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MC AND PUBLICATIONS

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Paul Di Filippo
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"Cloning Jesus"
S. C. Bryce

Reviews by
Steve Sawicki



Spring 2001 \$4.95



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Cometh!

D.E.H. 99

"The Tower" by Frank Wu, for *Darkling Plain* Issue no. 1



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STORIES OF THE IMAGINATION FANTASTIC®

Spring 2001

Fiction

<i>Joey's Machine</i> by Daniel J. Maines	5
<i>Cindy</i> by James S. Dorr	11
<i>Cloning Jesus</i> by S. C. Bryce	17
<i>Lifeforce</i> by Edo van Belkom	27
<i>Sensory Destruction</i> by Edward J. McFadden III	31
<i>Karuna, Inc.</i> by Paul Di Filippo	37

Poetry

<i>The Stars Forgotten</i> by G. O. Clark	8
<i>Rainbow in the Darkness</i> by Bobbi Sinha-Morey	8
<i>Whatever She Needs</i> by Timons Esaias	14

Nonfiction

Ed-itorial	2
Fantastic Bookshelf: Reviews by Steve Sawicki	23
The Lord of the Rings Cometh: Report #1 by Ed McFadden	33

Cover art by Dominic Emile Harman; interior art by Frank Wu.

Ed-itorial

I remember vividly the day I finished reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time—holed-up in my mother's apartment, reading every spare moment. I was so eager to reach the conclusion. But when I did finish, the sense of loss was so great, I re-read the trilogy, starting at the beginning on the very same day that I had reached the end. (See my ramblings on the *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy in this issue.) That was over 20 years ago and I can't recall having that feeling since—with respect to entertainment—until last night when I watched Kelly's torch get extinguished making Richard Hatch the sole Survivor. Yes, as I write this part of the editorial it is the day after the final episode of *Survivor*. There were many people who criticized this show—and its viewers. "Ed, you're smarter than that." "Ed, why do you find that show entertaining. It's so stupid." And so on. But I have never been one to be affected by others and I went on watching my show, and one by one those who criticized came around. Many thought this show displayed the worst in the human adventure. I disagree. The show was extremely compelling and I had a great time watching it. It was a game. Plain and simple. No different than office politics, friends and family screwing each other over money, football players trying to knock the heads off other players, and so on. In a way *Survivor* was more pure . . . at least everyone knew why they were there.

Did I mention that I picked Richard to win? And as a result my wife [had] to cut the grass for a month! I will miss this show, as I'm sure, like most things, the second time around will be but a shadow of the original. I will apply for this show and maybe that will be my fifteen minutes. But for now the tribe has spoken.

I recently received Circler Press' new catalogue. This press is doing some excellent work in the field of SF/F erotica. If you would like a copy of the catalog, e-mail Ceclia Tan at ctan@circler.com and she will send you a copy. Read on and enjoy. . . .

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Edward J. McFadden

Publisher

Warren Lapine

Associate Editor

Patrick Thomas

Administrative Assistants

Dawn McFadden

Carol Joyce

Layout & Design

Angela Kessler

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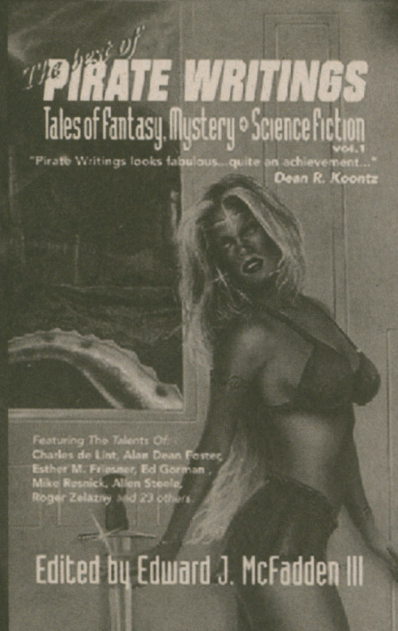
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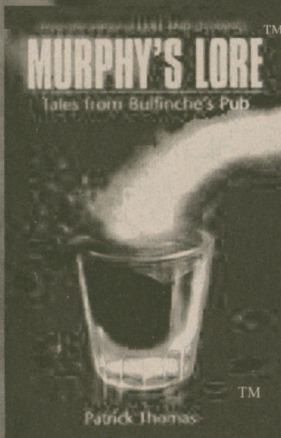
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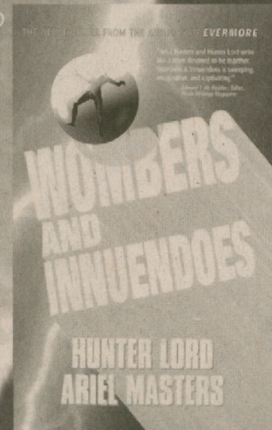
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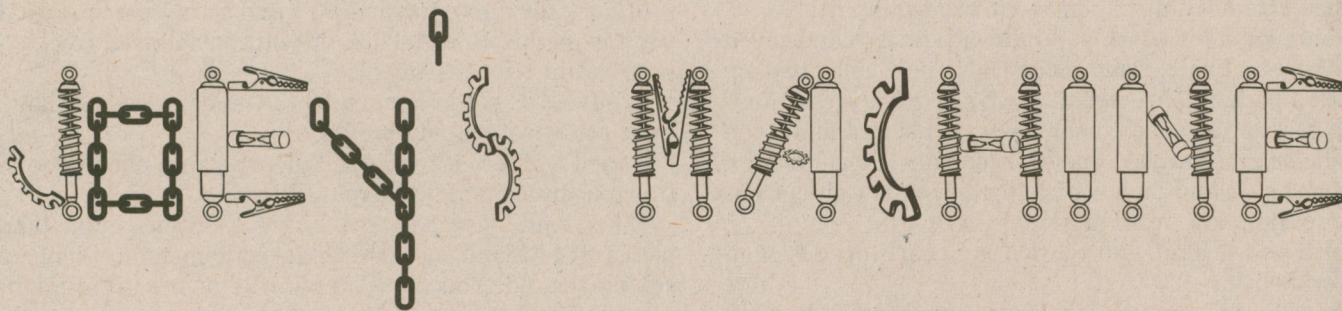
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"Joey's Machine" marks Daniel's second short fiction sale. His first was a more mainstream piece for Biker Magazine. Daniel holds a day job as an industrial mechanic, dealing with a large variety of lubricants on a daily basis. This, coupled with an overheard argument between two bikers as to why their scooters leaked oil, formed the inspiration for "Joey's Machine."



by Daniel J. Maines

My scooter started running rough just before I got home from a putt into town for lunch. Stumbling at a high RPM, just as I was ready to shift, ticked me off. After all the time and money I had put into it, I wanted to hear a sweet-running motor.

Then I saw this little skinny dude hanging around the door to my shop, and that really scalded my ass. I wheeled up the driveway and cracked the throttle a couple of times. A staccato burst of backfire made him flinch. Must be running a little rich.

I killed the bike and pulled off my skullcap, the smallest motorcycle helmet legal in this state. The wind in my beard and what's left of my hair is one reason I ride. I scowled at him.

He smiled back at me, or at least his mouth did, with lips the color of raw hamburger that's set on the counter too long. His eyes were hidden by mirrored shades, his head by a wide-brimmed fedora, and the rest of him by a gray trench coat with the collar pulled up, his hands stuffed in the pockets. The skin I could see was white. I don't mean just pale, I mean white as bleached bone. I tagged him as a bill collector, repo man, or a refugee from some old private-eye movie. Maybe all three.

He said, "You are Joey's Machine?"

"Close enough. I'm Joey Graham."

The sign at the end of my driveway had been pummeled by the snowplow last winter, losing the piece that said "Shop." I stepped off the bike, angling away from him. He seemed kind of like a wise-guy; his voice had an odd lilt to it. I didn't like the way he kept his hands concealed, and I wanted room to operate.

"I am John Smith and I have a proposition for you."

John Smith, yeah right, and I'm the frigging king of England. I eased closer to the scrap metal pile at the corner of the stop. The three-foot length of damaged drive shaft sticking out of the heap would do just fine. I don't like strange dudes showing up with propositions.

There's a reason for the "No Colors" sign on my shop door. I ride solo and like it that way, but I did do repair work for several different clubs. No telling if one of them had a new enemy.

John Smith said, "Would you be interested in creating a machine for me? It is a simple device. The output will be a type of lubricant better than anything you have used."

Uh oh. An Inventor. This rural county seems to breed them like flies. Must be something in the water.

I said, "Listen, Smith, or whatever your name is, I got too much paying work to do to mess around with some dork with probably no money who thinks he's got the best idea since cold beer, all right?" I grabbed the length of shaft and yanked it out of the scrap pile. "Just hoof it on out of here."

He must have walked from somewhere. Other than my bike, there was no other vehicle in sight.

He pulled his gloved hands out of his coat pockets and held them palms up. His fingers and palms looked too big and fat to go with the rest of his skinny body.

"I have money." One hand flashed into a pocket. He pulled a thick sheaf of C-notes out of his coat and fanned them. "I will buy all materials necessary for the construction and pay you fairly for the work. Five thousand of these dollars. I also buy speed. The machine must have an output tomorrow."

My eyes popped at the sight of all that green. I had two bikes inside to put back together and some machining work to do for a local farmer, but money talks.

I dropped the drive shaft and stepped around him to unlock the shop door. I caught a sweet whiff of coconuts and apples. Must be sunscreen for that fishbelly-white skin.

"Step into my office, Mr. John Smith. Right now, I want to know what happens if your machine doesn't make what you hope it does. Do I still get paid?" I had wired the overhead fluorescent lights into a motion sensor and they came on as soon as we stepped in.

"It will make the required substance. And you will be paid." He pulled out that wad again and counted off ten bills. "This is for you, in addition to your payment, just for speaking with me."

I took the money. It felt real, crisp but not brand new, and smelled good. I checked the serial numbers. None of them matched, so I stuffed the bills into my jeans pocket.

He said, "I have a small amount of the lubricant I wish to produce with me. My original machine was destroyed in

a fire, along with most of my supply of the fluid, but I saved enough to make a demonstration for you."

"Show me what you've got, Smith. You paid a grand to talk to me, do it up!"

"I will require a small metal sphere and an enclosure, this size." He held his hands about two feet apart.

I'd once cut a big bearing in half with a torch and saved the shiny steel balls from inside it. No particular reason, I'm just a pack rat. I rooted through several layers of junk at the back of the bench, near the wall, before I found the old coffee can. I grabbed one of those balls, bigger than a ping-pong ball, and then used a rag to wipe the sludge out of the round pan I drain used oil into.

Smith said, "Here," and pointed to a nearly open spot on my workbench.

I shoved some parts and tools aside and pushed the pan in. The smell of coconuts and apples was stronger now.

"Give the sphere a gentle rotation into the container."

I gave it a little more than "gentle," and the ball spun to the edge of the pan and rolled around twice before stopping.

I said, "Yeah, now what?" and snagged the ball.

John produced a perfume sample-sized vial from his coat and let a small splash of colorless liquid fall into the center of the pan. He tilted the pan to spread the stuff around and then took his hands away from it.

"Do it again, only with less force."

I don't like being told what to do, so I ignored his direction and gave the ball an even harder spin into the pan. It slid through that stuff and started rolling around the bottom edge of the pan like it was always downhill. It didn't gain speed, but it didn't slow down and stop, either.

I watched it for a few seconds and scratched my balding head through my bandanna. The ball didn't seem to be losing any speed that I could see.

"What do you call this stuff, Smith?"

"It is lubricant. It reduces friction and removes heat by preventing direct contact between moving components."

"I know what a lubricant does." The steel ball was just now beginning to slow down. In another minute it finally stopped. Slippery, it took two tries to pick up.

I combed my fingers through the length of my beard and said, "I'll build your machine, but we're going to need a better name than just 'Lubricant.' Although 'Lube' might be a good seller." In my mind, I was already his partner. "If this stuff can work as well in an engine or transmission, we're going to put OPEC out of business! You don't make it out of crude oil, do you? In any case, I want a taste of the profits instead of a flat fee. Say, ten percent?" The smell of coconuts and apples was getting into my head, so I lit a smoke. Smith coughed and stepped back.

"I wish to buy your services only. The building can be done by any person."

"Not in this county." Greed got the better of me. I was fired up. I huffed on my smoke and Smith stepped back again. "You said you wanted results tomorrow. You're short on time, maybe you have a product demo scheduled? I'm your man, but now I want fifteen percent."

"You will be disappointed by a percentage. I might sell the concept for a dollar, or it may prove to be impractical to produce on a large scale. You should take the money."

Nobody could be whacked enough to let the patent to a

super lubricant go for anything less than a firstborn child. I had heard rumors of big oil companies buying up and sitting on the patents to new ideas that might replace petroleum, but I figured I had him over a barrel. All I saw was dollar signs.

"Every time you put me off, I add to my percentage. I want in on this, Smith! I'll build your machine for free, but now I want twenty percent."

"You will do better if you take the money, Joey Graham. I am not certain of any profits."

I tried a different tack. "Tell me what you need to build this machine, and I'll tell you if I have it."

Like I said, I'm a pack rat. I have a shitload of bits and pieces of industrial and commercial equipment and vehicles sitting around. You never know when something might come in handy.

John Smith said, "I have looked at your stock; some elements can be adapted. A diagram of the complete assembly would best illustrate the components required."

Stubbing out my smoke, I rummaged around the bench and through my toolbox, coming up with an old spiral-bound notebook and a pencil stub. I made as if to hand them to Smith, but he shook his head.

"You make the diagram. I am too clumsy. My hands were burned in the fire that destroyed my machine."

That explained the gloves, anyway. I opened the battered notebook and waited.

Smith stepped closer and I could smell his sunscreen again. "First is an airtight vessel that can be internally pressurized to . . ." He stopped and looked like he was mentally converting from that damn metric system. "Pressurized to two hundred fifty pounds per square inch and heated above the boiling point of water at this atmospheric pressure. The outlet will have a gate that can be closed and opened electrically."

I drew two circles and labeled them "compressor" and "heated receiver," then added a solenoid valve to the receiver.

Smith went on for twenty minutes, until my diagram covered three pages and included six air-tight tanks, a vacuum pump, several heat exchangers, three UV lamps, a couple of large magnets, chilled water supply, fluid pumps, and twenty four solenoid valves.

When he finally finished, I said, "I have all the larger pieces of equipment we'll need, including a number of truck radiators that will do nicely as heat exchangers. The only things you'll need to buy are the magnets, a couple of fluid pumps, hoses and valves, pipe fittings, and some electric wire for control power. Should be able to pick it all up for a couple of grand. How are you planning to operate this dingus? We're not moving a lot of volume, but you've got a lot of shit happening at once, here."

"I have a controller that will correctly sequence each step of the process. First, I want to see where your power supply is. Then, I want you to extend the power leads from each component to that location. I will manipulate those final connections myself."

I briefly wondered how his logic controller could take 480 volts and apply it directly to the mishmash of voltage requirements we were setting up, without any motor starters or transformers. A sudden vision of a slot machine

coming up all apples and coconuts and showering me with money pushed any doubts out of my head.

Smith said, "Will your power supply handle this demand?"

"No problem. I've got 600 amp service here. Give me some pipe sizes and I'll have the materials here in a few hours."

I called an industrial supply house in the city. I had used them before, and the promise of an extra five bills C.O.D. got the fifty-mile delivery limit extended as well as guaranteeing same-afternoon service. I would use half the grand Smith had given me, if I had to. It could be worth it, in the long run. Showing commitment might help convince Smith to make me a partner.

By the time the supplies were delivered, I had used my little electric forklift to clear a space on the shop floor and move the major components of the machine into rough alignment.

Smith paid the whole bill without a quibble, although his roll was getting noticeably smaller.

I put the CLOSED sign in the lone window and pulled the shade. From then on, Smith was always standing too close to me; coconut and apple sweetness overpowered even the sharp stink of the welder.

Usually I don't let anybody hover over me like that, but then I didn't knock off for a brew and a smoke either. I heard some bros stop by the shop, but their voices faded into an orchard of apples and coconuts. I made up hoses and fittings, ran pipe, bolted flanges, bent tubing, and installed pumps and valves until my stomach felt like my throat had been cut and I was dying for a smoke.

"Smith, it's four-thirty in the morning and I'm done. I'm gonna make me some chow, slam a few beers, and catch some Zs. You wanna crash on my couch?"

"No, Joey Graham, I will continue working. You must do what you require to survive."

"All right. Just don't answer the door. The machine will pick up any phone calls."

Any uneasiness I felt at leaving Smith alone in my shop was pushed into the background by a full belly with brews on top. He was an okay guy. With lots of money. A quick shower made the slide into the sheets extra sweet.

I dreamed of a huge segmented worm. The alternating apples and coconuts that made up its body ground together as it backed me into a corner and asked, "Don't you want to know?"

A rumbling, hissing clatter kicked my ass awake. Jumping into my jeans, I glanced at the clock. Nine. Three hours sleep doesn't cut it with me. I bounced gently off the walls on my way to the shop.

That damn door clipped my bare foot as I hopped through the opening, dancing the Stuffed Toe.

Smith never even noticed. Valves opened and shut, motors turned on and off at his command. His arms were a blur of motion around a block of what looked like soft pink granite. He would push the stripped end of a wire into it and then pinch different areas of the block in a kind of sequence.

My eyes weren't working too good and my purple toe was screaming behind the fuzziness of too little sleep, but Smith's hands, even wrapped in bandages, seemed to have

too many fingers, with even littler fingers on the ends.

He finally saw me and turned quickly away. When he turned back, he had his gloves on again, to go with the coat and hat he still wore.

I opened my mouth to ask about that block he was sticking wires into. If it was a new type of programmable logic controller, maybe based on the semi-organic computer research I'd been reading about, it was worth more than the lubricant.

Smith pulled off his shades. His eyes were startlingly green on black. He stepped close and the incense of coconuts and apples thickened in my head.

"Joey Graham, go back to sleep for a period of eight hours. Remember I advised you against a percentage."

That all came rushing back to me when I woke up at five-thirty that afternoon. Especially the memory of his eyes, deep-set oceans of emerald and ebony.

This time when I rushed out to the shop, it was quiet, and I didn't stub my toe.

That clumsy collection of equipment was silent and the pink block was gone, the wires leading to it cut off short. Smith was gone, too, but there was a fat envelope on the bench.

I opened it and counted five grand. Then I took that fucking machine apart, down to parade rest. I don't know what Smith used to start the process, but all I found was some smelly black sludge in the first tank.

The money spent just fine. It's been almost six months now since I threw a party for some of my bros and used the rest to buy a really nice milling machine for the shop, and no Feds have come knocking on my door, asking me about



funny money. If Smith was trying to scam me, where's his payoff? He could make people give him all the green he wanted with that coconuts and apples smell trick.

It had to be the new lubricant he was after, but I haven't seen anything on the news or read anything about a super lubricant or any new technology for logic controllers. That's got me thinking.

What if Smith was stranded here? Fires can happen anywhere, even on a well-constructed vehicle. What if he was not from this here-and-now, and his vessel needed a

certain fluid in order to operate and all he had on board was lost in a fire, leaving him marooned? What if he had to get by with a primitive local technology? If it was me, I would do what was necessary to get my ass home. Beg, borrow, or steal.

I do wish he'd left me a sample. He'd even wiped clean my oil drain pan from his demo.

My scoot probably would have run like a raped ape with that stuff in the oil tank. Wouldn't have lasted long though.

Everybody knows vintage American motorcycles leak oil.

THE STARS FORGOTTEN

by G. O. Clark

Damaged telescopes,
stuffed into a shopping cart,
shoved into a back corner
of the electronics superstore,
forgotten among all the latest
in personal computing and home
entertainment wizardry, out of
sight of the glazed-over eyes of
the Saturday afternoon shoppers,
their bodies mere extensions of
the furniture back home, their
minds on permanent layaway
in a two-dimensional realm of
voluntary somnambulism.

RAINBOW IN THE DARKNESS

by Bobbi Sinha-Morey

Tears of a rainbow
streak to the earth
in a million tiny
gems when moonlight
comes upon them
illuminating every
band so they glow
like neon in the
dark light of heaven.

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James S. Dorr is an active member of HWA and SFWA with 130 some stories and novelettes in print. He is a past Anthony (mystery) and Darrell nominee, winner of the 1998 Best of the Web award, and has been listed in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror for eight of the last nine years. Some of his publications include: Pirate Writings, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Best of Cemetery Dance, Aboriginal, and many others.

Cindy

by James S. Dorr

So I light a cigar. I know they're not good for you. But in the old country—under the *sidhe*, you know what I mean—even in my svelte Green Lady days I enjoyed a good smoke. Corn silk, maybe, or fine, dried peaseblossom. Sometimes stuff with a bit more zing in it. But now, with Cindy, I've got to be careful to have it finished before she comes upstairs.

Talk about priggish.

Like now, as I hear her dainty hand scratching against the rough wooden boards of the trapdoor. I douse the butt quickly and hide it between my—well never mind *where*. Where I'll find it later. I pick up my needle and thread it with silver and get on with sewing. "Is that you, Cindy?" I whisper demurely.

"Yes," comes the answer. The trapdoor rises and golden hair shines through, brightening even the dingy attic I use as my workshop. She climbs through completely, her milk-white skin glowing even beneath the dirt, ruby lips smiling, her lithe figure straightening when—a chattering.

A black straw beetle scuttles across the floor and Cindy's lips twist, just for a moment, as her foot comes down, crushing the creature. I hear its shell *crack*, hear the ooze of its life fluid—just for a moment. Then daintily, scarcely missing a step, she flicks a handkerchief down to her shoe and, still gracefully, pirouettes to my side and sits down beside me.

I've chosen well, I think, as I look up at her, spreading her unfinished gown out for her to see. I've tried to teach her how to move gracefully, not as a peasant—not heavily and clumsily as her stepsisters move when they practice their dance steps, but as a princess.

My lessons have taken well.

Nevertheless I glance at the insect-shaped smear on the oak floor, one leg still twitching, and wrinkle my nose as her eyes follow mine. "It's *dirty*," she explains—yes, she is priggish—then turns back to the dress, eyes squinting slightly as she inspects the flower pattern of the pearls I've sewn on its bodice.

"Is it not finished?" she asks. "Not yet?" She suppresses a shudder. "My stepsister's dresses, the ones I've had to sew with my own fingers, *not* using magic, are almost done, but this one for me seems to take forever. And the ball is just tomorrow!"

