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# THE WEIRDMONGER

## D.f. Lewis

I

The air in those parts was so hot, I found it difficult to keep the sensitive layers of my lungs intact; the sweat slipped down the sides of my nose through the sluggish moustache towards the dried out, wrinkled mouth. But, others seemed to revel in the torrid sun for, stretching their limbs from siesta, they crowded into the town square, in a uniform of colourful costumes, and grouped shufflingly around the ad hoc platform already set up by the seedy-looking man standing upon it.

I had been pushed to the front, inadvertently, although that very position had in fact been the ambition of all the onlookers so as to obtain as good a view as was possible in the shimmering mirages of the afternoon. I glanced behind me, rather apprehensive of being pushed too hard against the edge of the stage; and reminded myself, whatever the outcome, that, even beyond death, I would still be able to see the encircling mountain ranges; although escape from these landlocked constraints would also be circumscribed, come hell, death or high water.

The seedy man on the stage now prepared to speak and, let it be said, I feared he could do little more than sow dissention amongst his audience.

If booing were in order, I would certainly have been the cheer-leader. But, take stock,

first, don't jump to conclusions. Listen to what the man has got to say. Let's not stand, before we can fall. And his voice began to drone like the heat:

"I'm the Weirdmonger. I've come to give one of you a Weird, fit to turn your brain upside down. Who'll it be? Never flinch ..."

Someone, who preferred to remain anonymous, plucked my arm into the air, from behind me.

"... You, sir? Well, congratulations. The mountain air has sure done you some good. Join me up here ..."

I was pushed on to the stage, not by any specific conscious action by an anonymous individual, but by the in-built surging of the crowd as one.

The sudden silence revealed that the clocktower had lost its bells.

"Sir, what Weird have I up my sleeve for you, do you suppose?"

I shrugged.

"Well ..." and at this point, the clock had found its voice and tolled the hour of the day "... here be one - you'll marry a scone woman, in the bloom of her youth, and she will fatten you with her delicious bakings ..."

My stomach seemed to feel as it were swelling, but I could see no evidence of this and my trousers did not tighten.

"She will be the delight of your bed ..."
My finer parts grew gross but, again, no

visible sign ... except that the clock had forgot to cease its tolling and beckoned all to early vespers ... and, if I could disbelieve my eyes, my straightened pendulum swung to and fro.

"The scone woman will be seeded with wondrous childer."

My stomach now felt distended into a sack of live ferrets.

"This is a strange and telling Weird, for you, is it not, my dear sir?"

I could only remain silent.

The crowd booed, waved fists, crashed palms against the sides of the stage and, seeing that I would not be delivered of the Weird, chanted in almost perfect unison:

"The lands are locked,
The scone woman's cocked You're the rotten louse,
That manless mouse,
Who creeps and crawls
Along her private halls And that telling sign
Of her deep red wine
Is upon your dandle So off with its handle!"

I was so hot and dazed, unable to follow my own mind's illogicalities, let alone that

did not, in any way, belong to me.

The monger had finished his tale of weird, and its meaning seemed even lost on him. His confidence stammered to a halt. The crowd had left in desultory groups and, intermittently turning round to point at me, wandered into pubs and cafes, that had just put up their shutters for the early evening trade. A couple of oldsters played chess in the shadow of a coloured awning and, for all I knew, had continued to pass their slow moves across the chequered board, like a blessing, for the duration of my whole ordeal.

The monger whispered his last message in

my ears:

"With the scones in his oven, With utter shame above him, It's him I've weirded, With strangeness bearded."

The heat was head over heels, as if yet another notch of its intensity could not be wrung from the day. Wiping my long pendulous nose, I climbed down from the stage and went off to see if my mountainous confinement could be sprung.

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"Wagger Market! Wagger Market! You've come to Wagger Market!"

The call was a familiar one, a truism that

gave reassurance rather than new information.

I turned to my companion to see if she was enjoying herself. It was the first time she'd been to Wagger Market.

"It sure feels high today, with Winter just

around the corner," I commented.

She replied: "I can hardly breathe ..."

With excitement, no doubt. I nodded at her response. The stalls had not long been open and one in particular (bearing over its counter long strands of what looked like human hair, some plaited, some in just great skeins) attracted her to it. She passed her hands through the various colours on show and found a pig-tail that matched her red hat.

"That's a mighty pleasant colour," I

commented.

She did not reply. But she held it up against her cheek-bone, hair and skin enhancing each other.

I bought it for her, the stall-keeper giving me a knowing wink as he returned a lesser

coin in exchange.

Across the sanded track was a solitary stall, late opening it seemed, for a man was just unscrewing the hinges of its shutter.

I called across to him: "Hey! Good man! Have you got me a job for the day - I can help with hanging out whatever long-ends you trade in ..."

The man frowned, evidently displeased at being woken up so early for most of his day's tasks so far must have been accomplished in a state of bleary half-slumber. He opened his eyes wider, cracking the yellow sleep in the almost audibly. Then he saw my companion and smiled.

"No, sir, but for your good lady I might find a few odd jobs ..."

She was by this time hanging the pig-tail from her hat, reaching almost to knee-level, setting off her appearance a treat.

Then, to my consternation, I saw clearly what the man was selling from his stall, for he had begun to hang out long (very long) male members almost reaching the ground from the topmost shelf which he could hardly reach even by standing on tiptoe. The scrotum sacks were piled up against the roof of the shanty stall, and they must have been there yonks for the smell they gave off ...

My companion was by now running her fingers down some of the wares, testing the thickness, pliancy and consistency (no knots meant no diseases).

"Try the tongue on them, Miss, they'll spring up in your mouth a real treat."

She shook her head, indicating that she was already finding it difficult to breathe, without

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stuffing unnecessary items into her mouth. She, I knew, already sucked fizz-froths to staunch the buzzing in her head caused by the unadulterated mountain air.

I reluctantly left her helping the man unload his pony trap of further supplies of flesh hosing, and of a new line of stretched tumours, evidently fresh plucked off the brains of the good as dead, for they were still steaming and dripping as they hung from the front of the counter.

I wandered over to my favourite stall,

where the Weirdmonger held court.

"Roll up! Roll up! I've got carpets to sell rarer than the deepest piles of inner Persia ..."

And he would run his hand down the colourful shrouds that thickly be-tented his stall.

"Give your money, that's all you need and a fair stretch of magic rugging will deck your halls - and the wearing in them will last you more than just one lifetime."

I tossed my last coin in the air - it glinted in the mountain sun, catching his eye towards

me.

"Good sir! Just for that pretty penny, I can wrap you in baggings that are so richly seamed with double tweed - that the Winter I vouch will not penetrate to even the top layers of your flesh ..."

I shivered, for the edge of deepest Winter was surely less than a few hours away. I aimed the precious coin at his saucer but missed, for it rolled under some llama-twined P.E. mats hanging from a trestle beside the stall.

And, quick as mountain lightning, I saw a skinny arm reach out from whatever creature lurked thereunder and snatch the coin before I had the chance to retrieve it.

"Bad luck!" screeched the Weirdmonger. "A wagger's got yer loot!"

I scowled.

I'd forgotten but, as you know, the market is named after such creatures and some say the place literally crawls with them, out of sight most of the time. This was the first time I had actually seen evidence of one. Very few people knew exactly what they looked like, but often I had come across tellsters who rumoured that their tails were longer than the region's snakes (and, as you also know, these can stretch from the top of one mountain to the next).

Legends are strange - especially the true ones.

I shrugged at the Weirdmonger and gave him one of my more pitying looks, in the hope of encouraging his sympathy for my

plight. But by this time, my companion had returned and stood by my side draped in rudery (a fashion that shocks many people, including me).

She had a sparkling coin in her hand which she had apparently earned by helping the previous stall-holder and she held it out to me with a smile. I knew instinctively that she wanted me to buy a wrap-around carpet big enough for both of us in the now imminent Winter ... for the sun was now slowly easing itself behind the mountain top, glinting off the shifting snake scales ... The beginnings of a snow storm could be seen in the upper skies ...

The Weirdmonger smirked, as if he knew whatever carpet he was about to palm off on us would prove to be too threadbare.

The stalls were now quickly shuttering and desultory groups of buyers and sellers alike were wandering off to the cave systems in the south. But not everyone would be admitted to the warmth of the caves - much coinage would be essential to unlock the turnstiles.

Not all the sellers had done enough business to warrant the journey south, so they too crowded around the last stall to close - the Weirdmonger's carpet emporium. One among these was the secondhand-willy stall-holder that my companion had helped, now dragging bundles of his wares through the sand. Perhaps he intended to gnaw the Winter away beneath the carpet he was about to purchase.

But the worse was to come. It has since become a legend.

The Weirdmonger unrolled his many lengths of cross-weave and triple-textured sacking, like streamers at a party. And out of each there leapt strange creatures, sucking hard at the very air we breathed. Their be-whiskered fox faces darted to and fro like a nightmare I once had - and their bodies, not much more than the bones that held them up, arched and creaked in the slow snow ...

Until the visibility hid even the windings of their tails.

"Wagger Market! Wagger Market! You've come to Wagger Market!"

The Spring had arrived later than anyone had hoped. But the mountain air was now a trill in itself. The sun slowly rose back above the mountain top, glinting off the new coils that weaved the sky.

The Weirdmonger had set out his stall, the first one to do so. Not carpets this time, though - he had decided there was more coinage in rudery (despite the experience of

one who was lesser salesman than he).

Most of us who had been left behind to bear through the long Winter had become one with the waggers. A natural process, I suppose. I'm squatting inside one of those sacks of old, wrinkled skin which are piled up behind the long pink tubes hanging from the Weirdmonger's new stall.

I'm wondering if my erstwhile companion still sits in the sack next to me, plaiting, unplaiting her pig-tail to while away the endless Summer.

III

Horror came in two shapes.

The first was at dawn, when the lawns had just been cleared of the darkness by the groundsman. It came bounding across the golf links towards the house like a black dustbin liner, with gnawn meat bones for teeth.

The second was at dusk, when the caretaker's second assistant was black-lining the bowling green, and it came bounding back from the house, its eyes fizzing flames fit for a Guy Fawkes' night.

I lived in that house and had done so since the beginning of my life. Memory fails me now, but I think it all started as a childhood game of searching for the Weirdmonger. My late brothers and sisters, and the servants' kids, had together invented it, but what (or who) they really thought the Weirdmonger was I never knew. They did not bother to tell me.

I tagged along, my little hand in my middle-sized sister's.

"Come on, Sinny, come on, we'll never find the Weirdmonger at this sort of pace," she would say.

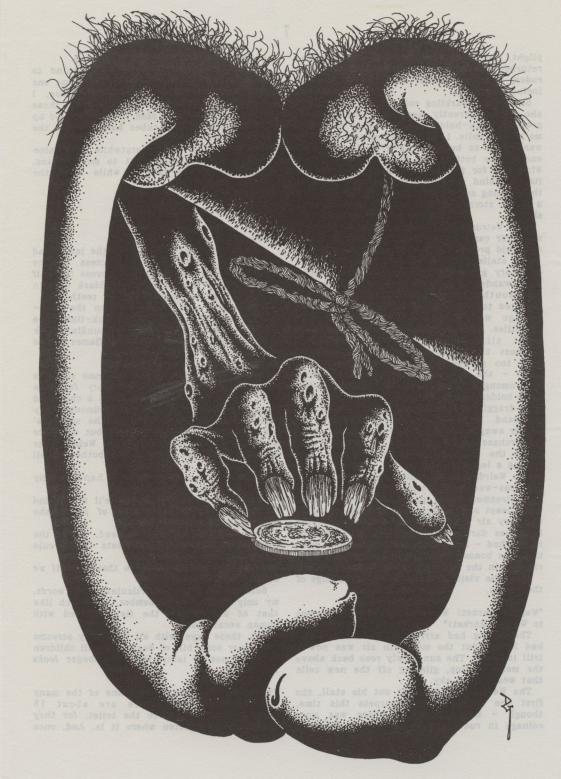
The others would race ahead, along the many corridors, like the ghosts they would one day become.

"Buck up, Sinny, we'll lose their tail, if we don't look out."

Being too young to articulate real words, my only response, I remember, was much like that of a beast of the fields graced with human vocal chords.

But, these days, with all the lively screams gone over some hill of death that all children reach sooner or later, the Weirdmonger looks for me.

First thing in the morning, one of the many servants (I think there are about 18 altogether) takes me to the toilet, for they tell me I've forgotten where it is. And, once



there, being on my own momentarily (for I DON'T let them watch), I see beast eyes staring up at me from the bowl, its face red as a wild maggot-ridden beetroot, as if daring me to deposit my load there, almost begging

me. And I always do.

Then, it's breakfast. Most of the servants have been up all night preparing it and, as I seat myself before the vast oaken trestle. they bring it to me like a living menu: a plate of gently coddled eggs lashed with runners of bacon carved from live pigs still fresh from having been fed on their own young; silver tureens containing folds of halfcongealed ducks' blood with, floating around in it, calf kidneys tenderised by a special cancerous disease that the servants incubated under their tongues; various cereals sown with jumbo peppercorns and laced with cream curds; wild honey-bees pickled in vats of the rich juices found, they tell me, in the golfholes on the links each morning; slivers of herring marinated for seven years in the wine that had turned Napoleon's head at Waterloo; and, finally, on mornings when the servants decide to give me a treat, multi-coloured toadstools (with the poison drained, immunized and side-dished as a sauce-dip) grilled rare and placed in the shape of a face on a doorstep of warm-baked bread.

I was never one for cooked breakfasts. But I forced it down, so that I could get back to the shimmering red face, whose appetite knew

no end.

The descendants of the servants told me all this about Sinecure Wabbit (for that was his name, believe it or not, and I don't). Neither could I credit one word about the Weirdmonger nor his delight in feeding off secondhand breakfasts.

The servants' kids used to call him Uncle Sinny and now they have grown into full-fledged groundsmen, caretakers, butlers, kitcheners ... I think they considered their late master to have been a genius graced with madness, or vice versa, I can't recall.

I took over this house with a certain amount of misgiving, not least being the expense. But when I heard the legend of the Weirdmonger (a toilet ghost!?), I tapped my head to see if my brain had worked loose.

And when I caught one of the older servants, late at night, syphoning the golf-holes, I could only put it down to something I would never be able to explain.

But when they actually told me that even I am not what I seem, I then felt somewhat vulnerable.

I wander through the nights in my black

plastic mackintosh under the streaming yellow rain and contaminated Autumn leaves, pleading for at least *someone* to give me a clearer perspective of my predicament.

I'll go in for breakfast soon, to have a swill, for the night's ramble has made me feel as useless as a Guy left high and dry on a damp bonfire.

Uncle Sinny's in the bowl waiting for his

pork sausages, so I'd better hurry.

I beg of you! The writer's failed. Can the reader help me towards the perspective I need? I don't know what the words mean, even as I write them, for I'm like a beast off the fields graced with human feelings but none of the understanding.

The 18 servants all lie face down on the golf links each with a tongue in a hole.

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He was reputed to sell everything, except kitchen sinks. He was born a salesman, in fact. Across the side of his wagon was emblazoned the motif:

"THE WEIRDMONGER COMETH
SELLS TO ALL KINDS
NO EXCEPTIONS MADE."

The day he came to our village was the hottest of the year - and some even argued, those in the position to know, that it was the hottest of the century ...

