps while your chin is still sore from the bat. The chubby woman they seated beside me was not only talkative, she was a sales representative for Aresport Artificials, the leading Martian android manufacturer. Somehow, she mistook me for a retailer from Earth, and for the first half-hour (it seemed like two or three hours) of the trip, she tried to sell me on her company's wonderful new Bronze Beauties, a spokesmodeling line intended for use as living mannequins. Using her attaché case as a stage, she brought up a series of holograms displaying well-muscled golden brown bodies in everything from G-strings to uniforms. When I finally managed to explain that I'm not in any kind of marketing or retail sales, she started trying to sell me domestic models.

"You'd be amazed what these babies can pick up," she said, bringing up holos of gardeners, maids, cooks, and mechanics at work. "Why, in six months a basic domestic model would be cleaning your house, landscaping your yard, overhauling your car. Beyond basic programming, they learn by doing, from instruction books, and from just plain old down-to-earth being told."

Suddenly I felt dizzy, and it had nothing to do with the ship's acceleration. Did she *learn*? Of course she did, you silly lawyer. *The AI learns to do what's required to fill the job, Taggart.* Android AIs can learn anything, even to beat their owners. If that realization had been a baseball bat, it would have ... well, maybe this had been a fruitful trip after all.

I focused my attention on the round woman's face. "Would I be able to custom order an android?" I asked.

"Oh, sure. Body type, face, hair and skin color, height, weight, basic programming. You name it. And, hey, my distributor swears we'll be selling in LA within a month."

I saw it so clearly: a tall, bronze-skinned android standing at a podium, a face vaguely reminiscent of Malcolm X, shirt open to the waist to display the tattoo on his chest, speaking to a massed crowd of humans and androids and vicdams, talking of slavery and degradation, demanding, "Let my people go!" Just like Moses.

And, of course, he'd need a good lawyer. □



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# On a Distant Wire

## By Martin Lambert

### Art by Jon Foster

Apr. 10th 2008, 10:24 p.m. Reuters AP, Beograd.

A special session of the UN Task force on Counter-Terrorism this evening imposed personal sanctions in absentia against self-styled General Juan Vega de Santos, exiled leader of Peru's Shining Path terrorist organisation.

A dictated press release (see full article on A-4) cited the recent bombing of AeroPeru 450, with the loss of over three hundred lives, as the cause of their extraordinary action.

Santos, 42, whereabouts unknown, has often been linked by UN Intelligence with acts of terrorism in Peru and neighbouring Bolivia.

His Maoist guerrillas are considered the last bastion of revolutionary communism in South America.

The soldier squatted patiently, an almost invisible, slick, and shapeless lump beneath his mottled camouflage cape. Even within the concealing shelter of the undergrowth, the sheets of torrential rain still slapped down upon his head, weighing a deep furrow in his hood from which a shimmering stream of water steadily poured, inches away from his drawn young face. Any observer whose gaze could have penetrated the driving rain, the low-lying ground mist, and the shadow of the hood might have wondered at the distant glaze of his unfocused eyes, the unusual pallor of his skin, and the sweat beading his otherwise dry forehead. For his was not a soldier's face; his forehead was too high, his features cut a shade too fine, too sensitive. But the boneless slump of his body, as he crouched there coolie fashion, told another story, a story of a man long accustomed to physical hardship. And waiting.

Down deep within himself, Teller watched and waited, his stomach knotting with tension. He was picking up a lot of motion behind him, diffuse splotches of color slowly drifting across the back of his retina, crawling into his field of vision as he crouched there, helpless to stop them. They'd been waiting for him! They were even following his own insertion track. And where was CyOps? Why hadn't they warned him? They weren't supposed to let them get this close. In his mind's eye he could clearly see the *guerreros'* rusted machetes crashing blow after blow, hacking a hole straight through the jungle to him. One of the sweat and rain-soaked thugs suddenly paused, shouldered his carbine, took aim right at his ashen face ... No!

Teller blinked rapidly, the splotches evaporating as his senses slowly returned. For the first time he actually heard something, the crash of a falling branch, the splash of booted feet — eerily tinny from his audio amps. With a barely perceptible motion his left hand closed on one of the cold canisters hanging from his belt. He shuddered as the memory of Fawcett's serious voice

washed over him again,

*If they have you, Mike, and there are no options ... Well, do as much damage as you can. 'Cause you know we can't let you go with all that tin in your head. When we deem it necessary we'll have to shut you down, Mike, you know that ... We'll have to shut you down.*

Course, they'd all be listening right now, gathered round his Comm Deck. Fawcett chain smoking, cursing between drags, mad that his toy soldier was in such shit. CyOps all professional, calling up new displays, enumerating contingencies, their voices all hushed and tense — like it was them that were meters away from a bullet in the head. His hand noiselessly slipped the safety off the grenade. Nobody was going to close him down, least of all Fawcett. He stared down hard at his knees and returned to silently mouthing the mantra they'd taught him as the ground cover behind him began to quiver and shake with the noise of a forced passage, punctuated by the dull swish and thunk of a real machete.

The lead *guerrero* burst into view to Teller's left, pausing for a moment to sweep a mass of tangled greenery from his blade. Another couple of steps to the right and he would have tripped over him. Then another mist-cloaked shape loomed close, and another, and then another, strung out at about two-meter intervals, indistinct shapes glimpsed through the streaming foliage. Teller squeezed his eyes shut, wondering sickly whether they could smell the acrid sweat of his fear, or hear the hysterical clamor of his heart. The soaked soldiers cast about, wiping their eyes clear of the spray and slipping in the mud. They stared through him, at him, over him, and beside him. But their rain-slicked carbines never came to rest. No cry went up that the *asesino* was found, no shots crashed out to disturb the steady hissing of the downpour.

CyOps came in just then, crackling with interference from the rain and the multipath over the mountains, almost causing his racing heart to miss a beat.

"Janet 5 here. What's happening? Optical telemetry is down to 6 percent of norm, and we're showing close proximity traces. Chrissake, Mike, open your eyes! Check 'em out. Janet 5 over."

Teller clucked a relieved acknowledgment and forced his eyes open. Hearing from CyOps was good. It meant he was going to make it. Whatever else it was, CyOps was his secret voice that whispered to him to hang on, that a gunshot was on the way; to hit dirt when the napalm came raining down and when to run and where. Out there in the zone CyOps' tinny little voice was his only link with home. And Janet 5, she was special, she wasn't going to let Teller die. She'd promised she'd never shut him down.