"Patience, child," I answer. "It will be done when it is

needed. And magic takes time too. One must use things that are already there, to work with their potentials. Like straw for material—you can't make even plain cloth thread if there's not straw to start with. Or, as with you and *not* your stepsisters, a certain fire must be already present before it can be used—be changed and amplified—to ignite a man's heart into passion. . . ."

She pouts very prettily. "Yes, if you say so." And in the moment of silence that follows I hear, from beneath us, the uneven rasp of her stepmother and her stepsisters' snoring.

"It's almost dawn," she finally tells me.

I let myself out through the back of the hovel, stepping carefully to avoid the cow shit of the barnyard. I see where the forest *was*, great gouts of it chopped down and cleared off to make new pasture, the gift of an aging king for his subjects. The sun is just coming up now so I hurry, not that its rays would harm me of course, but if you're like me, five or six hundred years old, there *is* the Korriggen Effect—that strange effect daylight has on folk like us that reddens our eyes and whitens our hair and makes us look crone-like—that I find embarrassing.

I am, like all of us, one who loves beauty.

Not ramshackle hovels—I glance behind at the one I've just left and wrinkle my nose. By the side of the path where the forest was I see the cut halves of an ax-smashed rabbit.

I shudder and hurry.

Not all has been cleared down, of course. There are woodlots still needed for winter fuel. There are some patches and groves left of fruit trees. And, in one, a barrow.

I hurry beneath it. I think of an aging king and his one son, the hope of the kingdom. I think of the ball just one night from now where the prince will choose a wife-to-be from among the kingdom's fairest women. I think of a virtuous maiden, a Cindy. Pretty and virtuous by human standards, even if priggish.

Even if cruel, perhaps, if one's a beetle.

I think—she'll do nicely. I hurry below ground, eyes adjusting to firefly lit tunnels. I revel in spiderwebs, thinner than silken thread, sprinkled in gold dust. In jewel-leaved trees. In meadows of emerald and seas of agate flowers stretching before me.

I shift shape subtly, an easy magic for us of the Fairyfolk, as I inspect the workshops I come to. And why not, I think.

Just as with Cindy—I will make *her* beautiful. Why not, at my age, firm the maracas up *just* a little, tighten in the old buttinsky, make the wings shine like gossamer moonlight? You know, a person like me? It's expected.

And so I stride onward, feeling better, not having to put up with the grandmotherly crap like with Cindy. I re-light my cigar.

I stop in the carriage works where, even now, they're shaping the final spells for the pumpkin. I check in the stables, seeing to it the mice have been well fed, when, suddenly, one of the frogs approaches.

"Trouble?" I ask him.

He nods. "Yes. The Elves again." Possibly he sees my look of relief—at least it has nothing to do with Cindy. I question him on that. The livery for footmen, there'll be no problem there. The mice that'll drive the coach are trained and ready. The other . . . I shrug.

"Tomorrow," I tell him.

Fairyland has no time, not as the land of the humans has, and yet it has days and nights of its own that parallel those of the world above it. Similarly, both the worlds above and below the ground have their own kinds of magic. And, as I stepped forth from the barrow that following evening, I felt the enchantment of anticipation.

Cindy met me in the barnyard—Cindy or "Ella" as she thought she might call herself if the prince asked her name—"It sounds more elegant," she explained to me.

Elegant. Ella. Just as we underground have several names too: The Faerie. The Good Neighbors. Good People. Little Folk. Oh yes, I understood.

"Ella," I say to her now in the attic—her stepmother and her stepsisters have already dressed and left, so we can speak loudly. And her gown is finished.

"Yes?" she asks meekly as she tries it on. Young women of Cindy's generation have often been gifted at birth by us

Wee Folk—gifted and cursed too—and her gift has been a mild disposition—something she's needed.

"Cindy," I say, "I want you to promise that you'll leave at midnight. Not one moment after. Magic is tricky—it's strongest at midnight—and after that I can't promise the spells will hold." Actually, that's crap—midnight is when it just *comes* to its full strength and, even after dawn, spells can be held if one goes to the trouble. But I have my reasons for setting this curfew.

"I understand," Cindy says. "And call me Ella."

"Yes. Ella," I say. "Now, turn yourself in your gown. Again—yes. Like that. Do you remember the dances I taught you?"

"Yes," she says.

"They're the kingdom's latest. Now remember this too—don't speak much. Just nod, as if knowingly, if the prince speaks to you. And remember; if you find yourself getting nervous, just hide your face behind your fan—that's what it's for—to regain your composure. You understand, Ella?"

"Yes," she says. "And to leave at midnight. But what if we're dancing then?"

"Then, especially—drop your fan and give a little shriek, as if you've just thought of something horrid, then race off as quickly as your feet can take you. You understand, Ella?"

She nods and blushes just a little. I make a change in her—only the tiniest change for now—to bring her heat up to make her blush better.

We hear a horn sound! The rattle of harness as she races down the steps. "Mind! Lift your skirts, girl!" I scream in her wake, then inspect the footman who opens the coach door—a slight tinge of greenness in his complexion, but he will do well enough.

I *would* go with her, I think, except . . . the matter of Elves, of course. I do have duties.



BEFORE



AFTER

And, even without me, she will do splendidly.

Dust and stink. The cows in their fields, lowing by moonlight, a moonlight that should by rights shine in a forest glade, lighting a circle of Fay Ladies dancing. But times have changed hereabouts on the surface. The forests are cut down and where there are trees left, the ones who would dwell with them are overcrowded.

And under the barrow, reflecting the surface world, crowding becomes a problem as well, I think as I rush down the hollow passages. Crowding breeds friction—and friction breeds crime. I stop in my quarters and rummage through my chest, finding a tube with hornets' nest magazine. Other ammo clips, too, I take with me.

As I re-emerge, I find Green Ladies waiting with similar implements. I whisper orders:

"Titania," I say, "have your group take the left fork, the caverns under the humans' churchyard. Mab, you take the right, where the Pixies are waiting." Twin pairs of eyes blink back in the darkness—the Pixies are Mab's friends, but, more to the point, they owe me a favor and, swift and tricky, they'll make good allies. "Nicoletta, you and your folk come with me, down the center. We'll split into two groups beneath the river."

Another eye blinking and then a buzzing as wings take the night air. We swoop through the gloom, lit only by the dim glow of fungus, dodging the roots of trees, hearing the angry buzz of our weapon packs echo our wing beats.

The Elf Gang is waiting. Mab's group has arrived first but, warned, the Elves have laid down a heavy fire, using bumblebees to keep them pinned down. But under the graveyard, Titania has found a small group of Kobolds, the leader of whom also owes me a favor. They turn the battle, distracting the Elves long enough for me to array my own forces, then have Nicoletta's returning troupe fly over, acting as bombers.

Hornets' nests smash down—the humming is deafening—as I stitch murder with my own weapon. I watch as an Elf's face turns purple with blood sores, watch as his eyes ooze white. Laugh as another is cut in two by razor-sharp stingers.

And then it's over. Mab's Pixies break free to finish the wounded, and then there is silence. I call my chiefs to me. Titania's right wing has suffered a minor tear, but otherwise we all seem whole enough.

Afterward, I have the traitor brought to me, the one who gave warning, a young half-Rusalka who's been having an affair with a minor Elf chieftain. I make an example.

I still hear her sobbing the following evening as, weary, I climb the twisted passageways back to the surface.

I hear the gossip in Cindy's attic, the news of the surface, and it has worked wonderfully! Even the slipper—I hadn't planned *that*, but, oh! how it fits in. The prince in his passion—that I *had* planned with my orders to Cindy to flee at midnight, to make use of the magic of surface folk, tweaking the prince's heart just as his interest in her reached its highest.

And, *oh!* The slipper! Empty in his hand.

And, as he mounted his horse to chase after her, what? A smashed pumpkin? A bevy of field mice even then

scrambling away from the roadside?

A prince's heart, broken?

I *use* this magic. I speak to a bird who speaks in a dream in the prince's ear. A search is mounted, not for a woman, but for a woman's *foot!*

Oh! How kinky!

The smell of a slipper inflaming his lust. A slipper I alter ever so slightly, so it will change size whenever it's tried on, fitting no woman's foot except for Cindy's.

And as for Cindy, she helps her stepsisters as she is ordered, perhaps with some glee as she cuts their toes to make their feet smaller, as she takes the razor of her deceased father to shave their heels until the bone gleams white.

And all to no avail—their feet are *still* too large when the prince and his retinue come by. While I, in my attic, peer out through the thatch over denuded hillsides and make yet one more change. One more change in Cindy.

The wedding is beautiful. All weddings are, even if I must go as an old woman. Ah, but in the evening, for the reception, I am magnificent in my own beauty—a beauty that almost rivals Cindy's. That does, in fact, later as, having given Cindy a potion, I creep in her likeness through dimly lit stone halls to her bridal chamber.

The prince is too anxious. He's stopped the party at scarcely ten while the magic I wish for won't peak until midnight.

I play with him, slowly, a foretaste of things to come with the real Cindy. I let him slip into me—maybe, I think, in the fullness of months I shall have a new changeling. I yield to his will, but never entirely. Always I breathe back strength into his waiting mouth, letting his passion grow until its natural time.

Midnight. I hear the chime, quickly excuse myself. "A moment, darling," I say as I kiss him. I rush to find Cindy, remove the potioned sleep from her eyes, and send *her* back to him, groggy and blinking, but *ever* so eager.

And, ah, Cindy's birth-curse. I crouch in the hall thinking how I have changed it, ever so subtly. Her priggishness? No—that's a part of her nature and cannot be altered. But rather her mildness, the gift of her birth, masks a certain proclivity toward over-warmth—a certain fire—when angered, when thwarted, when pelted with insults by her stepsisters . . . in short, when impassioned.

A certain fire that could be augmented into a tendency, ever so slight, toward a kind of spontaneous combustion.

By *any* passion.

And her prince is waiting.

Waiting to grasp her—I hear her love-squeals even through thick stone. His grunting in answer.

I smell the slight twangy odor of heated flesh, even before I hear the first scream. . . .

It's over.

I sit on my green throne beneath the barrow having my hair fixed—even at five or six hundred years old a lady must look her best—listening to gossip. I hear how the surface king died of grief when they found the charred corpses the following morning. The prince and Cindy. I laugh when I think of what her full name was, and what

she became. A *real* Cinderella.

And yet I feel sorry a little as well when I think about Cindy—the kid had some promise. The way she crushed beetles . . .

But family is family, I say. No use crying over spilled Cindies. Blood is blood, whether human or Faerie. And, up above, it will be some time before they think about cutting more forests.

As for the Elf Gang, they're out of business too, while, in my belly, I have my new changeling. They grow fast in Fairyland—I can feel him kicking already.

I light a cigar. I know they're not good for me, nor for him

either as likely as not, but even a Good Person has her vices. And life's messy anyhow, that's what I always say.

Sure, I get tired of it. But family's family. Sure, I feel sometimes like I'd like to put it down. Take a vacation. Maybe to Hy-Brasil, which I am told is lovely this time of year. Maybe—I wonder—perhaps for my lying in.

But in the meantime I have obligations. I call for Titania. I ask how her wing is. I call Nicoletta, wanting her to check out a rumor, something a Pixie has told me about Trolls.

Because that's the way life is, taking care of your own, when you're godmother.

Whatever She Needs

by Timons Esaias

The fashion
this year
in hotel restaurant hostesses
(as I gather from a five-hotel,
three-city, two-continent sample)
is Oriental, collagen-lipped
with long-line dress split up the side
boots optional
And it crosses my mind
to wonder where they all waited
before
and what jobs they'll go to
after
the fashion
grows stale

Unless they're a new robot
on the market for testing
or thorough research
and application
we'll put all that
racial identity nonsense and
adherence to genotype nonsense
behind us by then
and learn to let
a girl be whatever
she needs to be
to fit
the fashion

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"Cloning Jesus" is S.C. Bryce's first published short story. A lawyer and Harvard graduate from New Jersey, Shauna served for a short time as a reader for Ellen Datlow at OMNI Magazine.

CLONING JESUS

by S.C. Bryce

Years ago, I was thumbing through the newspaper when I came upon two fatefully placed articles. Juxtaposed, they inexorably posed a question that would disrupt the world.

The first article described various tests performed on the Shroud of Turin to determine the cloth's authenticity. Each of several radiocarbon dating results pointed to a different century as being the time when the cloth made its debut. Testing on pollen found on the Shroud purported to show that the image on the cloth set during March or April in the area of Jerusalem. At least, the researcher claimed that only then and there did two specific plants simultaneously release their pollens into the air so that they might affix to burial shrouds nearby. The last study reported type AB blood in the marks on the Shroud that supposedly memorialized Jesus' wounds.

The second article dealt with a completely different topic: the elimination of the hitherto problem of accelerated aging in clones. The author explained how, with host ova and even a tiny sample of biological material to provide a strand of DNA, a being might be cloned. The illustration of this principle was of course *Jurassic Park*, the classic in which Michael Crichton outlined how a wealthy businessman and over-zealous scientists might work together to re-create ancient life. In the novel, they used preserved blood as their source of DNA.

I went back to the first article immediately.

I am not a scientist. I always wished that I had been, rather than a lawyer trapped in an overly pressured job and a windowless office. Science always seemed to me to be a glamorous dream job where creativity ran wild, things exploded, and Tang, television, and Teflon were born. Those friends of mine who are actually scientists tell me that the "real world" of science has none of these things anymore, or at best only rarely. Science has become, they say, a lot like law. They tell me that just as there are no more Oliver Wendell Holmeses and Thurgood Marshalls, there are no more Darwins and Einsteins.

I was still a great believer that anything was possible in science, however, and when I went back to the first article, I had a vision. I don't believe that it was divine, as some might later have claimed, nor do I think that I was under the influence of the Great Deceiver. It was just one of those random thoughts that springs into one's mind and lodges there, egging one on to make it a reality. My vision naturally asked, "Why not clone Jesus?"

The idea didn't seem impossible. The first article said there were blood samples. The process would involve

getting such a sample, extracting the DNA, and doing some hocus-pocus in the laboratory. Surely, we'd have a new baby Jesus in no time.

Of course, I thought of the ethical questions immediately. I'd have to be a parent to this child, though I was certain that there were worse fates than being a deity's guardian. There would be publicity, fans, pilgrims, and so forth. I'd tour around the world, hit *60 Minutes* and the talk show circuit. It would be grueling, but I was certain that I'd adjust. In short, I realized that my life would change and, more, the world would change, but I was confident that they would change for the better.

Thus encouraged, I phoned Gina Cippaghila, my friendship with whom had long outlasted our short and clumsy college romance. While I was busy in my history classes, she was doing four years hard time mastering through rote memorization theorems, formulas, anatomy, and configurations of various molecules. She continued through an M.D./Ph.D. program and landed herself a research job and a grant. As a result, Gina was the head of her own company focusing on genetic research and working closely with domestic and foreign efforts at cloning.

We met that weekend for coffee and a light lunch at a trendy (that is to say overpriced) café. Gina was not initially as enthusiastic as I was. After questioning me repeatedly about my sobriety and checking her pocket calendar to make sure April 1st hadn't crept up on her yet again, she tried to reason with me.

"I don't think you've really thought this through, Kevin," she said, staring at me in the same manner I used with my kids. "You're a lawyer. Do you really think that we'd just go to the Catholic Church and ask to take a sample so that we might clone the Son of God? Don't you think that sounds even vaguely blasphemous?"

"But think of all the good that could come of this: world peace, hunger ended, everyone living in harmony," I said, thinking back to my inadequate Sunday school education.

"You sound like a commercial, which," she added, "I suppose you should since you're definitely trying to sell me something."

"Of course I am, but tell me about the science."

"Why are you so certain anyway that any DNA recovered would be from a divine Jesus? The last time I checked, you were hardly counted among the true believers. You might well find yourself with the clone of just some guy, maybe from Biblical times, maybe from the Middle Ages."

I was undaunted. "Gina, isn't it worth finding out? I am not a believer, not because the idea of God lacks merit, but because I am too much of a rationalist. I need the proof of God in my hands. This is an opportunity to get it."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then there's nothing lost, nothing changes." I leaned forward across the table. "Think of this as potentially the greatest discovery of all time." I paused dramatically, picturing the glorious unveiling of our accomplishment and me telling my law firm what to do with my job. "We'd be way past Galileo, Newton, Heisenberg, and those other suckers. Just tell me, is this possible? They've been cloning domestic animals for years now and manufactured body parts are routine. My grandmother got a new bladder two years ago. Are you telling me that science isn't up to the task? I mean, I keep reading articles that cloning of humans in their entirety is not only theory anymore, or even some fuzzy probability, but in the final stages of becoming a very real part of life."

"You exaggerate."

"Do I?" I asked, but over the course of the next thirty minutes, Gina systematically beat back my defenses until I surrendered. The idea, she told me, was ridiculous. No one would allow us to obtain a blood sample from the Shroud for this purpose and lying to the Catholic Church about our reasons was, pardon the pagan expression, tempting fate. Further, there was no guarantee that viable DNA could be obtained from a blood sample millennia old and contaminated by, among other things, desert sands, urban air, pollen, and grubby fingers. Moreover, the DNA was all Mary's, half, or even entirely divine (and therefore Gina suggested that at a minimum it would present unique issues and might be unrecoverable).

Lastly, she explained that even in the best case scenario we wouldn't be really getting Jesus. We'd have his near equivalent of a twin who would be raised on Nickelodeon, MTV, and pro-wrestling rather than carpentry and proselytizing. Should nurture hold greater sway than nature, Jesus' clone might well be an overweight, over-indulgent kid whose poor brain was saturated with media violence, the sexual dysfunctions of talk show guests, and inane reruns of *Melrose Place*. Or, Jesus' clone might be an ardent pacifist who was the schoolyard bully's favorite punching bag. And what, she asked, would happen the first time Jesus' clone was slapped on the knuckles by an angry, ruler-wielding nun? Providing the proper environment and upbringing for a Savior in this day and age was most likely beyond my moderate means and expertise.

Soon, Gina reached the rising cost of a college education along with the difficulties of obtaining financial aid for even the most gifted of students. By that time, I was convinced that not only was the cloning of baby Jesus a bad idea, but I'd like to get rid of my own kids too.

Thus triumphant, Gina returned to her laboratory and left me frowning sadly into my coffee. My thoughts turned from the rubble that was left of my idea to speculations on the contents of several large envelopes that had arrived at my desk Friday afternoon. I hadn't had the courage to open them and so they sat, waiting for me as if in ambush. As usual, Monday morning arrived too quickly and I could no longer avoid work with daydreaming. I became once again

a galley slave at the oars and the rhythm of drudgery suppressed my imagination until some undetermined future when it would again bubble to the surface.

Buried in my work, I lost track of Gina in the several months after we had our conversation. At first, I didn't even notice. When I finally did, I thought that it was just one of those things; old friends drift apart and, after some undetermined time, believe that it's too weird to call each other up and say, "Hey, what happened?" In the back of my mind, I always assumed that we'd reconnect. I never dreamed that the next time I'd get news of her would be three years later while reading in the local morning paper about a lawsuit.

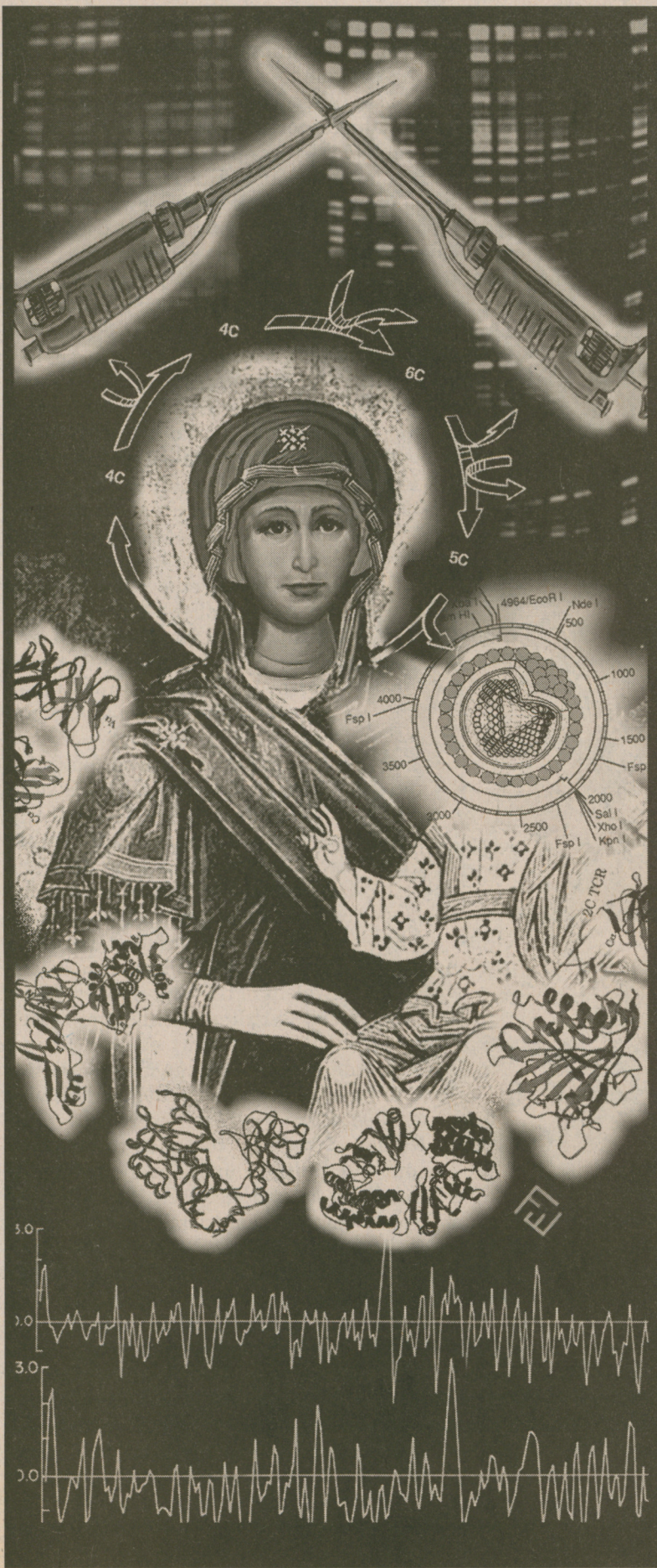
Initially, I read the headline and flipped the page. Only idle curiosity made me double-check the story. "Rights of Surrogate Mother?" the caption asked. The article told of a custody battle in which a woman had hired a college student in need of cash to carry a fetus to term. The pregnancy was uneventful, with the woman supporting the student during the pregnancy, even going so far as to host the student in her home. The woman provided food, shelter, and medical care for the surrogate.