The village square was quiet, empty except for one little boy gently pushing himself up and down on the see-saw. And that little boy was me, though at this far reach of time, it is difficult to be certain.

The sun was straight above him, a bodiless beast with a scorching red eye. The awnings of the shanty-town, which could only manage to throw threadbare shadows, creaked and groaned in the still heat. All but the boy slept off last night's celebration party - the wedding of the year, it had been called, but the boy hadn't seen much of it. It was only to be much later that a bigger, more uproarious wedding feast would hit the village (or town, as it would be then), his own.

Suddenly, between the rhythmic cranking of the see-saw, he heard the distant sound of wheels crunching ... and from the brow of the horizon he saw a shape moving out of the endless scrubland. Slow it was, gradually filling out, deepening, sharpening - until he decided it was not a misbegotten gap hungering to imbibe reality like a black hole; no, it was a wagon, swaying slightly from side to side, being pulled by a scrawny

donkey or two.

And as it was pulled into the square, one or two of the bedraggled villagers could be seen crawling out from under the dowdy-striped awnings, rubbing sleep from their eyes with large spotted pocket-handkerchiefs. The boy took himself off the see-saw, leaving it swinging of its own volition for more than just a few seconds; and took to the hand of one of the bleary-looking grown-ups which happened to belong to his mummy.

From a nearby roof, the nearest the village could boast of one worthy of that name, from the top of its overgrown chimney, a tinny voice blared out on a makeshift megaphone-

loudspeaker:

"The Weirdmonger cometh! The Weirdmonger cometh! Bring all that you own, for he'll have unbelievable items to exchange ... Roll up, roll up, villagers all, for the Weirdmonger truly cometh among you ..."

Evidently, the Weirdmonger, for this was he in the wagon, had an undercover agent in the village, one who was ensconced somewhere in the vicinity with a microphone in his hand.

The boy, now grown into an ancient man, is the only one left alive who can even attempt to describe the Weirdmonger. Apparently, he perched at the front of the wagon, reins sagging from his blacklace—

#### WRITERS' BOOTSTRAP

Struggling huh? I know the feeling. So heck, let's review one anothers' stories for mutual feedback and assistance. The deal is you send me a story and I send you another writer's story in return. You pencil your comments on the text and supply a summary of what you thought.

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We're in the same boat. Let's pull together!

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John Duffield, 24 Fordwich Rise, Hertford, SG14 2BE gloved hand, a pommelled whip upright in the other, the top of which came level with the peak of his steeplejack hat. His long purple cape hid whatever other clothes he wore, but his face was indeed clear-cut between this and the hat, but because of the subsequent passage of time it is blurred for the likes of us. Guessing its appearance, it must have been startling to those poor innocents, used only to living hand to mouth, whose pips squeaked every time the rent man came round ...

The Weirdmonger stood upon the roof of his wagon; the boy could not believe that it was strong enough to bear his weight and would bow in at any moment, landing him amongst all his belongings inside, the nature of which nobody in the village dared even to imagine ...

"I come here," the Weirdmonger roared, "to sell Weirds, and Weirds are merely Words that materialize into all sorts of true existence the moment I release them from between my lips ..."

Even these introductory squawked into the sky like forgotten memories of what it was like before one was born.

"I see some here who need not buy, for they have already everything I can possibly sell. But, a few (maybe only one) desperately need my Weirds more than even you need yourself. Made to measure Weirds, must be better than off the peg, I assure you. So who'll be the first? You, sir? Or you ..."

He pointed straight at the boy, who was by now vigorously shaking his head. But his mummy pushed him towards the wagon.

There was a funnel rising from the back of the wagon, with saw-like teeth at its aperture, whence black-curdled smoke belched seemingly in rhythm with the Weirdmonger's tapping of the handle of his whip in the palm of his hand, as he spoke ...

"Yes, young lad, do come nearer, as I see you need one of my Weirds more than most. I

can see it in your eyes."

The boy looked back pleadingly at his mummy and then to where he'd left the see-saw nodding, but it was now surrounded by open-mouthed villagers fidgeting from foot to foot, his mummy among them.

He then looked up at the Weirdmonger; the eyes that looked down upon him were now searing his soul with their deepening stare.

The Weirdmonger took a striped rubber ball from his voluminous cape and threw it to the boy. And they played catch for a few minutes until one of them missed.

"Come yet nearer, young 'un. Let me hold your hand."

And the Weirdmonger knelt on the roof and held his hand out to the boy, who automatically took it ... and immediately felt shock after shock course through his body, as if he had been plugged into some closed circuit with Hell itself. The bubbling noise he felt, must be his own blood simmering in his veins; the screeching in his head was from various items of his innards bitterly complaining at the ordeal; and the sudden roar of wind surging through his belly became the metabolic backfiring of brain cells from out his arse ...

The next thing he knew was the megaphone calling everyone to their homes, for the sale was evidently over. He felt incredibly bad. His undergarments were soggy, his penis still hard but his mummy said never mind. He did not understand, even less than he did before.

Only hindsight has wisdom.

The soul with which he had been born was exchanged for another, a jumble sale version — and however deep he rummaged in this different soul, he could not find the bits he had once cherished. The precious bits had gone with the wind. And the secondhand soul did not fit somehow, was a mental form of nagging toothache. He had been sold a pup, no doubt, but, like all those others before him, he would have to rub along with it, until the possibility (however slim) of catching the original one beyond the borders of that foreign land called Death ...

He looked up and saw the wagon retreating into the surrounding scrubland, its smoke still puffing into the darkening sky ... The Words still came faintly to him on a new-sprung breeze; their squawking emissions that rode along above the Weirdmonger's wagon had an extra pair of butterfly wings among them ...

Today he is an old man, a very old man, ready for death but it will not come however hard he strains. He watches his great great grandson, a boy just like he used to be, playing some godless game called Hyperkill on a video screen. The old man shrugs; perhaps today, the Weirdmonger, if he deigns to return, will be a blessing in disguise. For Evil can kill Evil, they say. Or, to put it another way, the more Evil there is about, the more Good there'll be to balance it out. Today, the old man feared that neither Evil nor Good existed ...

He looked through the window towards what had been the village square, now a garage forecourt. He thought he could see, he thought he saw ... cranking up and down in the heat of the day. And what was that other sound? The crunching of wagon wheels ...

He died in his own arms; he'd gone to find the Weirdmonger to give him his ball back.

So he wasn't me after all. I'm just balancing the see-saw at one end, playing with my old friend Good at the other.

things siways start Vail. The Welrdmonger

It would be hotter this side of the sun.

The Weirdmonger was on the final flight from Earth, joining all those others from below the straight and narrow, the Final Selection, the Barley Wine of humanity ... in the rocketship that had been remaindered as the last poop scoop, bigger than the Earth from off which it roared.

The Weirdmonger shuddered in the cold that blasted in from all the missing metal plates of the ship ... space was apparently leaking in,

black curling wisps of it.

In the dimming light, he could just make out the other companion shapes fidgeting about, ugly, rearing faces on snake shadows. These were his co-habiters for the rest of Eternity? He should have stayed behind, given Earth-out a miss for once, taken it on the chin, rather than take a flier with Project Exodus, in the desperate attempt to follow on into the earlier time-slots where the pioneer Earth-outlings had lodged their smaller roadster rockets ... Where would it all end?

In the good old days before the rots set in, the Weirdmonger was in control of his own Destiny as well as, in fact, of others. Each word he used to speak was in itself a truth (far truer than Kant believed anything could be), each word became a weird became a reality became a thing that could be taken for granted.

They all became commonplace, however weird, however extraordinary ... His customervictims were usually the straightforward working man, you know, those sort, with half-fags between their four-letter words, standing in holes they'd just dug, looking at the sky, wondering why they're there, then not wondering why they're there, and taking up the digging again.

Such mortals were Weirdmonger fodder supreme. He would wander between the holes surveying each shovelling shape, as the sun set beyond their shoulders. He would whisper dreams into their council-house skulls, knowing all the time that the brains were dead to the world ...

But he did it for the hell of it.

And one day hell came - even for the Weirdmonger.

Everybody lost confidence in everybody else. And without confidence, the dominoes fell, the indices slumped and even the steadfast Earth itself became to them nothing but a bare bone swimming through the dark deaths of space ...

And why the confidence suddenly started to fall nobody could quite fathom. And big things always start small. The Weirdmonger put it down to something inside himself - for it was his world after all. And he was fast

losing confidence in himself.

The riots set in one night, as he swung in his hammock between those trees in his garden he knew to be sturdy. Their roots good as drained the Earth's core of its surplus curds. The night sparkled with a skyful of curiously large stars. It was perfect.

Then the fury wind came. Out of nowhere. And crushed the trees and cracked the Earth's crust between. And the Weirdmonger had not "thought" the wind first! It came out of nothing but itself. Unpremeditated.

Unwarned.

Come morning, the working men refused to put things straight, for they felt hard done by. Their roofs had gone into orbit - and the morning sky was darkened with them. The men just sat in their holes and stared at the damage.

Day by day, things went from bad to worse. The Weirdmonger had lost control ...

The indices slipped further than anyone believed they could, beyond all sense and logic. Futures were a commodity as rare as nuggethead diamonds but, however rare, grew worthless as the past.

The Weirdmonger talked himself into believing that belief was only hibernating, but the cold colder grew as the days became a

pinprick of light ...

Even the rocketships were only rudiments of such belief.

He looked up into the darkness that he had predicted would last forever.

The sky was suddenly full of shooting stars and maybe, after all, he was on board one of them verging on a new world that even now he was creating from the dross of entropy.

But the snake shadows lurch closer round his body has been trawled by the tangled hammock and is easy meat - and as they splt out their unlit fags, they take the Weirdmonger's vital part from his trousers and suck him inside out.

They gaze up to see whether the sun is likely to return - wondering not only why they're there but who they are.

THE END

# interzone

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#### THIE TROUBLE

#### WITH THEASUS

As the monorail slipped noiselessly into its pod at the terminal station Jaemon Lee rose from the polished metal seat and retrieved his bag from the overhead rack. The train juddered to a stop just as he reached the electronic doors, which swished back with a slight cough. Before he could leave, however, Jaemon was shoved back into the depths of the train by the surge of boarding passengers. He clung desperately to a stanchion as the human tide washed past in a mad rush for the seats, until at last he espied a gap and made good his escape.

He followed the stream of people galloping towards the ticket sentinels. Standing before one of the machines Jaemon presented his credit card, which the sentinel snatched with spindly arms, feeding it into a paper thin slot and deducting the standard fare for all monorail journeys. A few moments later he stood on the pavements of William's City, looking up at the tall glistening buildings in grim despair.

He could never quite come to grips with the crystal architecture, the way they rose like many coloured monoliths and vanished into the eternal low lying clouds. He knew that each of the vast structures also descended far into the ground, perhaps for as many as twenty levels, each a virtual village in itself. Tubed streets linked the upper floors in places. It was like looking up at a huge spider's web on a frosty morning back home on Earth. Then Jaemon spotted the taxi rank and, weaving his way through the throng, he entered the metal barred queue.

A pair of robocops cruised by, just above the heads of the scurrying crowds. The masses of people stared intently at the sky or ground as one, certain that everyone else would take any necessary evasive action. There were six billion people here on Theasus, in two continents; twelve million on this one small island alone. Most of whom appeared to be travelling the same street as Jaemon Lee.

Thirty E-minutes passed before Jaemon reached the front of the queue; but before he could board a taxi an old woman shouldered him aside, opened the door and climbed in, throwing an obscene gesture in his direction. Jaemon was too stunned to do or say anything, and embarrassed to boot. Then he noticed the smirking man standing behind him.

"Don't even think about it," Jaemon warned, as the fellow shuffled forward, trying to worm his way into the narrow space through which the old biddy had gone. Perhaps it was something in the Earthman's voice and firm stance that deterred the other, hinting that he was getting just that mite ticked off; for the man, big as he was, took a step back and averted his gaze.

The next cab dropped Jaemon off at the huge coffee coloured Trade And Commerce Centre. Having checked his credentials, searched and x-rayed him, and finally perusing his bag, the security guards handed him a small plastic I.D. badge, which he clipped firmly to his blue all-in-one. He knew the way by now and within a few moments was greeted by the computersec, which announced his arrival in flamboyant tones, and bade him enter the plush office beyond.

High Clerk Donovan rose from his chair behind the light alloy desk, in which winged lizard creatures were engraved, and said in a deep but loud voice:

"Jaemon Lee, welcome! I'm glad to see you. Please, sit down."

"Thanks. I came to see if you have any news for me. It has been three weeks now, you know."

Donovan scratched his nose absent-mindedly and stared at Jaemon. "Well, as you mention

it, yes I do have some news. Unfortunately it's the worst kind. Your request has been turned down." He leant forward and added in a conspiratorial manner: "The word is that any trade with Earth might affect our relationship with Homeworld. We're neutral, as you know, and want to remain that way. This is off the record, incidentally."

Jaemon's glazed alloy chair swivelled slightly as he too leant forward. "Come on Frank, you know I only want sea leopard skins! That's not really much to ask for, is it? How could they possibly contribute to a war effort? Our customers would pay handsomely for those pelts, I can tell you. Your crews are making a real killing at the moment, and it's damned unfair!"

"Mr. Lee, you're not implying that Theasian astronauts are participating in illegal transactions are you?"

"Perish the thought!"

"Listen Jaemon, I'm sorry, really I am. But the government have said no, and that's it, finished! You can, of course, launch an appeal."

Jaemon sighed loudly and leant back in his chair. "We both know an appeal would be turned down. To apply for a third time I'd have to leave Theasus, apply for another visa — which might, as we both know, not be granted — and then re-enter. That's the law."

The high clerk shrugged, smiling slightly in an apologetic manner. "Well, that's the way of things I'm afraid. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Thanks, but no. Would you excuse me? I have an appointment later today and want to prepare. My thanks, sir, for your time and effort."

They shook hands solemnly, but as Jaemon left the office he was suddenly glad that the doors were automatic. He knew that he'd have found it difficult to resist the urge to slam them otherwise.

To top it all it was raining outside. There were, of course, other planets with other seas and oceans, but none with sea leopard. Double damn it!

Right now he needed a drink, and a glowing sign proclaimed a topless bar through the downpour. It was only a short distance away, and so with a wry smile he splashed through the puddles towards it.

The bar, as it turned out, was packed; filled with trendy youths, music, and tourists from all over the settled worlds. Here and there miners reclined beneath hired personal robotenders, trying vainly to drink their weight in fluids. The tourists were generally more refined, taking dainty sips from slim or

short chunky glasses; staring with disdain at the gangs of street urchins, who flercely gripped their two-handed 'buckets' filled with pink frothy slime, the local equivalent of heer

Jaemon took a seat by the bar and ordered himself a slime. Although naked but for a tiny g-string, the barmaids were painted in a curious imitation of clothes, as were many of the other customers, so that in the dim light one didn't quite know what one was seeing. After serving him the elfin barmaid hovered about for a while, as if hoping Jaemon might hire her for the night. Jaemon ignored her, hoping she'd go away, which she did after a while.

By his fifth drink Jaemon was feeling a trifle merry. He was pleased to see that the drinks were cheaper than in most places, which in a way made up for the grim decor. By his eighth Jaemon was in orbit. Unfortunately that was when someone decided to bump into him, knocking him clean off his bar stool.

"Hey, dog face," snapped a shaven haired, pimply faced thug, with cool eyes and a calculating expression. "Watch where you're going!"