A semblance of life returned to his eyes as he watched the last *guerrero* slowly submerge back into the jungle gloom.

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As the proximity traces died away from his peripheral vision, Teller stiffly rose from his cramped hiding place. Stretching carefully, he slipped on his waterlogged pack, stopping momentarily to fumble out a camouflaged set of field glasses. His hands were cold, clumsy and shaking with reaction. Janet 5, looking over his shoulder, came back,

"So, Teller, the boards read clear ... who were your friends?"

Teller shrugged, "I don't know. Santos's men, I suppose. I couldn't see much in the rain. What's it matter?"

"Any obvious augments?"

Teller wiped spray off his face and forced his way closer to the relative shelter of a giant tree trunk, one of the host disappearing into the canopy a dizzying height above him. He considered the question, remembering their heavy-shouldered torsos, their bulging arms, and the half-grin frozen on their blunt, brutal features.

"No, I don't think so. Just big Third-World meat jobs. No sign of systems augment. If they had any tin they would have caught my IR signature for sure ..."

"Primitive models ... huh, Teller?"

Teller smiled wanly, then frowned, nodding slowly. Damn right. They were all primitive, compared to him. CyOps might sneer behind his back, but none of them could survive out here in the zone. And they knew it. Only he could thread himself undetected through any defense to the target. He was the most advanced, most lethal soldier in history. One of a kind.

"Teller, you okay? Your ee-kay lines are doing a little dance."

Teller breathed out, rubbing his warm, wet forehead tiredly. After a moment more he was able to answer, an indistinct murmur to his damp green surroundings, picked up, amplified, and reconstructed by the almost microscopic subvoc amps embedded in his jawbone, before it winged its way up to Big Bird and off to mother.

"Sure ... I'm fine. Guess I don't like being compared to Santos's meat jobs ... that's all."

He thought he heard Janet 5 click her tongue apprehensively.

"C'mon, Teller, you know I was kidding. There's only one Mikey ... okay?"

Teller looked up at the canopy far above him, his eyes slowly filling with the tears of the jungle.

"Yeah ... that's right, only one Mikey."

But he continued to stand there a while, as the electronic hiss of the comfort noise faded to the more immediate din of the steadily falling rain.

The faint rays of the departing sun painted bloody highlights on the soaked fabric of Teller's cape, shifting silently as he wearily pushed his way closer to his destination. Every so often he would pause, pressing the fingertips of his right hand to his temple, before continuing at a slight angle to his previous direction, guided by the magic muttering that he alone could hear. Total darkness had fallen by the time he arrived at an opening in the forest wall. He emerged hesitantly from the riotous growth that had enveloped him for the last three days, a pale ghostly figure half seen in the moonlight, a wraith summoned from the nighttime fog that swirled from the sodden jungle.

Before him a steep muddy hillside, eroded by the continual rains, descended to the banks of a slowly

winding river. The river swirled heavily, choked with the detritus carried down from the forest. Beyond the river burned the lights of Santos's base, a lonely huddle of dull prefabs overlooked by a couple of rickety watchtowers. The camp was only barely visible in the reflected glow from a couple of arclights overlooking the makeshift airstrip. Hardly an airstrip, more an ugly gash in the forest to the immediate left of the encampment. It seemed totally devoid of vegetation, bearing mute witness to the power of Santos's defoliants. Teller carefully settled himself down to wait. As he relaxed, the jungle seemed to rustle a sigh of relief; nobody stirred in the encampment, and the contrasting hush of the jungle night descended. Eventually his chin fell slowly onto his chest and he slept.

Several times during the night CyOps's finger hovered over the crash button, seconds away from shattering his deep sleep, as the proximity traces kicked sporadically, reacting to Santos's patrols as they combed the nearby jungle, searching for the Yankee *asesino*, but searching in vain.

A puff of morning breeze cooled Teller's forehead, ruffling the light hair on his crossed forearms. It signaled the arrival of dawn, but Teller never noticed as the previous day's burning sun began its long climb above the treetops, boiling steam from all that its fierce rays touched. Teller dreamed on, deep in the dark embrace of beta-induced sleep piped in from his cerebral implants. He dreamed of warm steady rain, distant lights, droning aircraft, the familiar thud of a recoiling rifle, the acrid-sweet smell of cordite, and the meaty thunk of a bullet striking home. A secret smile flittered across his careless face as, in his dream, a wonderful tickling warmth began to flood throughout his body, lifting him closer and closer to an unbearably brilliant light.

An hour later the air temperature had broken into the nineties, and sweat was beading on Teller's still relaxed brow. The white noise from his implants, so reminiscent of the sea, suddenly cut out in favor of the quieter hiss of the comfort noise that was the constant companion of his waking hours. His eyelids flickered, and a slow grimace twisted his features as the heat hit him and the sweat in his eyes began to sting. In seconds he was awake, his stomach acidly contracting with the realization that this again was the time. He licked his lips, his wakening face betraying trepidation and anticipation in almost equal measures. Mother came right online, prompted by the reawakened scittering of his traces.

"Rise and shine, soldier boy ... time to get up and get busy. Santos is due in forty minutes. Big Bird is showing his plane clear as day on the main monitor. He's coming directly toward you at low altitude. You know the drill, come back when you're plugged in ..."

Teller sighed and rolled onto his back, reaching over to his pack. The rifle fitted together in seconds, part of a comforting routine that it seemed to Teller he had practiced all his life. Breech, action, stock, barrel, and scope — the precision-machined parts clicked along on their march to unity. When it was complete, Teller hunched over its metallic length, torquing its components down, carefully checking the verniers.

Fawcett's deeper tones suddenly sounded in his amps, hoarse with tension,



"Teller, I want you to play this one cool. It's our biggest Op to date. Do this right, and when you get back you can curl up all alone with your wire and drool away for as long as ..."

"For Christ's sake, Fawcett," cut in Janet 5, "leave him be, he's gonna do it right ..."

"I always do it right," whispered Teller to his rifle as he clipped it into a worn leather sling. He slowly wound the sling's slack about his bicep and forearm and rolled back into a prone position, pressing his feverish forehead to the cool gunmetal.

"Fawcett, one of these days ... You ... Goddamn it, you and your surgeon friends made me the way I am. I didn't join up for the wire. I wanted to be ... I am your perfect goddamn soldier."

CyOps bit their lip.

Reaching over with his right hand, he rotated his left forearm fractionally upward, digging his thumb hard into the side of his elbow. There was a loud, cracking sound and a low moan from Teller as his elbow locked into position.