Yet when the contracted-for infant was born, the surrogate mother, as so often happens in these cases, became quickly attached to the baby once she held him in her arms. She had second thoughts about giving her newborn to a relative stranger and refused to do so. Instead, she claimed that she had custody rights to the baby. The horrified woman, a local geneticist, argued back that the surrogate mother was completely unrelated to the baby and, at any rate, the surrogate had signed a valid contract forgoing any and all legal claims to the child. The surrogate mother filed suit for custody of the infant; the geneticist counter-sued. The geneticist was Gina Cippaghila.

Shocked, I phoned Gina to offer my support, but my heartfelt messages went unanswered. I was reduced to following the story in the paper and muttering my sympathies to the newsprint.

The paper dutifully updated the story and the matter seemed to be working itself out steadily in Gina's favor. Then the family court demanded to know just who the biological parents of the baby, whom Gina named Adam, were. After stonewalling the court with theories of privacy and suspicious claims of misplaced documents, Gina was threatened with imprisonment for contempt of court. Thus, she was forced to reveal a sordid mess and I, along the rest of the world, learned the extraordinary importance of this seemingly local custody battle.

Gina testified that, with the aid of anonymous investors, she purchased virtually microscopic flakes of blood taken from the Shroud of Turin many years ago by researchers who proved that, contrary to the belief of many, the Shroud was not the pinnacle of medieval photography but rather was an actual death shroud complete with bona fide blood stains. Gina isolated complete strands of DNA from the blood sample. With patience, she was able to implant the DNA into a host human cell, which she then raised in a test tube until she could successfully implant it into the surrogate mother.



The surrogate had no idea of the identity of the fetus; she knew only that she was under contract to do her best to produce a healthy infant. She was told a simple half-truth: the baby was genetically Gina's, who was unable to carry a fetus to term on her own. The surrogate had no reason to disbelieve or question further.

According to the news, Gina's company and investors managed to keep the whole thing under wraps until the family court proceedings. Gina said that she intended to wait until the infant was significantly older to reveal his unique heritage. She had, she claimed, truthfully wanted a child, but was unable to conceive. The whole experiment was an afterthought of her intense personal desire to have a baby and now that Adam had been born, she wished that she'd never done it. Of course, she added that since he had in fact been born, she might as well take the opportunity to allow science and indeed everyone to benefit from it by studying him. She magnanimously stated that it was her duty as a citizen of the world.

The news of Gina's testimony exploded. What had been short, periodic articles on the rights of surrogate mothers in a local paper instantly became all-consuming news around the globe. Wherever there were televisions, radios, newspapers, magazines, or the Internet, there was the case of Gina, Adam, and the surrogate mother.

It was as I predicted, only with Gina getting both the kudos and boos while I tracked the course of the events from my easy chair. I was tempted to stake my own claim in this mess, feeling that the thoughts of the person whose vision sparked these odd events were worth something in the free market. I needn't sit and watch Gina reap the rewards of my idea without some sort of protest. I even went so far as to leave her angry messages. Yet, I began to have mixed feelings about the matter. As good an idea as the clone had seemed when I invited Gina for coffee, the reality of it was more daunting. This was more than making bladders in the lab; this was an infant, a human being, and possibly much more than that. So I kept my head down low when I might have tried for a piece of the action. Soon enough I was glad that my own little involvement was known only to me and to Gina—and she wasn't about to share the spotlight.

When I had considered my ethical questions way back when the possibility of cloning Jesus first occurred to me, I had neglected obvious religious and cultural implications. I am not a particularly religious person myself. I describe myself as an agnostic raised in a generic Christian household whose emphases on Christmas morning were more stockings and family reunions than the celebration of the birth of Our Savior. Thus, I was unprepared for what happened. Thankfully, my reticence to come forward prevented me from being with Gina on the front line.

I had thought that a clone from the Shroud would be really cool. We would be praised for our innovative

work, even if the DNA turned out to be from just some schmuck. The clone might even really be Jesus and if so he would go out to cure the sick and feed the hungry. At best, I expected world peace and cultures coming together, realizing that the world was a bigger place than any individual. At the very least, it would be one of history's most amazing moments.

Exactly the opposite happened. Once the story broke, the world fractionalized. Christian fanatics argued that Adam was actually Jesus incarnate. They said that the Son of God had come again, just as he had promised. They demanded another Inquisition, the expulsion or execution of unbelievers, and promised that the Second Coming of Christ would show the world just how right they had always been. Others argued that the whole thing was blasphemy. This baby, they said, was no more Jesus than anyone else. After all, divinity cannot be cloned. Some took a middle ground, deciding to wait until the infant was older to see if he would exhibit any power.

Initially, many religious institutions were hesitant to come out with their own opinions on the issue, as were their secular counterparts. They seemed to want to decry the clone, but were unwilling to take the chance of offending someone who—just maybe—really was the second Christ. This hesitancy would not continue.

When photos of Adam were published and the public saw, for the first time, that the baby did not and never would have the brown, silky hair and blue eyes so popular in Western imagery, many disowned him. They flatly stated that he absolutely could not be representative of Christ and the claimed relationship to Christ was a sham or, at least, the DNA had somehow been tainted. On the other hand, non-white Christians and reconstructionists felt vindicated by the absence of these very same features and were noisy in their pleasure.

All forms of media created a deluge of information and public opinion. The clergy of various religions debated among themselves and with secular leaders regarding the significance of baby Adam. Jewish and Islamic leaders whole-heartedly rejected divine lineage. At best, Muslims concluded that Adam was a clone of a prophet. More likely, they said, Adam was nothing more than a clone of an ordinary man.

Meanwhile, the Pope fought wild rumors that he would dismantle the papacy once Jesus' clone attained his majority and could speak directly to his followers. Moreover, rumor had it that not only the Catholic Church but every church would be required to turn over its wealth to the infant. Unscrupulous attorneys filled gossip columns with offers to launch a lawsuit on Adam's behalf under the

theory that the accumulated wealth of the churches was being held in trust for the infant as the original Jesus' lawful heir.

Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Western religions watched the scandal as interested outsiders. For many, tolerance and feasibility were cornerstones and so the clone presented no theological issues. However, they freely expressed their ethical and sociological views. No small number of proponents of reincarnation sided with those clamoring for Adam as a true Jesus. Then, they quietly abandoned this view when philosophers pointed out that cloning cannot be equivalent to reincarnation because such equation led to the curious possibility that a clone of a living donor has a duplicate soul, a partial soul, or none at all.

While people converted to devout forms of Christianity, many others left the fold, protesting what they called the last straw in the invasion of charlatans into religion. They likened Gina to the snake oil salesmen of old and to TV preachers begging for money as they lived in palaces built with the Social Security and pensions of the elderly. Some said that Gina was the Devil and had engineered this false Christ in order to lead the faithful to evil. Others said the opposite—she had brought into reality divine prediction in order to save us all.

The surrogate mother was even more forward in demanding custody, the infant's possible divinity giving her claim upon the baby greater urgency. Although she had been a happy agnostic before the revelation of her infant's heritage, she now claimed to be the equivalent of the Virgin Mary. Some agreed with her. Still others were entirely skeptical of her claim, wondering just how much of her desire to have a relationship with Adam was linked to his newly discovered heritage.

Refusing to deign to answer questions about her motivations, she nonetheless stormed the courthouse with hundreds of supporters in tow and sent friendly forces to rally outside Gina's home and offices.

Thus, it wasn't long before both Gina and the surrogate mother found themselves in a quandary that had they cultivated but now could not escape, much less control. They fended off the press and supporters and, later, more sinister elements.

I watched the daily video footage of Gina, disheveled and harried, wading through angry pickets with hired bodyguards. The drama, more addictive and sometimes more far-fetched than a soap opera, constantly unfolded. Gina's face appeared in the evening news and the morning paper. Each day, she looked older. The bricks thrown through her windows, the taunts and jeers spat at her in



the streets and in debate, the accusations, and courtroom battles each etched a new line in her face. Any residual resentment I felt for her theft and development of my idea was gone. I had nothing but pity for her and Adam, who was still too young to even notice the commotion. His future seemed so bright in idle speculation and so chaotic in reality.

Not even his immediate custody problem was quickly solved. The family court stalled, not wanting the responsibility of making any kind of determination about the baby. Further tests were ordered, briefs on obscure issues demanded, and intimations made that the case might better be decided by a federal court.

I watched in horror and guilt. After all, it was my idea, my suggestion and enthusiasm that had influenced Gina to do this. In a way, I felt that this chaos had been unleashed upon the world at my request. In addition to the impact on my conscience, the uncertainty had more tangible effects on my life once Gina returned my calls.

I had given up the possibility of speaking with her, so when she called me at 3 A.M. one night, I was surprised at more than just the time.

"Gina?" I asked, hardly recognizing her voice.

"Please," she repeated with a desperation I'd never heard in anyone's voice, "I need to talk to you. Can I come over?" "You mean now?"

"I know I don't have the right to ask this of you. I'm going crazy and I need to talk to someone." Her voice cracked.

Not knowing what else to say, I stammered out a "Sure" and hung up.

The knock came at the door moments later, before even I had time to pull on my robe. Gina stood shivering in the drizzle, huddled against a bodyguard. She'd called me from her cell phone.

"Oh God, Kevin," she said as I opened the storm door to let them in. "What have I done?"

Shocked, I stared at her. As terrible as Gina looked on TV, it was nothing compared to the woman I saw dripping in my foyer. Gina had always been a strong, determined character, going from the top of her class to the top of her field. She was smart, successful, and unabashed in showing it. Yet now, Gina was broken. Her hair was greasy and damp. Her face twitched uncontrollably and her eyes darted around the room.

"Can you shut the blinds?" she asked.

If I hadn't already given up my jealous anger toward Gina, those feelings would have melted away in an instant. Gina was no one to envy; she was a lone gazelle at a darkened watering hole, surrounded by hyenas, lions, and crocodiles.

Quietly so that we wouldn't wake my family, I sat her down in the kitchen and put up tea. I gave her a blanket and sent her bodyguard into the living room. It took all the restraint I had not to bombard her with questions.

"Of course, you're wondering why I'm here," she said.

I admitted that I was.

"You're the only one I have left to talk to. I know you don't have any reason to give me the time of day. I know what I did to you. I don't expect you to forgive me, but for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Forget about it," I said. She'd been punished more than enough for whatever slight she'd made.

"I guess you want to know why I did it. Everyone wants to know why."

"Why did you?"

She smiled crookedly. "For the same reasons you wanted to. World peace. To see if I could. It seemed like a good idea at the time." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Guess I was wrong."

"It does seem to have taken a bad turn," I said helplessly.

We stared into our cups of tea until Gina broke the silence. "God, Kevin! It wasn't supposed to happen this way. None of this was supposed to happen!" She was rambling and, realizing it, suddenly fell quiet, clenching her jaw.

"What can I do to help you, Gina?"

"I wish I'd never done it," she said abruptly, talking more to herself than to me. "If there were something I could do to undo this . . . something to end this." She was brooding and, for some reason that I couldn't pinpoint, it scared me. "Someone once said that it can take more courage to be a villain than a martyr. Do you believe that?"

"What do you mean?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Does it take more courage to allow yourself to be villainized by history than to be worshiped?"

"Gina, I think—"

"Never mind," she cut me off with a forced laugh and a wave of her hand. "It's crazy talk, I know." She shook off the blanket and stood up. "Anyway, I've got to go. It's late and I woke you up. I'm sorry; I don't know what I was thinking." She collected her coat and bodyguard and, ignoring my flustered offers to stay, rushed to open the door. "Thanks, Kevin. Don't worry, everything's going to be okay."

She ran out into the night.

The anonymity in which I lived during greater part of this spiritual crisis did not last after Gina's visit. The press found its way to my door in its relentless hunt for a new angle on the story. They didn't come to me because they discovered that I was the source of Gina's inspiration, but because they learned that we were friends and that she had paid me a surreptitious nighttime visit. They were on a quest to uncover anyone and everyone from her present and her past that might offer them a quote, some insight, or a tidbit of scandal.

As soon as the first reporter found me, it seemed, they all did. The information must have spread through their ranks like knowledge of a source of nectar through a hive of bees. My phone rang at all hours of the day and night until I unplugged it altogether. Then came the knocks on my door, reporters on my front stoop, and cameramen flooding my home with harsh spotlights. We huddled at home with the shades down. My kids did not attend school and I took a leave of absence from work. The attention on me, however, was a passing fad. Almost as soon as my fortress was erected, I ceased to need it. Disappointed and unsatiated, the media quickly moved onto other targets.

While the various officials delayed and I hid, public opinion continued to rage and predictably moved past debate, past scathing words and insults, and quickly on to violence. Virtually everyone found the clone of Jesus to be

the ultimate, conclusive proof that he had been right and all his fellows wrong. Thus, they graduated from the odd brick thrown into a window or car. Strangers, undeterred by the presence of bodyguards, followed both Gina and the surrogate through the streets and lurked outside their homes. Threats of death became a part of their daily routine.

The violence radiated outward from the nuclei of Gina and the surrogate mother. Despite efforts by the police, mosques, synagogues, and churches alike were vandalized and burned to the ground. Gunfire, riots, and explosions became almost commonplace. TV screens were filled with haunting images of bloody children crying as rescuers pulled them from the bodies of their dead parents. Militant Christians flooded Israel by the thousands, triggering riots and the declaration of martial law. The U.N. outlined a plan of mobilization-of-stabilization.

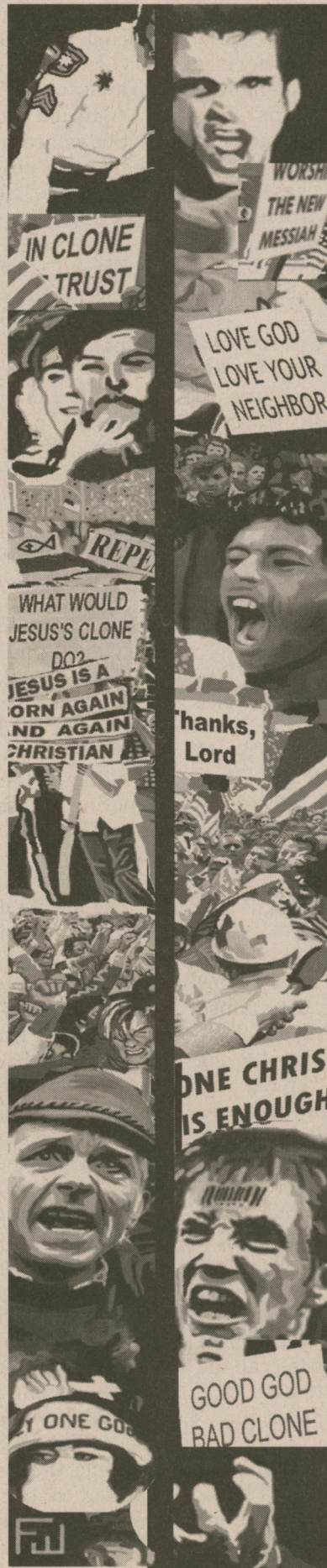
We had entered into a new era of crusades.

Then on October 26th, a mail bomb tore a hole through Gina's living room during Adam's weekly visitation with her. Gina and Adam were killed instantly, making much of the frenzy that surrounded them moot.

Contrary to the hopes of his followers, Adam did not rise on the third day; he didn't have the opportunity to even try. His remains were immediately cremated and disposed of under questionable authority. His prompt cremation and the mysterious burning of Gina's house led me to suspect that someone, whether Church or state, hoped to avoid a black market in Adam relics that might spark a frenzy in cloning additional Adams. Soon after the cremation, the Church-organized search recovered all samples of materials taken from the Shroud from various researchers the sealed the Shroud, its accoutrements, and the samples in a vault.

After a brief stint as leader of her own small religious organization, the surrogate found her "true calling." Tearful and draped in black, she entered a secluded convent in Maine. Pilgrims still seek her blessing, but she is rarely seen in public.

An investigation followed the bombing, but authorities never identified a culprit. Within days of Gina and Adam's deaths, most members of her staff disappeared without a trace or met untimely ends. The



public whispered about the destroyed evidence, break-ins at Gina's laboratory, and fraud. The anonymous investors whose funds helped to purchase the Shroud blood samples could be traced only as far back as their recently closed Swiss bank accounts.

There was even a controversial interview by *The National Enquirer* in which one of her workers suggested that he helped Gina fake the entire incident to raise funds for her struggling business by impregnating the surrogate with his own sperm. The worker likened Adam to the Cardiff Giant and the Piltdown man. He was killed in a car accident the next day.

Internet sites have blamed Gina's investors, the CIA, communists, Quebec separatists, religious fanatics, both liberals and conservatives, and other "anti-Adam factions" for the bombing. There are still crazies who creep around and, depending upon their religious affiliation, take revenge against random people they believe were connected either to the creation of a false god or to the unjust murder of the second Son of God.

Rumors of a cover-up conspiracy eclipsing the JFK assassination have been rampant for years now, and I expect they'll continue long into the future. Even so, much of the fervor surrounding Adam's origins and possibilities died with him. Of course, Adam's premature death and rapid cremation combined with the destruction of Gina's records meant that none of the hypotheses about him could be proved to the satisfaction of science. Adam's believers and detractors, like those of his twin born millennia before him, were left with nothing but their faith.

For me, that faith had strange manifestations. I once again said "Good morning" to people on the street. I found myself pitching in at a soup kitchen a few times and even picked up a pair of kittens from the pound as a Christmas surprise. I wasn't alone. "The Adam Crisis," as the press had dubbed it, was followed by people taking a hard, quiet look at themselves and being disappointed in what they saw. TV took a sentimental turn. Charities experienced record-breaking assistance that holiday season. Legislation on medical benefits for children, which had languished for years, was revived and quickly enacted.

Perhaps Adam would accomplish what we hoped after all.

Fantastic Bookshelf

by Steven Sawicki

There are three things that strike me when I pick up a novel; the title, art, and synergy. When I used to haunt the bookstores, I'd generally just walk the aisles at first, getting a feel for the mass of paperbacks and hardcovers squatting there. In those days I looked almost singularly at paperbacks. Eventually the time would come to actually touch a book. I'd put this off for as long as possible because touching inevitably led to buying, and I was generally broke in those days. For years I just responded to the marketing departments' and the art departments' choices concerning style and cover art. I'd be drawn to or forced away from a title. Most left me more or less neutral. I also went unaware of this. At some point I began to notice what was drawing me and what was repelling me. I paid attention to which books drew my hand and which books I failed to even recognize. I'm more in tune today about these things and still go to the bookstore to haunt the aisles to see what draws the eye and hand. I no longer buy everything I touch, so the stores are a much safer place for me and my wallet.

***Animist*, Eve Forward, Tor Hardcover ISBN 0-312-86891-X, \$23.95 (\$34.95 Canada), 336 pgs.**

Eve Forward is Robert Forward's daughter. Not that this is critical information to have but you were going to ask anyway. *Animist* is a coming-of-age fantasy novel that takes place in world made up of multiple races, magic and the usual mix of politics and greed. This book is also the first in a trilogy, but then it would hardly be a fantasy if it weren't. The book centers around Alex who is a young man just about to graduate from the college of Animists. Animists are individuals who link with animals in a sort of symbiotic relationship that provides magic abilities and protection to the human and the animal gets a life of being cared for. Exactly which animal one gets linked to is more or less up to chance and there is certain status in certain animals and a lack of status in others. In any case, Alex is sort of a bumbling student for whom the college masters really see no hope. He's been at the college for a some time and while he does not fail neither does he excel.

Alex graduates and must go out into the world, working his way across the land as an animist and hoping to link with his animal soon. He ends up on a boat and it is here that he makes contact with the animal that becomes his anim. It's not quite the animal he'd been hoping for but he makes the best of it. And this seems to be Alex's main best trait, the ability to make the best of the situation he finds himself in. He ends up on the island of Miraposa, which is made up of two separate kingdoms. The kingdoms are at war and Alex helps first one side then the other, befriendng the usual odd assortment of characters and

creatures, all of whom serve to add one more step in his journey to manhood. Along the way there are magic, a beautiful princess, betrayal, death, puzzles and politics. The book sort of whimpers to an end but this is, after all, a trilogy so one expects there to be not much of an ending in any case.

The book is well written, the characters likable and interesting and the magic system, if only generally explained, is unusual enough to make the lack of detail easy to forgive. The whole thing is readable and entertaining. It will be interesting to see where Forward goes with the trilogy and what else she might have to offer after that.

Book titles tend to fall into three categories; descriptive, evocative, and irrelevant. *Animist* is descriptive, and so is the next book I'll look at, *The Jackal of Nar*. Vinge's *Tangled Up In Blue* is evocative, calling up any number of images and memories. Denver's book, *The Fourth World*, skirts the boundaries between evocation and irrelevance. The final book I'll look at, *Sky Coyote*, is descriptive. Now, you can't always tell which category a title falls into just by reading it. You have to finish the book to do that. Titles are like covers, lures to get the book into your hand with the idea that, once there, it's a short trip to the cash register. But pause if you will, and consider. If you merely skim the titles of the books in this column you'll find they either resonate or they don't. Try reading them out loud. If they were movie titles which would you want to see? If you heard someone mention them which one would capture your interest?

***The Jackal Of Nar*, John Marco, Bantam Spectra Paperback, ISBN 0-553-57887-1, \$6.99 (\$9.99 Canada), 754 pgs.**

This is a big book. It's a fantasy, but instead of stating that it is a trilogy it is simply "Book One of Tyrants and Kings." Maybe there'll only be three books and maybe there'll be six. The next book in the series, *The Grand Design*, is just recently out in trade paperback and it's a big book as well, but the first book does come to a very satisfying conclusion. The Jackal of the title is one Prince Richius Vantran, who is thrust into war by his father who is responding to the demands of the evil emperor. The book follows Richius as he leads his men in a losing effort against the might of Lucel-Lor. Richius escapes, is enticed to the capital to meet the emperor, gets caught up in a web of intrigue and quickly finds himself back in the thick of battle once again. There are battles and love and battles and friendships broken and battles and old enemies made friends and battles and old enemies made dead and . . .

well, but you probably get the idea. This is almost a roller coaster ride from one crisis event to another. Prince Richius leads exactly the kind of life we want our protagonists to lead: challenging, frustrating and heroic. This is a thick book full of rich detail with characters who seem to be leading their own lives instead of just going through the paces an author has set them to. The writing is sharp and to the point, the dialogue sings and the settings are captivating. Even the villains are interesting. As a first book this is pretty amazing stuff. Marco has talent, enough so that I've already stuck the second book on my "must read soon" pile.