"My apologies friend," Jaemon said, picking himself up, "but I think you're mistaken. I wasn't going anywhere. In fact I was sitting on this here stool, which you'll note is secured to the floor. Hence you must have bumped into me!"

The youth's orange eyes widened as someone behind him sniggered. "Earthfolk! I might have known. Starting trouble already, eh? Gonna blast us like you did Scandor, eh?"

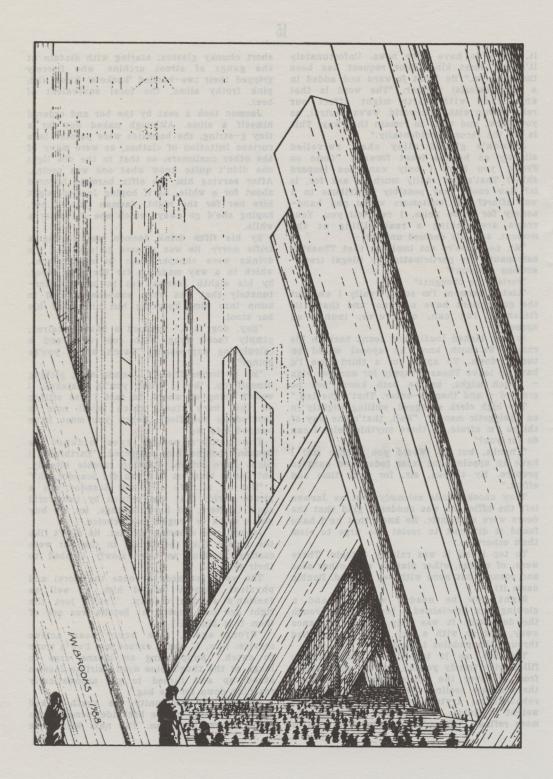
"Not at all. We all know Scandor was a pirate world; that was proven by interworld court ... Here, no hard feelings, let me buy you a drink or drug of your choice."

Jaemon was sobering up fast. He didn't like the scowls that the others in the bar were casting at him, as they slowly climbed to their feet.

The youth seemed to sense the moral and physical support behind him, as well as Jaemon's sudden dismay. "You're just the right age too. Lookitcha! Betcha was one of them that blasted!"

"Wrong again, I've never seen active service. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've a mono to catch." Suppressing an insane urge to laugh at the thug's blue dyed hairline Jaemon stood up and turned to go, automatically reaching down for his bag.

Seizing his opportunity the youth kicked Jaemon squarely in the backside, sending him flying across the room. The next kick came



at his head.

"Scum bag!" a woman called.

"Filth, murdering garbage!" others yelled.

The last thing that Jaemon saw was the crowd surging forward; a forest of legs and feet swinging towards him.

Jaemon opened one puffy, bloodshot eye, and looked feebly around him. Closing it again he groaned loudly, wincing as an injection snickered into his right arm. He looked about again. Shady, indistinct figures grew closer.

"How do you feel, Jaemon Lee?" asked a

gentle melodious voice.

He peered up and into a soft well-lined face. The man's eyes were a natural blue, and the insignia on his grey all-in-one uniform proclaimed him as a captain in Earth's space fleet.

"Pretty good, considering. How did I get here?"

The captain muttered something to a doctor, who pressed a hidden switch. With a low whine the hovering automeds retreated into the wall recesses on either side of Jaemon's bunk.

"I'm Captain Ramon, commanding officer of the ES York, whose sick quarters you're in at the moment. The doc' here tells me that you'll be all right, just minor bruising really. Your skull and rib fractures have all been seen to, but needless to say you'll be sore for a few days yet."

"That's reassuring, but do you mind

answering my question?"

"You arrived courtesy of the Theasian government. They told us what had happened, although we already knew of course: all of our traders and officials visiting sensitive areas are placed under sensitrack. We knew you were innocent and had tried to talk your way out of trouble. And they knew we knew." He watched as the doctor left the room, then nodded at Jaemon, looking down at him with a slight smile. "It seems Theasus is scared stupid we're going to attack them over this incident. They're apologising profusely. Oh, and a guy by the name of Donovan offered to allow you the trade concessions you requested, in a bid to make amends."

"And of course you refused," Jaemon said, staring up at the officer, while forcing

himself into a sitting position.

"Naturally." The captain's top lip lifted in more snarl than sneer, his eyes narrowed and glinted icily. "I told them it sounded remarkably like bribery, and that we don't deal in those terms. I also said that we couldn't understand how they could allow such violence to befall one of our people, their

guest as it were; and that certain people back home have expressed the belief it may have been a deliberate ploy by both Homeworlders and Theasians in an attempt to discredit us, particularly as all the assallants — with the exception of a few participating locals escaped."

"So what happens now?"

The sneer became a grin, more honest but less warm. "The trouble with the Theasians is that they've always been fence sitters, and know they can't remain that way much longer. All they needed was a little nudge in the right direction.

"In fact I just received a call from their government, telling us that they hope all this wouldn't jeopardise relationships between our peoples, particularly as they are just about to offer the sole rights to their crystal deposits. With those in our hands we can power a fleet six times larger than we have at present. I asked them if this was a firm offer, and they said yes, given that we station a battle squadron in this system for their defense."

"Excellent!" Jaemon chuckled, tentatively standing up and walking over to a wall mirror to examine his battered face. "Good God! Your man overdid it a bit, didn't he?"

"Had to look good. Besides, he enjoys his work; I had to give him explicit orders not to kill you."

Jaemon glanced at the officer for a moment, before returning his attention to the mirror and touching his nose gingerly. "Well, we both got what we wanted, didn't we. You got your crystals, and I the skin rights; minus your seven percent of course."

Ramon lit a cigar with a diamond covered lighter, placing the filter delicately between his lips. "Not quite. You see, there's always the danger you might decide to talk, and to be honest I can't take the risk. Besides, one hundred percent is better than seven, don't you think?"

The trader's jaw dropped. He turned to face Ramon. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Let me put it this way. As it was I who negotiated the deal, who do you think would get the skin concession if you were to die from your injuries? Why, me of course." Even as the officer spoke the sick bay doors behind him opened with a low hiss, and a tall pimply youth entered the room.

"You've met my man, I believe?" chortled

Ramon, as he strode to the door.

As the blue headed youth nodded an acknowledgement Jaemon saw that this time the man was smiling.

THE END

# SZN8ONOMICON

# TALE HODMOOD

If you run a store on Day Street called 'Darkness', you got a reputation to keep up. Most nights on Day Street you can't see a car's headlights for the neon glow around. Pigfan had his nose pressed up against the glass hard or you couldn't see into the dark for the bizarre reflections on the cheap soft windowglass when he heard a man walk into Darkness and say, "This is going to be tough." Sensing a hustle opportunity Pig stood close by the entrance, trying to look small and unnoticeable in the distinct glare of the surrounding lights. He heard nothing; and he had sharp hearing, so he assumed that the mark had got his help and turned away. He had lots of stuff to do anyway. Play the video arcade games, make some cash for his plug habit, keep himself known. For Pigfan it's all a matter of being known. That's why he wasn't surprised to hear a shout from over the other side of the street.

"Hey, Pig!"

Pig looked into the purple microlights dancing on the Sleezjoint over the road. A moving, slouching silhouette leaned onto the bonnet of a car. Unknown to Pig; possibly some guy with connexions. Everyone got your name sometime or other. Pig felt like a public utility, a fone or john or something. When they get your name they think you've been provided free by a beneficent government for their own entertainment. He turned towards the figure, not a dark figure exactly; he was on Day Street, and shadowy on the Street means kind of lowlit, with the folds of even the darkest material glowing in purple and electric blue, every movement being bathed in searchlights and keylights. He walked over the road to Wardour Street, between the cars, their flashing tungsten beams weak in the surrounding glare, to the wet row of parked cars, Sleezjoint neon reflected on their hoods and roofs. The figure was wearing a black leather jacket, zips and chains; not fashionably expensive, but not junkie material. Not the sort of stuff a guy is going to wear if he wants you to do him a favor. The face seemed familiar but identification eluded Pig. A party somewhere?

"See you a guy a minute ago, wear a suit, he walk down the street ahead of me. He went into the arcade and I lose him. Didja

see him come out?"

Day Street is the busiest street in the city. Four hundred thousand people a week walk along Day Street. They all look the same: like people looking for something and expecting it here. Like this guy ahead of Pig, for instance. But Pig knew who he meant. Someone the lights didn't pick out, someone who stood in front of that flashing string of microlights, all electric blue as they were and still looked dark and hidden. Someone who would walk along Day Street wrapped in Darkness. "He went in there," he said pointing at the shopfront. Leatherjacket shivered. "How he get in?"

Pig shrugged. How does anybody get into a building with an ordinary door and window? "He went in through the door," he said.

Bored, Pig turned to go.

Leatherjacket crossed the road. Last Pig saw of him, he had his nose pressed up against Darkness trying to see through the dusty reflections.

Pig spent an hour hustling on the north

end of the street, making money, collecting favors, dazzled by the lights of the big Cinemas. He liked the warm, smoky area around the brazier the guy roasting chestnuts tended. He'd stand there and kind of bask while he was waiting for something to happen. For a busy thorofare Day Street could be awesomely quiet. He didn't try talking; the chestnut guy had never spoken in his life as far as Pig knew. So he was a bit surprised when Chestnut said: "Haven't seen you for a long time, Pig."

Pig stared at him, unable to think of a reply. "Only, this bloke was asking after you a while ago. A white bloke." A white bloke? Nobody was white on Day Street. Everyone was shiny purple and silver where their sweat gleamed in the neon. You might be orange by the amusement arcade where the giant orange coffeepot poured and emptied, poured and emptied, on the wall of the patisserie, and the great white cake was divided up and served time after time. Or you might be green near the huge twisting snake above the amusement arcade. Or maybe red, as you stood under the prodigious red lighthouse lights in the upper windows. But Pig hadn't seen a white guy in years.

"Whenabouts was this?"
"Only an hour or so ago."
"Did he tell you to tell me?"

"Sure did."

"Did he give you a message for me?"

The chestnut guy shrugged, his shoulders rising up around his chin. Pig noticed smudges of soot around his eyes and nose, blighting his hawknose profile in the Cinema lights. Pig walked off.

Could the chestnut dude have meant Leatherjacket? Had Leatherjacket been white? Pig couldn't remember anything about him except his zips and chains, and his fear of, well, Darkness.

was walking north, off Day Street, towards the big stone buildings of the old centre of Town. One of those places full of men on horseback represented all stonily, in a way they must have dreaded even then; dark and gloomy, cold and frozen into immobility. Literally petrified old men, town founders carved solidly and unable to move even their eyes to hide the dissolution of their civic ideals from their ageless faces. Even now, grown up at nineteen, Pig had to try hard to resist the temptation of sticking his tongue out at these images outdated and shadowed in the squares. Pig walked around Soho Square intending to get an Ice Cream from FORTY FLAVORS PARLOR.

He never made it. He found himself

running.

The dislocation was quick and frightening. One moment he was walking into an Ice Cream parlor, next he was running like a fox, leaping down Tottenham Road, south from the big train station where the trains disgorged the tourists into the foul city air. A mile north of Forty Flavors, with no recollection of the interval. Someone else had done the running 'til he caught up and worked out where this mad career would deposit him.

And as he thought of it clearly, he was there, out of breath and scared half to death on the mat of the Amusement Arcade in the middle of Day Street. As he fell through the door, he lost his senses.

Gradually he realised that they were not lost but jammed by the meaningless signals of the Arcade. His vision was useless from the glare of the tumbling disco lights, the sense free jumble of cartoon figures on the screens of the games, the glittering holograms of the Sensonomicon and the beehivesmoke thick fog of the patchouli incense burned to excess by the proprietor's crazy son. His hearing suffered from the horns and sirens and bellowing voices of the games, and the endless dingdingkaching of the Pachinko machines chattering like metal monkeys in the misty distance of the arcade. His balance and gait were wrecked by the heavy deep pile carpet on the swaybacked crumbling floor. Pig had spent hours each night here for years and never noticed the cacophony inside, but as he grew calmer, and his dark adapted eyes grew used to the dreadful light level, he began to make sense of it all. But he couldn't explain the taste in his mouth; it seemed to be algae, or iron. Some time later he remembered; it was the taste of a train station, when the train brakes and the brake linings begin to heat up. He hadn't been near a train for five years. Not since he'd arrived in Freeport, looking for action, adventure, drugs, freedom from Natokoku restrictions. What a jerk he'd been, mincing around the city, trusting and innocent. He'd been fitted for a plug on his first day in Freeport.

When he regained his senses he walked out of the Amusement Arcade, staring out at the coffee pot on the Patisserie wall, at that pointless tilt and pour, tilt and pour. It seemed to Pig that he'd stood under it for years, all his adult life spent under a neon coffee pot. He walked along the sidewalk bathed in the Colibri flashes of the familiar haunts. To get back to the bedsit he called home he had to walk the full length of the brighter end of Day Street, always half dreading, half looking forward to the lurid

spider gloom of the facade of Darkness.

By now the clientele were drawing up and queuing around the corner, standing amongst the trash cans and cardboard boxes of the unlit alley. Pig did not know how they got here; they seemed to home on into the place without visible means of transport. Beam me up! he thought as he passed. No buses on Day Street, no legal parking either. No bicycles chained to the lampposts, no skateboards or unicycles, rickshaws or conestogas. Just an endless tide of humanity washing up and down the sidewalk, with some flotsam being thrown into each establishment, separating into types according to the frontage of the shop. Youth in the Amusement Arcade; tourists into the patisserie; musicians in the guitar shop; film types in the Hamburger joint; and creeps into the alley beside Darkness. When he passed the blacked out window with its gloomy, dusty logo in dark on black he shivered: he felt as though a hand was raised to him inside the window. He glanced at the reflective glass. Even here a shadow wasn't black, but was colored by the various lights angling down onto it. He put out his hand and ran it over the Darkness logo. His palm crawled. He put his nose up to the glass and stared at his hand. As his hand moved across the warm glass it drew electric blue sparks across the gap between his skin and the dusty surface of the window. They didn't hurt, and they didn't tickle. They kind of shocked lightly, little miniature crackles like a static discharge but more ubiquitous. Pig pushed his hand against the window, and fell forward; his hand had actually pushed into the glass, indented it like a sheet of polythene, and it filled out slowly as he took his hand away.

But he'd been seen or felt and a bouncer

appeared shouting.

Pig rolled his lip to sneer, but his courage deserted him and he pushed up his collar and slouched off; five hundred yards until he could lie down. He reached his room weak-legged and exhausted.

He woke up twice in the middle of the day. A bad time to be awake, but he missed his plug and his sleep was hassled and tumbled. He had dreams of tube trains thundering into the windowglass of Darkness, and the window kind of knitting into a whole again as the train passed through. And everybody on the train seemed to be staring out of their windows at Pig as he stood bathed in searchlights, coffeepots and snakes projected around him.

He came awake as it grew dark. He needed no alarm clock; a blackbird outside his window began his evensong at the same time each evening. This relict of his pre-city life seemed more comfortable with the city routine than he. It made its living from a 30 square yard patch of grass between a substation and a tumbledown Church, and still found time to sing the day long. He got up, flinging the damp sheet across the room, and crossed to the refrigerator. As he took a pac, the vid downstairs started bleeping his code. The communal vid was a nuisance, but a habit boy like Pig might never afford his own credit card; he relied on picking up used fonecards and vidcards from the gutters and squeezing the last units from the strip. He put the pac on to heat breakfast w/eggs, the saltiest and spiciest and went downstairs. By the time he got to the vid the house was in uproar, people shouting up to goddam answer that vid. The whole house worked nights, and early evening was relaxation time. Everyone plugged into eventide fun and forgot about vids and stuff, til they beeped.