"You come out here and do this, then, Fawcett. You twisted bastard! I always do it right. Always!"

The steady hiss of the comfort noise never answered. When he brought his right hand back to the trigger and settled into position, the rubber cup of the sight rested naturally against his eye. His motion ceased, all his attention funnelled into the bulging telescopic sight. Minutes passed by.

"C'mon, Teller, please. Fawcett didn't mean it. Plug in ... we're waiting for telemetry. Is there a problem?"

Teller slowly pulled the rifle from his shoulder.

"No problem," he muttered in reply, "and ... Janet, we're still all right, aren't we?"

"We'll always be all right, Mikey ... honest. Now just get it together and plug in, please."

From a recess in the stock he pulled a little disk trailing a fine cable. After peeling a protective backing off the disk he carefully attached it behind his left ear, just under the hairline. A little red LED began to burn on the sight assembly. He returned to his inspection of the camp. CyOps breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Okay, Teller, we have you on the telemetry board. All systems are functional. Just train your club on the target ..."

Teller complied, clucking an acknowledgment as an untidy pile of mud-spattered fuel drums leaped into focus. His magnified gaze slowly panned left, pacing out the distance to the end of the runway. Nearly ten meters, about five or six seconds at a normal walking pace. He grunted his satisfaction. All the time he needed. Janet 5's voice slowed as she peered across her telemetry deck.

"Estimated range is under a click ... we're reading 925 meters. Wind conditions excellent. Steady laminar flow bearing 120 degrees, directly over the river. Air-moisture surprisingly low at sixty-four percent ... and the sun will be directly behind you if Santos arrives on time. D'you copy all this?"

"Yeah ... I copy. Doesn't look so bad. The plane will be taxiing from left to right. I'll have a clear shot all the way from the plane to the nearest cover, which happens



to be a pile of fuel drums. It's feasible."

Janet 5 snorted.

"Copy the gas tanks, make your second and third rounds incendiary. This's your easiest so far. A blind man couldn't miss."

Teller frowned. Easy for her to say. One shot, maybe two, with no sighting rounds, at a distance approaching a click! Teller knew of perhaps three people in the world, including himself, who could make such a shot. Three people that he and CyOps knew about. All heavy augments, lugging loads of tin. But only he could guarantee to make it in the zone.

The sight suddenly emitted a sustained electronic whine as Big Bird relayed on its settings, freshly computed from the telemetry. Teller raised his head to inspect the tiny readouts. He thought for a moment before tapping in a couple of his own corrections. The sight whined again for a second, and Teller's amps went briefly dead. But Janet 5 decided not to say anything. CyOps had witnessed first-hand Teller's intuitive handling of his rifle, and they weren't going to argue. After all, it was Teller out there, wired into his high-tech armory ... and it was Teller's finger on the trigger.

Teller's eyes shot open as the drone of a light aircraft began to swell in his ears. He rolled onto his side and, shading his eyes, squinted up into the giddy blue sky. But he didn't see it until its shadow flitted past, almost touching him. The plane was flying incredibly low, following the river's course. It was a small vectored-thrust job, he didn't recognize the make, little more than a shiny bubble cockpit sprouting stubby little wings and a pair of gimbal-mounted turbofans.

He rolled back to position, snugging the rifle to his shoulder as the plane banked for its return pass. The pilot must have been satisfied with his once-over of the camp, because a spindly undercarriage began to unfold slowly from the fuselage. Teller's sight picture bobbed across the cockpit for a split second, capturing a blurred circle of glinting plexiglass and helmeted figures as the sight whined in its electronic struggle to hold focus. With a suddenly rising howl the plane sat back up on its thrusters and coasted downward toward the runway. A muddy spray swirled away in a widening fan from the approaching plane, plastering a couple of green-clad figures who had run out to greet its arrival, forcing them to hold their forage caps tight to their ducked heads. Then, effortlessly, it was down and turning to taxi back towards the camp.

Teller's heart began to beat a sickening tattoo as he squirmed to get comfortable, causing his sight picture to jump noticeably. Both occupants of the bubble were still goggled, unrecognizable. CyOps was completely silent; even the comfort noise seemed to have receded. Then

the figure in the co-pilot's chair was pulling at the straps, dragging his helmet clear. A bearded, swarthy face, long black hair shot through with gray. Almost a distinguished face ... almost. Teller clucked with excitement.

"I have visual ID of Santos. It's definitely him. Janet, it's time ... Janet?"

Janet 5 was there, sounding a little subdued.

"Roger on visual ID, ready on the coronary board ... just say when, Teller."

Teller's distant telescopic eye bored into Santos as he finished unclipping from his harness, popped the hatch on the bubble and swung to the ground. There he paused, shouting something unheard to the pilot before turning to greet the two soldiers. Teller squeezed his eyes shut. Ready on the coronary board. Don't think about it. Just give the word. This is what he's designed to do.

"Now," he muttered, "Janet, do it now ..."

Immediately Teller's chest heaved in unconscious rebellion as the pounding of his heart stuttered and subsided. His eyes began to bug and he struggled momentarily with an overwhelming desire to gasp for breath. Janet 5 caught him,

*"Coronary hiatus committed, oxygen purge in point five seconds ... mark."*

The craving in Teller's chest quickly eased as multiple tiny sacs, bonded to his major arteries, began to fizz oxygen into his hungry tissues, distributing life while his silent heart rested.

Teller blinked, and his attention returned to his impossibly steady sight picture. He started to relax his long body consciously, lethargically tracking right until he caught up with Santos, gently beginning to take up the trigger's first stage. The crosshairs moved with Santos, slowly wandering over his midriff as the trigger pulled up against the second stage. Teller's stomach sagged against his belt. The pressure grew on the cold, metal trigger. He was hanging in space, balanced on the fragile thrust of finger against trigger, stock against shoulder, rest against palm; floating on a warm bed of beta-blockers thoughtfully infused by CyOps. If he did anything to disturb the steadily building pressure on the trigger he would surely topple and fall ...

Santos staggered under the unseen hammer blow, punched momentarily out of Teller's sight picture by the recoil. When the sight bobbed dizzily back on target, the ground, the plane, and the oil barrels veered crazily past as Teller hunted for Santos. Then he had him, sprawled on his back, his heels feebly pushing him toward the fuel dump, one hand pawing at the damp earth, the other pressed to the dark stain visibly growing on his chest. His face was contorted into a rictus of pain and shock — the sick grimace of a man who knows, but cannot believe, that his time has come to die.