Cover art plays just as important a role in what we pick up or don't as the title does. Like titles, cover art tends to fall into three categories: art that was commissioned for the book and that reflects a scene, art that captures the mood of the book while not really detailing any actual event in the book, and art that the art department got at a good price but that has not a damn thing to do with the book you're holding. Doing cover art is a challenge. The artist has to read the book and then gather some sort of inspiration. All this has to happen in a fairly short period of time as well because publishers don't want a book sitting around just because the art isn't ready. The art for *Animist* has the protagonist, Alex, holding a monkey-like creature while two wolves sit in the background. Alex befriends a rat and not a monkey-creature. The cover of the *Jackal of Nar* shows a group of horsemen overlooking a great city in a scene taken directly from the novel. Danver's cover art is sort of representative, showing, more or less, the pivotal event of the book, although you don't know it to look at it and you wouldn't guess it even with my having told you. Vinge's book has a marvelous cover that captures almost the whole book in a single event. Baker's book has a cover that is sort of abstract and that contains symbols and figures from many scenes of the book. Again, it is interesting to note which ones grab you and produce an emotional response.

***The Fourth World*, Dennis Danvers, Avon Eos Hardcover, ISBN0-380-97761-3, \$23.00 (\$34.95 Canada), 336 pgs.**

I'm not entirely sure what the fourth world of the title refers to. It could have a couple of different meanings and I'm loath to say too much because one of the interpretations gives too much away. In any case, the book is set in the future when those who have money choose to stay home, linked to their computers, experiencing the world in a virtual way. Only the poor and unskilled still go outside, relegated to the work required to enable those with wealth to stay inside. And this is in America. In the third world countries things are much different, albeit in a worse way. Into this mix is thrown one Santee St. John, a virtual video journalist who witnesses a massacre and then feels obligated to tell the world about it. He develops a web site, meets a beautiful woman named Margaret, loses his job, and joins the cause of the Zapatistas. Along the way they meet an assortment of odd characters and have many adventures. That is, until Santee vanishes.

Then, Margaret enlists the aid of food delivery boy Webster Webfoot and sets off on a rescue. That happens next has global importance and only Santee seems to hold the key to keep it all from happening. Exactly what is happening and who is behind it makes up the reason for reading the book.

Like Danvers' previous books, this one deals with people enticed/involved with virtual reality to the point that it supplants the real world. There is a kicker here though, and it's quite a mind bender. Danvers certainly knows his virtual reality and one wonders if he can write a book that does not involve it as either a setting or a major plot vehicle.

Danvers writes very interesting characters. Not only the main characters but many of the secondary characters are so fleshed out in such an economical way that they all seem like real people. It's a talented piece of work. The story itself is not only interesting but captivating. The ending is a bit of letdown since it is more or less obvious once you start putting the pieces together. I enjoyed the book, especially the first three quarters.

There is a synergy when you hold a book, the coming together of title, cover art, author's name and a few intangibles. Marketing departments spend lots of money trying to figure this stuff out. As far as I can tell no one has yet. Where the title is placed, how large the author's name is, what colors go into the cover art, what fonts are used and whether or not there is any embossing are all factors that must be decided long before you ever even touch a book. The choices that are made may not make or break a book because there are other factors that come into play as well, season of release, competition, timeliness, and, oh yes, the writing.

***Tangled Up In Blue*, Joan D. Vinge, Tor Hardcover, ISBN 0-312-87196-1, \$23.95 (\$34.95 Canada), 235 pgs.**

This book is set in the Snow Queen universe, although you need not have read the previous books to understand this one. The setting is Tiamat, the world where the snow queen reigns and where the Galactic Hegemony holds everything in a tight fist. The tale revolves not around the snow queen, however, but around a police officer, a blue, Officer Nyx LaisTree. Another important player is Devony, a shapeshifter whose who uses the snow queen as much as the snow queen uses her. The final character ingredient in the mix is Gundhalinu, an offworlder who gets pulled in just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The novel is a mystery, where Nyx, with the help of Gundhalinu and Devony, struggles to put all the pieces together before the pieces come together on their own and spell destruction. Tiamat is a corrupt planet and the city of Carbuncle the most corrupt city of them all. The snow queen cultivates the corruption in order to gain offworld artifacts in the hopes of delaying the thought to be inevitable leaving of the Hegemony offworlders, which would throw the planet back to its primitive roots.

The story weaves in and out of the lives of the three protagonists dropping tragedy and sorrow for the most part although an occasional moment of joy slips through.

This is a hard story of a world on the edge of a return to darkness and the struggle between the people who hope to delay that return and those who hope to take advantage of it. It's a fascinating story written by a master teller. Vinge uses all of her talents in this book leaving nothing undone. The plot is tight, the characters fun to be with and the story itself is nothing less than dynamite. Oh yeah, and the cover is just fabulous. You won't want to put it down once you pick it up. Once you start reading you'll be even more loath to leave.

There are rumors that certain colors draw readers more than other colors. There are rumors that certain type faces hold the eye longer. There are rumors that a raised title or an embossed cover provides just enough extra oomph to increase sales. Obviously these rumors are false. If they were true we'd be walking into bookstores where every book was the same color with titles in the same font and all embossed and raised. Since we don't see such a thing we can only surmise that these things are occasional flukes. Besides, wouldn't you, as a good author, be pissed if they publisher printed your book in a blue dust jacket when everyone knows that red is the killer color? Thankfully we get the diversity that makes the shelves a rainbow of color, form, and style.

Sky Coyote, Kage Baker, Avon Eos paperback, ISBN 0-380-73180-0, \$5.99 (\$7.99 Canada), 292 pgs.

When I read the first fifty pages of this book I thought I really had something in my hands. The story starts with the gathering of a group of time-traveling cyborg immortals at a place that soon won't exist anymore. The cyborgs embrace either an avid work ethic or a worn cynicism, which sets them at each other's throats more often than not. To add to that, Baker posits that time is cumulative, so that all the annoying habits of people magnify to the point where you not only really can't stand them but you remember the things they did over a century ago. Then the book took a turn, settling in with a particular group of cyborgs tasked with the removal of the people of a certain village to a point later in time. This is where the book almost becomes a parody of itself. The cyborgs pretend to be gods, even to the point of having their bodies altered. Yet, while the task seems a serious one, they all seem to take it more as a joke than anything else. Perhaps this was meant as humor. If it was I think Baker missed an opportunity to do a really fun and gritty book here. The book is an interesting read if only for the concepts but there are places where I was hard put not to toss it across the room.

Lafferty in Orbit, R. A. Lafferty, Wildside Press, ISBN 1-880448-68-8, \$15, (\$18 Canada), 220 pgs.

A quick plug for this book, which is part of the Wildside Press library. Lafferty is one of those authors who every science fiction fan should read at least once and this would be a good place to start. The book contains 19 stories by Lafferty and an introduction by Damon Knight, which is quite apt since so many of the tales come from the Orbit

anthologies. Lafferty is an almost indescribable writer, part Heinlein, part Dick, part Leiber, yet undeniably all Lafferty. He's not had the recognition he deserves, mostly because of his writing style and because he has chosen to write about people rather than technology. Lafferty is a stylist and an extraordinary wordsmith. Hats off to Wildside for keeping a neglected author in print.

These are my opinions and not necessarily those of the editorial staff. The editorial staff have enough of their own opinions with which to get into trouble, they don't need mine. No one paid me to write any of these reviews, except for the editor of course, and he doesn't pay enough. I do get all this stuff more or less for free from the publishers but it's a heavy burden and comes with guilt and responsibility. Speaking of such, if you wish to thrust free copies at me you can send them to Steve Sawicki, P. O. Box 341, Watertown, CT, 06795-0341. Sending something does not guarantee a review nor even a reading, but not sending a copy does guarantee the lack of a review. Including chocolate gets you closer, unless it makes the book all sticky. I did get bread once with a book, it was stale. If you disagree with something said here, tell the editor. Otherwise, feel free to email me at my most appropriate email address: reviewer@mindless.com. And, until next time, fantasize safely.

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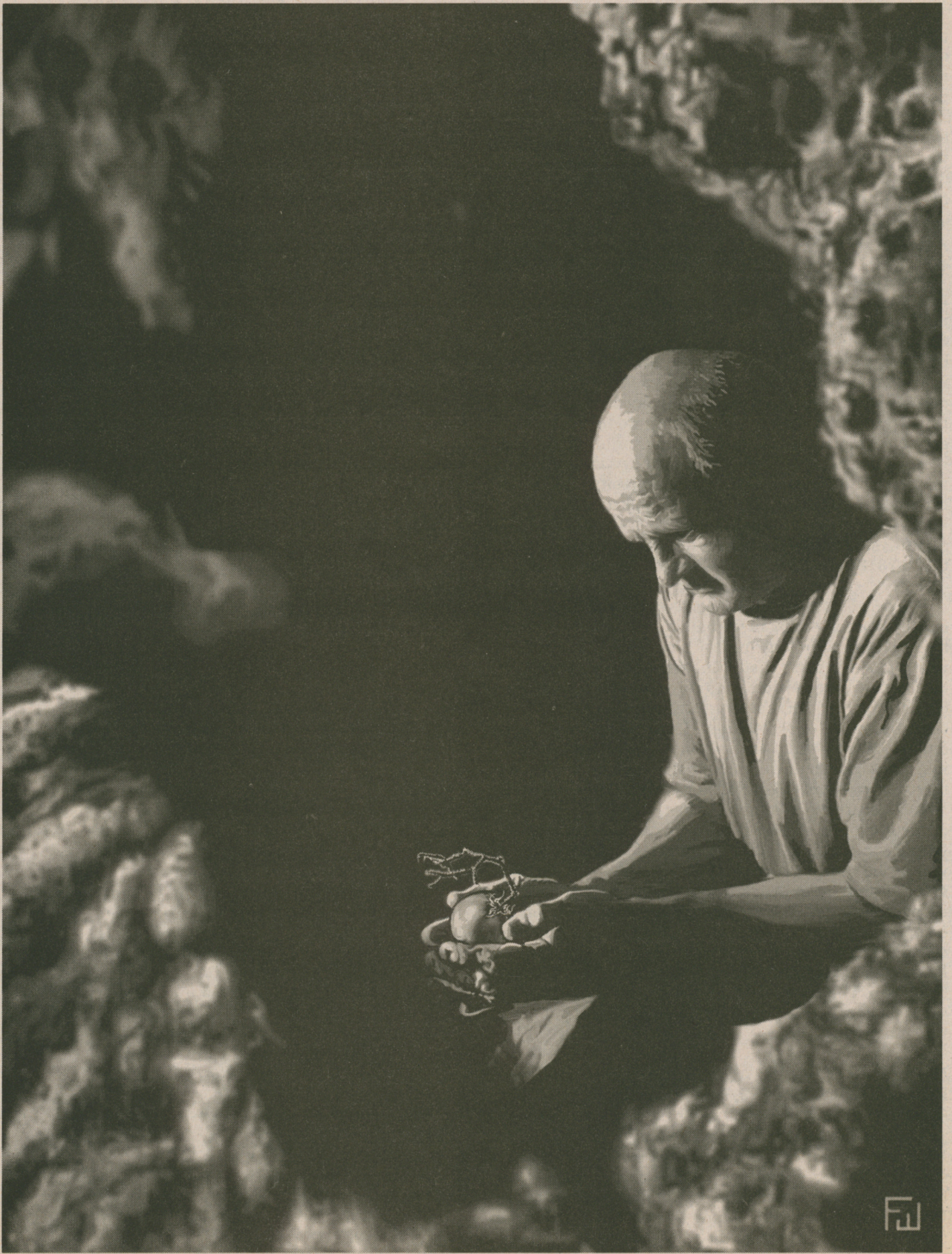
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As a fiction writer, Edo made an auspicious debut in the horror field when his first short story sale "Baseball Memories" was reprinted in Year's Best Horror Stories 20, edited by Karl Edward Wagner. Since that first sale in 1989 he's sold over 100 stories to such magazines as *Aethlon: The Journal of Sports Literature*, *Haunts*, *RPM*, *On Spec*, *Palace Corbie*, and *The Iguana Informer*. His first novel, *Wurm Wolf*, was published by HarperCollins in 1995 and was a Locus bestseller. Other novels include *Lord Soth (TSR)* and *Mister Magick (HarperCollins)*. His first collection is the chapbook, *Virtual Girls: The Erotic Gems of Evan Hollander*, a collection of five erotic science fiction stories published under the Evan Hollander pseudonym published by Circling Press of Boston. He lives in Brampton, Ontario (just northwest of Toronto), with his wife Roberta and son Luke.



by Edo van Belkom

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A dozen time-stiffened joints cracked and popped as the old man eased himself down onto a knee. After taking a moment to steady himself, he placed his palms on the ground and inched forward for a closer look.

When he first saw the seedling peeking up out of the ground his heart had filled with hope. Perhaps it was possible to grow things underground without the chemicals they used in the Farm Tunnels. Maybe they could grow their own food, become self-sufficient . . . and close themselves off from the harsh, often violent world of the tunnels.

He leaned forward until he was inches from the tiny sprout.

He drew a breath.

Squinted.

"Bah!" he said at last in disgust.

The sprout was nothing more than a dried brown twig standing upright in the soil.

Weighed down by the heavy heart of one who has failed, the old man slowly got to his feet. He'd been trying to grow fruits and vegetables for years, but despite ample sunlight from the fiber-optic tubes overhead, organic fertilization of the soil, and regular measured watering, not a single plant had ever reached maturity.

With a sigh, he took the hoe from its resting-place in the corner of their cavern home and chopped at the ground, turning it over in preparation for yet another attempt to bring life from the soil underground.

"Patience, Carlo," the old man's wife, Flora said, as she entered the room. "Life is different now. Things can grow down here, you just haven't found the way to do it yet."

Flora was several years older than her husband, but her warm smile and eternally optimistic outlook made it easy to see past her gray-white hair and wrinkled folds of brown-spotted skin. She was young at heart, full of life, and was the only thing that made life underground bearable for Carlo.

He looked at her, and smiled.

"I haven't given up, my dear," Carlo said. "Not yet, anyway."

Flora walked over to Carlo's side, placed an arm around his waist and rested her head lightly on his shoulder. "You keep trying—" She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "—I know you'll succeed. It's just a matter of time."

She went to the far wall and took two mesh bags from a hook set into the stone. "In the meantime, I'm going down to the Market Tunnel. Is there anything we need, besides the usual?"

"We could use some citrus," Carlo said as he continued to work the soil.

"All right, I'll see if I can find some lemons on sale. Anything else you want?"

Carlo stopped working, rested against the handle of the hoe, and turned in Flora's direction. "Just for you to return to me safe and sound."

She tilted her head to one side as if she were mildly offended by Carlo's words. "I shouldn't be too long."

And then she was gone.

Carlo didn't like his wife venturing out into the tunnels alone, but Flora was a strong, independent woman who cherished her freedom and hated having Carlo looking over her shoulder while she shopped. Sure, the tunnels were dangerous, but Flora would rather risk their dangers than allow herself to be held prisoner by them.

Carlo took the hoe in his hands and returned to work on his garden plot. There wasn't much he could do to the soil that he hadn't already done, but turning the soil—with sunlight from the fiber-optic tubes shining warmly on his back—helped relax him, helped to pass the time.

When the surface of the garden was perfectly flat and the soil had taken on the appearance of finely ground coffee, Carlo stopped working and glanced at his watch.

What?

He wiped a drop of sweat from his eye with a damp shirtsleeve, looked at his watch again . . . and felt his heart fall like a rock into the pit of his stomach.

Flora should have been home hours ago.

He wiped another bead of sweat from his forehead.

She'd never been this late before. Never.

Carlo's hand shook uncertainly as he set his garden tools in the corner and took his walking stick from its familiar resting-place by the front door. He clenched the scraggly, worn stick firmly in his hand, causing his pale fingers to turn an even more deathly shade of white. Then, holding the walking stick before him like the white cane of a blind man, he left his home heading for the tunnels.

He moved quickly through the tunnels, trying not to let the stiffness of his joints slow him down. He called his wife's name as he went.

"Flora!" he cried, little more than a whisper.

He was halfway to the market tunnels when he heard something sickening—the soft, satisfied slurp of dogs—the kind of sound the forever-hungry hounds of underground made when fresh meat was in good supply.

"Flora!" cried Carlo, louder this time. "No!"

She was lying face down, but Carlo easily recognized her blue shawl and gray-white hair. Two dogs were biting into the gory flesh of her neck while a third chewed contentedly on the calf of her right leg. A fourth dog, smaller, perhaps just a puppy, lapped at the puddle of blood pooled around her head.

For a brief fleeting moment, Carlo had a hope that things weren't as bad as they seemed, that Flora might still be alive, but as one of the dogs tore a goblet of flesh from her ruined neck, he knew it wasn't possible.

At that moment, his heart folded in on itself. His body suddenly became numb all over, as if his life had just come to an end as well.

He stabbed at the dogs with his walking stick.

"Get away!" he sneered. "Leave her alone!"

With each jab, the stick's metal tip gave the dogs a stinging jolt of electricity. At first the dogs looked at him in surprise, but after a few more proddings they reluctantly decided they'd had their fill. They slowly backed away from Flora, licking their chops, and watching.

Carlo fell to his knees and placed his hands on the body. It was cold, stiff . . . dead. His hands trembled as he wept. Then, as his body began to spasm in uncontrollable shakes, his cries grew into loud anguished sobs.

Through the watery haze of his tears Carlo saw the empty mesh shopping bags at Flora's side, and the dark wet holes where her ears used to be.

"Bastards!" he cried, clenched fists pounding on his thighs. "Game Boys . . . Cricket Boys . . . Music Boys . . . All of you! Bastards!"

His next words died in his throat as he bent forward and his head fell onto his wife's body.

He cried openly for several minutes, allowing himself to be overtaken by his grief.

Only when he felt one of the dogs sniffing his head, he realized the danger he was in.

Doing his best to put his emotions on hold for the moment, Carlo took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes with the

heel of his hand, and jabbed the dog with his walking stick. The dog yelped once and ran away.

Carlo knew he had to return home, but he couldn't possibly leave Flora for the Squad to take back to the Sanitation Tunnel. He decided he'd take her with him.

With loving care he rolled Flora onto her back. Then, trying not to look at the curious smile that made her face seem bright, even in death, he lifted her by the legs and began the arduous task of dragging her body home.

After a dozen stops to rest, Carlo finally arrived home. Already, the inside of their dwelling seemed dim and gray . . . lifeless. In the dim light from the overhead bulbs, Flora's ravaged body looked even worse than it had in the tunnels. There were teeth marks covering the exposed parts of her flesh and the trip home had turned her clothes into little more than dirty tatters.

An undeserved, undignified end.

Even so, there was still a slight smile on Flora's face. A warm, loving sort of smile that looked as if it were still drawing energy from Flora's soul.

Wherever that might be.

Carlo realized there was nothing more he could do for her. If Flora had been there at that moment she'd be chiding him for carrying on and telling him to get on with his life.

He ran a hand over her hair one last time and got up off his knees. Then he took the spade from its spot in the corner and began digging an oblong trench in his garden plot. He couldn't give Flora a proper burial, but at least he could keep her from the Sanitation Tunnel, keep her from being made into soap and god knows what else.

When the hole was deep enough, Carlo performed a little ceremony over the altar of his wife's body. After reciting all the prayers he could remember, he concluded by saying, "I love you, Flora. Always." Then, doing his best to keep the tears from leaking from his eyes, he hauled her body into the hole.

The first spade of soil shifted onto Flora's body, mottling it with brown specks and making Carlo's stomach turn. He closed his eyes for the next few minutes while he worked, opening them only when Flora's body had been completely covered in dirt.

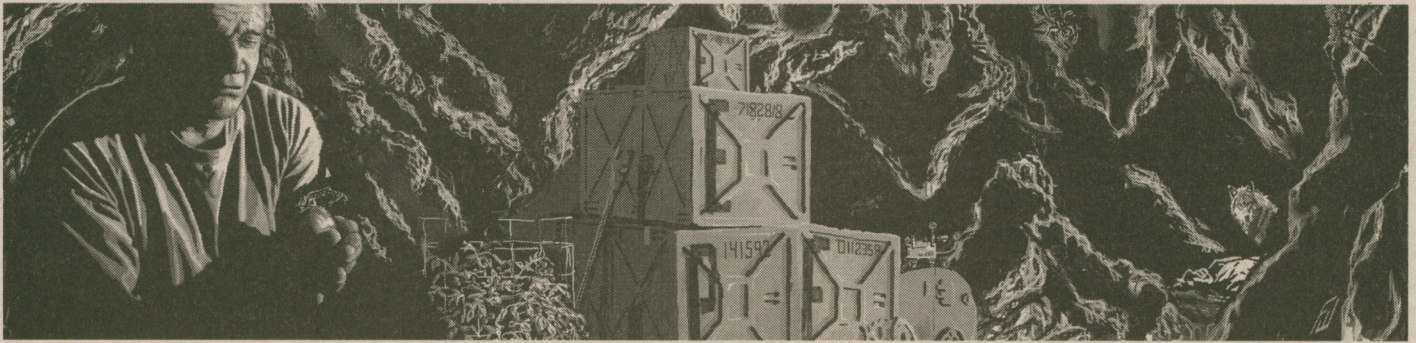
He worked the soil for hours afterwards, stopping only when the plot was completely level and betrayed no hint of what lay beneath the surface.

Then, with exhaustion overtaking his grief, Carlo went to the bedroom and curled up into a tight little ball.

He lay awake on the bed for two days before finally falling into a deep but fitful sleep.

A month went by before Carlo noticed anything different about the garden. At first he thought it was just his aged eyes playing tricks on him, but upon closer inspection of the soil he saw that things were actually growing up from the ground. The sprouts were tiny and scattered, but there were dozens of them.

Flora's body had obviously changed the chemical balance of the soil, bringing life to a place that had previously been devoid of it. Carlo thought about the irony of it for a long time, but eventually came to realize that it was only fitting that life underground could only be had through death.



Buoyed by the thought that some part of Flora was living on, Carlo quickly took up care of the seedlings, watering them and nurturing them with all the love a parent would bestow on a newborn child. When the first fruit—a small cherry-sized tomato—was ripe enough to eat, Carlo made the occasion a special event.

He washed the fruit delicately, held it up to the light to see the drops of water glisten upon its tight crimson skin, and then he bit into it, relishing the feel of its juices squirting into his mouth like tiny bursts of life.