He walked down and lifted the garish chinese handset. He darked the screen hastily, knowing the woman opposite would watch the call on her Intrudacam so-called first class camera system. Pig stuck gum over the lens whenever he thought he could get away with it, but she could peel it off remotely. First class means thinking of stuff like that.

"Hey, Pigfan, it's me!"

"What do you mean it's you, guy? I can't see you here." "So? You should pay for a proper vid. I not responsible for you cheepnis. Took you time answering."

Pig still didn't know who it was. He glanced at the Intrudacam; the light was on so he took off his shirt and threw it over the camera. He cautiously brighted the vid and stared into the face of Leatherjacket.

"How did you get my code?"

"Listen, this too important for argue. That man you kill, what you see outside Darkness, had many people work for him. I know you in danger, do you?" The remote peeled off his shirt and it dropped to the floor. The red, unblinking light of the video camera watched Pig from behind. He didn't notice. "I haven't killed anyone!" he could never remember to speak in Jet streettalk in a crisis, not in his blood. "Yeh, listen, the guy you throw under a train is not surprising dead."

Pig looked down at his shirtless boy's torso. "I don't throw people under trains. I not strong enough if I even want to. I haven't seen a train in years. You think I hypnotise maybe and the mark say, 'Yeh, I throw self under train soon's I find train'?"
But he remembered that smell of train brakes



in his throat and knew it was true. "You trip him and he fall. You not big kung fu guy, I know. It all in eventide media. If you doubt I, call a Faksheet." "I do it," said Pig, consciously translating 'I'll do that'. "You have watch you behind you," said Leather-jacket. Pig turned and looked up at the disshirted Intrudacam. It winked at him in the gloom.

"Was this guy white?" he asked Leatherjacket.

"No, fool, I white. It my logo on my jacket. You never play video arcade games, I hope, you not notice any bit it happen around you. You score 300 out of ten thousand, so far and that for killing the Darkness guy. Any minute now, the screen change and allens from outer space come zap you and you not even know how come you got past the first screen." As he spoke he turned around, and Pig saw a circular alligator leather logo on his back; a white spade, symbol and text. He turned back.

Impelled to check, Pig stared into Leather-jacket's image. It was regular Korean brown-chinese. Not like Pig's sallow European. Excess baggage after the war, left here to learn about cities by osmosis and not doing too bad a job. Pig's prissy Natoman education and background hadn't given him the edge he'd expected.

Before Pig could reply, Leatherjacket slumped forward, and as he looked down, Pig saw a coffeepot tilting, reflected in the impassable brown eyes.

"That hurt," said Leatherjacket, and blood ran out of his mouth.

Pigfan paused to instruct the public vid to transfer the unused credits from the dead guy's card to his own vid, and then ran, putting on his shirt as he went. He knew the number of the public vid because he saw it every day; it was opposite the Patisserie on Day Street; given away by the reflection in Leatherjacket's eyes. It didn't take him one minute. He rushed into the booth still dazzled by the searchlights and glare of the streetlights. The vid was covered in blood, glistening in a lurid Dali fashion, reflecting the curved, dripped image of a coffeepot getting duller as the shine dried off. Leatherjacket's fonecard lay on the ground; someone had realised that the callee had drained it, and thrown it on the floor. Wallet, ID and so on had been taken. Pig looked at the fonecard. He hadn't broken the connexion. If anyone had inserted their card and instructed robop to trace the call, then it would lead them ... home.

He was getting used to running, now. His

legs ached from running both conscious and unconscious. He rushed upstairs and skidded into his room, completely blinded in the gloom. He backed to the doorway and listened. Then he went downstairs again and reset the vidreceiver. Perhaps a minute wasn't long enough to trace a call anyway.

The microwave had switched off on its self-timer, but the pac had lost its fresh-cooked puffy bloat, deflated like a balloon, and sat wrinkled and horrible on the turntable. He put it on for another minute hoping it would recover. Needing a drink, he went to the refrigerator. He got a can of Sweat and sat back to drink it, keeping an ear out for the door. Until now he'd been J. Random Drifter. Stirring up the local Triad was a bad move. It might be the beginning of the end.

There was no peace all night. Not daring to go out, he sat in his room drinking his collection of garishly labelled soft drinks, hoping and craving and nearly braving the terrible unprotected street for his plug, his fix he so desperately needed. He stayed put, swaying, shiny with cold sweat, watching the Footprint programmes on the TV and trying to summon up the courage for the trip to the plug parlour in Wardour Street.

The vid beeped continuously all night. Never his code, it rang for one resident after another. And citizen followed citizen down the stairs to answer it, an endless swearing traipse of aquaintances past his door. He couldn't tell if the calls were genuine tho' he pressed his ear against the door each time someone answered. Pig tried to tell himself that it was just paranoia, but it nagged and nagged at him, every half hour or so the damn vid would shriek like a 'port alarm, and some dumb jerk would walk swearing downstairs and pick up that junk handset and say hello. And Pig would jump up and listen out to see if it was a joke call, or a genuine chatterbox friend on the transmitting end. He insighted finally that this Mrs Downstairs was no paranoid peeping tom, but a woman driven genuinely crazy by having the vid parked outside her door. Early in the morning the blackbird was just getting up he put on his old gray jellaba and snuck downstairs. Everybody either gone to work or watching 'You Bet Your Life' on Footprint, he reasoned, no danger in the city when the snuff came live via Satellite TV. He tiptoed past the hallway residence, glaring at the Intrudacam, daring it to glo red as he passed its IR field; it stayed dark. He could hear the snowy soft lacerating voice of Hue Xen selling his contestants death or slavery on the TV. He moved foot pause foot like a cat stalking a bird tho' without the chattering teeth. As he reached the door the vid shrieked out his code and he spun terrified round and flattened himself against the outer door, hands behind his back, staring at the set. It was lit up like a christmas window, glowing orange and neon colors from improbable places where there were no lights to light up. The Intrudacam came to life and swung round towards it, kind of gazing evenly at it as though it had expected the vid to do something weird for some time now and had been just proved right.

Vids exert a horrible fascination on the subscribing public. Pig had never passed a bleeping vid and not answered it and despite his uncanny horror at the SFX lightshow beaming from the set, he was drawn towards it. When he touched the handset the milspec horrorshow glow faded, and he picked it up hardly daring to breathe. He darked the screen hurriedly, by instinct thinking of the Intrudacam. He heard a familiar voice say: "Hey guy, very soon now the screen change and aliens from outer space come zap you and you not even know how come you got past the first screen."

As far as Pig could remember, it was an exact quote. On an impulse he jabbed at the gain on the vidset, and the receiver blazed into light. The graphic that jumped onto the screen was so realistic he felt futilely around the wall for the firebutton; Tripus Class Two Angroids seared across the little noninterlaced screen of the vid, jerky but perfectly rendered spaceships haring after the little octopus shaped craft which the punter flies in "Space Migrant Blastout", Pig's favorite videogame of the poor current crop. Without controls or firebutton the octopoid craft was doomed, and Pig watched the Angroids throw their electrostatic net across its path and phaser it to death, and it exploded mightily, possibly even lighting up some of the nonexistent neons on the outer vidset, Pig didn't know, he was too stunned to notice.

For a long second, the smokefilled reeking air of the Amusement Arcade faded in around Pig, causing the bare hallway to darken slightly and waver into unreality. The dingdingka of the Pachinko machines seemed also to turbo-treble-boost in the mix of city noises, but when he concentrated his own hallway reassembled and the patchouli incense drifted away. He put the vid handset down. The screen was black and smoking. When he tried to call robop he got an 'emergency calls only' tone. The vid had died with the octopoid, it seemed.

On the way out, he nearly smiled. The

underworld might not be after him; it was someone with the sense of humour to tape Leatherjacket's last words and then mock up a videogame to match them: not in keeping with the cult of 'face' which drove the Triads of the district into acts of frantic cruelty. He had a personal enemy.

First priority was now to get to Plug Caff before he died of frustration and aching addicted greed. He half-ran his protesting body to Wardour Street and dropped into the Plug Caff piling all his cash on the desk of the bored, lax attendant.

"Two hours," said the B.L.A

Two hours! Almost forever to a guy as worn down by life as Pig. He stumbled into the sauna-warm plug-house, gathering all his necessary stuff, and stripped off his jellaba. Laying on the marshmallow soft pallet he grabbed for the plug. Everytime previously he'd checked the plug interface with a little breakout box that addicts carried for testing the quality of the current. Today it was in his room in its ivory case, no good to anyone. He switched on the TV Hue Xen was gone now, it was children's cartoons and settled the IV drip, and put the food, drinks and so on beside him on the floor-height mattress. He held the plug in his hands, warming it for precious seconds of his two hours, looking at the readout on the side of the barrel, thrilling with anticipation behind his tired eyes. Then he grabbed it in his fist and thrust it violently into the socket over his left ear.

Back arched in ecstasy, he never even ate the food, never even watched TV.

A long time later, at least two lifetimes, he began to come round from the all-encompassing joy of the current. In front of him was a sheet of white, like a page of white. He looked it up and down. Perhaps it was a spade. Pig plunged on into his only clue, looking for a plan of action.

When he left the Plug Caff, more settled, better fed and less manic, he sauntered into Day Street almost his old pre-murder self. In the gathering heat of the late summer morning the deserted street festered unfeted by the tourists and desperati, lonely, stinking. With its famous lights turned off Day Street lies belly-up and rotting under the smooth superior heated glare of the sun. The sun simply washes out the contrast that Mystery relies on for its publicity material. Pig walked down the cracked sidewalk, going home, tho' home held no special attraction. It was a

# roa-roa ad ria Ra

#### A French science fiction story

## kostrw kri

By the 21st Century, as we all know, France was a country run by a mighty bureaucratic computer which controlled the lives of everybody, monitored people's thoughts, and

imposed bourgeois banality.

Regime.

This computer was housed in the caverns of the postal-telecommunications headquarters hidden deep beneath the Tuilleries Gardens. It was popularly known as "Bon-Bon" - this bureaucrate-ordinateur normalistique - because it worked for the common good, le bon publique, and was regarded as a real sweetie by 99% of citizens, who were all implanted with a neural receptor at the age of 16. Dulcet emotions of the consumer society were broadcast by Bon-Bon to all France from its transmitter up the Eiffel Tower.

The 1% of revolutionaries were, however, able to escape from the bourgeois regime of Bon-Bon - which they scathingly called the Bonbon Dynasty - by means of an illicit drug called Temporiel, which allowed them to enter shared false reality states of internal subjective time-distortion, within which they attempted to create their own radical reconstruction of reality, and where they plotted eventually to overthrow the Bonbon

Little did the revolutionaries know that Temporiel was actually manufactured and distributed (out of Marseilles) by Bon-Bon itself as a way of confining protest to the domain of false reality invisible to 99% of the population!

Now, we all know that the soul of a nation is its language. Language is the logiciel which operates the matériel of human beings.

We know, too, of the blatant invasion of the language of France for years by an army of English words - a kind of grippe linguistique - which Government edicts had failed to repel.

So Bon-Bon decided to build a machine for the purification of the French language.

Various schemes ran through its cybernetic brain.

Words are weighty things, as we know. So therefore English words would be rounded up, condensed, loaded into shells, and bombarded back across la Manche by a gun like Big Bertha which had once menaced Paris.

An electro-linguistic force field would be erected around metropolitan France.

Citizens would be given painful shocks (through their neural receptors) every time they uttered an English word.

Billions of balloons full of French words would be released to drift abroad and burst over foreign countries, producing une pluie de parole.

A linguistic virus would be designed, une peste parolesque.

All of these ideas were considered and rejected by Bon-Bon, till finally the solution occurred to it.

The drug Temporiel was the key. The formula of Temporiel would be subtly changed so that its users felt a compulsion to speak English in their subjective shared false realities. This would cause a psycholinguistic "gravity-suction" which would progressively drag all English words out of the minds of the majority, imprisoning them within the "event horizon" of the supposedly revolutionary false reality.

But unforeseen consequences occurred.

If English was the language of the false reality of those radical addicts of Temporiel, what must the socio-historic content of that false reality be?



It must be an alternative France - where no Norman conquest of England occurred; but instead an English conquest of Normandy. Where in the Middle Ages the invading English kings captured and held all France and imposed Anglo-Saxon speech upon the country. Where Rabelais and Racine (known as John Root) wrote their works in English. A land not of Cartesianism, but of Britannic Pragmatism. A land where French was only spoken in remote rural areas, to the extent that Gaelic is still spoken in the British Isles. A land not of wine and croissants and gastronomy, but of disgusting tea, and greasy bacon and eggs, and warm beer.

Horrified especially by the food in their false reality, the revolutionaries ceased plotting quarrelsomely against Bon-Bon and commenced active patriotic rebellion. Drugged with Temporiel, so that they perceived the actual Eiffel Tower of Bon-Bon's Paris as "Queen Victoria's Spire", and shouting battlecries (in English) such as "Let us eat Brie!" they dynamited two of the legs of the tower, bringing it crashing down, and destroying Bon-Bon's transmitters.

The Second French Revolution had begun ...

THE END

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# THE

The boards were nailed across the window, the traffic noise was muffled.

All the furniture was out in the hallway; the carpet too.

Door locked and bolted.

Ready.

Murray let his consciousness fizz out sideways while his body lay curled on the floor.

Across the hemisphere people slept and dreamed.

Murray drifted until he sensed the presence of a manipulation field at work, then homed in until he was close enough to spot a gap he could slip through.

"Any moment now ... any moment now ..."

He was in.

This mind was in deep sleep and the Network was taking full advantage of its processing power. Murray felt around for the best channel onwards.

"Right, which one seems promising ...?"
They all did, as per bloody usual.

"Eeny meeny miny mo ..."

He eased himself into the stream and floated off.

"I should never have gone further than sodding Bognor," he thought bitterly as he bobbed along. Those years of training in Tibet under that senile old lama had brought him nothing but trouble.

Ever since the big KGB/CIA merger he'd been blackmailed into working for every Mickey Mouse political movement that ever went on to gain 'power'. They could never have made it without his skills but as soon as they got there it was always "We're sorry, Mr. Murray, but we can no longer offer you employment," and he had to go on the run yet again to avoid the various agents of the state sponsored assassination bodies ...

He felt a sudden surge and found himself

# **EMPLOYEE**

# PAUL O'BRIEN

deposited in a new psyche.

Whoever it was was experiencing REM and the exit channels shut down just as he moved towards them. He was caught here until the dreaming stopped and the Network resumed its exploitation of the free brainpower.

Murray sighed inwardly.

"Metaphysical TV time again."

He sat back (metaphysically) to watch the dream.

Rain fell with unnatural slowness over a landscape of forested jelly moulds.

His first work had been on behalf of the communist anti-feminist PPPP (Proletarian Penis Power Party), which he had subsequently helped to overthrow two months later in the cause of the ultra-right God and Guns Brigade, who viewed nuclear weapons as the perfect solution to such social problems as the inner cities.