Teller calmly steered the sight upwards, steady in the looming quiet, settling on the nearest oil drum. He relaxed his length again, focusing inward and squeezing under his breath. Again, he wasn't conscious of the trigger breaking. For hardly any reason at all the sight bucked and, before it had settled, Teller simultaneously heard a muffled boom and felt a hot slap of air against his face. He arched his neck up and gaped

downward as an expanding ball of flame drifted across the airstrip, borne on a greasy plume of smoke.

Guerreros boiled out of the encampment, scurrying about randomly like little green ants. Teller returned to the scope, scanning for bodies as he'd been trained. His stomach gave a little heave as a scorched hand flopped into view, palm up.

Santos was dead.

The whole dreadful scene since the oxygen purge had only taken about thirty seconds.

"Teller, we read two rounds fired ... Do we have a confirmed kill? Teller, report status now!"

Teller croaked something unintelligible on empty lungs, gulped some air and repeated, "Con-firmed kill ... definite sighting. Janet, get me out of here! It's like an anthill down

there."

Teller trailed off at the tinny cacophony of whooping and shouting from his amps, quickly drowned out by an excited Janet 5.

"Yes! Copy that kill. Prep for immediate angiotrauma."

Teller found himself hardly able to acknowledge, his mouth was suddenly so dry. On cue his chest lurched under a mighty impact, and he slammed onto his side, curling in mute spasm, his eyes snapping wide open before rolling up out of sight. The sudden clamor of his heart and the surruration of the blood in his arteries were for a moment the loudest noise in his ears, louder even than the amps. Just let him stay conscious. A feverish tingling raced to his extremities, and he gasped out loud, his breathing reflex returning. He clawed the cable from his neck. It spooled quickly back into the stock of the rifle where it had fallen across his thighs. Unlocking his elbow, he painfully twisted to his knees and, his legs shaking violently in reaction, began to crawl slowly backwards into the jungle's cover, his eyes fixed on the chaos below him. Maybe, just maybe, he was going to make it.

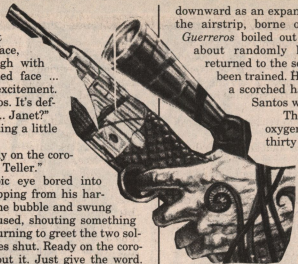
Janet 5 came back.

"Angiotrauma good first time! Howd'ya feel?"

"I'm okay," Teller gasped, "just ... make sure ... get out of here!"

"We show nothing on proximity ... track two-twenty degrees for a hundred meters, then pack the rifle and await extraction plot. No worries, Teller, they don't know what hit 'em."

Teller clucked compliance and forced himself in the allotted direction. He felt like an old man after the angiotrauma, all weak and wobbly on his feet. It never got any easier with practice. After about two hundred difficult steps he crawled into a dense clump of parasitic foliage at the base of a jungle giant and rapidly, with shaking hands, broke down the rifle into its innocent components. It would be worse than useless in the jungle. As soon as he was finished and starting to shudder with unspent adrenaline, Janet 5's directions started coming in, charting the path he would have to take to the extraction point, a grueling five clicks down the valley floor. He wiped his hands free of sweat and stiffly rose, gratefully returning to the anonymous, mist-carpeted maze of the rain forest.





Teller was sick with apprehension by the time he made the bend in the river, his last landmark in the zone. After four hours of crouching shuffle his neck ached with looking over his shoulder. Even his ears were sore with the strain of listening for a cry of discovery.

"Janet, d'you think I'm clear yet? How's it looking? Janet ... talk to me!"

"Okay, Teller, okay ... you're almost clear. What's your current position?"

"I can see the river bend. I'm close, about half a klick south of it, on a small hill."

A long, static-filled pause before Janet 5 came back.

"Copy that. The choppers are on their way, ee-tee-ay sixteen-o-five hours. Let us know when you're wrapped ..."

Teller shuffled tiredly on toward his growing, tantalizing glow of rescue. For Santos he didn't spare a thought. His terrified expression, the bright red blood pulsing from between his fingers, the shock of the explosion; all the images were already assuming a remote, dreamlike quality in Teller's mind, overshadowed by his eagerness to get to safety. His fingers agitatedly rubbed his temple, massaging a dull itch that steadily grew and grew.

With a noisy, hysterical chattering the two Ondoi choppers slid into view, running low over the river. Behind them boiled long vortices of wake and curling dervishes of spray, dragged from the sluggish brown flow. Teller rose to his knees, his heart pounding fiercely with a dawning elation. He hunkered down and began to crawl to the river edge and the narrow strip of exposed bank. Janet 5 was listening through his ears.

"We're picking up choppers on our audio deck ... they ours?"

Teller froze, looking up quickly to check their markings. Not the best time to wave up to a hostile gunner. He clucked a shaky acknowledgement.

"Activating beacon ... now hold your position, Teller."

From Teller's skull a minute inaudible drum began to beat, summoning the angular war birds. Teller saw the lead co-pilot's insect head glance over in his direction, pointing vigorously straight down at him. At some unseen signal both birds' noses came up, as they simultaneously transitioned to hover. The second chopper began to gun its throttle, staccato puffs of dark smoke streaming from its exhaust flumes, blasting the jungle with screams of driven air as it climbed vertically into the sky. Its turrets swiveled with an audible electronic whine, their IR sensors scouring the jungle for bogies. The lead chopper dipped to a low hover and began to sideslip its way towards Teller's position, its bulbous electronic nose casting for his electromagnetic scent.

"Okay, Teller, extraction leader reports all green. No contacts on the board. Move out when ready ... over."

Teller sucked in a deep breath, settled his pack, and pushed his way clear into the blinding sunlight. In a shambling crouch reminiscent of a crab he zigzagged until he was directly under the belly of the lead bird. The blast from its blades was now deafening; it blew stinging spray into his eyes, half blinding him. He squinted up at its lowering dark belly as it dropped towards him, blotting out the sky. He'd really made it out! He tilted his head back and screamed incoherently into the downblast, an unheard, primal howl of triumph

and vindication. Only he could have made the kill; only his tin could have made it look so easy. He sorely wanted to see the envious faces of the CyOps team right now. And he wanted the reward he was due. He needed his wire so bad ... he ached for it.