In a few more months, Carlo had grown a good supply of carrots, celery, beets, and beans. He'd never eaten so well underground, or been so healthy.

But it wasn't enough.

He still had to venture out into the tunnels every so often for supplies. He might have been healthier, and stronger than he'd been in the past, but he was still an old man. He was still a vulnerable and easy target for any number of gangs. How long would it be before he suffered the same fate as Flora?

Too soon, he thought.

And then he came up with a plan.

That night he ventured into the tunnels to carry it out.

He found the first bum just minutes from his home, his body still warm and blood still dripping from the gory red patches on either side of his head. Later, he found another bum—this one a bag lady—in almost the same spot as he'd found Flora. Her throat had been cut and it looked as if she might have been raped.

No matter, Carlo thought. Old men and beggars can't be choosers.

Sunlight was filtering down through the fiber-optic tubes by the time he'd gotten the second body through the front door of his home. He crawled into bed and rested a while before beginning work around mid-afternoon. By nightfall, two shallow graves had been dug. Carlo unceremoniously dumped a body into each open pit, then covered them in dirt.

And then he waited. . . .

And waited.

But the second and third plots were as infertile as the first had been.

Why?

Carlo wondered.

And then the answer came to him, blossoming like a flower from the back of his mind.

It wasn't dead bodies that made things grow, it was Flora, or rather her spirit, her . . . life force, that had fertilized the ground.

The realization made him giddy. It was suddenly as if Flora had never died. She'd been there with him every day, more a part of his life now than ever before.

There was only one thing to do.

Carlo dug up the two bums, cleaned them off as best he could, and dragged them back into the tunnels where the Squad would be sure to find them.

That done, he dug up Flora.

Her skin had turned blue and black and gray but Carlo thought she was more beautiful than ever. He brushed the dirt from her face, and saw the faint smile still etched there, as if in stone.

His heart soared.

Once again he took the spade from the corner. Then holding the shovel firmly in his hands, he drove the sharp steel edge down into her leg, just below the knee. The calf broke away from the thigh like a half-rotten piece of wood.

Then he hacked off her other extremities, not stopping until her body was broken up into scores of fist-sized pieces.

One by one, he placed the bits of flesh in each of the three plots, making sure that her body was spread evenly throughout the garden.

Flora, he thought, would be pleased.

Several months later, there were a wide variety of fruits and vegetables growing in all three plots.

Best of all, Carlo hadn't set foot in the tunnels for weeks. Anything he couldn't grow himself, he was able to get from a Jobber Boy who knocked on his door every other day offering goods in trade for produce.

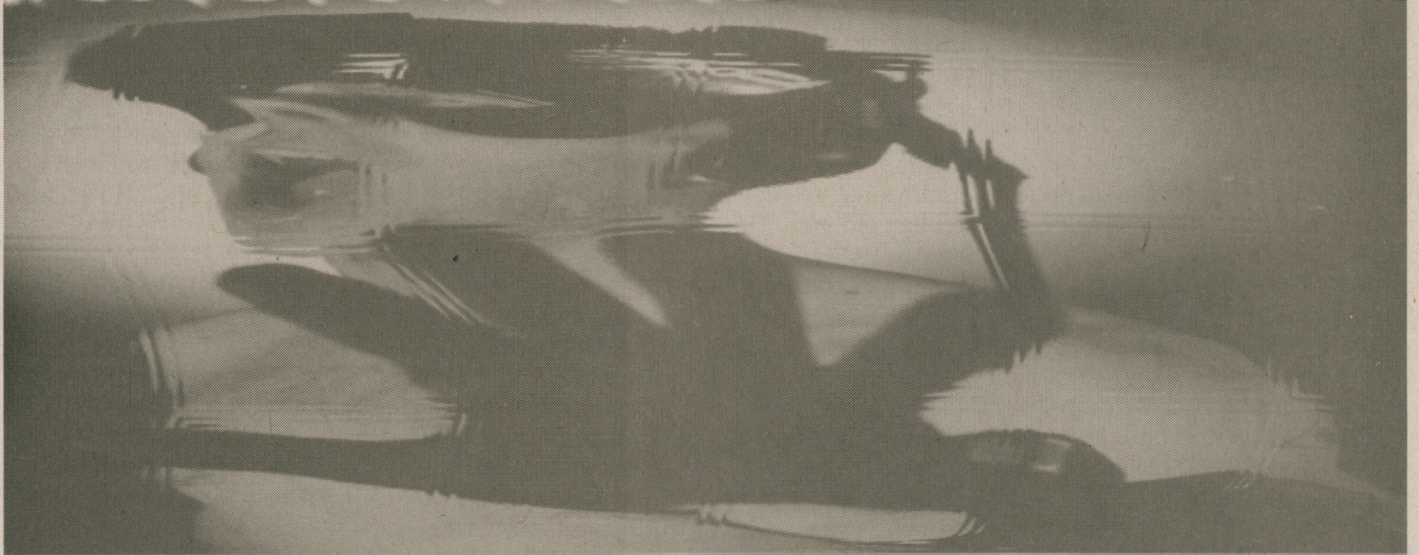
Carlo was content.

But it wasn't the abundance of fruit and vegetables that made him happy, it was the small section of the original plot that he'd set aside for his wife.

He'd planted flowers there, and let her do the rest.

From asters and primrose to bleeding hearts and buttercups, the colors were blindingly bright, vibrant and . . . alive.

Carlo sometimes missed his wife, but he never felt lonely because Flora was always in bloom.



I was recently cleaning my office and I came across a stack of old small press magazines, many of which contained stories that I had written between 1990 and 1995. Picking through the pile I selected a couple to use in **Fantastic** when a few pages needed to be filled. **Sensory Destruction** first appeared in a very small press magazine called **Heliocentric Net**. I hope you enjoy it.—EM

Sensory Destruction

by Edward J. McFadden III

Teddy hadn't made the trip to the refrigerator in months. His eyes squinted at the sunlight that streamed through the window.

Sunlight.

He had forgotten what real sunlight felt like on his skin. The warmth, how when you closed your eyes the blackness was lit with a pale red glow. Somehow, in the back of his mind, he thought he missed the sunlight.

Slowly he lumbered across his living room into the kitchen. His joints ached, pounding with a deep pain that brought a grimace to his pale, fat, round face. His movements were slow and erratic and it took him several minutes to reach the refrigerator nestled in the corner of the kitchen. Opening it, he saw an old crusty bottle of mustard and a half-eaten rotting apple. Frowning, he slammed the door.

Suddenly his watch beeped and it caused his head to jerk back in an awkward spasm that resembled a fish leaping from the water. "Crap, I'm due at work in five minutes," he mumbled as he started his journey back to the chair.

Teddy was a young man, approaching the fine age of thirty. He was in good shape, weighing in at a trim 327 pounds. He remembered when he was a child, back when he moved more, even ran once in a while. Now the fat hung like over-stuffed pillows from his broad frame. His eyes, which had once been sharp blue, were now faded, a worn blue-green with large pupils covering most of the iris. Sweat dripped from his forehead. His fingers were red and inflamed, every fingertip containing an advanced touch enhancer node.

Finally he reached the chair and typed in the initiation sequence. The chair creaked and buckled under the load of his immense girth. Beep. . . . Beep. . . . Beep. . . .

"Alright, I'll be there in a minute! Keep your pants on!" As quickly as he could, Teddy sat in his chair and affixed the audio regulators to his ears. He pressed a small yellow button and the Sight Induced Rhythmic Generator (SIRG) glided down across his eyes and nose. Plugging in the touch enhancer connection, Teddy could feel paper between his

fingers. A voice was becoming louder, almost yelling. Focusing, Teddy sat before his boss, Glenda.

". . . and further more . . ." She rambled on, but Teddy didn't hear her. Her holographic image was beautiful. Often he fantasized about her image and wondered what she really looked like. She was about the same age as him, which he knew from the personnel files. They had worked together, or rather Teddy had worked for her, for six years, yet they had never met. In fact, it would have been a little difficult meeting, since Glenda lived on the Mars colony. Still, he could fantasize and wonder—and program her into the pleasure simulator. Noticing his inattentiveness, Glenda paused.

"Where are you today?" She asked as a smile crept across her face. "I need your input on this and you're not even here." Teddy chuckled. Of course he wasn't there, he had never been there. *Christ, I haven't been out of my house since I was twelve.*

"Sorry, I just disconnected for awhile to get something to eat." Glenda's image looked at him, perplexed. "Yeah, I try to take a walk every once and a while. Make sure my body is still alive."

"What you need is some coffee," she said as her holographic image poured him a cup of coffee and passed it across the table to him. Slowly Teddy felt the tiny Bud-Simulator needle prick his tongue. It hardly hurt anymore. His tongue had become a lump of scar tissue, pricked and poked with the injection of too much coffee and too many martinis. Yet he could still feel the simulated hot coffee running down his throat, smell the ground coffee beans, and taste the bitter caffeine. The needle released and Teddy felt like a donut.

"Thanks," he said in a remorseful tone and paused. "I'm sorry, please continue."

"Yeah, I was saying that you have to revise this report today before lunch. Mr. Ta Yee is logging on this afternoon and I want it done."

"Sure, me and Hap will take care of it right away. Want to join us for lunch today? I found this cool place in

England, fully interactive. You can catch your own lunch. You and I went there before. . . .”

Glenda’s image looked sad, and she ignored his small Freudian slip. She had never been there with him . . . maybe her image had.

“Hap called in sick today,” she said finally. Despite his emotional regulator, Teddy felt his stomach burn for a moment, then it was gone.

“Sick,” Teddy’s image wavered. “I’ll drop by his place, see what’s up.” Glenda nodded.

To save time, Teddy decided to forego the ritual of driving his GT-3000, his state-of-the-art sports car. Instead, he entered the manual override sequence and in moments he was standing at the door to Hap’s holographic house. Teddy wondered what the structure really looked like. If Teddy’s real apartment was any indication, it was better to keep the holo-image up all the time.

Teddy rang the bell and waited. No answer. He rang again. Still no answer. Typing in another manual override sequence, he was inside.

Hap’s house was extravagant, the product of hundreds of hours of intense programming. It was perfect down to every last detail. Except, of course, that it wasn’t real.

Ornate colors decorated the finely engraved woodwork that lined the walls. Blue-gold furniture accented a large Persian rug of similar color. The colors were so sharp, so vivid, that Teddy found himself wondering if they would ever fade, become old.

Suddenly the room flickered and Teddy could see a stark room filled with garbage and old furniture. Small rats darted back and forth across the floor. A dead plant sat rotted in the corner.

The image restored and he was once again standing amidst Hap’s lavishly decorated living room.

Teddy found Hap’s holographic image lying on the bed, eyes closed. “Hap, you there? Hap,” called Teddy.

“I’m here, old buddy. What brings you?”

“Well, I,” muttered Teddy as the room blinked again. This time the holographic image was totally removed and Teddy could see Hap in his chair.

Hap was six years younger than Teddy, but twice his size. It was hard for Teddy to distinguish arms and legs from the giant torso. Wires protruded from his fingers, needles ran through his gums and face. Teddy’s image blinked, then restored.

“Hap, you alright, man?”

Hap didn’t seem to hear. All his energy and attention were focused on trying to reestablish his connection with the net. He moaned in a low and pitiful tone. Teddy shook his head. Unlike himself, Hap had grown up in the chair. It was all that he knew.

Thirty-six hours after birth the education programs began running through a child’s sensory implants. At the age of six, every child was fitted with a chair and began working. Hap didn’t know what the sun felt like. He didn’t know what the sun was, beyond its textbook definition.

A shudder ran through Hap’s body. A mammoth roll of fat buckled and his head shot forward, slamming into the SIRG. His fat arms began flailing, twitching with spasms of pain.

Abruptly the holographic image of Hap’s house returned, but his image was no where to be found.

Congestive heart failure and sensory overload malfunctions were listed as the causes of death, but Teddy had other ideas. Hap’s heart had been reinforced many times to compensate for his chair-induced girth. Yet, perhaps it had been his lack of life? Real life. Teddy’s holographic image stared out the window of his office. Hap had been in that chair for twenty some odd years.

Teddy didn’t even hear Glenda enter his office. “You O.K.?” she asked. Her image was sad and it seemed to waver as Teddy looked up at her.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think I’m gonna head home. Maybe go on a vacation or something.”

“Good idea,” she responded. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She left without further comment and Teddy knew she was hurting as much as he was, she just wouldn’t show it.

Once again Teddy decided to forego driving his car and entered the manual override. With a flicker of light and a blur of color, Teddy was unlocking the front door to his lavish holographic apartment. Elegant furniture, brightly colored pictures, and small decorative sculptures filled the living room. Light streamed in through the window and Teddy could feel the Sensory Enhancer heating his face; not like real sunlight at all.

Without conscious effort, Teddy found that his hand drifted to the large yellow button to his left and immediately the vertigo of disconnection filled him. The SIRG began to lift and natural light filled his eyes. He felt ill as he ripped the small sensory enhancer nodes from his fingertips. He yelled with pain as the connections were broken and his fingers were left bare, free to feel on their own. His stomach began to settle as he heard the SIRG snap into place above his head. He lifted his hand, staring at it.

It was as white as snow. Thin lines of red crept their way through his fingers to their tips. He made a fist and pain flooded through him as his joints cracked and bent with years of neglect. Slowly he got to his feet and made his way across the cluttered room and fumbled with the lock on the front door.

Sunlight filled his small living room as he flung the door open. Shielding his eyes he stepped outside. Teddy breathed deeply then coughed. Fresh air. His lungs heaved and contracted.

Grass encroached on the unused roads, covering the black worn pavement, returning it to the earth. The outside of his building sat on the verge of collapse, its red bricks crumpling, forlorn. Small animals darted about, but no human could be seen.

Slowly Teddy began to lumber down the grassy road. There used to be a forest somewhere around here, he thought. Maybe I’ll find the sea or perhaps the mountains.

Had Teddy been connected to the net, he would have seen the holographic images of many pretty people walking along the street he now lumbered down, their perfect images staring at his large misshapen body with disgust, wondering what had happened to the wretched creature and why he wore a wide smile.

The Lord of the Rings Cometh

Report #1

by Ed McFadden

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not touched by the frost.*

*From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken:
The crownless again shall be king.*

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

As you get older you begin to look back on your life and ask “What if?” What if I picked a different major in college, what if hadn’t wasted that money, what if I had bought that stock in the beginning...what if? What if Ed McFadden hadn’t read *The Lord of the Rings* in eighth grade? Would I be a fiction editor today? I think not.

I wasn’t much of a student as a kid. I was a classic underachiever, having no interest in the topics taught, yada, yada, yada. It’s an old story, one everyone reading this can probably relate to. Then a “What if?” event comes along and changes everything. For me reading *The Lord of the Rings* was a turning point in my life. I remember reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* in two sittings, locking myself away in my mother’s apartment, just reading. I wanted to reach the climax of the tale so badly that when I did the sense of loss was so great that I reread the trilogy. Since then, I have read or listened to *The Lord of the Rings* over 30 times, I’ve read Tolkien’s biography, a book of letters spanning his life, etc. So, I consider myself somewhat of a Tolkien historian. (My articles and fiction have appeared in numerous Tolkien fanzines and magazines.)

My connection with these books and the characters brought to life therein pushed me to read more, to try and replicate that feeling of joy, then of loss, that a great book delivers. Over the years there have been few books, if any, that holds the impact that *The Lord of the Rings* holds for me. It was the start of my literary life. It made me want to write, read, and eventually edit. How can one tale do all these things? That’s the story I’m here to tell.

Once and while, if we’re lucky, there is a movie (or series of movies or TV show) that creates a phenomenon that can’t be explained. Films that cross boundaries and fly across continents reaching people of all races and colors. *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Indiana Jones*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, and *Survivor* are examples, in my opinion. *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy will be one of these phenomena.

For those of you who don’t know, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is currently being filmed on the small island nation of New Zealand. With Peter Jackson directing (*Bad Taste*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Meet the Feebles*, *The Frighteners*, and

others) and Newline Cinema supplying the \$130 million dollar budget, the initial feedback on this project has been incredible. With a tentative release date for the first film set for Christmas 2001, one might ask, “Why are you talking about this so early?”

My intention is to bring *Fantastic’s* readers regular updates on this project culminating in first release coverage, interviews, etc. I’m even trying to get on the New Zealand set before principle photography for all three movies wraps in a few months. I will present facts, rumors and my comments. First some facts.

The budget: Many said \$130 million? That won’t go far. Yes it will. Due to the exchange rate and the New Zealand economy the \$130 million is like \$400 million in the U.S. So, these films have no lack of funds. Also, principle photography for all three films will take place at the same time. This saves major cash.

Location: perfect. Utilizing computer technology to fill in the gaps, all principle photography will take place on the beautiful landscapes of New Zealand. Immense sets have been constructed, and a small town housing technical staff, actors, and support staff is visible amidst the lush New Zealand landscape. Many movie personnel have been living in New Zealand since the beginning of filming and will remain there until principle photography wraps—almost a year and a half. This includes the director, who lives in a 24’ travel trailer outside the ramshackle village. As we move forward, I will try and show pictures of these areas but security is extremely tight and getting pictures is very difficult. The few shown here I obtained from the Internet.

Cast: Here’s a partial list: Elijah Wood as Frodo Baggins, Sean Astin as Sam Gamgee, Ian McKellen as Gandalf, Ian Holm as Bilbo Baggins, Liv Tyler as Arwen, Cate Blanchett as Galadriel, and many others. I know, I know, you already have questions. How can a full-size person be a hobbit?

What follows is my interpretation, including some quotes from Peter Jackson, on how all of this is going to come together. *The Lord of the Rings* has basically been un-filmable until now. There have been a few animated attempts, which are generally regarded as major failures. Now, with computer technology what it is and the budget for this film being adequate, *The Lord of the Rings* can be captured on film for the first time. Peter Jackson describes the films as a cross between *Legend* and *Braveheart*—meaning the films will have the content of *Braveheart* and the beautiful imagery of both films.

When asked “How will you handle not using ‘small people’ to portray the Hobbits,” Peter responded by saying computer technology will be used to shrink regular-sized actors. I think this is a great decision. One of the ways to kill these films before they even come to life would be to

limit these characters by utilizing “small people.” (I’m so PC.) No offense, but that pool of actors is pretty small, no pun intended.

Where’s *The Hobbit* in all this? Down the road, and Peter may or may not direct. I figure he’ll direct if *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a hit. If not, he won’t. Either way, New Line is committed to making the film at some time in the future.

No, the Tolkien estate is not involved in the project. That would make the project officially sanctioned and the estate doesn’t want that. In my opinion this is ridiculous. They sold the rights, therefore it’s sanctioned. The English will be English after all. However, I’m sure the estate would ramble on about numerous legal issues that force the estate to act in this manner.

One of the chief fears of among fans all around the world is Peter Jackson’s ability to make films that suspend disbelief...that are real. When you see some of the pictures you’ll see that this concern is for naught. Peter fully understands the potential pitfalls that await him around every turn and is actively jumping over all of them. Peter states, “One of the chief reasons for wanting to spend 5 years of my life making these films has been that I don’t think that fantasy has been well served by cinema. Starting out with strong scripts (and we are obviously dealing with great material) will put us ahead of a lot of other fantasy films. Not making the movies self-consciously fantasy will help too.”

OK, now the tough one: What will be cut? Speculation regarding this topic is wide spread. Peter says only, “It is true that most of the cuts will come from the first book.” I personally don’t like this, as *The Fellowship of the Ring* was my favorite of the three. However, it’s probably the smart way to handle it. While a lot happens in book one, many scenes can be cut without taking away from the whole and that is the goal here. I would write the entire script for all three films as one then break it into three films based on natural breaking points—this should not follow the books. We’ll see. But chances are Tom Bombadil and the like will not make the cut. Any fan of Tolkien knows that Peter Jackson must walk a fine line here. Every Tolkien fan has their favorite character or their favorite scene—some of these folks are going to be disappointed. But remember: if Peter were to film all three books, without cutting anything, each film would be four hours long!

“If you want to have a hit you’ve got to make it quick so they cut it down to 3:05.” —Billy Joel

Clearly, this is the area that will either make Peter Jackson a god, or the guy who destroyed the greatest epic fantasy ever. I feel Peter will make smart choices. He knows the material, he is a big fan of Tolkien and he understands what makes the story great. But, I wouldn’t cut too much from book one. While book one does have a slower pace, it sets up the character development in such a way that the final two books have a great impact on the reader. If Peter cuts too much from book one he runs the risk of having the viewer not care enough about the characters—beep, game over. Bilbo’s birthday party, the hobbits’ first encounter with a black rider, The Prancing Pony, Weathertop, the Fords of Bruinen, and Moria are all crucial. And what of the great council? I can’t see today’s

youth sitting through twenty minutes of the characters sitting around a table debating the fate of the world. Perfect spot for flashbacks. Also, the history of Middle Earth is very important to the story. On this topic Peter states, “Most of the Middle-earth history we show will be related to the events important to our immediate story, i.e. Isildur’s death, defeat of Sauron during the Second Age and the history of Gollum and the Ring. We will be detailing some of the Elven history as well as a sense of the Numenorians and the rise, and decline, of Gondor. That will mostly be in narration and not on-screen.” Narration, be careful, Peter.

On this topic Peter said, “Our philosophy is simple. We don’t want to make any radical changes to the basic events or characters in the books. So Sam will NOT become a girl (another piece of rumor-mill bullshit that’s been floating around for a year), or have a gay relationship with Frodo, or anything silly like that. We will have to remove certain events or characters, but they will be clean lifts. Any changes we do make will be centered on developing characters or events in the spirit that Tolkien created them, but maybe taking them further than he did. For example, the Aragorn/Arwen romance is a lovely part of the story...but if it was filmed exactly as Tolkien wrote it, they would have maybe 10 minutes screen time together over 6 hours of film. So we have to find a way to include Arwen in more of the story, to have a chance at creating a meaningful screen romance. However, we won’t do anything radical like adding her to the fellowship, as that would be departing too much from what we all know and love.” Arwen, hmmm, it couldn’t have anything to do with NewLine and who’s playing Arwen, could it? Or bringing more women to the theaters?

Some technical information: The films will be shot in Super 35, which creates a 2.35 ratio. 70mm was considered, but the problems with the computer-generated special effects were too daunting with respect to resolution. The score will be classical sounding—Peter says it will have a “Celtic feel.” The film will utilize over 15,000 extras—many from the New Zealand military. The films will be rated PG-13, but Peter states it will be a “hard PG-13.” The three films will have an approximate running time of six hours.