The survivors of the resulting events conscripted him to help establish the short lived Isotope party, who managed to withstand an attempted coup by the ineffectual Back to the Land Movement (ineffectual because most of the people who weren't already Back at the Land were charred and radioactive), but eventually fell to the Murray-assisted combined troops of the private medicine industries who were enjoying the biggest financial boost ever as a result of the policies of the old G&G Brigade (assault on welfare state/inner cities).

"The ironic thing," thought Murray, "is that the real power is where it's always been."

The dreams evaporated and the Network took over again.

Murray travelled on.

He didn't really expect any success. After thirteen weeks the search had become a habitual chore.

Then, nine minds later, he found himself at a place he'd almost given up hope of discovering. Every night for three months and now, when he no longer really cared, he had reached a main line mental interface. Three months and he had finally arrived at a gateway to the heart of the Network.

For the last three months he'd been working for the Beards for Women splinter group of the Role-Reversal Party. As soon as they told him what they wanted done he had realised that it was the most stupid and dangerous commission he had ever been given. But the threat of yet again having his false identity torn away had pushed him down the old path that would lead to a short period of safety before he was once more forced to change his cover. And again he would be sought out by another daft cause. And it would all start over from the beginning.

A hundred different ideologies and all they really cared about was the way they wanted things to look. They didn't give a fart about

the way things really were.

What was worse was that everybody knew the real situation. It was only because the KGB/CIA had ceased to muck about behind the scenes and made public the fact that they had been running things all along that the last ten years of pseudopolitical pantomime had been possible.

Every potential tin-pot dictator who could think of a stance stood a chance of creating a movement to sweep him into office.

And it was all because everyone knew that in the end it would make no difference.

Murray had to wait a long time before he had mustered the courage to enter the main course that flowed past him with the momentum of an unguessable mass of information.

"One ... two ... three ..." he counted: for what seemed like forever that was as far as he could get.

"One ... two ... three ... GOOOOOSHIIIIIIIITT ... !!!"



If his heart had been there it would have been hammering to pieces.

He couldn't go back now.

No eddies here.

Just smothering velocity.

Tributary channels hardly wafted against him. He was going too fast to sense outside the stream anything other than a shower of blurs going on and on ...

Ten years as an enforced activist and not once had Murray been made to mess with the real authority. Now he was headed for the centre of the Network, the wellspring of the KGB/CIA's power.

Utilising the phenomenal processing power of millions of sleeping brains the Network allowed them to store and handle enough information to observe and predict the future of every significant aspect of people's lives, and most of the trivial ones as well.

Knowledge is power and total knowledge is total power. That's what they had. At least, they were so close it made no difference.

With a third of humanity asleep at any one time they could keep tabs on everything.

Everyone knew about it, but they couldn't do anything. Nobody really cared, either.

Murray could sense something big ahead. Something very big. The flow began to tremble, then rushed on.

Tremble.

Rush.

Tremble.

Rush.

Tremble.

Rush.

Shudder, shudder, shudder, "AAAAAAGHH!!!"
He was racing along a narrow channel, and
he was being steered. Somehow they had a
grip on him. He was helpless.

He knew he was whirlpooling in to the epicentre.

He was spun, then stopped at a point of terrorising calm, while the tempest thrashed about him.

Then they cut his senses off.

The Beards for Women people had wanted him to explore the Network. They didn't want to destroy it. They wanted to know if they could use it to alter people's dress sense while they slept.

He should have known it was futile from the start. His skills were rare, true, but not unique. To suppose they wouldn't have taken this sort of infiltration into account when creating their security safeguards just went to show how a decade of aimless effort scrambled your faculties.

What now?

A forever of sensory deprivation?

"At least now I'll get some peace, perhaps." But Murray didn't really feel optimistic.

Light suddenly flashed into him and he was back in his body.

He was trussed to a chair.

Experimentally he opened an eye in time to see an old man in the robes of a ceremonial magician stroll out through the door.

He was in a bright, bland room. The chair was bolted to the floor. A large blank-faced man in white overalls stood by the doorway. In front of him was a middle aged woman in a raincoat and trilby hat.

"You have been an irritation recently, Mr. Murray," she said in an accent of drawled vowels and rolled 'r's. "You should have stuck to parliamentary politics."

"I didn't do it voluntarily," explained Murray in a cheesy grin. "I've got nothing against your people. I could even be of help to you. My special abilities ..."

"We have several people performing such functions; none are overtaxed. But do not worry. We will provide you with plenty of work. We have a very specific vacancy for a trained brain such as yours."

"Ah! Well then, if you'll untie me I'll get down to it."

"I think you are confused, Mr. Murray." She smiled with genuine humour. "We only have a vacancy for your brain."

Murray's brain acted as a semi-independent component in the biosection of the Network's central control unit. He was responsible for choosing which minds got locked into the system each night. He had to fulfil a quota, but he was free to decide who to utilise.

Murray was as miserable here as he had been before, and he simply couldn't concentrate on his work. His mind tended to wander (in the conventional sense) and as a result he seldom bothered to change the time allocations. Because of this he soon discovered that if a mind was continually used, night after night, then after about a month its owner went mad.

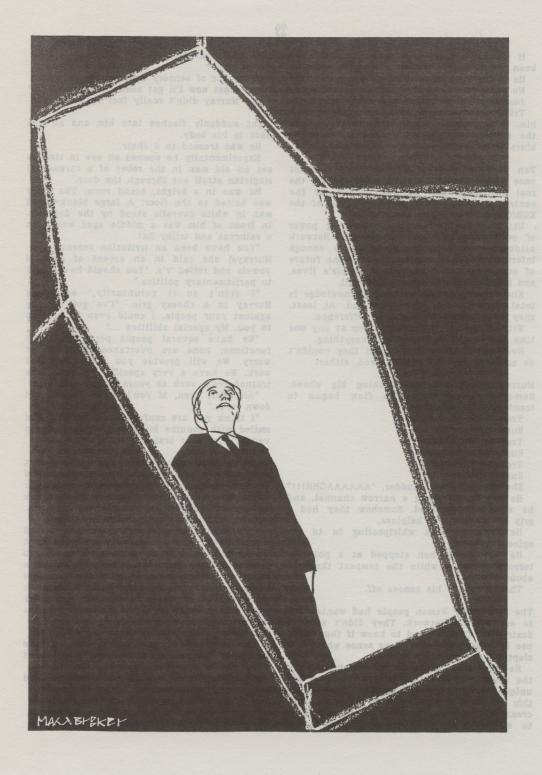
Revenge at last!

He applied this knowledge to all the members of the KGB/CIA and the overt governments.

In a short time the world was controlled solely by insane people.

Not that anyone noticed.

THE END



# THE PENULTIMATE HORROR STORY

## Wayne Allen Sallee

Don't be surprised to hear me, Bill. And quit looking around like some rubberneck ... no one else can hear me. You're the only one who needs to hear this. This ... my Penultimate Horror Story.

Why are you so shocked to hear that? I always said that I'd be writing fiction every day 'til I kicked. And then some, as it turns out haha. What really kills me - aside from you poisoning my meals with cyanide, Bill, what better roommate could a soul ask for? - is how many people actually showed for this damn funeral. I didn't know I had so many friends. And on a day like this! The first really fine Saturday of the year. It must be hitting seventy out there, and what is it, March fifth, sixth? You'll forgive me if I can't get to the calendar in my wallet, bro'.

Yea, good day for boating out on Lake Michigan, cruise for some babes down Belmont, if I do say so. Tell me, Bill, when did you start putting the cyanide in my food? December? January? I confess I never even tasted it at all. I wonder if you sprinkled it in my Orville Reddenbacher popcorn I munched on over Hill Street Blues. Damn, I really did want to find out if they'd catch Coffey's killer. But what would you know about good television. I ask that rhetorically, Bill. Don't answer or there will be some snickers in the crowd.

And stop straining your neck to peer over the lip of the coffin. My lips aren't moving. I'm not Charlie McCarthy, you know.

But I was a good writer. Not a great one, mind you. But good enough. Tell me, Bill, were you jealous of my sales, mediocre as they were, while you got nothing but rejection slips? Was that it, huh, buckaroo? Maybe you should have been a little more dedicated, like I was. Research your material, instead of slapping together something quick and half-assed so that you're done in time to watch the nightly Three's Company rerun. God, I hate John Ritter!

Oh, geez, I could puke. Who does Paula Cantrell think she is, wearing that clinging pink blouse? Always looking for a pickup, that girl. I wonder how much padding she's got stuffed in there? And it's no shock to me

that my only brother Phil is a no-show. Probably gave my parents some tripe about being tied up in Denver or something.

I hope you get a big kick out of watching my mother crying, Bill. And my dad. Two years from retirement on the fire department. I was supposed to be there for him, help him ease into his new life. I was only 30. You bastard.

Okay, okay. Maybe I was a little righteous about my work. Maybe I didn't talk much while I was in the middle of 'conceiving' a new 'baby', but, hell, you should understand my dedication to my craft. It was the only thing I could really do well, God knows a scrawny little runt like me couldn't have many career choices. And with my mug, marriage to some rich woman was highly unlikely.

But, Jesus Christ, Bill, I never shirked my responsibilities around the apartment: I did the dishes, I took out the trash. You can't get me on that. And how many times did I take my portable Smith-Corona down to the laundry room when you had Caroline over?

Well, better put your pallbearer gloves on, dude; the priest seems to be winding down. Oh, yeah. Before I go: why did I say this was my penultimate horror story? I know you comprehend that 'penultimate' is defined as 'second from last'. Did I ever tell you I learned that word while reading a Spider-Man comic? That's right. Spidey's alter-ego, Peter Parker, and his girl, Mary Jane Watson were on their way to get 'the penultimate ice cream sundae' when Pete's Spider-Sense warned him that The Green Goblin was in the vicinity. And you don't understand why I bought so many comics.

Anyways, I've gotta make this quick, they're closing the lid now. Penultimate. Right. I call it that because I'll come by in a few days and tell you the Ultimate Horror Story. The Big Daddy. It might take as long as a week, though, because I'm not really sure how long it's going to take me to dig myself out of the grave.

Be seeing you, Bill.

THE END

# CAUGHT IN THE RAIN

# Mark Samuels

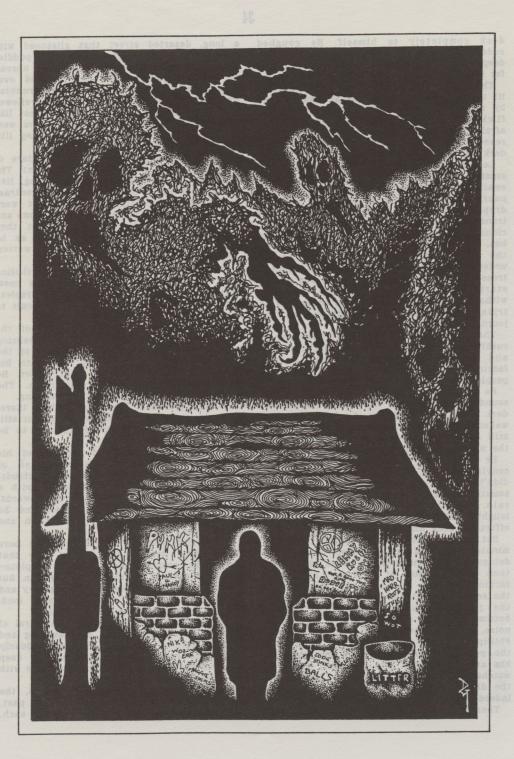
Night was drawing in. The sun had sunk below the horizon and only a glow of crimson remained to show it had been there at all. The shadows crept from street to street like a horde of spiders. Then grey clouds swept across the deep blue heavens as if to suffocate the stars, multiplying until a leaden shroud hung over the city. Streetlamps flickered into life and shortly afterwards the rain started to fall.

Phillips looked at his watch for the tenth time. He was standing in a small, rickety, wooden shelter just behind a bus stop. He gazed solemnly at the rain as it cascaded through the yellow light of the streetlamps. The raindrops could be seen for an instant, falling, almost seeming to have been slowed down in their earthbound passage. Above his head, he could hear their steady rhythm on the rooftop, a constant splashing repeated over and over again. The gusting wind directed the falling rain and rippled the puddles which reflected the streetlamps' eerie glow and sometimes the headlights of a passing car before it swept through and drove away into the darkness. Phillips felt damp and cold and looked at his watch in boredom. Droplets of water dribbled from the hole in the roof and struck the nape of his neck, trickling down his back and making him shiver.

He swore to himself and reached inside the breast pocket of his damp overcoat for a half empty pack of cigarettes. Thrusting one eagerly between his lips, he fumbled around his other pockets for some matches. Then he lit one, its small, red flame hissing into life and making his shadow crawl suddenly along the shelter's thin wooden rafters like a gigantic black fly. He sucked at the curling smoke hungrily, letting it drift inside his lungs for some time before exhaling. The rain started to get heavier, bouncing off the road and forging leaf-choked streams that surged along kerbs and tumbled into thirsty, dark drains. The swaying trees sighed and rustled in the wind, trying vainly to shake the moisture from their leaves.

And then from the distance he heard the thrumming of an engine. A bus approached, ploughing through the deluge. Pulling up his collar, Phillips stepped out of the shelter into the rain and waved his left arm, signalling the bus to stop. It was one of the older models, a double-decker with a curved roof. One of its yellow indicators suddenly flashed into life, blinking on and off, on and off as it pulled over. A smile formed on Phillips' face as he hastily boarded and breathed a sigh of relief at having found a warm and dry refuge from the worsening storm. The bell rang and the bus pulled away, ploughing through the watery roads once more.

He climbed the twisted stairs to the upper desk and made sure to choose a smoker's seat at the rear where he could finish his cigarette in peace. Though, it seemed, it was unlikely to matter since he had the upper



deck completely to himself. He coughed suddenly and loudly, a rattling noise from deep in his chest that echoed and lingered for too long in the empty stillness.

Then a sudden flash of lightning brilliantly lit up the interior of the bus and was chased by a mighty reverberating boom. The lights flickered for an instant and Phillips was afraid they might fail altogether; for some reason he did not care to be alone in the

dark. But they did only flicker.

Leaning back into his seat he rubbed at the steamed up window with his fist, clearing a small circle through which he could see. The pouring rain showed no sign of abating, droplets streaming along the window like transparent maggots. The water beat ferociously on the thin metal of the roof of the bus, a loud drumming noise accompanied by the scratching of branches as it passed underneath an overhanging mass of stunted trees. The diffuse light within the bus was in stark contrast to the hungry darkness without, a darkness that almost seemed to be trying to smother the streetlamps as the journey progressed.

The rain gushed from the heavens, a rushing, falling cataract, drowning the streets and hissing wildly in contempt. It was fascinating to watch, the streets empty of

people, the passage of life subdued.

He chuckled to himself. But the chuckle sounded offensive in the emptiness of the dark. Phillips was uneasy. He felt as if he'd wakened from a dream of drowning in a deep, still lake, only to hear the rain beating at the window, beating drumming, seeking entry.

He would have to get off soon. He tried to convince himself he was uneasy because he didn't want to get drenched again, but it was something deeper than that. He feared the rain. Its thunder sounded like rumbling laughter and the lightning its guide in its

efforts to seek him out.