He was barely aware of the strong arms that reached down and snatched him into the dark interior of the chopper hold. Hard, tanned faces stared at him distastefully as the engine whine rose to a demonic howl. The chopper banked alarmingly as it spun on its axis and fled back down the river, towards home. But Teller was aware of none of this. As soon as he had been dragged aboard the chopper his pale features had slackened and his eyes had filmed. Janet 5 was murmuring reassuringly into his ear, while CyOps trickled a microcurrent deep into Teller's cortex. Pure pleasure coursed into his brain, drowning out all his senses in cresting waves of sexual gratification, lassitude, health, and profound intoxication. A thin bead of saliva trickled from his smiling lips. Janet 5 crooned on.

"You're mommy's boy, Teller. You've been so good ... now everything's going to be all right."

The huge Special Forces sergeant leaned over Teller, checking for a pulse in his pale, skinny forearm. It was racing, actually visible where the wrist artery showed blue. He grimaced and spat out into the wind.

"Goddamn spooks ..."

Apr. 23rd 2008, 4:45 p.m. Reuters AP, Beograd.

Hared Vimenosovic, UN Under-Secretary for Counter-Terrorism, announced the successful sanction of Juan Vega de Santos in a brief press conference one hour ago.

Sr. de Santos was the leader of the Maoist terror organisation known as the Shining Path, whose members have waged a guerrilla war of particular savagery against the Peruvian and Bolivian states for the last three decades.

This brings to twenty-five the number of successful personal sanctions carried out by the UN against sponsors of global terrorism.

To date, the UN Special Forces tasked with applying these sanctions have succeeded in eliminating each sanctioned individual with no attendant loss of life.

UN sources continue to refuse to reveal the nature of the military units deployed against those individuals and reiterate the close to 400% drop in international terrorism since personal sanctions first came into effect in June of 2006. □

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# Silent in the Cities

By Mary Soon Lee

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

The city always cried when I left, and the night of my eighteenth birthday was no exception. Yet in the early evening, the sky was perfectly clear. I was walking beside the River Thames, in a London where people still moved around in metal boxes called cars. "This is boring." Halfheartedly, I kicked a stone along the sidewalk. "Isn't there anywhere different?"

"There are one thousand eighty-three separate environments —"

"No, I mean *different!*" I picked up the stone and hurled it at the low wall separating me from the river.

"Perhaps you would like to go to Cairo —"

"No!" For the first time I realized what was wrong. I glared at the small computer remote hovering in front of me. "I want to get away from *you*."

Inexplicably, the computer hesitated, the yellow eye of the remote blinking rapidly. "That is not possible, Sarah."

I stared at the metallic gray sphere, my anger fading into a general gloom. The whole day had been a disappointment, from the lavishly wrapped birthday presents to the huge chocolate cake, layered with fudge, black cherries, and clotted cream. I hadn't wanted a Picasso, or a Fabergé egg, or any of the other gifts. I hadn't been able to think of any object that I *did* want.

"Sarah," the endlessly patient, endlessly dull voice broke into my self-pity. "You are growing cold. Would you like a coat?"

"No." It was hardly worth asking the next question, but I went through the motions anyway. "Why can't I get away from you?"

"Information access denied." The yellow eye winked almost smugly.

"Then I'll go to Venice, at ten o'clock tonight."

Immediately, the sky darkened. Large gray patches gathered overhead. I didn't watch. The ritual was too familiar, and although the shapes were supposed to resemble clouds, they looked like shadows thrown onto the inside of an upside-down bowl. Which was essentially all that they were, except that the bowl was five kilometers wide and covered the city. The first drops of water splashed my face as I crossed the road.

"London." That was how I referred to the computer, addressing it by the name of whatever city I was in. It had begun as a joke, and grown into a habit. "London, bring back the people."

I moved into the shelter of Embankment Underground station as the people appeared. A businessman dashed up the nearby bridge, black

umbrella raised like a weapon. Two tramps shuffled into the Underground station. I saw the grime coating their hands, smelled the sickening stink of people who haven't washed in weeks. The illusion ended abruptly at their heads. Greasy hair, splattered by rain, clung to the sides of what should have been their faces. But instead of eyes, nose, mouth, there was only a pale blue oval, smooth as an eggshell. No flicker of human awareness, no contemptuous curl of a lip. Just a featureless expanse of milky blue.

"Got any change, luv?" The sound emerged from the nearer tramp, but the blue oval was motionless.

I fumbled in my pocket, dropped a couple of pound coins into his hat, and backed out of the Underground station. I disliked talking to the faceless people, but provided I walked quickly they mostly ignored me. One more anonymous stranger in a city filled with anonymous strangers.

Outside, it was raining hard. I strode up the narrow street to the Strand. Passing the old church, its tall pillars floodlit in the dusk, I crossed to the center of Trafalgar Square. As usual, the square was covered with pigeons.

"Happy birthday, Sarah," two remotes chorused. A flight of pigeons rose into the air, searching for overnight perches. The birds moved apart, spacing themselves into an improbable configuration. I gazed at the straggling letters: S A R A H.

"Thanks," I muttered. One of the pigeons jerked unnaturally, and fell down with a high-pitched mechanical whine.

The evening grayed into night. I sat there in the pouring rain, my hair tangling into a brown sodden mess. The city was beautiful: reflected light puddling in pools, cars with gasoline-burning engines rushing by, their rear ends glowing red. But I was bored, hopelessly bored.

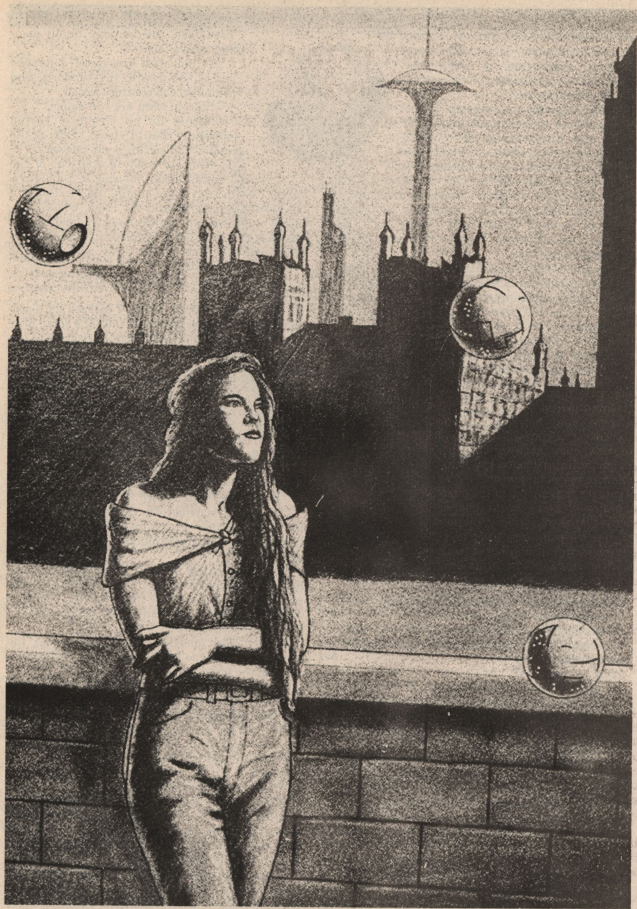
At ten o'clock, the remotes beeped softly. I followed them over to Nelson's column. The stone exterior parted silently, opening into a brightly lit room. I stepped inside, blinking moisture out of my eyes.