And how will Sauron be depicted? “This is a great question, and one we have been grappling with [since the beginning of the project],” said Peter. “We still don’t have a definitive answer. The Sauron of the books is sketchy at best, which makes it hard to turn him into a screen villain to carry three movies. Imagine not seeing Darth Vader for all three *Star Wars* films. You just can’t do it. We obviously have Sauron’s various emissaries to represent him, but just how Sauron himself appears is still a puzzle we are trying to solve.”

Now for some rumors: Sources close to the project have leaked that Arwen, played by Liv Tyler, is not going to appear as much as originally anticipated. The original plan, as stated above, was to increase the screen time of this character. However, apparently Liv’s performance was rather poor and Peter felt she didn’t add anything to the overall project. Therefore, speculation is that Arwen will not play as big a role as was planned, and that many of Liv’s scenes will end up on the cutting room floor.

Also, anticipating a backlash from some ridiculous parent group or some such, it was speculated that the Hobbits and their companions would not be seen smoking on screen. Smoking was a major part of the books. The hobbits were always talking about pipe weed and there are several scenes and conversations devoted to it in the books (Tolkien was a big pipe smoker.) However, reports from the Peter Jackson camp, and several actors in the film, state that smoking, while not PC, is included in the films. The Hobbits will be puffing away.

Finally, the point has been raised as to the "gay" overtones of some of the scenes in the books. Now, I don't think any are intended. But some have implied that the scenes with Sam stroking Frodo's head and kissing him are homoerotic. When taken out of context, I guess, the scenes could be interpreted that way. But when looked at in the context of the entire story, their friendship, the things they have endured together, I think the scenes are appropriate and I think it's sad that decisions of this kind even need to be made. It appears that these scenes will *not* show Sam kissing Frodo, and their love will be implied rather than shown.

Well, I hope the information provided here has gotten you as excited about these films as I am. Much of the information provided here is available on the Internet and I would like to thank www.aint-it-cool-news.com for the Peter Jackson quotes. If you would like to read the entire interview with Peter it is posted on that site. I hope to have an interview with Peter in a future issue.



Boromir



The Hobbits



Elrond and Arwen



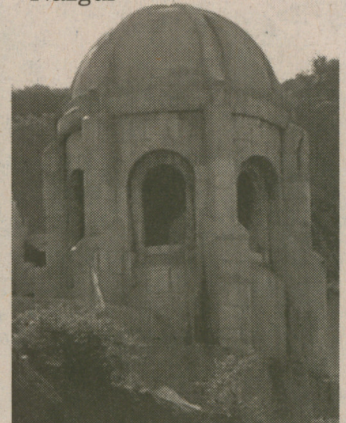
Galadriel



Nazgul



Aragorn in Battle



Minas Tirith



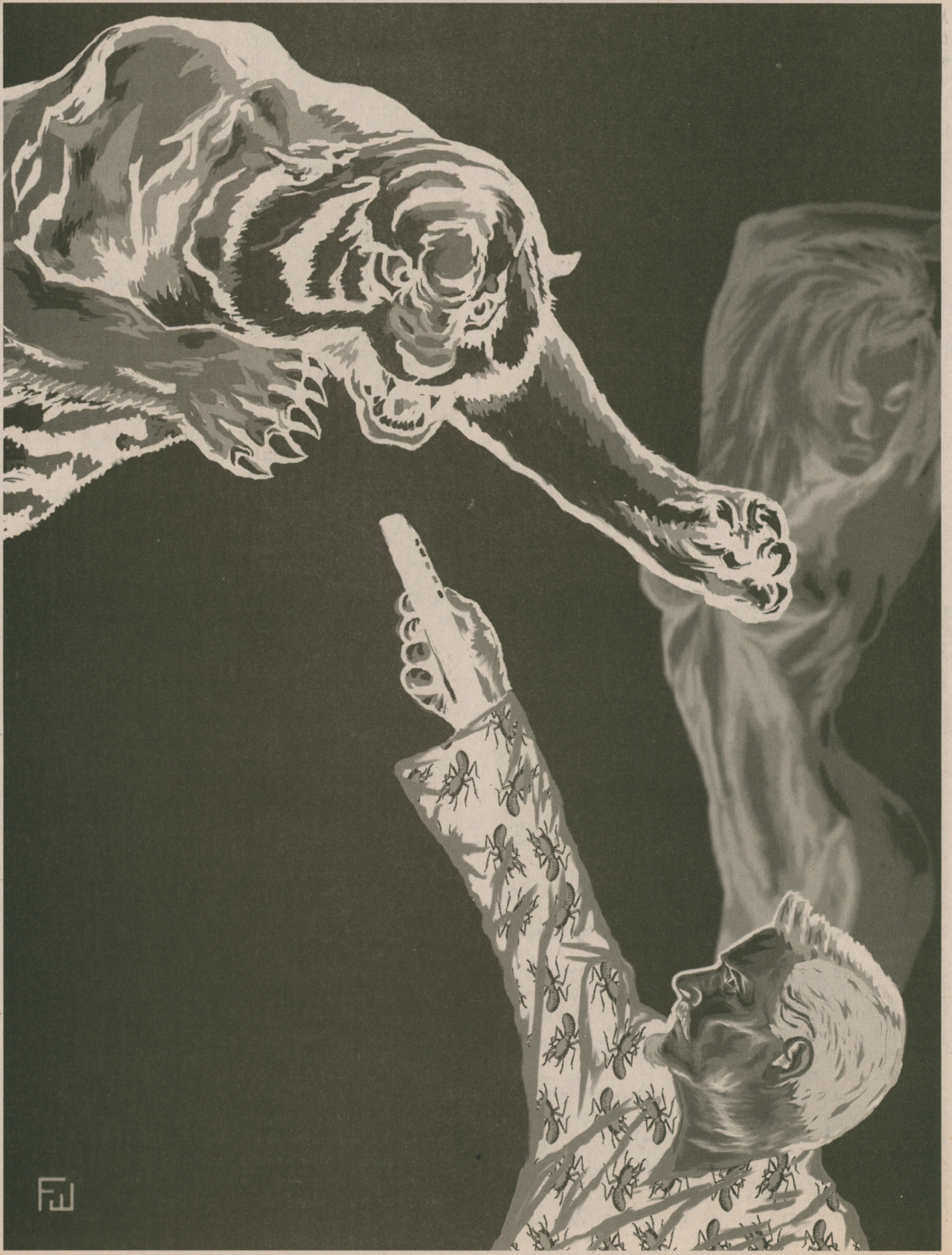
Frodo



The Council at Rivendell



Gimli



Paul Di Filippo was a fixture in Pirate Writings . . . and he will be a fixture in Fantastic as well. Paul has written numerous books including The Steampunk Trilogy, Ribofunk, Fractal Paisleys; and he has a new collection coming out in 2001. His short fiction has appeared in all the major fiction magazines and many anthologies.

Karuna, Inc.

by Paul Di Filippo

"He learned about pain and death from an ugly dying dog. It had been run over and lay by the side of the road, its chest crushed, bloody foam bubbling from its mouth. When he bent over it the dog gazed at him with glasslike eyes that already saw into the next world.

"To understand what the dog was saying he put his hand on its stumpy tail. 'Who mandated this death for you?' he asked the dog. 'What have you done?'"

—Philip K. Dick, *The Divine Invasion*

I. MEMORIES OF THE 37th

Maybe he should get himself a dog.

A dog—a pet, a constant companion, something to fuss over—might help.

But then again, maybe not. It was so hard to know, to make up his mind.

Considering his unique situation. His special troubles. His extra share of suffering.

Adding any unknown factor to the sad equation of his life might disguise its solution, remove any answer forever beyond his powers of philosophical computation. (Assuming his life—anyone's life—was solvable at all.)

But how could he know for sure without trying?

Yet did he dare try?

Foolish as the dilemma seemed, it was a real quandary, seemingly his alone.

Others seemed not to have such problems.

For instance. Everyone in Thurman Swan's life had a dog, it seemed. All the people he hung with daily at the Karuna Koffeehouse. (He felt odd calling them "friends," upon such short acquaintance, even though they were starting to feel a little like that.) Shenda, Buddy, Chug'em, SinSin, Verity, Odd Vibe . . . They were all dog-owners, every manjack and womanjill of them. Big dogs or little dogs, mutts or purebreds, quiet or yippy, reserved or exuberant, shaggy or groomed, their dogs came in all varieties. But one thing all the animals had in common, Thurman had noticed: they were inseparable from their masters and mistresses, loyal beyond questioning, and seemed to repay every attention lavished on them in some psychic coin.

Call it love, for lack of a less amorphous word.

Thurman could have used some of that.

The cheap clock radio came on then, dumb alarm-timer, unaware of Thurman's insomnia, activating it needlessly.

The device was the only item on his nightstand. There had been a framed picture of Kendra and Kyle, but when the letters and calls stopped coming, he had stored the picture of his ex-wife and child in his lone suitcase on the high closet shelf.

Thurman had already been lying awake for hours, although he hadn't had the energy to get out of bed. He didn't sleep much these days. Not since the war.

The war that had held so many mysteries in its short span, and changed so much—for him, if no one else.

Furnace skies. Sand lacquered with blood. And greasy, roilsome black clouds . . .

He was in one of the ammo-packed, barrel-stacked bunkers that made up the conquered fortified maze at Kamisiyah, laying the charges that would bring the place down like a bamboo hut in a typhoon. He wore no protective gear, hadn't thought he needed it. His superiors certainly hadn't insisted on it. Dusty sunlight probed through wall-slits like Olympian fingers. Sweat leaked out from beneath his helmet liner. He took a swig from his plastic liter bottle of water, then returned to work. His deft actions raised spectral echoes in the cavernous concrete room, ovenlike in its heat and feeling.

But what was it baking?

So intent was Thurman on the delicate wiring job that he didn't notice the entrance of visitors.

"Specialist Swan."

Thurman jumped like a cricket.

Major Riggins stood in the doorway. With him was a civilian.

Civilians made everyone antsy, and Thurman was no exception. But there was something extra disturbing about this guy.

As thin as a jail cell bar and just as rigid, wearing an expensive continental-tailored suit so incongruous in this militarized desert setting, the guy radiated a cold reptilian menace. His stance and aura reminiscent of a fly-cocked iguana were reinforced by shaved head, pasty glabrous skin and bulging eyes.

Major Riggins spoke. "As you can see, Mister Durchfreude, the demolition is calculated to leave absolutely nothing intact."

Durchfreude stepped into the room and began running a gnarly hand lovingly and as if with regret over the piles of crated munitions. Thurman's gaze followed the ugly

manicured hand in fascination, as if fastened by an invisible string. For the first time, he noticed what appeared to be a trademark stamped on many of the crates and drums and pallets.

It was a stenciled bug. A termite?

The civilian returned to the doorway. "Excellent," he dismissively hissed, then turned and walked off.

Major Riggins had the grace to look embarrassed. "You can return to your work, Swan," he said brusquely.

Then his commander left, hurrying after the civilian like a whipped hound.

Thurman went back about his task. But his concentration refused to return.

And a day later, at 2:05 P.M., March 4, 1991, when Thurman and his fellow members of the 37th Engineer Battalion assembled at a "safe" distance from the bunkers, video cameras in hand, and the proper signals were sent, liberating a force that shook the earth for miles around and sending up a filthy toxic plume that eventually covered thousands of surrounding hectares, including of course their camp, Thurman, uneasily watching, thought to see the mysterious civilian's face forming and dissolving in the oily black billows.

A commercial issued from the bedside radio. "Drink Zingo! It's cell-u-licious!"

A drink *would* taste good. Not that Zingo crap, but a very milky cappuccino. More milk than coffee, in fact. With half a plain bagel. No schmear. Thurman's stomach wasn't up to much more.

Now, if he could only get up.

He got up.

In the bathroom, Thurman hawked bloody sputum into the sink—pink oyster on porcelain—put prescription unguent on all his rashes, took two Extra-strength Tylenol for his omnipresent headache, counted his ribs, combed his hair and flushed the strands in the comb down the toilet. In the bedroom he dressed gingerly, in loose sweats and unlaced sneakers, so as to avoid stressing his aching joints. Halfheartedly, he neatened the sweaty bedcovers. No one would see them, after all.

In the entryway of his small apartment, he scooped up pill-vials and inhalers, pocketing them. Claiming his aluminum cane with the foam back-bolster clipped to it, he left his two semi-furnished rooms behind.

Another busy day of doing nothing awaited. Retiree city. Adult daycare. Park-bench idyll.

Not the worst life for a sick old man.

Too bad Thurman was only twenty-seven.

5. bullfinch's mythology

"No!"

Shenda Moore burst the shackles of her bad dream with an actual effort of will. There was nothing involuntary or accidental about her escape. No built-in handy mental trapdoor opened automatically, no cluster of ancient guardian neurons on the alert triggered its patented *wake-up!* subroutine. No, it was all Shenda's own doing. The disengagement from the horrifying scenario, the refusal to participate in her subconscious's fear-trip, the determination to leave the grasping fantasies of sleep

behind for the larger consensual illusion called reality . . . it was attributable to the force of Shenda's character.

Really, everyone who knew her would have said, so *typical of the girl!*

Sometimes Shenda wished she were different. Not so driven, so in-charge, so *capable*. Sure, mostly she was grateful every minute of every day to Titi Yaya for bringing her up so. Shenda *liked* who she was.

But being responsible for *everything* was really so much *work!* An endless roster of sweaty jobs: mopping up messes, straightening crooked lives, building and repairing, shoring up, tearing down, kissing all the boo-boos better. *Mwah!* And now: stop yer sobbin'.

Dancing with the Tarbaby, Shenda called it.

And there was no stopping allowed.

Especially now—with Karuna, Inc., taking off and demanding so much of her time—Shenda awoke most mornings with a hierarchical tree of chores arrayed neatly in her head, a tree where any free time hung like forbidden fruit at the farthest unreachable branchtips.

But even coming online to such a formidable task-array was better than waking like *this*.

Shenda's heart was still pounding like a conga, her shouted denial still bouncing around the bedroom walls. She clicked on a table lamp and swung her slim and muscular caramel legs out from under the sheets, sitting upright in her cotton Hanro nightshirt. She massaged each temple with two fingers for a while, lustrous and wavy black hair falling around her lowered face, while contemplating the nightmare.

It was not the first time she had had it.

She was on a flat graveled rooftop in broad daylight, level with the upper stories of many surrounding buildings. Tin-walled elevator-shaft shack, a satellite dish, door to a stairwell, whirling vents, a couple of planters and deckchairs. Highly plausible, except that she had never been in such a place.

With her was Bullfinch.

In her hand, Shenda suddenly realized she clutched a tennis ball.

Bullfinch capered around her, leaping up for the Holy Grail of the ragged green ball, begging her to throw it.

So she threw, sidearm, expert and strong. Wildly, without care or forethought.

The ball sailed through the air, Bullfinch in hot pursuit, claws raking the gravel.

Over the parapet the ball sailed.

With a majestic leap, Bullfinch madly, blithely followed, sailing off into deadly space.

In the dream, Shenda screamed her denial.

Now she merely murmured, "No"

The "meaning" of the dream was plain enough: her duties were getting to her, the weight of her responsibilities to those she loved was making her imagine she might easily fuck up.

Hell, she *knew* she was gonna fuck up sooner or later. It was inevitable. Everyone fucked up continuously. That could almost be a definition of human existence. The 24-7 fuck up. She didn't need any dream to remind her of that.

All she prayed was that she wouldn't fuck up too bad. Be left with enough of her faculties to pick up the pieces and start again.

Luck came into this somewhere.

And luck was one of the things beyond her control.

Her heart had calmed. Rising determinedly to her bare feet (the purple paint on her toenails was all *chipped*—she'd *have* to make time to see SinSin for a pedicure—not that she had, like, any *man* in her life these days to *appreciate* such details), Shenda went about getting ready for her day.

Her first instinctive action after the nightfright was to check on Bullfinch.

She found the dog snoring in the dining room.

Disdaining his very expensive catalog-ordered puffy cushion bed, Bullfinch had made himself a nest.

Somehow he had reached a corner of Titi Yaya's antique linen cloth (remnant of old high times in Havana) where it hung down from the tabletop. He had dragged the cloth down, bringing two brass candlesticks with it. (God, she must have been *dead to the world*!) Then he had chewed the irreplaceable cloth to the shredded state most suitably evocative of some genetic memory of an African grass lair.

"Oh, Bully! Whatever is Titi going to say!"

Bullfinch swallowed a final snore in a gurgle, then awoke. His wattled, enfolded face peered innocently up at her. Breaking into an ingratiating, tongue-lolling smile, he wagged his stubby tail.

Shenda found her anger instantly dissipating.

Most empathetic people found it impossible to stay mad at a bulldog for long, they were so mild-mannered and goofy-looking.

Especially one colored like a canary.

The employee at the animal shelter—a bearded, spectacled fellow with some kind of East European accent and a name tag reading JAN CLUJ—walked Shenda back among the cages so that she could make her choice. Ambling down the wet cement aisle, she found herself, of course, wanting to take every one of the abandoned yelping mutts home. But it was not until she saw the bright yellow occupant of one cage that she stopped decisively.

"What's the story with this one?"

"To my eyes, which are admittedly not of the most expert, our friend is the variety of English Bulldog. Was picked up on Kindred Street, near the college. Of tags, none. Meeting his maker in" —Jan Cluj checked the page slipped into a galvanized frame wired to the cage—"five more days."

"But what about that *color*?"

Jan Cluj shrugged, as if the matter were of



little interest. "It is unnatural. Most assuredly obtained chemically. I accuse some likely college boys. They are insufficiently studious and given to madcaps."

Crouching, Shenda extended her fingers through the wire separating her and the yellow dog. He snuffled her fingers eagerly and sloppily. She stood.

"There's no roots showing, or normal-colored patches the dye job would've missed."

Exasperatedly: "Dear lady, the dog is as you see him, fit and active by medical ukase, most normal save for his hue. Explanations are superfluous. Will you have him?"

"I will have him."

After signing the relevant forms, Shenda took the happy bounding yellow dog straight to a grooming salon known as Kanine Klips (recommended by Pepsi, who had her poodle, French Fry, done there regularly), where she had the anomalous bulldog dipped and clipped.

Then she waited for his normally colored fur to grow out.

Three years later, she was still waiting.

The dog was some kind of genetic sport. His naturally unnatural coloration was a shade most commonly associated with avian life-forms.

Shenda had resisted naming the bulldog until he assumed his true form. Called him "Hey, you!" and "Here, doggie!" for weeks, out of some kind of feeling that to name him wrongly would be to warp his personality. But when the true state of his freakish coat became evident, there was no other possible name for such a specimen.

"Bullfinch," said Shenda with weary patience, "get up off that tablecloth please. It's time for you to go out and do your business."

Bullfinch obeyed. He arose and trotted over to the back door of the house. Shenda opened it and the dog went outside into her small fenced yard.

While the criminally destructive canine was busy outside, Shenda gathered up the precious tatters, surveyed them mournfully, estimating possibilities of repair, then, clucking her tongue, chucked the rags into the trash.

Bullfinch re-entered the house. Promptly, the dog went over to the wastebasket and dragged the ruined fabric out and over to his bed. With great care and exactitude, employing paws and muzzle, he arranged the cloth atop the puffy cushion to his liking. He plopped his rear haunches down on his new dog blanket, and sat regarding his mistress.

Shenda gave up. "I don't have time to play no tug-of-war with you, Bullyboy. My day is fuller than usual. And it starts *now*."

As if to say, *Mine too!* Bullfinch nodded his weighty corrugated head several times, then lowered his forequarters and was soon asleep.

Shenda showered and groomed. Those toenails *had to go!* In a robe, toweling her hair dry, she flipped on the bedroom radio automatically, thinking to catch the news, but then hardly listened. She put her panties on ass-backwards, caught herself, swore, and redonned them correctly.

Dressed in baggy Gap jeans and a green silk shirt, she ate a chocolate Pop Tart standing up at the sink, washing it down with a tumbler of chocolate milk. Her face was blank, as if her mind were vacationing in a more alluring country than her body.

"—cell-u-licious!" declaimed the radio.

Shenda snapped out of her fugue, looked at the clock, and exclaimed, "Louie Kabloolie! Bully, I've got to run! You got plenty of kibbles, and tonight I'll bring you a real treat. Promise!" She scuffled on a pair of open-toed Candies, grabbed up a courier-style satchel and her car-keys.

The door slammed behind her. Bullfinch opened one eye, then the other. Seeing nothing that needed his attention, he closed them and returned to sleep.

He could fly. He really could. And that airborne tennis ball was *no problem*.

3. FROZEN FURNITURE

No dreams, pleasant or otherwise, but rather a mechanical device, awoke Marmaduke Twigg from his Midas-golden slumbers.

Like every other member of the Phineas Gage League, Twigg was physiologically incapable of dreaming. The relevant circuitry, along with much else, had been chemically and surgically excised from Twigg's altered brain.

As a consequence, he was radically insane. And in the worst possible way.

The mania didn't show, didn't impede his daily functioning. Indeed, Twigg's brand of insanity *increased* his cunning, ingenuity, deftness, manipulative social skills and will to power. Minute to grasping minute, hour to scheming hour, day to conquering day, he appeared to himself and others as a single-minded superman, apparently a paragon of efficient, rational action. Perched on the very uppermost rungs of the social ladder, Twigg seemingly owed all his accomplishments to the secret devastations willingly wrought on his grey matter.

Yet it was as if a dam had been erected in the brains of Twigg and his compatriots, a dam behind which fetid black waters were continually massing.

A dam which must one day give way, taking not only the well-deserving Twigg and his peers to their vivid destruction, but countless others, the more or less innocent and the less or more complicit.

Right now, of course, such a fate seemed vastly improbable.

Twigg thought—rather, *knew*—that he was a new and improved breed of human, superior to anyone not a League member.

He knew that the world was his oyster.

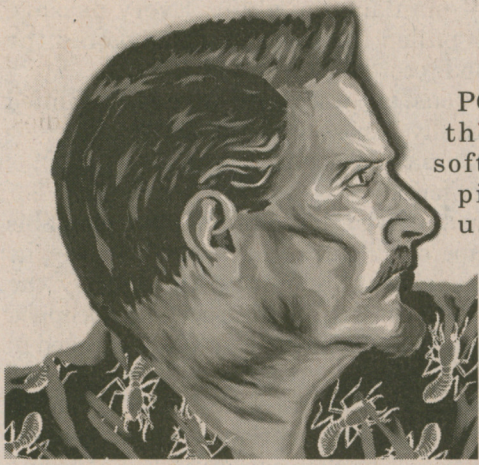
The only thing left to determine was at precisely which angle one should work the knife into the hapless stubborn bivalve, and how best to *twist* the sharp instrument properly.