But the bus ploughed on, and after a few minutes he could see his stop through the deluge. So he conquered his fears, dismissing them as the result of tiredness, his reason turning on them viciously. He jumped from the seat and went down the twisted stairs to the platform, pushing the buzzer at the bottom. The bus drew up with a squelching noise, splashing away puddles in an arc, and Phillips defiantly stepped off and strode into the pelting thunderstorm. The bus overtook him and drove away into the rainy night. He watched it disappear, its lights fading into the distance, leaving him feeling very alone indeed.

Then he turned a corner and emerged into

a long, deserted street that glistened with wetness, ripples on the surface of puddles making reflections seem ghostly and unreal. He could almost believe he'd crossed over into another dimension. He saw rubbish littered everywhere, old newspapers, yellowed and wet, flopping down the windy street like mindless things. Black gorged bin-liners were shoved up against brick walls, clinging like fat gelatinous slugs.

As he passed through the orange glare of the streetlamps, he hurried to the next. The dark gaps in between seemed engulfing, like liquid corridors of indian ink. And in contrast the houses that flanked the street were ablaze with light, the sound of televisions and music ebbing faintly from them, yet they seemed strangely distant to Phillips as he plodded onwards, getting wetter and wetter, colder and colder.

The rain washed on to his face, dribbling from his hair down the bridge of his nose. Occasionally he had to squint as droplets sprayed into his eyes, making it difficult to see clearly.

It was as he reached the middle of the street that he suddenly had an overwhelming impulse to look behind. His thoughts of the storm seeking him out crept back into his mind. His heart started to beat faster. He could feel it throbbing in his chest. The hissing of the pouring rain was deafening.

He turned around. There was nothing there. The rain-soaked street was deserted, but still the feeling of being pursued was not to be dismissed.

As he turned back and recontinued his slow, trudging march, another flash of lightning scorched across the sombre clouds, this time a ragged bolt that roared with a deafening crackle. Phillips stared upwards. The lightning was getting closer, and he counted the seconds between the flash and the thunder.

He hurried onwards, his legs moving more swiftly now, despite the lashing rain that impeded his progress and which had completely soaked through his clothes to the skin. But still the lightning blazed in blinding fury and the rumbling thunder was unbearably loud. Phillips knew something was after him.

Scattered by the howling wind, a spiral of mottled leaves spun about him. Rushing and rustling like a whirlpool. Phillips suddenly started to run, his breath coming in deep laboured gasps as his lungs tried to cope with the unaccustomed exertion.

He ran past half-recognised streets, the sodium yellow of streetlamps flashing past, dashing into the black gaps between each, before another burst of lightning turned everything into a stark whiteness. The rain cascaded to earth, a gushing deluge that became pools of concentric ripples and shallow lakes across pavements and reads through which Phillips plunged.

The swaying trees were clawing fingers that seemed to snatch at him, their lower branches tearing at his clothes as he fled, his heart thumping wildly, echoing louder, louder and ever louder in his throbbing head. And behind him was a hissing cacophony of rain. The flashes of lightning were getting nearer.

At last Phillips could flee no more. His breathing was a wheezing series of gulps, and his heart beat like a sledgehammer. His weak, tired legs gave way beneath him and he tumbled to the slippery wet pavement in utter exhaustion and despair.

And there was a flash of forked lightning most powerful of all that seemed to sear the very heavens and the leaden clouds writhed and reformed in billowing obeisance.

The shower poured from the sky with a monsoon-like precipitation and everything was a glistening sea of rain.

He lay, sprawled, broken and helpless in the puddles, his chesty gasps drowned by the stentorian voice of the rainfall.

The murky clouds were so low that they

seemed to brush the roofs and chimneys of the soaking houses. They raced across the city like a horde of shapeless phantoms. The sky a mass of formless grey and filled with the roaring of the squall. The city was drowned in gushing rivers.

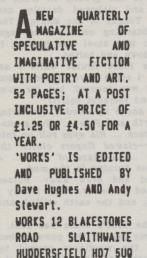
Phillips crawled across the street and up several slippery steps into an arched, dripping doorway. It was shadowy in the portal and he edged into one of the corners, seeking refuge. When he looked up at the rolling cloudbank he saw it was changing and that a nebulous maelstrom was projecting out from the mass, a formless thing composed of the storm itself, a blackened cloud of smog given life by the electrical fury of the lightning.

He lay, crouching and wet in the cold corner of the doorway awaiting his inevitable fate. The vaporous thing would be searching, streaking through abandoned, watery streets and alleyways, avenues and roads until it found him. Though Phillips would scream, he knew that the sound would become nothing but a gurgling choking as his lungs were filled with rainwater.

The streetlamps flickered. Once, twice.

Finally they went out and the sound of the falling rain hissed ominously in the darkness.

THE END





MAGAZINE WHICH PRIDES ITSELF ON QUALITY, BOTH FOR IT'S FICTION POETRY; WITH 6000 GRAPHICS AND ARTWORK WE HAVE FEATURED: Andy Darlington. Steve Sneyd, John Haines, Des Levis, Chris Reed, Pat Khan Steve Walter and John Light. THIS IS ALL IN \$1. WITH \$2 AND \$3 LOOKING EVEN

# THE STAR WIZARD

#### K. McNeil Kelly

Impaled across the barren, grey Ozark mountains, the blue-black clouds threatened our retreat. I watched, dismayed, as that murky nebula began to release its burden of hail, drawing a pale shroud across the mountain pass which was our last hope of escape from the Druids of Gahlach and their feral gnomish armies. I had no doubt it was their demonic power which held nature's most destructive creation transfixed thus.

Through no conscious thought, my right hand touched the scrap of vellum, well hidden inside my vest, which alone of the spells and incantations at my command, could still bring us victory over the pursuing armies of the druids.

The General, Lord Radeck, drew reign alongside my stalled wagon, fingering the silver talisman my old master, Eldrick Grey Cloak, had given him as protection against all magicks. I continued to study the hazards confronting us, ignoring him.

"Well ... wizard ... don't just stand there admirin' the view, dispel the bloody thing!" Radeck The Empty Headed (my private title for our brave leader) commanded of me above the skirl of the rising winds.

"I cannot. The powers which Summoned it

are too great."

"And here you had me believin' you were the most powerful sorcerer since Eldrick died," he mocked.

Annoyed, I began to fidget with the heavy

gold ring I wore on my right hand. A mystic ring, new forged by me, which, I was sure, would counter Radeck's charm. Perhaps the time had come for a test.

"Some great bloody sorcerer you are! Your weakness lost us the battle of Dunoon Plains - and now you're tellin' me you can't even work one little Banishment Spell?"

Angry, I leapt to the ground in front of Radeck's plumed and ribboned destrier and bespoke it in the Tongue of the Making. The beast screamed. Standing on its hind legs, churning frigid air with steel clad hooves, it threw its master down and bolted.

"There are nine Black Druids while I am but one. Yet still I could have protected our armies 'til victory was secured, but for your inept leadership and recreant spirit!"

I raise the ring above my head ... Mustering the spirits of Earth and Fire ... The ground splits beneath Radeck ... His eyes roll up into his head ... Fear-clawed fingers clutch the impotent talisman ... A blaze of fire ... A scream ... A carcass burning in the mud ...

Soldiers shouted and drew away. Horses screamed and bolted in terror. Until finally I did lower my arms, and the earth stilled, and the fires died.

For a moment the wind's voice was still. I experienced a fierce joy as the power ebbed from me, purging the weariness caused by weeks on the march, and the shame of the battle lost.

Climbing nimbly back on to the seat of my wagon, I stood, so that all present could see

and hear me clearly.

"Valiant warriors of Cordor, your master lies dead!" It took the simplest of charms to make my voice boom, deep and terrible, across the hillside. "But follow me across the Ozarks and into Dumoy, and at the circle of stones called the Dancing Maids, I will Summon a great and fearful power down from the heavens to destroy the Black Druids once and for all!"

Some cheered. Others scowled, their doubt etched clearly on their faces: a wizard for general? A thing unprecedented in all the

annals of warfare!

"The Hyenas are still squabbling over the bodies of the friends we left on Dunoon Plains! Have they died in vain?" I shouted, then lowered my voice to a bitter but carrying whisper.

"Ah, I see what it is: the best we left at Dunoon, what stands dithering before me here are the craven, those last into the fight and first to flee when the retreat was blown!"

Warriors drew their swords and beat them on their shields, shouting denials. For a moment, I thought they would attack me!

"Will you follow me?"

"Aye!" land basedyes sissessesses

The next day we marched into the storm. Many died in the following weeks, but at last, in the sixth week of my leadership, we outpaced the storm and came under happier skies to the forested lands of Dumoy. And four weeks beyond that, we reached barren moorland, and built our encampment within sight of the warped figures of the Dancing Maids.

As the last segment of orange sun fled the black horizon, I drank the first of three elixirs I had spent two days brewing. A smouldering pain seeped from my belly, infecting my limbs. Trembling as with the ague, I stumbled around the circle, painting the nine stones with the second elixir, and coming to the focus, anointed my mystic staff with the third.

As Lucifer, brightest of the three moons, pierced the blue-black veil of night, I began to chant the words of power. The Dancing Maids lit with an obscure inner glow, seeming to writhe and twist of their own accord. My trembling limbs stilled and I felt light, inconsequential.

The spirits of the stones begin their dance ... Glowing, naked bodies whirl and leap to a rhythm I cannot hear ... "Leave off chanting



Join us great mage!" ... I squeeze my eyelids tight - only to see them more clearly ... Large breasts ... Supple flesh ... Imploring looks ... Words fade from memory ... Hours pass ... The sky lightens ...

The unheard beat quickens ... Grows more frantic with the light ... Desperate ... The maids draw nearer ... Red light taints grey arms as they reach for me ... Craggy eyes beg

me to stop ...

With the last of my strength I plunge the yew staff into the earth ... A great beam of light leaps away from the carved head, up into the bluing heavens ... Power gone, the

spirits vanish ...

I staggered aside and fell beyond the ring. For many minutes I lay witless and unable to comprehend anything of the world. I came to myself only when my befuddled state was penetrated by the realisation that the dazzling light which shone from above could not possibly be the sun. Looking about, I noticed that the soldiers nearest me were all craning upwards, mouths agape. Some ran away, but quickly turned back, as if drawn by a string.

Suddenly a globe of light fell into the circle and hovered above my staff. Slowly, the light faded and a man stood revealed - a man of heroic proportions, with stern, warrior features and trunk and limbs as thick as those of the oak.

"I am your saviour!" he proclaimed in a huge, bass voice, which easily reached the sma' folk back at the camp.

"Follow me into battle against the Druids, and we shall destroy them utterly! For now that I stand once more upon green earth, no mortal power can hope to match my sorcery. Draw strength from my brilliance, all who share my glory, and let battle commence!'

A blue white light flowed all around us. Weariness dropped from the soldiers' faces, giving a strangely child-like aspect to their features. Yet it had no effect on me.

"Help me up?" I asked the star wizard, as he strode out of the stone ring. He paused, but only to look down and sneer.

"Your powers are exhausted, old man. Stripped away. These warriors, your lands,

they all belong to me now."

"Victory! Victory!" he shouted, and was echoed by a thousand voices. Knights mounted their destriers, foot soldiers snatched up their pikes, and the wizard led the column south to meet the Druids, leaving me paralysed and spent. It began to snow ...

THE END

### SONOMICON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

destination, and you need a destination or you ain't going nowhere. That is the logic instilled by the electroshock peace of the plug parlour. "Hey, Pig!" An unnatural, low, electronic voice spoke. Pig froze, his shoulders bunching up tight to protect his back from the knife that surely accompanied the voice from behind.

"Pigfan, freeze or eat sonic death!"

It was Sweesim. Pig needn't stop and turn round to see the blaster pointed at his back loaded with sonic attack, but he did anyway. And as he turned, little Sweesim flicked her hand over the dipswitches of the blaster, synthesizing choral music, of all the possibilities it contained, heavenly voices accompanied by a beatbox so hard and precise the street seemed to crack under the pressure. He laughed and grabbed at the musicblaster, they tug-of-warred with it, grinning, 'til he left off and Sweesim staggered back still giggling, the incongruous purity of the voices wowing and fluttering as the piezoelectric keyboard buckled and stretched, losing tension in the fight.

"Where you been, Sweesim? And turn off

damned stuff, already."

"I been around to see I friend, she play cello. We make music together. Go to party now. We play there."

"What a cello?"

"It a big violin. Not important. I..."

Pig waved her silent. "Where I go if I want quiet round here? You not right person to ask, obvious, but it possible." "Answer first, what a blood brain barrier?"

"What a what?"

"What a bood blain barrier?"

"A blood brain barrier? Blood vessel in brain have strong wall with overlap, stops chemical like antibody, painkiller, drugs and stuff affecting brain. It protect brain from poison in blood. Not much good since poison kill body and brain have nowhere to go. That why everyone die of AIDS. AIDS get in brain and drug not cross barrier."

"I read in Eventide Faksheet that Plug Dependence break down blood brain barrier. It not say why important. It a say bad thing, in

all."

Comprehension dawned. "Great! Pluggies get cured if they get AIDS. I a always said better than heroin. Cheaper also. Now tell I where I can be quiet. I want to think."

"You not know how, Pigfan. Better you come with me to warehouse party still going strong in Tottenham Road." "No, Sweesim, I've got a lot of sorting out to do. I'm not sleepy and I can't face my room. What good's a party anyway?" Pig realised his light grip on the streettalk accent had slipped again, but he thought someone like Sweesim would never notice. With her spun-sugar pink hair and pastel clothes she seemed as light as a fairycake from the Patisserie. She grabbed his arm and led him up the shockingly bright sunny side of the street.

They turned up into Tottenham Road, into the tides of trash left by the transitting

thousands.

"Sweesim, I not want a party." She stopped and stood almost solid in front of him, right hand on hip, left arm supporting the musicbox on her left shoulder.

"I a want you there, Pig. Why you call Pig anyway?" "Swee, you look like a Trilithon Madax Warrioid standing there aggressive like that. I can refuse you nothing, at least until I get more points and the Grylax Vord Swamp gives up its dead." Pig half lived in his videogames, and his metaphors were inevitably game references, universal symbols in the Amusement Arcade, of limited use outside. "Where I was born, up north, everybody a Moslem. All my friends, neighbors, Moslem. But my folks Chinese, like yours. We a had pork every day. All my friends say they smell I like a pig, lover of pig, a Pigfan." He'd never told anyone that.

"I not know you Chinese," said Sweesim, and spoke to him in Hokkien. Pig shook his

head.

"I not Chinese, folk adopt I."

They reached a derelict tenement block off the main street. From the upper windows issued a bulldozer of sound, sonic-cleaning huge volumes of air so that dust rained down around the shaggy-guttered building. In glee, Sweesim caressed the musicbox she carried, and a descant echo of the ferocious Click wailed from it, answering and reflecting the melody, counterpointing and complementing the beat. They walked to the tiny unwelcoming entrance and went on up the stairs.

Inside the dimly lit third floor lobby Pig could make out the shapes of partyfans sitting around. Some were animated shapes flitting a shadowshow along the walls, and some were dispirited, bent shapes sat morosely on the floor. They passed a group sharing an illegal plug, and Pig felt a twitch of need. Should he not bend down and join his seven fellows here with the eight-lead

plug, clearly in need of one more pluggie? But Sweesim pulled him on, searching for the sound-system heart of the party. They found the stax at last, in the fifth floor room with the south facing windows, the shattered safetyglass a cutup picture of the city from which searchlight beams flicked and swung, unable to impact the day. Sweesim laughed and danced, finding plenty of space in the room, half-emptied as it was by sound-pressure. Pig was deafened by the noise which seemed to hit his chest as hard as his ears, constricting his breathing. He ran out, needing silence more than ever.