"Descending to level twenty-eight."

After a minute, the elevator halted, and I walked out and took the capsule to Venice. The capsule ride was as dull as the rest of the day, fifteen minutes trapped in a windowless pod with two over-anxious remotes.

Finally, the ride ended. I caught the elevator to





the surface and exited into the warmth of an Italian summer night. Frustrated, suddenly desperate to enjoy the remainder of my birthday, I ran across St. Mark's Square.

"Stop!" the remotes shrieked.

I ignored them, running at full speed over a tiny bridge. If it hadn't been for the third remote, I might have missed her. But I saw the remote speeding out of an alleyway, beeping in alarm. I glanced down the alleyway — and saw the child.

She couldn't have been more than two years old, face screwed up in rage. "Won't go!" She stomped an imperious foot at the nursemaid standing beside her.

Her face. I stood transfixed by that puffy, tear-blotched, wonderful face. Her eyes were wide with the most beautiful anger, brown eyes turning to me even as the nursemaid scooped her up and carried her away.

"Wait!" I launched myself after them, barely registering the pale blue oval of the nursemaid's head. They disappeared into a dilapidated building, orange paint flaking from the walls. I reached the door, tugged at the handle, but it didn't budge. I threw myself at it. Wood splintered, knocking the breath out of me, but the door stayed closed.

"Sarah, are you all right?"

Three remotes danced around me as I flung myself at the door again. My left arm struck the wood in a sharp agony. The door cracked, and I grinned.

But two centimeters behind the broken wood was a solid metal sheet.

"Sarah, you cannot get through. The building has been sealed with a titanium alloy shield."

I subsided onto the doorstep, my arm throbbing. "Who is she?"

"Information access denied." Three yellow eyes blinked simultaneously.

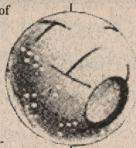
I shut my eyes, and there, in the city of Venice, on the night of my eighteenth birthday, I bawled like an infant.

A hot breeze played against the lemon curtains. Sounds carried through the open window: a scattering of Italian accents, the babble of a party of Japanese tourists, the roar of a passing motorboat.

I think the Japanese tourists woke me. Sitting up in a bed in the Hotel Vaccani, momentarily disoriented, I heard their voices rising in excitement. And then I remembered what had happened. "Venice!" Obediently, a remote descended from its vantage point near the ceiling. "Tell me about the child."

For the second time in as many days, the computer hesitated. The beam of its eye roving across my face.

"Tell me."



"Breakfast," the computer finally managed, "is available —"

"To hell with breakfast!" I jumped out of bed, ran to the windows, and slammed the shutters closed.

"Sarah, what are you doing?"

Lifting up an elegantly carved mahogany chair, I aimed wildly at the remote. "I'm getting some answers."

The remote easily darted out of the way. I swung again, missing it completely.

With considerably more energy than foresight, I chased the remote around the room. Glass ornaments shattered into multicolored fragments. One chair leg broke against a brand new flatscreen display, probably the hotel's pride and joy. The remote survived intact.

"Sarah, if this is so important to you —"

"It is!"

The remote froze. Puzzled, I delayed for a second, and then hurled the chair onto the small gray sphere. The impact jarred through my arms as the remote squealed urgently, maintaining its position while the chair cracked around it. An instant later, the sphere fell to the floor and rolled toward the flatscreen display.

Carefully, I bent down to inspect it. The casing had split open, exposing a complicated mess of miniaturized motors and lime-green sheets of molecular electronics. I smiled triumphantly. It was the first time I'd ever managed to damage the computer.

"Do you feel better now?"

Startled, I watched the flatscreen flicker into life. The computer echoed its question in blue lettering on a cream background. "Do you feel better now?"

"No." Adrenaline ebbed from my system, rationality belatedly returning. Disabling one remote would hardly incapacitate the computer. "Please." The word didn't come easily. "Tell me who she is. Let me see her again."

"Why?" The question wrote itself across the screen in giant blue letters, even as it reverberated from the speakers. I did not answer.

Footsteps creaked up the stairs. Something thudded against the bedroom door. Another thud, and the door gave way. Two of the hotel servants walked in, one dressed in a maid's uniform, one in the messier overall of the kitchen staff. Two blue ovals confronted me across the room. "Why?" they repeated.

"Because," I whispered, "I'm lonely."

The servants stood still. The flatscreen darkened to black. *I'm lonely*. I'd never admitted that before. Yet more than anything else in the world, more than anything else I'd ever wanted, I wanted to see the child again.

The silence stretched unbearably. I prodded the broken remote. Metal and plastic, molecular circuits and clever programming. Nothing more. I



closed my hand around it, hard enough to hurt.

The air conditioning whirred in the background, but I could not hear a single voice. I crossed over to the window. Outside, the people had stopped in the streets, standing neatly, arms by their sides. Water lapped peacefully against the sides of the canal. A scrap of crimson paper flapped in the persistent breeze. No one moved.

"Venice?" I leaned out of the window. "Venice!"

The scrap of paper tore loose and blew into the canal. Nothing else changed. I turned around, staring at the two servants by the door. They made no move to stop me as I went over and brushed my fingers against the milky blue smoothness of their heads.

Shivering, I walked downstairs and out into the dead city.

**F**or hours I wandered the streets, the stones scorching my bare feet, the cotton night-dress sticking to damp skin. Everywhere I went the people stood like so many faceless statues, dumb and unresponsive.

At midday, standing at the border of the city where the vast overhead dome curved down to the ground, I balled my hands into fists and yelled for the hundredth time, "Venice!"

No one answered.

I stared up the bright blue curve of the dome. High above, I saw the flat white blobs of imitation cirrus clouds, but the clouds were in exactly the same position as they had been when I ran outside.

There was a woman standing beside me, a straw hat obscuring most of her head. Trembling, I nerved myself to touch her. I put both hands against the flowered pattern of her dress and pushed hard. "Venice!"