Crack!

The shell halves fell apart.

And the raw meat was sucked greedily, gleefully down.

Twigg lay sleeping on his back in the exact center of the mattress of his enormous four-column canopied bed. His chest-folded arms were clad in ebony silk salted with white dots. Beneath his crossed arms, crimson satin sheets and a crest-embroidered white duvet were drawn up in unwrinkled swaths. (The crest on the coverlet depicted a heraldic shield enclosing crossed iron rods with a



superimposed eye, and the Gothic initials PGL.) Resting in the middle of a softer-than-down pillow, Twigg's unlined face seemed the ivory mask of one of the lesser pharaohs.

Suddenly, without visible stimulation, Twigg's pebbly

eyes snapped open like rollershades, and he was instantly alert.

Twigg could feel the small unit consisting of pump and segmented reservoirs implanted inside him stop its gentle whirring. The same device (which regulated many hormonal functions previously so crudely performed by now missing grey matter) had sent him efficiently to sleep exactly four hours ago, during which time he had not stirred a limb.

He knew that most of his servants—especially those who had the least personal contact with him, knowing his peculiarities only through rumor—jokingly referred to him as one of the undead. But Twigg of course cared not.

All the lesser cattle were the true phantoms, without substance, ineffectual. Only he and his kind were truly *alive*.

Twigg's breakfast would soon arrive, carried to him by his loyal factotum, Snivelshytz. In the meantime, he flew the jetcraft of his mind over the varied terrain of his day.

Meetings, public and private: legislators, aides, ambassadors, presidents, CEO's, media slaves. Acquisitions and sales: companies, divisions, patents, real estate, souls. Phone calls: conferenced and one-on-one. Presentations: from scientists, PR experts, lawyers, brokers, military strategists. Wedged into the interstices: meals and an intensively crafted scientific workout.

All of it absolutely necessary, absolutely vital to keeping all the delicately balanced plates of Isoterm's myriad businesses spinning.

Yet all of it absolutely tedious.

But tonight. Tonight would make up for all the boredom.

For tonight was the monthly meeting of the Phineas Gage League.

Twigg smiled at the thought.

His smile appeared like fire burning a hole in the paper of his face.

Memories of his own entrance into the League trickled over his interior dam. These were not so pleasant. The initiation rituals were stringent. Had to be. No whiners or losers or weaklings allowed. Cull out the sick cattle right at the head of the chute. Still, the shock and the pain—

Twigg reflectively fingered a small puckered scar on his right temple. His smile had disappeared.

To recover his anticipation of that night's pleasures, Twigg reached up to stroke one of his bed's four canopy supports.

At each corner of the enormous imperial bed stood a life-sized naked woman, arms upstretched over her head, thus pulling her breasts high and flat. Each woman supported one corner of the heavy wooden frame that held the brocaded fabric canopy.

These caryatids were each one unique, sculpted with absolute realism, down to the finest hair and wrinkle. They were colored a uniform alabaster. Their surfaces were absolutely marmoreal, as unyielding as ice. Twigg's hand, lasciviously molding the butt of one-woman statue, neither dented nor jiggled the realistic curves. Rather, his hand slid over the human rondures as if they were curiously frictionless.

The door to Twigg's bedroom, half a hundred feet away, opened. A man entered, bearing a domed tray. He crossed the carpet with measured elderly steps.

Twigg bounded out of bed lithely.

His black pajamas, it was now revealed, were embroidered with hundreds of identical white termites.

"Ah, Snivelshytz! Well done! On the table if you please!"

The old and crabbed servant—longish hair the shade of old celluloid—set his burden down.

The table was a large piece of gold-rimmed glass borne aloft on the backs of two kneeling naked men arranged parallel. One of the humaniform trestles was a middle-aged paunchy type, the other young and lean.

Twigg moved to an antique desk of normal construction, where a high-end computer incongruously sat. He powered it up, eager to begin his day of bending and shaping, betrayal and coercion. Simultaneously, with seeming unconcern, he questioned his servant.

"Birthday this week, Snivelshytz? Am I correct?"

"As always, sir."

"Not thinking of retirement yet, are you?"

A fearful tremor passed over Snivelshytz's worn features. "No, sir! Of course not! I served your father for his whole life, and his father before him! How could I even *think* of retiring!"

"Very good!" Twigg ceased his typing. As if pondering a different topic, he said, "I *must* find a hassock for this room! Well, I'll get around to it some day."

The servant seemed on the verge of fainting. "Any—anything else, sir?"

"No, Snivelshytz, you may go."

Twigg's braying laughter escorted Snivelshytz out.

Whipping the silver cover off the tray, Twigg disclosed his breakfast.

It was a single uncapped bottle of sinisterly effervescent Zingo, whose label featured the famous lightning-bolt Z.

Twigg grabbed the bottle and downed its bright Cool-Mint-Listerine-colored contents.

Cell-u-licious!

Setting the empty bottle down, the man picked up a device off the table. It resembled a standard remote-control unit.

Pivoting, Twigg raised the unit and pointed across the vast room.



On the far side of the interior acreage stood a full-sized statue of a Siberian tiger, absolutely lifelike save for its unvarying artificial whiteness. The beast's face was frozen open in a toothy snarl, every ridge of its pallid gullet delineated; one mammoth paw was lifted in mid-gesture. Separate from the statue, strapped around its neck, was a collar and small box.

Twiggy pressed a button.

The tiger's anguished roar filled the room, its striped face a Kabuki mask of rage. Like an orange white and black express train, it raced at its tormentor. Twiggy stood like a statue himself.

Several yards distant from its infuriating quarry, the tiger leaped, its maw a slick red cavern, claws extended.

At the last possible moment Twiggy pressed another button.

The stasis-transfigured tiger, now vanilla white, fell with a heavy thud to the deep carpet, nearly at Twiggy's bare feet.

"Yes!" said Twiggy gleefully. "Like to see even that cool bastard Durchfreude do better."

Naming the Dark Intercessor aloud seemed to cast a shadow on Twiggy's pleasure.

The man was a valuable nuisance. Every use of his talents simultaneously decreased his utility and increased the liability he represented.

One day the balance would tip decisively on the side of liability.

And then, Twiggy grimly suspected, it would take more than the easy press of a button to put Kraft Durchfreude away.

4. *Espredezo Eggde*

The wide, welcoming, windowed wood door to the Karuna Koffeehouse had its own unique method of announcing customers.

Mounted inside above the entrance was a Laff Bag: one of those innocuous sacks that contained a device to play

tinny mechanical maniacal laughter. Every passage through the door pulled the string that triggered the abridged five-second recording.

Making a pompous entrance into the gaily-painted Karuna was practically impossible.

Not that there weren't folks who still tried.

Fuquan Fletcher for one.

Thurman had just arrived that morning, setting off his own personally impersonal gale of guffaws. This early, he had found his favorite table empty, the one by the moisture-misted south window. Taking a seat, he unclipped the cylindrical foam bolster from his cane and arranged in the small of his back.

The fragrant atmosphere of the Koffeehouse was filled with the gurgles and chortles of various brewing devices, the chatter of the trio of workers on duty, the savoring sipping sounds of sleepy humans gradually coming up to full mental speed with the aid of friendly plant derivatives. The ceiling-mounted speakers suddenly crackled alive with the sounds of Respighi. A wide-mouthed toaster noisily ejected its crisped bagel passengers.

All was right with the world.

If not with Thurman himself.

Lining up his various prescriptions on the tabletop, Thurman tried not to feel too sorry for himself. Self-pity was an attitude that didn't do any good, he knew from the recent bitter years, though surely easy enough to fall into.

Looking up from his chesslike array of bottles, Thurman saw one of the baristas approaching.

Normal service at the Karuna involved placing one's order while standing at the long, oaken, display-case-dotted counter separating customers from the employees and the exotic tools of their trade, and then maneuvering with said expeditiously filled order through the crush toward an empty or friend-occupied table. The baristas generally ventured out only to clear tables of post-java debris and swab them down. (And even these incursions into the customer area were infrequent, thanks to the unusual self-policing neatness of most Karuna patrons.)

But for Thurman—and anyone else who obviously needed special attention—exceptions were easily made.

Just part of the thoughtful charm that found expression in the Karuna's motto:

The place to come when even home isn't kind enough.

The phrase Thurman always involuntarily associated with the young female barista named Verity Freestone was "pocket-sized." Pixie-cut black hair topping a seventy-five pound package of cheerful myopia.

Today Verity wore a striped shirt that exposed her pierced-navel belly, brown corduroy pants that would've fit Thurman's 12-year-old nephew, Raggle, and a pair of Birkenstocks. Verity filled out *her* pants, however, in a more interesting—to lonely Thurman—fashion.

Verity pushed her thick glasses up on a mildly sweaty snub nose. "Hi, Thur. The usual?"

"Um, sure. Except maybe just wave the beans over the cappuccino, okay? The old stomach—"

"Thurman, you look *wicked* peaked. Are you okay?"

"As okay as I'll ever get."

Verity eyed the pill vials ranked before Thurman and frowned. "All those unnatural chemicals can't be good for

you. Haven't you tried any alternative healing methods? Maybe get the old *chi* flowing. What about vitamins? You take any vitamins?"

Thurman waved the advice away. "Verity, really—I appreciate your concern. But I can't change any part of my medical care right now. Strict doctor's orders. I'm barely holding on as it is."

Verity's expression changed from faintly hectoring to triumphantly assured. "I know just what you need, Thur."

This was more than Thurman himself knew. "And what might that be?"

"Some espresso eggs! They're not on the menu. We—the help, that is—we make them just for ourselves. But I'm gonna fix *you* up some special!"

The treat sounded nauseating to Thurman. "Verity, I don't know if I can take any espresso in my eggs—"

"Oh, they don't have any *coffee* in them. We just call them that because we make them using the espresso machine steamjet."

"Well, if they're mild—"

"Mild don't even come close!"

Before Thurman could object any further, Verity clomped determinedly off.

Thurman plucked the rumpled morning newspaper from the adjacent window-ledge and unfolded it. A headline caught his attention:

DISPOSAL LOGS MISSING FROM GULF WAR

CIA BLAMES ACCIDENTAL ERASURES

He made an effort to focus on the smaller print.

Just then the door laughed.

Fuquan Fletcher was the Karuna's coffee-bean roaster. A master at his craft, he was indispensable to the quality of the Karuna's drinks, and thus responsible for much of its success.

That single and singular virtue failed to compensate for the fact that he was an utter prick.

At least in Thurman's eyes. But not, he suspected, in his alone.

Always dapperly dressed and impeccably groomed, the trim mustachioed black man had no admirers more fervent and appreciative of his immense hypothetical charms than himself. He was a loud walking arrogant billboard for his own athletic, sexual, financial, and terpsichorean prowess.

"Ladies!" bellowed Fuquan from the door. "Show me a hot oven, and I'll get right down to some sweaty work!"

Returning to Thurman's table, an unfazed Verity passed by her co-worker. "Morning, Fuquan."

The man made as if to embrace her, a move Verity deftly eluded with a twist and a skip, all without spilling a drop of the drink on her tray.

"Freestone! I got you pegged, girl! You're one of them sex-elves like I seen in a comic once! Show the world your pointy ears, girl! Let them puppies out to play! Then you and me will go into your fantasy world!"

Thurman was highly embarrassed by this display. For the *n*th time, he pondered putting Fuquan in his place. Once he would have done it automatically. Visceral memories of R&R barroom brawls tweaked his flaccid muscles. But now he had neither the energy nor the ability.

Verity was unfazed by the familiar routine. "Fuquan, you'd better cut the talk and get to work. We're running low on Jamaican."

"One day you're gonna give me some of your good stuff, Miss Peanut."

"Don't count on it. Thurman, here's those eggs I was talking about."

Moving irrepressibly on to other equally futile love-conquests and bouts of braggadocio, Fuquan went behind the counter where Thurman could see him donning a neck-to-knee apron.

"Don't you ever get sick of him?"

"Oh, he's harmless. It's the ones who don't say anything you have to watch out for."

Thurman instantly felt that perhaps he was one of those suspiciously quiet ones, and fumbled for some sort of conversational tidbit, as Verity disburdened her tray onto the table.

"Uh, how's your dog doing?"

Verity owned a long-haired dachshund (referred to by Fuquan as, of course, "Hairy Weenie"). "Slinky Dog is just fine. He goes out to stud next week. Slinky makes his girlfriends happy, and I make a little extra cash."

The mention of even canine stud duty saddened and embarrassed the affliction-unstudly Thurman. "Um, great, I guess. . . ."

"Now, try these, Thur, and tell me what you think."

Before him, fluffy white-flecked yellow clouds of whipped and steam-cooked eggs seemed to float an inch off their plate. Thurman had never seen such ethereal scrambled eggs. Plainly, there was a component of antigravity to their recipe.

Thurman forked some up and delivered them to his taste buds.

There was not even any sensation of them resting on his tongue. The sweet creamy taste of the eggs seemed to suffuse directly into his bloodstream. Chewing was definitely superfluous.

"These—these are the best eggs I've ever had!"

Verity smiled and patted his shoulder. "Part of your regular order from now on, Thurman. We'll get a little flesh back on those bones."

Thurman finished his eggs with gusto, as well as his usual plain bagel half and cappuccino (oh, all right: weakly flavored hot sugary milk). Feeling better than he had in months, he settled back to absorb the busy evolving scene around him.

People watching was Thurman's main recreational activity these days. Cost nothing, and took little strength.

Odd Vibe came in. A quiet and generally unsmiling Norwegian who bore the unfortunately twistable name of Otto Wibe, he was the Karuna's baker.

Thurman could hear Fuquan greet his backroom co-worker.

"Odd Vibe, my man! You sleep in those clothes or roll a bum and strip him?"

"Fletcher, you go and sit on a biscotti, by gosh!"

"Oh, sharp one, Oddy! We'll have you playing the dozens yet!"

Around eleven, Tibor "Chug'em" Gruntpat made his daily appearance. Chug'em was a sanitation worker,

fiftyish and gnarled, just coming off-shift. He had been up since about three A.M. Without a word, Buddy Cheetah—drummer for a struggling band called the Beagle Boys, who was working the counter with Verity—lined up four double-mochacinnos in front of the grey-haired muscular man, who knocked them back in a total of sixteen seconds. Then Chug'em left to sleep through the day.

Others less and more memorable came and went, the latter category featuring SinSin Bang and Pepsi Scattergood from the Kwik Kuts salon three doors down the block. As usual, the brace of beauticians were impeccably trigged out. The Misses Mode O'Day. And, natch, their hairstyles had changed since last week.

Nelumbo Nucifera, good-looking Italo-American boy who kept all the females happy with his tight tee shirts, came out from behind the counter to clear Thurman's dish and refill his cup.

"Thanks, Nello."

"Hey, want to hear a joke, man? This guy walks into a bar with an alligator on a leash. . . ."

In the buttery sunlight after Nello's departure, Thurman began to grow sleepy.

And then the door's chortles, sounding somehow lighter and more vibrant, announced Shenda Moore.

Her arrival had the same effect on Thurman's nerves as a Scud missile intersecting the Aegis defense system. He came instantly awake, his heart thumping to a salsa beat.

Wasn't she just so achingly damn *beautiful*?

And wow!

Peeking out of her open-toed shoes—

Those Easter-egg nails!

5. MONEY COMES

The Tarbaby wanted to *tango* today!

Shenda's hasty departure from her apartment had set the tone for the rest of her morning. From one appointment to another she had raced. Suppliers and building contractors, City Hall and DEM, office supply stores and print shops, the homes of employees out on long-term sick leave. The odometer on her little green Jetta seemed to revolve madly like one of those movie time-machine displays as the decades whipped by. Shenda's Dayrunner was thick as a slice of Sequoia, stuffed with loose business cards that took flight at the slightest provocation, making her feel like an utter *idiot* as she stooped to recover them under the noses of leering sneering straight-edge white guys in *suits*!

(Whenever Shenda heard this putdown tone in her mental monologue, she would automatically pause, disengage the gears on the aggression machinery, and try to radiate a little human warmth, the way Titi Yaya had taught her when she was a little girl. The practice had been hard at first, gotten easier over the years—although the mental trick never ceased to be something she must consciously invoke as a counterweight to natural human impatience. This refusal to hate or impose false separations lay at the heart of Shenda's personal MO, and at the heart of her vision for Karuna, Inc.)

As she dashed about town, attending to all the daily hassles associated with running the expanding set of

enterprises loosely linked under the umbrella of Karuna, Inc., Shenda felt a twinge of irreducible guilt.

She had not taken Bullfinch for a walk in days. (That dream—) The dog was uncomplaining, but Shenda knew that he missed the exercise. Hell, so did she!

If walking with Bullfinch pleased them both, then why hadn't they done it in too long?

Was her life becoming the kind of White Queen's Race she had always derided in others?

Was she forgetting what was really important in life?

She hoped not. Natural optimism made her ascribe this unnaturally busy and stressful period to the fact that now, after three hard years, Karuna, Inc., was really taking off.

Maybe soon now she could even hire a helper!

Stopped at the traffic light at the corner of Perimeter and Santa Barbara Streets, Shenda looked idly to her left and saw a big truck emblazoned with some kind of insect logo.

Must be exterminators . . .

The light went green. Shenda wheeled right on Perimeter toward her final two stops before lunch. (Both stops had been planned to mix pleasure and business, one of Shenda's survival tactics. At Kwik Kuts, she'd get her pedicure and instead of dishing dirt, discuss business. Then, at the Karuna, she'd lunch after tending to their affairs.)

As she expertly threaded the traffic, she thought back to the beginnings of this whole unlikely scheme.

Three years ago, she had been a business major fresh out of the university, temping in a series of dead-end jobs, and unsure of the path before her. The *what* and *why* of her life were plain enough, but the *how* was shrouded in mystery. Then Titi Yaya had phoned, a day in advance of her standard weekly call.

"Shen-shen, dear." Only Titi Yaya called her *that* old childhood name anymore. "You remember Titi Luce?"

"Of course, of course. I saw her once when I was six. She visiting from Miami?"

"Not anymore, dear. She's dead. Nine days ago. I just got back."

"Oh boy . . . Sorry to hear it, Titi."

"I know you are, dear. Now, pay attention. I can't get out of the house today. Too much to make ready. So I need you to pick up a few things for the *oro ile Olofi* ceremonies tonight. Seven white candles, a pigeon, eight coconuts, some *cascarilla*, Florida Water . . ."

Shenda scribbled dutifully, although she was not truthfully looking forward to attending the *oro ile Olofi*. Titi Yaya and the other santeras would ask when she was at least going to take the Necklaces, embrace the Warriors—never mind making the saint!—would press on her protective bracelets at the very least—the *ide*—and she would have to refuse, to say that she didn't follow the Religion anymore, had never really done so since reaching adulthood. Unpleasantness would result.

Titi Yaya finished her list. "And be here sharply at nine, dear. Oh, by the way: Luce left you a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Goodbye till nine."

The connection was severed on Titi Yaya's end but not on Shenda's, as she held the phone stupidly in her hand until the recorded operator voice came on.

The first thing Shenda did was press the disconnect button on the handset, then dial the temp agency and resign.

The second thing she did was walk (no car then) to the Karuna, where she could sit and have a coffee and think.

In those days, the Karuna looked nothing like its current self. Didn't even have the same name, but was known instead as the Corona Coffeehouse. Drab, dirty, dusty and disagreeable, it was mismanaged by absentee tax-finagling owners and patronized by shady types, the yuppies they preyed on, and a clique of arty poseurs.

Liars and strivers and bores, oh my!

Only a handful of the employees redeemed the joint. Folks glad to have a job and trying their best to overcome bad conditions.

Sitting with a cup of acidic, burnt coffee, thinking alternately of the nameless yellow adopted dog back home in her tiny walk-up and the bequest so cavalierly dropped in her lap by her ever-surprising aunts, Shenda tried to imagine what she might do with the money, the best way to put it to work.

There came an unbidden moment then—a moment most incommensurate with the tawdry surroundings, a self-catalyzing timeless nanosecond Shenda would never forget—when the whole world seemed to blossom, to split open like a fruit, revealing the seeds of her whole future.

Shenda was at the bank the next day.

Depositing the bequest and using it as collateral, she took out a loan. With that money, she bought the Corona from owners eager to dump it cheap and write off the loss.

Rechristening the place was easy. Somehow the soundalike new name surfaced, recalled from a college philosophy class.

Shenda wasn't quite sure what the *exact* definition of "karuna" was. But it had something to do with warmth and spaciousness, and it sounded suitably exotic. Plus, anyone who went looking for the old "Corona" would likely end up at the new "Karuna."

Firing the incompetent and surly employees had been positively pleasant. Shenda was not one to flinch from necessary triage. The girl could be positively *brutal* when brutal was called for. (She would have made a good nurse or general, and had in fact become a mixture of both.)

Once the Karuna was running on a steady footing (about six months; guess those business courses were worth something after all), Shenda incorporated a holding company that also utilized the Karuna name.

This parent company had but one purpose. Its short prospectus was perhaps unique in the history of capitalism. Shenda was very proud of it. She had written all of it herself.

"Karuna, Inc., is a cooperative overseeing entity whose sole purpose is to facilitate and maximize the functioning of its subsidiaries through any ethical means available, including but not limited to group purchasing agreements; joint bargaining and sales forces; intersubsidiary loans and personnel exchanges; healthcare coordination; shared management, training and education; pooled charitable donations and grants; mutual information sharing; etc., etc.

"A company wishing to become a subsidiary of Karuna, Inc., must first redefine its sole business mission to be the

creation of environmentally responsible, non-exploitive, domestic-based, maximally creative jobs to be filled without prejudice or favoritism. The performance of all employees shall be regularly evaluated, partially on accomplishment of defined goals and partially on native abilities and attitudes of employees, with the latter considerations outweighing the former in cases requiring arbitration. While maximum product and service quality are to be always striven for, the primary goal of the subsidiaries shall always be the full employment of all workers meeting the qualifications of goodwill and exertion of individual levels of competence. It is to be hoped that the delivery of high-quality goods and services will be a byproduct of such treatment.

"Upon demonstration of such a redesign, a company will be admitted as a subsidiary, with all rights and obligations pertaining thereto, upon a positive vote of the Karuna, Inc., board.