He finished up in a lower room, surrounded by irritable Triad-Chinese. Still unable to hear for the uncompromising Click exploding through the room, he squinted into the mob of men grouped around the walls. Selfpreservation came back to the fore, and he started to look out and hustle, maneuvering until he got a look in, introducing himself, selling himself, getting into the swing. He'd just got to know a big Crack dealer called Orlandi when he turned around and caught a glance of, well, Leatherjacket. No mistaking that impassive Korean face. He excused himself and began to edge in that direction, finding the room perceptibly fuller and more viscous. Wherever he found himself wasn't near the Korean.

For five minutes he pushed and tunnelled around the jam-packed room, being inexcusably rude in an environment where an imagined slight may be fatal. He survived, but he saw no sign of Leatherjacket. He blazed into the next room, unnerved. No proof of the reemergence of Leatherjacket here; it was a bar. He bought a big drink with a stolen credit card. He bought another with another. He bought a third with a third. He had no cash and was rapidly drinking out his credit. What next? Find Sweesim and cadge a drink or find the White Spade? He left the bar and light-headed for the stairs.

On the third floor landing he paused again, looking at the loosely grouped pluggies. The normalcy of the scene, the routine, the tangible peer pressure hauled him towards them. One was reading a comicbook, one animatedly talking about cricket. Two argued over the parity protocol of the plug, and three dozed lightly. He walked over and picked up the spare plug.

"Hi, fellers, how's the juice?" he said, and stuck it in his ear.

When a dream turns to waking, it doesn't go away like a candleflame. It hovers and flickers, drifting out and in, so that hard facts and illogicalities coexist for a period, that time when you can cure cancer or speak Italian or your brother isn't dead. And you wake up and discover it isn't so; it was a dream, private and unmarketable, a useless husk of prior meaning. When Pig woke up from his hour of stupor the first thing he noticed was the TV; then the food; then the marshmallow mattress. He was still at Plug Caff. "Sharkey! I just dreamed I at a party,"

he said to no-one in particular. "I always in bed with I mother." said the man in the next pallet. "Means noth, that for sure. She a total hag." For a moment the party reassembled. He looked at the comicbook held near his face by an intense young guy in glasses: a Superhero comic, as evidenced by the darkling cover with its sketch of menace and power unleashed. Art: Frank Delgado, Pig guessed. Lettering by Ken Ota. He couldn't remember the Supe, tho'. A minor league hero, not yet a videogame. On the cover a young woman with Chinese eyes and babygirl pink hair sat cradling a Synspinet II. Sweesim! Or was she just part of the fantasy? He opened his mouth to speak to the image on the cover of the magazine, but before he could speak he was hit by studio lights.

According to the antitheft marking plates on the furniture he was in Footprint Satellite Studios. And Footprint was only famous for one programme: Hue Xen's death or slavery show, You Bet Your Life. Sweating under the lights, he heard Hue Xen's freezing soft voice wheedling him into a bet.

"You are known as Pigfan because of your, ah, predilection for pork, Mr Saunders?"

"That's right." Sharks, what a dream. If I dream I snuff, will I ever wake?

"Do you still eat much pork?"

"I can't afford pork, Mr Hue." Why I play along with this dangerous dude?

"I bet you can't eat my pork, Mr Saunders."

"I'm starving! I'll eat anything!" Why am I saying these things, why I not walk out, am I drugged? Why I not spit at this pirate, this murderer from Eireland? Next time he speak, answer: You fraud, this is a fit up. He tried, he forced himself. He said it. "It's a fit up!"

"You're telling me," said the guy in the next pallet, unexpectedly moving so that his shadow fell over Pig. "Pluggers promise you eternal joy an' all you get is sleep with you mom. It transgress Trade Description Act. What that music?"

"I not hear music." He was back in the Plug Caff. It was a dream, he should have tested the current. He should know to check the quality of plug after all these years. He heard the musicbox beat begin to grow in the background, thumping leaden and slow like a faulty audiotape. Not Sweesim. Consummate musician, his girl.

Not that he'd ever met her.

"Pig, run, run!"

"Sweesim, what is it?"

"Unplug and run. It's a raid. If they catch us we'll be deported. Warehouse parties are illegal. And you've been Intrudacammed confessing to a murder. Natokoku won't have you. You'll end up in Eireland as a body-slave or worse. Get up!" She was tugging and pulling at him. He got to his feet groggily. As he surfaced from the dreams, he turned to the guy with glasses, still placidly reading his comic, like a waxwork. "What comic are you reading, guy?"

"I reading 'White Spade'."

"Not know 'White Spade'," he said, hiding his shock. "White Spade scourge of Plug Dealers. He rove world freeing us from fear of being wired up for plug. He hate dealers, and kill them ingeniously. It well camp comic."

Before he could think of a reply, Sweesim tugged him off and they ran, down the firestairs and into the exit, and straight into the waiting Bolis net. Caught fast like the octopoid craft in Space Migrant Blastout.

It was an hour and a half before the Bolis made its mistake. Fingerprinted, stripped, redressed, photographed and charged with murder, the Bolismen put him and Sweesim in the same 'port, leaving her fully armed with the musicbox. She simply commanded the sonic lock to open, and they sashayed from the heavily armored caterpillar-track 'port and snuck out of the cordon as the Bolis rounded up remnants of the party from the heating ducts and liftshafts, storecupboards and service pipes.

"I can smell patchouli," he said.

"Synesthesia," said Sweesim. "Senses get mix up, so smell a light or see a sound or so on. Pluggie get it, wear down the demarcation in the brain with high voltage."

"No, smell I. It smell of Amusement Arcade in Day Street." "It reek, true, but we two klicks from there. Not able to smell it."

"It not synesthesia, I not smell any lights."
"Pigfan, I tell you now whole truth. I
member of White Spade Organisation. We exist
to save addicts. You in bad trouble now. All
your sense of time gone, you not even know
where you are. Chip Ah try to tell you about
danger and you ignore it. Chip Ah now dead.
You have to remember not to go to the Plug
Caff tonite. It dangerous. If you go, you will
be picked up by the Bolis at a party, and

deported. Slavery is all of existence in Eireland, that or gain freedom on Gladiator Shows like Hue Xen's."

"But it was you that took me to the party!"

"What you rave now?"

"Today is yesterday night!"

"Plug dangerous, you prove it by talk nonsense ... listen to you. I tried to tell you about blood brain barrier, and you say it good thing."

"I have to find a fone. There is time to warn me. If they get my fingerprints I'm a dead man!" He began to run about in circles, unable to know where to start. Then it occurred to him: follow the incense. He moved over to his left and followed the gradient of the smell, finally entering a dark office block on Tottenham Road. The beehivesmoke began to thicken and his hopes increased; he pushed against a heavy door.

And was in an arena, with a crowd screaming for blood all around. He was armed with a steaknife. It bore an antitheft label:

Footprint Studios.

He was about to eat pork or lose his life trying. The wild boar trotted in, and Pigfan smiled in relief; it was fat and happy looking, snuffling at the ground, checking out the territory. It scented him, then turned away. Pigfan gripped the knife. As he walked towards the pig, he heard a Thunk! and a dart protruded from the pig's back. Outraged and possibly drugged, the pig began to rush to and fro, grunting and squealing in fear and anger. Pigfan decided to rush it. With dogs he'd always been told to put his arm down their throat and kill them whilst they couldn't bite you. He could try the same strategy on the pig.

It might have worked, too. But before he could thrust out his arm, he felt a Thunk! and within seconds he began to feel disoriented and sick, waves of pain washing over his back. Presumably a gaudy feathered dart now projected from his own back. He staggered a little, dropped to his knees. Another dart hit the pig. His eyes began to close. How long, he thought, does it take a pig to eat a fan? The pig trotted up to him, and feinted, brushing its tusks across his cheeks. Oddly, it didn't have any smell. Satisfied that he was harmless the pig withdrew for a charge. He heard the squealing but he could no longer see the arena.

"Pig! I found a fone!" Sweesim dragged him from the office block.

Dazed and disoriented, Pig stared at her.
"It won't work. I haven't any cash and the
Bolis took my black credit cards." "I got my
box. We can hack robop. The automatic

exchange works on tones. Supply right tones and you connected." Pig was led to the fonebank and he punched 1111, and waited for robop to answer. Sweesim held her box to the handset. Synspinets were sold preprogrammed to hack fones. She covered her ears with her forearms and Pig had barely time to do the same before the catastrophic screech of the hack code cracked the glass of the main menu screen on the fone. He listened to the aimless piping and peeping of the robop exchange. The box got ready for another onslaught. After that, he got a dialling tone.

"What number you want?"

"0606182."

The box politely shrilled the code into the handset, and he heard his home code begin to bleep. He knew his real self now stood flattened against the door, heart triple beating in horror as the time-jammed fone lit up like the Thatcher Building on The Mall. But this time, he could tell himself what was going on, if he could remember his theory. He couldn't.

When he answered, all he had to say was don't go to the Plug Caff, but he couldn't speak. He heard Sweesim's box give the spiel about aliens. Ostensibly, it was talking to him, the caller, reminding him of Leather-jacket's words, chiding him for forgetting his lines. But it was carrying down the foneline to his other self, setting past events into motion. Presumably his mind supplied the lightshow, a deranged outpouring of sense data from his brain, damaged by withdrawal from plug; synesthesia. Probably the sound of the bleep set it off. He put down the phone and turned to Sweesim. He was inexplicably on his knees, facing sawdust.

This time he could smell the pig. He gripped the steaknife in both hands and held it steady in front of him as the pig charged, goring tusks covered in saliva, head caked in filth. He'd spent so long in the past that the drug was wearing off, and he knelt steady, holding the knife still as the pig ran onto it, then dropping down to one side to avoid the tusks. He was crushed under the weight of it, but its throat was cut. Another dart zonked into his back, but it was too late. The pig staggered to its feet, blood pouring onto the concrete. Pigfan stabbed it in the eye, and stood up despite the sapping pain of the dart, waiting for the pig to collapse. He carved a piece of skin and put it in his mouth, and he had won. These contests looked impossible on TV, but now he knew they were rigged. He hadn't been in much danger from this happy, stupid animal. He'd be a freeman of Eireland tonite, and Hue Xen would say: I thought you

were a fan of pigs, Mr Saunders. You seem to have damaged this one irreparably. He waited jubilantly for Sweesim's world to fade in around him. He waited five minutes. The invisible crowd had stopped in mid-cheer so that they bled a continuous low roar. He panicked and ran for the doors of the arena, and shook them open.

He went through into the attar-filled air of the Amusement Arcade. The Korean was waiting.

"What did you make of it, Pig? It better than a videogame." He indicated the cab-shaped game booth Pig had come from. Pig looked back. In garish holographic characters, the booth read 'SENSONOMICON' in English and Japanese.

"How long was I in there?" This transfor-

mation left him oddly unmoved.

"Twenty minutes, maybe. It seem a lifetime, I know. Every sense stimulated by coils. No surgery like with plug. You give brief description of plot on keyboard and machine gives you a whole adventure. Better than dreaming nasty sex on a pallet in a plug parlour. What did you do?" "I dreamed I was a plug addict." It all seemed clear to Pigfan now. The relief was unbelievable. Pity he was talking to the Korean as though he was a friend in real life. "Hah! Us White Spade not plug addict. Pledged to rid world of scourge of plug." They leaned into the booth and looked at the controls. The machine was flashing up the scenes it could synthesize onto its little screen; a girl with pink hair, evil Triadmen, a gaming arena, each tiny and faded looking. The genuine synthesized articles were brighter and unrealistically vivid, Pig knew. He got back in his seat. "I've just got some unfinished business in here," he said, getting out a stolen credit card. He read the name on it. Chip Ah, a Korean name. He put it in the slot. The world shrunk to a dot, and then reassembled.

Sweesim was standing waiting for him. "See, Pig, I tell you that fone yourself is illogic," she said. "You not able to say the words you want. This because plug breakdown temporal lobe of brain and time is nonsense to you after it happen. You not know anything it happen around you. Any moment now, the world change and aliens from outer space come blast you and you ..."

"Sweesim, I know more zoology than you think. The temporal lobe isn't concerned with time. It's called temporal because it's nearest

the temple."

"You have to believe me. It dangerous." Sweesim was sobbing now. "You get arrested and deported. You die. I love you, Pig, you a not die!"

"I not die, I go to Eireland and win freedom. I already done it. I not afraid of deportation." He began to get angry. "You don't exist. I can prove it. We'll go to the Amusement Arcade and I'll show you your archetype on the screen. You're the product of a ... a mad Japanese programmer!"

As he spoke, she seemed to flatten. A rainbow flickered across her features. It was the tungsten light fading on a color hologram. Then all he could see was the op-art moire of the unlit celluloid.

"I get you for this," said Sweesim's voice through her box. The sound crackled and broke up, the plastic of the Synspinet faded and buckled.

He heard a crack from above, and a shower of glass dropped past him. He looked up. The buildings around Tottenham Road were suddenly aged and deserted, long unused. He panicked and ran for the Tube Station; he could get a train home, out of the city, back to the peace of his home town.

Only one man was walking along the platform. One man and a thousand half-substantial ghosts. A suited man; this was the one he'd killed. With no crowds around it was a free gift. He could do it so easily. If he just walked away, what would happen? He walked outside and looked at the piles of trash that pocked the dilapidated limbo out there. He guessed that he would remain here until the man was dead; any other course was literally no real option. A typical videogame strategy to keep the punter on the programmed track.

The suited man walked provocatively near the edge of the platform, avoiding the ghosts. Making up his mind, Pig simply walked through them, stepped up to the man and tripped him. A train obligingly roared into the station and the ghosts began to scream thinly and panic, milling around and vomiting. Guessing at the exit to the Sensonomicon, Pig walked to the fotobooth and sat in front of the camera. The face that stared back from the mirror was a fifteen year old boy's. It looked familiar.

A vague, dark suited blur hovered above him.
"Mr Saunders, Mr Saunders. Wake up."

He looked up at the Mr Suit. He seemed different. Less dark, more normal. He tested his senses. He couldn't be sure, but this felt like reality. He was lying on a theatre trolley. "Where am I?"

"You're in Darkness, sir. You've been trying out the plug system we sell here, fully legal

and safe. You've been out for about two hours. I'm sure it was satisfactory, sir. Do you want to be fitted with the socket today? If we do it immediately, it saves giving you another local anesthetic. Less danger to you, and of course, cheaper."

"It was horrible, I'm not having that done to me. I've seen the future. I get deported and have to fight a boar. You can stuff your

plug."

His mind was made up. The Nato restrictions of his home town seemed sensible safeguards. All he'd wanted to escape from now had a use, a hedge against this predatory citylife and its terrifying drug dealers. He'd get the train home tonight. He got up to leave.