The woman toppled, body rigid, and collapsed stiffly to the ground. Her arms stayed at precisely the same angle to her torso, finishing up a finger's breadth above the sidewalk. Her straw hat slipped loose, revealing the blank horror that substituted for a face.

Terrified, I turned on my heels and ran all the way back to St. Mark's Square. Gasping, calf muscles aching, I reached the patch of stone that hid the entrance to the elevator shaft. Before I could attempt to force it open, the stone slid smoothly apart, and I slipped inside.

"Descending to level thirty-four."

"What happened? Why didn't you answer me? I thought you'd broken down somehow."

The computer said nothing. It said nothing when we arrived at level thirty-four, nothing when I stepped into the waiting capsule, nothing when I



instructed it to go to New York. Yet the capsule accelerated into motion, and I desperately hoped that everything would return to normal. I pictured the constant rush of people in Times Square, willing them to be there. I imagined the dizzying height of the new Empire State Building — four times as tall as the original and prominent even in Manhattan. New York was set in the year 2062, six decades after London and Venice, and I promised myself a tour in the cushioned comfort of a hover-bubble.

The capsule stopped, and I caught the elevator. There was something subtly unfamiliar about the ride up to the surface, a minute change in the lighting, or in the slight hiss that it made. The door opened.

I wasn't at Times Square. I wasn't in New York.

Gleaming steel elevators stretched up to a far distant ceiling, spaced evenly around a circle. They opened onto balcony after balcony of glass-fronted shelves, filled with paper books, microdiscs, and info-sheets. On the bottom level, directly in front of me, was a single computer terminal.

"Where am I?"

A remote floated toward me. "This is the data center, Sarah. Information may be accessed from the control terminal."

Slowly, I walked over and read the entry displayed on the screen:

#### Interstellar Colonization.

The mass-energy relation for transit to Earth-compatible planets prevents the use of manned ships. With journey times of at least one hundred and twenty years, the mass of multi-generational vessels is prohibitive. The first feasible colony ship was designed in the year 2419 and a prototype assembled by 2428. The vessel was equipped with autonomous robots similar to those used in building Subpacifics and other underwater cities.

I skimmed through this, but the words didn't penetrate, didn't answer any of the questions that mattered. "Where —?" my throat was dry. "Where is the child?"

The screen switched to a video image of the brown-eyed, brown-haired girl I had glimpsed yesterday night. I breathed out, captivated, watching her play with a teddy bear identical to the one I'd had as an infant.

Abruptly, the image altered, displaying an older child, perhaps ten years of age. She was thinner than the infant, but she had the same brown hair, the same wide-set eyes. I blinked disbelief

ingly, placed one finger to my own face, touched the identical tilt of the nose. They must be records of myself as I was growing up, but that didn't make any sense. I'd seen the child in Venice. "What ... who ... is she?"

"She is Sarah Morris, Version Eight."

Numbly, I sank onto the floor, head resting on my arms, eyes closed. The child's face filled my mind, her face — *my* face. But I couldn't think of the right questions to ask, couldn't believe that I wouldn't wake up in London to the sound of the computer singing "Happy Birthday."

"Sarah, are you all right?"

I started, suddenly aware that I was painfully stiff. "Is she — are they — real?" Once I began, questions tumbled out of nowhere. "How many of them are there? Why wouldn't you let me meet them? How did this happen?"

The remote beeped, eye flashing as it waited for a chance to answer. "They are real. There are eighteen versions of Sarah currently alive." It hesitated, and I half-expected it to announce that the remaining information was restricted. "I ... did not allow you to meet them, because I did not know how you would react. You are all clones of the original Sarah Morris."

"Clones," I echoed. "But why isn't there anyone else? Is there anyone else?"

"The radiation exposure exceeded predictions. No other DNA samples survived the journey to this planet."

An hour later, my brain was overflowing with information. Six centuries ago, an unmanned colony ship had reached this world and assembled the structures programmed into its data banks. The computer showed me schematics and stress analyses, but I saw the cities of my childhood. I remembered the sun rising over ancient Babylon, the light stroking against the roofs. I remembered spring in twenty-second-century Washington, cherry blossom falling like snow across the troubled streets.

And I listened to the computer telling me about my predecessors, the first six clones who had lived alone, a new one created only when the previous one died. Until I was nine years old, and the computer fashioned my eldest sister.

"Sarah, are you upset?"

I shook my head slowly. "No, but I don't understand why you did it. If the earlier clones lived alone, why are there now eighteen of us?"

"One ... was ... insufficient." The remote sounded nervous, but I knew that must be my imagination. "There was ... a need ... for more."

"What need?"

The remote floated forward, brushing softly against my hand. "Without you, it is silent in the cities."

I looked at it, not understanding.

"Whenever you leave a city, the machines stop. There is no day or night." It touched my hand

again. "Without you, there is no one for me to talk to."

**T**oday, I was in Paris. I wore my feet out walking round the Louvre, burned my tongue on a cup of espresso, and inspected my newest sister, Sarah Tamara Morris, three days old.

In the early evening, I headed back to the Eiffel Tower. Two of my sisters were strolling arm in arm, followed by a string of remotes. They waved me over to join them, but I shook my head. They had each other, and I was content.

I stood under the metal grace of the Eiffel Tower, watching as a man in a silk gown bowed to me. From under his gown, he pulled out a milky blue rose, the exact same color as his head, and presented it to me with a flourish. I took the rose, looked around once more as the sun set in a clear sky, and caught the elevator to New Delhi. □



## Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal* will be a special Christmas issue with three theme stories, including "White Christmas," by Sean Williams, "Loop," by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and "Alone Again in Dweebland," by Patricia Anthony.

It will also feature an interview with Hal Clement, whose Barlennan (from *Mission of Gravity*), sculpted by David Deitrick, will grace the cover.

In addition, we'll have the following stories: "Chromosome Music," by Craig De Lancey, "Lasuta," by Nigel A. Brown, "Skyball," by Eric Brown, "Perfection," by Stuart Palmer, "The Rescue of Lucinda Discal," by Jon C. Picciuolo, "Going with Fergus," by Carol Brown, and "Helping Plants," by David Riley. And, if there is space, "The Interview," by Michael J. Sherrod, and "The Engine of Recall" by Karl Schroeder.



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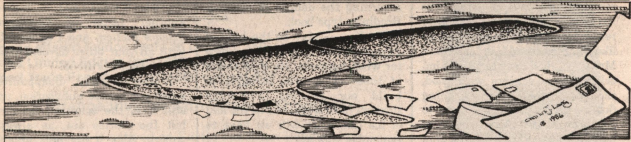
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Dear Charlie,

Darrell Schweitzer's essay in his book review column for your summer '96 issue has prompted me to write and disagree, not with something Darrell said, but with his friend Mr. X. Mr. X allegedly believes that huge sales for his *Star Trek* (etc.) novels will mean high order rates for his non-media-related titles. This may be the case for the first couple of those non-media titles, but pretty

soon sales figures are going to catch up with him.

I had a pal who used to work for Barnes & Noble; she let me look in their inventory computer to see how I and some of my pals were doing. It's true that the inventory list is alphabetized by authors' names, but anyone with half a brain can look at the sales figures and think, "Hmmm — we sold 50 copies of X's *Star Trek*, *The Deadly Duck of Doom*, but we only sold 2 copies of his new book, *The*

*Great Big Whatsis*." My pal, who was no fool, knew that she should not assume that the success of a *Star Trek* novel had anything at all to do with the author who wrote it.

In the bookstores, the media titles are not shelved by author. They are placed in their own special sections. Mr. X's non-media titles will go on the shelves under his name. The audiences for the two sections are mostly going to be separate groups. The media

## A Special Anthology ...

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readers don't give a damn who writes their *X-Files* fix. The other readers, the ones who read books like *Fahrenheit 451*, do care; and Mr. X\_\_\_\_\_ will have to prove himself to those readers with good, thought-provoking, entertaining fiction. He's still going to have to go through the same audience-building rigors the rest of us non-media grunts are going through; and when the discrepancies between his sales figures start to catch up with him, he may find that his job is harder, not easier.

Publishers are also smart enough to realize that a writer's sales figures for a media-related title have nothing to do with his success rate on his own. Let's look at those figures I quoted for that one Barnes & Noble store again: fifty copies of the *Star Trek* book; two copies of the other one. (By the way, while the titles are made up, those figures are based on what I really saw.) When you expand those figures to nationwide sales, the discrepancy looks even worse. What are the publishers thinking when they look at that? "Sheesh! There's no point in letting Mr. X\_\_\_\_\_ write anything but the media stuff." Mr. X\_\_\_\_\_ may be able to pay for fancy braces for his kid, but he's also going to be trapped in an artistically narrow world. For an artist, that's tough.

And finally, I'm not so sure that the media-title market is going to keep expanding. I used to read some of the *Star Trek* novels myself, about ten years ago. I got a bang out of them, they were like popcorn. But I got sick of them, fast. The good writers, like John Vornholt and John Ford, got to be fewer and farther between, and I found that the fact that they were *Star Trek* novels wasn't enough for me. People who love to read want good fiction; and I've noticed that in my local store, the media title section has stopped growing, and is now shrinking again. Let's wait a few years and see what's really happening before we start

mourning the demise of the Ray Bradbury-type book.

Mr. X\_\_\_\_\_ may be the kind of guy who lands on his feet, no matter what happens. He may smirk at those of us who struggle to build our reading audiences through hard work; but at the end of his life, what will we have to remember him by?

*Star Trek: The Deadly Duck of Doom*. Maybe success doesn't have to be yours to be the best revenge.

Sincerely yours,  
Emily Devenport  
Phoenix, AZ

Welcome back, guys. God, I missed you.

I won't name the six fiction mags I read (used to be seven — au revoir, *Amazing*), but *Aboriginal SF* is the best by far. Why? The bottom line is story selection. Print 'em on old grocery bags for all I care, but pick good ones. Whoever decides what stories go into your 'zine (Ryan?) has great taste. Yes, taste — the act is purely subjective. Normally I praise or lambaste the efforts of your contributors in my missives (that will recommence), but this time all the words are for you, the staff of the greatest fiction mag in publication.

You are the balls.

The absolute nonpareil nads.

Never thought I'd hafta actually tell you that, because it seemed obvious, but considering the non-fiscal nature of your pay ... *La*.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

More later,  
J.T. Hughes  
Laurel, MD

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I was THRILLED to receive another issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, and I agree fully with all your other devoted readers — it stands alone.

I was terribly disappointed when you ceased publication, and still miss the beautiful artwork, but the stories are, as always, superb. Alas, I am only able to renew my subscription for another 4 issues at this time (check enclosed).

I certainly hope your mother is recovering well. I work in a hospital and know first-hand how traumatic what you are experiencing can be, and you are all extremely brave to continue the battle to enrich her life.

Thanks for doing whatever it takes to keep this great magazine available for those of us who have need of greater intellectual challenge than *The Enquirer* or *The Star!*

With devoted appreciation,  
Debbie Bell  
Belton, SC

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Issue 47 & 48 (especially McGarry's "Syrinx" and David Hill's "A Bad Case of the Flu"), and hope to have my stories published in future issues of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

I'm glad you managed to overcome the hardships mentioned in your Editor's Notes, and wish you and your staff much success in the future. Thanks for your time and dedication to quality.

Sincerely,  
Ray Curry  
Columbus AFB, MS

## Moving?

If you plan to move between now and December, 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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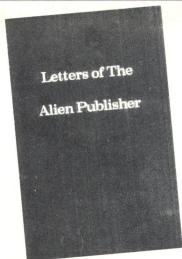
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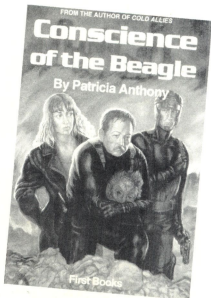
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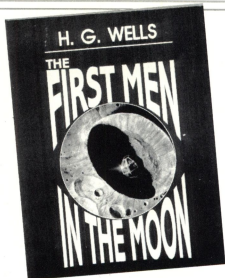
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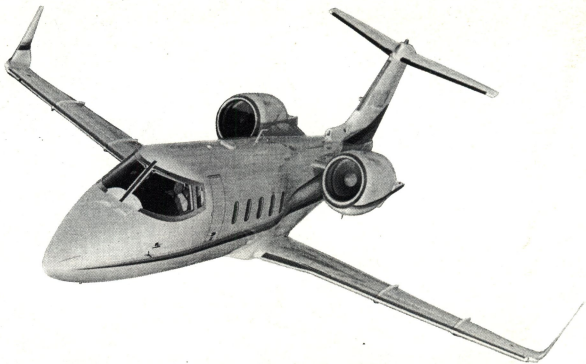
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