"Oh, we can't let you go yet, sir," said the man, getting a knife. He forced the struggling adolescent back onto the trolley and activated the headboard surgeria. Gasping at the sudden pain, Pigfan/Saunders fought himself upright, and remembering the window's properties, grabbed Mr Suit's knife and ran for the window. He plunged through it, and as he expected it didn't cut him to ribbons. It blebbed around him, encasing him in a thick, black, toffeelike shroud. He rolled onto the pavement, suffocating. He fought free of the caul-like covering, and stood looking for a

moment at the umbilicus linking it to the window. As he watched, the elastic window-material began to draw the thread back into itself. The window reconstituted, logo intacta. Darkness was not breached. He took some time to take stock. He was wearing a curious arab-type jellaba. He had no money or credit, presumably all still inside Darkness. No ID, no name. But from what he'd learned in the last two hours he could make a living on Day Street. He looked around at the curiously muted lights. The actinic property would come later, with addiction. He scratched his ear. The socket was firmly in place.

First he needed some money. When he spotted a Korean in a vid booth, whispering urgently in street argot, he recognised his opportunity. He crept under the camera angle and reached out to bury the knife in his

back.

"Sorry, Chip Ah," he whispered.

He took the credit cards and ID, but the fonecard had been drained. He ran for his life. Over the street a girl with pink hair waved at him.

Eventually he would be deported for murder and addiction. But he would survive, at least until the world changed and the aliens came.

THE END



# MAGAZINES

Prose EDGE DETECTOR, Glenn Grant, 1177 St-Marc, Montreal, Quebec, H3H 2E4, Canada. #1: A4, 36pp, \$3:50, 4/\$13. A hot new Canadian magazine sporting provocative and well written science fiction in a jazzy and imaginative presentation. Paul Di Filippo shows the trouble with the ultimate sexotechnology in "Modern Conveniences", whilst Glenn Grant explores marital trauma against a backdrop of western economic collapse when South American states withhold repayment of loans in "Darkness Falls from the Air". The disarmament theme gets a humourous and refreshingly original treatment in Mike Gunderloy's "Pea-Green Ploughshares" as 'glunks' are found to have an incredible appetite for gunpowder and high explosives. There's more fiction from Peter Lamborn Wilson, Esther Vincent and James Bailie, with comment by Rudy Rucker. Well illustrated and imaginatively designed, EDGE DETECTOR is a welcome addition to the small press scene.

GLOBAL TAPESTRY JOURNAL, Dave Cunliffe, Spring Bank, Longsight Road, Copster Green, Blackburn, Lancs BB1 9EU. #19: A5, 80pp, £1:50, 4/£5. Good to see GLOBAL TAPESTRY back in action after a lengthy layoff, but still in fine fighting form. A definite and more marked 'beat' feel to this issue, with tributes to Gregory Corso and Neal Cassady, plus a review of Gary Snyder's travelogue 'Passage Through India', as well as the usual crop of poems and short prose and the extensive international review section. Always a meaty read!

OUROBOROS, Erskine Carter, 3216 13th Avenue, Rock Island, IL 61201, USA. #7: A5, 80pp, \$4. Horror stories galore to make your spine run cold in this special Halloween issue dedicated to the ghosts of drive-in theatres past. Some of the stories were not my chalice of blood, heh! heh!, but certainly value for money.

NEW PATHWAYS into science fiction &

fantasy, c/o MGA Services, PO Box 863994, Plano, TX 75086-3994 USA. #10: A4, 40pp, \$4. A special anniversary edition of this highly polished Stateside magazine, with Brian Aldiss, Michael Blumlein, Matt Howarth and John Shirley among those adding to the festivities, so satisfaction's guaranteed. #11: A4, 40pp, \$4. Another good issue, with stories by Meredith Rolley, Paul Di Filippo and firm favourite Don Webb to tickle your fancy, and Alfred Klosterman's fine graphics in proliferation.

NOCTULPA, George Hatch, PO Box 5175, Long Island City, New York 11105, USA. #2: A5, 92pp, \$4. A fine offering from this new horror magazine, with slick presentation and very good artwork to back up the stories. Especially pleasing were 'The Sacrifice' by Miroslaw Lipinski and David Starkey's 20 page novella chapbook insert 'Gnostic'.

SPACE & TIME, Gordon Linzner, 138 W. 70th Street (4B), New York 10023-4432 USA. #74: A5, 120pp, \$4. A consistently enjoyable crop of highly original sf and fantasy short stories. More a horror emphasis in this issue with 'The Car Park' by Jan Bee Landman, a well crafted tale of urban terror, and Doug Beason's 'The Third Option' of particular note. Always worth investigating.

WORKS, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ. #1: A5, 52pp, £1:25. A brand new speculative fiction magazine from Dave Hughes and Andy Stewart, and a very impressive first effort it is too. Solid prose from John Avison, Des Lewis and Simon Nicholson, plus a longer story called "Cafe Shut" from John Light. There's also poetry from Terry Broome, J.F. Haines and Steve Sneyd, but the highlight of the magazine is part one of "Isis", a novelette by Andy Darlington to be concluded next issue. The overall presentation is very good, with imaginative use of design and striking illustrations by newcomer Steve Walker. An impressive first issue, and sure to go from strength to strength.

#### Poetry

FIVE LEAVES LEFT, Richard Mason, Flat 7, 4 Chestnut Avenue, Headingley, Leeds LS6 1BA. #6: A4, 24pp, \$1:50/\$3. One of the most visually attractive poetry magazines to have come my way for a long, long time. Designer and co-editor Sharron Astbury certainly knows how to make the most of the glossy large format, and together with the good quality poetry, stories, art and reviews this makes FIVE LEAVES LEFT highly recommendable.

KRAX, Andy Robson, 63 Dixon Lane, Leeds LS12 4RR. #24: A5, 52pp, £1:25/\$2. A bastion of the poetry small press, this issue with a special photo report of the National Convention of Small Presses at Corby last year.

NEW HOPE INTERNATIONAL, Gerald England, 23 Gambrel Bank Road, Ashton-under-Lyne, OL6 8TW. #11: A5, 32pp, \$1:25/\$3. Poetry by Eddie Flintoff, Colin Nixon, David R. Morgan and others. 1988 Review Supplement with over 60 books and magazines A5, 28pp, 75p/\$1 or free to subscribers.

#### Market

FACTSHEET FIVE, Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Avenue, Rensselaer, NY 12144-4502 USA. #26: A4, 72pp, \$5. Over 500 magazine reviews, plus articles, letters, books and music. Extremely valuable reference material if you want to know more about the US small press - check it out.

LIGHT'S LIST OF LITERARY MAGAZINES 1988, John Light, The Light House, 29 Longfield Road, Tring, Herts HP23 4DG. A5, 8pp, 30p + SAE. Names and addresses of over 180 UK small press magazines of prose, poetry and art for readers and writers alike.

SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER, Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523-1329. #52: A5, 28pp, 12/\$16. An extra large edition of this important and influential market magazine sporting reviews and information from both sides of the Atlantic. A firm favourite.

#### Collections

SUBVERSIVE ART AT POPULAR PRICES by Andy Darlington, from Purple Heather Publications, Richard Mason, Flat 7, 4 Chestnut Avenue, Headingley, Leeds LS6 1BA.

A5, 24pp, \$1:50/\$3. An interesting collection from this ever-popular writer and journalist. Readers of BACK BRAIN RECLUSE will probably only be familiar with Andy's prose work, but fifteen years as a gigging poet means his verse is equally vibrant and hardhitting.

JOAQUIN (IN THE FOG) by Peter Plate, from Autofiction Series, 1844 Foothill Boulevard, Oakland, CA 94606, USA. A5, 80pp, \$4:00. I had the extremely good fortune of catching Peter Plate live at Leeds Alternative Cabaret in June, in which he held the audience totally captive for half an hour as he recited work about his childhood in San Bernardino. That magic is recreated in this short novel, again drawn from his own experience, whilst incorporating popular Californian folklore and the story of the outlaw Joaquin Murrieta. The economic style is packed with imagery which builds up a unique vision of west coast society.

#### Miscellaneous

SHARK TACTICS, Mike Cobley, 18 Athole Gardens, Hillhead, Glasgow G12 9BA. #5: A5, 4pp, 20p. Short but sharp newsletter format magazine with outspoken reviews and articles on sf and current affairs. What the cosseted business needs to give it a well-needed boot up the backside. Why don't the people who matter take notice?

### Classified Adverts

CLOSE TO THE EDGE, John Winder, 170 St. Osyth Road, Clacton, Essex CO15 3HD. #1: A5, 40pp, 90p/\$3. Fantasy and horror, fiction and artwork.

THE EDGE: A magazine of imaginative writing. Science fiction, fantasy, horror, criticism, reviews. Issue #1, 32 A4 pages, available November, £1:30 including postage. Cheques etc payable to G. Evans. Contributions welcome: short stories, articles, poetry. 56 Writtle Road, Chelmsford, Essex. CM1 3BU.

ALL PRICES ARE FOR UK ONLY AND INCLUDE POST AND PACKING UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED -:- ALWAYS TRY TO INCLUDE AN S.A.E. IF ONLY WRITING FOR INFORMATION -:- PLEASE MENTION BACK BRAIN RECLUSE WHEN WRITING TO OTHER MAGAZINES.

## LETTERS

Peter Tennant, 9 Henry Cross Close, Ship-dham, Thetford, Norfolk IP25 7LQ.

Thanks for sending me BBR #10.

"The Technophobe" by Lyle Hopwood is one of, if not the best story you have published, at least since I've been reading the magazine. It took the streetwise dialect and hi-tech inventiveness of the best cyberpunk, added a classical touch uniquely its own and presented the whole package in a neat and compulsively readable plot. I was reminded of both Chandler and Dick, whom I love, and yet Lyle has his own distinct voice that owes nothing to genre trends. An excellent story with real characters and a convincing backcloth, one that leaves you begging for more, please.

After such quality "The Idol in the Office" by Tom Farbman was disappointing. The story goes nowhere, though it seems to promise much, and in the end simply doesn't make

much sense, at least to me.

Benson Herbert's "Checkmate" was better. Stories with a 'chess' theme are hardly original and game playing aliens are a dime a dozen. But it was intriguing enough to hold my interest and competently written if at times prone to go over the top. Having said all of which I felt the ending, reminiscent of Van Vogt's Anarchistic Colossus with its alien game players, was a letdown, a total copout.

"Cathode Waltz" by Tim Nickels seemed to ramble, but I liked the feel of it, the jazziness if you care for the term. Tim writes well though perhaps he needs to organize his

material to a more pointed effect.

Simon Clark's "Dream the Real" started well, strong characters in an intriguing situation, one fraught with unseen potential, only to peter out in self-indulgent whimsy. I've nothing against either whimsy or self-indulgence in literature but I like to feel I can share in the fun. With this story I felt excluded. Something important was taking place but the author didn't really let me in on it.

Some excellent poetry this time around and some superb art, as ever. I especially took great pleasure in the SMS cover and interior work by Dallas Goffin. Both artists use monochrome to devastating effect.

Reading it through this letter seems rather negative, at least as regards fiction, which is a false impression as I liked the magazine very much and generally speaking consider BBR to be among the best publications on the small press scene. I suppose it is easier to damn than praise, but at least the criticism arises, I hope, out of genuine sympathy with what you're trying to accomplish. Keep up the good work.

Andrew Graham, 112 First Avenue, Bush Hill Park, Enfield, Middx. EN1 1BP.

A few words about BBR #8 and #9. #8 I liked a lot - most of the contents were good, though I particularly liked "Music to the Ears" by John Light and "Ground Control" by Wayne Allen Sallee, though I can't really say why. #9 - the Bob Shaw interview was interesting, but far and away the best thing was Andy Darlington's "Invisible City / Underground Music", just for the mood it created, perfectly complemented by the at times Cawthorn-ish artwork. And also, of course, the content of the story was thought provoking, for example the bit about value judgements, and so on. Deciding which statements the author makes I agree with, or disagree with, to whatever reservation / degree, was interesting ... fun, even. The rest of issue #9, by comparison, in terms of fiction, I felt was quite poor - they seemed quite shallow, or even whimsical at times.

Tim Nickels, Terrapins Inn, Buckley Street, Salcombe. South Devon TQ8 8DD.

Thanks for sending on BBR #10. You did a tremendous job on "Cathode Waltz" and Matt Brooker's illustration was just perfect. A real bonus. Can you thank him most warmly for me?

"Dream the Real" by Simon Clark was fantastic. The true power of mystery ... I think the story is just about the best piece that I have read in your magazine.

Dave Hughes, Works, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ.

Cover: Better! Nice to see it adopting the more usual standard set by BBR, not that the artwork was bad on BBR #9, just wrong for the cover of BBR.

"Technophobe": superb - must be one of the best small press sf stories I've ever seen.

Good and, surprisingly effective use of the Chandler type of dialogue. Nice characterization and excellent use of technical gadgetry - a true Bo Derek story ... 10/10.

a true Bo Derek story ... 10/10.
"Idol in the Office": Nice twist in the tale
with this story:- obsession:- paranoia. Hope

the holiday cures the guy!

"Checkmate": This story seemed so dated—I don't mean this in any way derogatory—but I couldn't help remembering those old Golden Age of SF that Asimov edited—remember? Cleverly done, that's if it was intentional. A trifle overlong for such an 'appropriate' ending (Orwellian rewards?). A good 'Old Boys' adventure. Nice illo. This story should be read by candlelight!

"Passenger": The other poems in *BBR* #10 didn't seem to click for me, but this one is brilliant. I seem to remember that I liked Ray Jon from other small press mags. Good man.

Send me some.

"Cathode Waltz": Incredible over-use of his name 'Fido'. The name itself attracts the reader's attention straight away because of the association with a dog. In the first one and a half columns there are too many 'Fido's. Seeing as there's no one else in the story up until then it begs the question is this necessary? The story didn't really gel with me I'm afraid.

"Dream the Real": Liked this one! I don't know why - nice and vague in many respects, didn't patronise me by explaining too much, if you know what I mean. I guess it was the mood it invoked. Nicely told and complemented by one of the best Matt Brooker illos I've seen. Matt deserves a pat on the back for being so varied in style.

Overall: Bad thing putting "Technophobe" where you did. Instead of building us up to it gently, you blast our minds with it, and then the others seem pretty tame. Perhaps it might have been better, like they do with various stage acts, to put the strongest on last.

Nice and clean, efficient looking, as always. Another problem that seems to occur quite a lot with BBR is the overkill with adverts of BBR subs and/or back issues. There are three and a half sides, that qualifies another short story! The one advert (the half page one) says everything, the others just confirm it with different illos.

The magazine section of BBR is a nice and refreshing read - not only does it offer diversion after (or during) the fiction, it also highlights other markets - hence the title!

Saying all the above, though, I still maintain that BBR is still one of the most attractively produced small press mags - I know of one magazine which has learnt a lot

from its presentation and marketing. Well, we have to blame someone don't we!

Rudi Rubberoid, The Rubber Fanzine, PO Box 2432, Bellingham, WA 98227-2432, USA.

I loaned a couple of the issues of BBR to various people with Outstanding Good Taste. The reaction was curiously similar. All of them had unreserved praise for production values and artwork. Most thought you do an incredible job of makeup and book design, type choice and layout and that you have some outstandingly spiffy artists doing for you. The same people, alas, thought that the written contributions were quite disappointing and not up to the graphic standards of the magazine, generally speaking. I suspect that part of the problem is that all of these people are SF Fans and more than usually articulate and literate and their standards are pretty high. But I pass this on to you for what it's worth ... Personally, I would not be as strong about it as some of them were, but there were a number of stories in BBR that I really wondered at. Not that they were all that bad, they just weren't very good, by my standards. Most of my friends wistfully wished that there were even one American zine that looked half as good as BBR. You do a helluva job!

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