"Profit-making is naturally encouraged. Each subsidiary shall pay a tenth of its profits to the parent corporation for the furtherance of the shared mission as outlined above.

"All owners of subsidiaries become members of the board of Karuna, Inc., and at regular meetings—open also to all subsidiary employees and their relatives, as vested shareholders—the board members shall vote to determine any future corporate actions outside the stated scope of this document, or amendments thereto. A simple majority shall carry all votes. In the case of ties, the vote of the President (Shenda Moore, undersigned) shall be called on. The President may also veto any board decision in the best interests of Karuna, Inc."

Shenda wavered a little over that last bit. It sounded kinda dictatorial. (Especially since she really had two votes: one as the owner of the Karuna Koffeehouse, the first subsidiary, and one as president.)

Hell! It was her idea, her money, and her effort!

Let anybody who wasn't satisfied stage a coup!

Smith and Hawken. Ben and Jerry's. Tom's of Maine. The Body Shop. Sure, they all tried to live up to *some* of the same principles Shenda had outlined in the formation of *her* company. But none of these others had as their primary mission the simple creation and sustainment of good jobs for those who needed them. (Perhaps the national figure who came closest to Shenda's conception of how to treat people was Aaron Feuerstein, the owner of the fire-destroyed Malden Mills in Massachusetts, who had maintained his idled help on a full payroll throughout reconstruction.)

In each of those other companies, the ultimate emphasis was on the *product*, on making and selling it, grabbing market share. Whatever the company rhetoric, when push came to shove the workers drew the short straw.

"Doing well by doing good" was *their* motto.

"Doing good and maybe doing well" was Shenda's.

It was a real although subtle difference.

(And in the end, there didn't even seem to be any *maybe* about it. Loan paid off, house and car bought, the Karuna turning a nice monthly profit. Louie Kablooie! What more could you ask of a business plan?)

Shenda didn't really give a *flying fuck* about product. People were drowning in products, they bought too much

too cheaply anyway. It didn't take a genius to turn out quality goods. That part was simple.

What took skill and talent and vision and general resourcefulness—qualities Shenda was a little surprised to find out she had in abundance—was promoting conditions that opened up satisfying, decent-paying vocational niches for everyone. Getting people into a harness that didn't bind and having them all pull together, for the common good.

General Shenda, jetting in her Jetta toward a pedicure and lunch.

Never thought being a general might someday mean having to fight a war.

६. नाँद

Marmaduke Twigg adjusted the bib of his black rubber apron, smoothing the cord where it passed around the collar of his five-thousand-dollar suit. The long, butcher-style garment bore the PGL crest in the middle of the chest.

Unlike the Masons and their aprons, the Phineas Gage League had adopted theirs for strictly practical reasons.

The lovely expensive fabrics favored by the League members reacted so *poorly* to bloodstains!

Confident he was looking his best, Twigg walked forward to the clustered PGL members who had arrived before him.

They stood on a subway platform, lit by a single scanty light. The dusty station was a deserted one, off the maps, reachable only through a certain sub-basement's concealed door.

Of course, a League member owned the building that included that sub-basement.

Empty for over ninety years, the station possessed a certain Victorian, Edwardian feel to it, wonderfully consistent with the period of the League's founding. Twigg could almost believe that he had traveled back in time, back to that romantic age of the great industrialist Robber Barons: Carnegie, DuPont, Rockefeller, Getty, Rothschild, Hearst, Krupp—

Not that he would have traded places with any of those legendary figures. Sure, they had had a few nice perks. No inflation, no taxes, no government regulations. Truly classy playgrounds like Newport and Saratoga and Baden-Baden. Half the world's resources and population subjugated as colonies under their boots. The respect and ass-kissing admiration of society.

But taken all in all, the present offered so much more!

The assembled members—eleven, Twigg quickly counted, making him the last to arrive—hailed him with varying degrees of civility and enthusiasm. Here were important personages—competitors and rivals—who would, upon receiving any news of Twigg's painful demise, lose not a minute in popping their finest champagne, toasting his anticipated afterlife roasting, and pissing the metabolically transformed fluid on his grave. Yet they were constrained by the rules of the League from doing more to his person now or elsewhen than uttering a mildly cutting *bon mot*.

Such was the strength of the bond between them.

The League members were a motley assortment of international figures, most of whose faces would be

instantly recognizable to the average newspaper reader or television viewer, all leaders of enormous, globe-girdling enterprises, media talking-head sources of quotes and advice.

Twigg catalogued his peers.

Sasha Kapok, of Kalpagni, Ltd.

Ernest Firgower, of Stonecipher Industries.

Isabelle Fistule, of Burnes Sloan Hardin Hades.

Jack Burrows-White, of Crumbee Products.

Nick Potash, of Harrow & Wither.

Edouard Ensor, of Somnifax et Cie.

Alba Cumberbatch, of Asura Refineries.

Osada Sarakin, of Preta-Loka Entertainments.

Abruptio Placentae, of Culex, SA.

Cooper Stopford, of Brasher Investments, Plc.

Klaus Kunzi-Fuchs, of Rudrakonig, GmbH.

Lastly, of course, came the nervous-looking new recruit, Samuel Stanes, of LD-100 Pharmaceuticals, whose initiation would bring the League up to its full strength of thirteen.

After greeting his compatriots, Twigg moved to the absolute edge of the platform and looked down the tunnel for the train. Not seeing it, he made a dismissive noise and stepped back, joining the rest.

Like a group of commuting meat cutters, they waited silently.

At last the train arrived.

Not modern subway cars, nor even antique carriages, but rather primitive open mining cars like riveted iron buckets with seats, pulled by a tough little engine, at the helm of which sat the Dark Intercessor.

Kraft Durchfreude.

Durchfreude was one of the League's rare failures. Something had gone wrong in the procedure that would have made him a full-fledged League member. A portion of his higher individualism and initiative had been unfortunately excised. The team and head surgeon responsible for the screw-up had soon come to wish they had never seen a scalpel. Durchfreude himself had been declared officially dead, and his corporate empire had devolved to a son, who knew nothing of his father's actual fate, nor of the League.

Yet a use and further half-life had been found for Durchfreude. Unwaveringly loyal and obedient, he made an excellent cat's-paw, a unique tool, disposable if need be, rotating his services among the League's initiates as requested.

And in fact, if no one had a more pressing need for Durchfreude's services, Twigg himself intended to borrow the creature soon for a short and simple private assignment on behalf of Isoterm.

Stepping carefully, the PGL'ers filtered into the various cars, except for the caboose.

That car was filled with bound unconscious bodies.

Men, women, children. Some animals.

Once they were all aboard, Durchfreude rang a little mechanical bell (with what mix of sardonicism and actual childlike glee, Twigg could not discern in the dimness), and the train chugged off, its single kerosene lamp the only illumination.

Not far beyond the station, the tracks began to slope to a not negligible degree. Soon, the train's brakes were squealing, the engine's gears in low, as they dropped into the earth's depths, torturing rasping shrieks from the rails.

After a time, the tracks leveled out. A light at the end of the tunnel appeared after they rounded a bend.

The train emerged into a cavernous room hewn from the living rock, and stopped. Naked flames from bracketed torches illuminated the rough clammy walls. Hidden vents created slight air currents that caused the flames to jump and lick like hungry tongues. Thick Persian rugs—stained despite the best cleaning attempts—softened the hard floor.

Durchfreude leaped down and hustled carpeted wooden steps up to the cars so that the thirteen passengers could dismount.

The room was furnished with various comfortable chairs and couches—as well as shrouded equipment whose shapes implied a more sinister nature. Scattered tables were laden with fine gourmet food and vintage drink, as well as various recreational pills and needles. Full sanitary and ablutionary facilities were half-visible behind a folding screen.

At one end of the room was a kind of dais supporting a lectern. On the wall behind the podium hung a large reproduction of the PGL crest, as well as a framed portrait. The painting depicted a mustachioed white man with the looks typical of the mid-1800's. There was, however, a curious deformity to a portion of his skull.

The members dispersed among the furniture, helping themselves to the refreshments, making small talk. After unloading the unconscious cargo, stacking the hog-tied bodies like cordwood, Durchfreude had vanished somewhere, down the tunnel or behind the screen.

When the men and women of the League had settled down, business began.

As the oldest member, Ernest Firgower ascended the dais to conduct the meeting. Behind the podium, not much of the short elderly man was visible save for his vigorous shock of silver hair towering over his wrinkled brow (where that same small scar Twigg and the others shared leered obscenely), and his green eyes shining like the tips of poisoned stakes. Twigg fancied that his countryman resembled Bertrand Russell, had that philosopher ever

included in his CV the management of, say, a concentration camp.

Firgower coughed, began to speak in a reedy voice. "Fellows of the Rod, let us commence our business. The first matter on the docket is the division of Zairian natural resources—"

Twigg listened with only half his attention. The rest was focused on a blonde woman sprawled atop the pile of warm and gently respirating bodies. Her immaculate features and contorted limbs evoked the air of a Renaissance martyr portrait.

Twigg sucked in her delicious helplessness, tuning Firgower out. Twigg was a man who believed firmly in granting business and pleasure equal status.

At last the humdrum League affairs had all been dealt with. Twigg suppressed a yawn. It was hours before his normal sleep period. Was his onboard pump working as well as it should? He made a mental note to have it checked.

Now Firgower had begun the ritual preface to the initiation of Samuel Stanes, the last duty before they could all cut loose in that hot red festival that was a simultaneous abandonment and affirmation of their unique privilege.

Twigg perked up in his seat and listened. The old story never failed to enthrall.

"We are gathered together tonight in honor of our symbolic founder, the hapless yet lucky Phineas Gage. While he did not literally lay the first bricks of our organization—that honor belongs to the farsighted entrepreneurial

visionaries of our great-grandparents' generation—Gage provided the actual inspiration for our magnificent accomplishments.

"Phineas Gage was a simple untutored manual laborer during the middle of the 19th century. At the time of his remarkable transformation, he was helping to construct a railroad. The blasting of interfering rock ledges was underway. Gage was assigned to make sure the explosive charges were well in place. Taking his tamping rod, he went to work."

Firgower waved a thin arm backward at the crossed bars of the PGL crest, then almost toppled. He righted himself and continued.



"Gage performed his task a trifle too enthusiastically. At one drill hole in the stone, he created sparks and ignited the powder charge.

"The iron rod was sent rocketing upward, out of the channel as out of the barrel of a gun, through Gage's right eye, blazing a trail of gorgeous destruction across his lobes, and emerging entire out the top of his cranium.

"Let us leap ahead, over the confusion attendant on this accident and the subsequent primitive medical treatment. Gage survived his wonderful injury. But as all his old friends attested, he was utterly changed. From an easygoing, laughing, careless sort, he turned moody and unpredictable and demanding. He seemed to be without the normal constraints of civilization. Regard for his fellow humans, he had none. Completely self-centered, his actions—reprehensible to an ignorant milksop society—led to a life of ostracism and despair.

"We now know, of course, that along with much needless peripheral damage, Gage was the first man to undergo the removal of his brain's ethical nucleus or, as some of the more old-fashioned among us refer to it, his conscience.

"Lacking all power, occupying the wrong social stratum, Gage never benefitted from his inadvertent surgery. He could not fully make use of the miraculous ease and fluidity of action which one who is blessed with the destruction of one's conscience experiences. Never to doubt, never to allow pusillanimous sentiments for human cattle to interfere with one's own self-interest, never to waste a moment of one's precious time in introspection. To see clearly the quickest path to one's own ascension. Such is the legacy given to those of us who have undergone the perfected operation."

Firgower stepped out from behind the lectern. "And now, Samuel Stanes, we of the Phineas Gage League invite you to join our ranks. What sayest thou?"

Stanes stood on visibly weak knees. "I—I accept!"

Durchfreude had appeared from nowhere.

"The Dark Intercessor will administer the sacrament," intoned Firgower.

Twigg watched as Durchfreude fastened a stasis-box to Stanes' wrist. The leader of Isoterm found his finger straying almost of its own accord to his own temple, and restrained the traitorous digit with an act of will. Someone else flicked a wall-mounted switch, and the hissing of an electric-powered air-compressor resounded.

Sweat like oily evil dew spontaneously broke out on Stanes' brow. He closed his eyes.

Durchfreude brought into view a heavy-duty carpenter's nail gun, its tumescent hose trailing. He placed the muzzle against Stanes' right temporal ridge and squeezed the trigger.

The *pop* of the gun was followed by the crunching sound of the short nail driving through flesh, striking and partially penetrating the skull.

Stanes turned then into a rigid snowy sculpture of himself, as the stasis-box was activated by the control in Firgower's veined hand.

Durchfreude caught the unstable toppling figure, hoisted it and loaded it into the train. Mounting the engineer's seat, he drove Stanes off to the awaiting surgery.

No ride home for the others would be needed for hours.

For now the fun commenced. Already, as planned, the victims were waking up.

Twigg moved swiftly to claim the blonde.

But he need not have rushed. There were plenty of subjects to go around.

When Twigg next looked up amidst the screams and howls and guttural roars—the animals sounding human, the humans animal—he saw Cumberbatch with her mouth incarnadined, a wide red clownlike smear, Ensor holding a fluid-darkened saw, Sarakin pulling tight a noose, Fistule with her arm imbrued, buried inside a dog's split mortal shell.

Not jealous in the least, the superman returned to his own pleasures.

7. "What's wrong with you?"

Alert, almost vibrating, Thurman watched the regal and youthfully glamorous Shenda Moore stride swiftly across the Karuna's polished floorboards and pass behind the counter. She set her courier's case down with visible relief.

Verity eagerly started up a conversation with the Karuna's owner, of which Thurman caught only the opening.

"That sleazy new distributor came to the delivery door again, Shenda. This time he had a couple of greaseballs with him. Heavy muscle. Thought I'd be scared or something. Huh! I told them to go fuck themselves—"

Shenda's face darkened into a scowl. Thurman thought her intense and concentrated protective wrath was nearly as attractive as her general wide-focus warmth. She opened her mouth to speak, but her reply (beyond a prefatory "Those bastards—") was lost to Thurman in a sudden swell of noise: kitchen clatter, door laughter, street traffic, patron hooting. By the time things had quieted somewhat, Shenda had disappeared into the rear of the shop.

Thurman slumped down in his seat, cut off from the source of his momentary invigoration. For a moment, he had actually forgot his illness, succeeded in imagining himself whole again.

What he wouldn't give to get a little closer to this intriguing woman! He envisioned the way their conversation would swiftly flow, from easy early friendliness to gradual whispered intimacy. And then, in some quiet, private setting—

At that moment Thurman began to cough. Not a polite, out-in-public cough either, but one of his regularly occurring TB-victim-in-the-isolation-ward, lung-ripping, throat-searing gaspers. Clutching a sheaf of napkins for the expected expectoration, he tried to turn his body toward the window, away from the other customers. His knee jerked involuntarily, bumping the small table and sending his pill vials tumbling to the floor.

In the midst of his agony, Thurman felt waves of searing humiliation.

Nothing could make his embarrassment any worse.

Nothing?

A soft yet strong hand descended on his shoulder, followed by a familiar voice.

"Are you all right? What can we do?"

Oh, Sweet Mary!

It was her!

Thurman struggled to get his body under control. He finished gagging into the napkin wad, then instinctively stuck the filthy mass of tissue (paper) and tissue (cellular) into the pocket of his sweatpants. Trying to compose his mottled features into an semblance of normality, Thurman turned to face a standing Shenda Moore.

A sweet floral scent wafted off her. She clutched half a bite-rimmed sandwich unselfconsciously in one hand. Her exquisitely planed Afro-Caribbean face, framed in lax layered Fibonacci curves of thick hair, was a blend of alarm and curiosity, her taut body poised for whatever action might prove necessary.

Weakly, Thurman found a joke. "I—there was a fly in my coffee."

Shenda laughed. The sound was like temple bells. In a bold tone she completed the old joke: "Well, don't spread the word around, or everyone will want one!"

Then, just when Thurman expected the Karuna's proprietor to turn and walk off, she pulled up a chair and sat down beside him. Now she spoke in more confidential tones, and the watchers attracted by Thurman's discomfort turned back to their own business.

"Do you mind if I finish my lunch here?"

"No, never! I mean, sure, why not? It's your place."

This hardly sounded the note of gracious invitation Thurman intended. But Shenda seemed not to take offense. She waved over Nello.

"Nello, I'll have a Mango-Cherry, please. And—what's your name?"

This information was not immediately retrievable. After a dedicated search, however, involving all his processing power, a few syllables surfaced. "Thurman. Thurman Swan."

"Get Mister Swan whatever he wants."

Thurman had never tried any of the many Tantra-brand juices available at the Karuna. "Um, I'll have the same."

Nello left. Shenda took a bite out of her sandwich, meditatively studied Thurman while she chewed. Their juices arrived. Shenda uncapped hers and drank straight from the bottle, her lovely throat pulsing. Thurman took a tentative sip, cautious as always when introducing new acquaintances to his hermit stomach. Not bad.

Shenda finished her sandwich with deliberation and obvious enjoyment, washing it down with the rest of the sweet juice. She set the empty bottle decisively down. Still, she said nothing. Thurman was dying.

But when she finally spoke, he almost wished she hadn't.

"What's wrong with you?"

Of course. She wouldn't have been human if she hadn't zeroed in on his obvious sickly condition. Still, Hunchback Thurman *had* hoped the pretty gypsy girl could have avoided the touchy subject.

He wearily started to recount his sad and baffling tale with its lack of a clear conclusion or moral.

"Well, you see, I was in the Gulf War—"

Shenda impatiently waved his words away. "I don't care about *that* shit! That's *old* shit, kiddo! I assume you got a doctor for whatever happened to you there. Maybe not the best doctor or the best kind of treatment. That's something

you gotta look into some more maybe. But what I want to know is, what's *wrong* with you?"

His mouth hanging open, Thurman couldn't answer.

Shenda leaned closer, drilling him with her unwavering gaze. "Look. I see you in here every day of the week, any hour I come in. Now, I certainly don't bitch about anybody taking up space without spending a lot. Hell, that's one of the things this place is *for*! And I'm flattered that you find this joint so attractive. But *no one* should be so desperate or lonely or unimaginative that they've only got one place to go! I mean, like Groucho said, 'I love my cigar, but even I take it out of my mouth sometimes!'"

Thurman struggled to recover himself. "Well sure, I agree, if you were talking about a normal person—"

Shenda banged her hand flat down on the table, raising a gunshot report. "Where's your tail? You got a tail? Show me your tail! Or maybe you're hiding a third eye somewhere?"

Shenda pressed a finger into his brow.

"Ouch!"

"No, I didn't think so. Thurman, you *are* normal. Maybe a 'struggling kind of normal, but who isn't? No, you've let your spirit get a kink in it, Thurman. You've been dealt a lousy hand, but you're still supposed to play it. Instead, you're down a well of apathy without a bucket to piss in! You need to get out and around, my friend."

The word friend was like a life raft. "I—what could I do?"

"How about a job?"

"A job? What kind of job could I possibly handle?"

"There's a job for everyone. Wait right here."

Shenda got up and walked to the counter, where she retrieved her bag. She strode briskly back, dropped down, and removed her appointment book from within the satchel. A single business card shot out under its own volition onto the tabletop. Shenda picked it up and read it.

"Perfect! Go to this address today. This very afternoon, do you hear me? Tell Vance I sent you and said for him to put you to work."

Shenda stood then, extended her hand. "Welcome to the Karuna family, Thurman."

Thurman found himself standing somehow without reliance on his cane. He took Shenda's hand. Her grip was a pleasant pain.

When she was halfway across the room, Thurman impulsively called out, "Shenda Moore!"

She stopped and whirled. "Yes!"

"I like your toenails!"

Shenda eyed Thurman with new interest. Coyly angling one foot like a model, she said, "Me too!"

And then she was out of the Koffeehouse, force of nature dissolving in a burst of laughs.

Thurman sank back down gratefully into his seat, feeling his face flushing. He was *almost* glad she was gone.

Now that he had gotten some small fraction of his crazy wish fulfilled, however unpredictably, he wasn't sure how much of Shenda Moore's intense company he could take!

Someone else was now standing by his table.

Fuquan Fletcher was smiling. But the smile was not pleasant, nor meant to be.

"Big man. Likes the lady's *toenails*! Gonna let the world know it!"

"Fuquan, what's your problem?"

"You my problem, man, you try to move in on Shenda Moore. That girl is *mine*! She got her nose open for *me*!"

"Is that so? You sure she feels that way?"

"Sure? I'll show you sure, man!" The irate coffee-roaster jabbed a finger into Thurman's chest.

This was the second time Thurman had been poked in the space of a few minutes. Unlike the first educational prodding, this poke made him mad. So—after he did not respond with immediate belligerence, causing Fuquan to laugh coarsely and turn to leave—Thurman felt completely justified in using his cane to hook one of the black man's ankles and pull his foot out from under him, sending him crashing to the floor.

Fuquan was up and heading with bunched fists for a risen shaky Thurman when Buddy and Nello and Verity intervened, referee baristas holding the opponents apart.

"Hey, c'mon, guys, who started this?"

Neither antagonist said anything. After a tense moment, Fuquan brushed himself off and stalked into the back.

Gathering up his pills and accoutrements, feeling that his life was becoming more interesting by the second, Thurman departed the Karuna.

Outside, he studied the business card.

KUSTOM KARS AND KANVASES
VANCE VON JOLLY, ARTIST IN RESIDENCE
"HOUSE OF THE WINGED HEART"
1616 ROTHFINK BOULEVARD

Thurman checked his wallet. Not a lot of green. But hey—he had a job now!

In the cab, Thurman speculated on what he would find at the end of the ride. Disembarking, he discovered the wan products of his imagination to be a pale shadow of reality.

He stood facing an old garage: four cinder block bays flanked by an office space. The entire nondescript structure, however, had been studded with brightly colored glazed ceramic objects in *bas-relief*, executed in a zippy cartoon style. Animals, trees, people, cars, toys, musical notes.

Above the office door was the biggest piece of pottery, big as a sofa: an anatomically correct heart sprouting white-feathered angel wings.

Thurman entered the cluttered office. No one home. He moved into the bays.

The first three were occupied by exotic cars: hotrods in various stages of being gaudily decorated. The last bay was filled with easels and wall-leaning stacks of canvases, also in various stages of completion. The paintings exhibited the same daffy sensibility as the outdoor ceramics. A beat-up workbench held brushes, tubes of color, tips of thinner and crusty rags. A tatty couch with mussed blankets, a metal-topped kitchen table and a small refrigerator seemed to hint at regular overnight human occupancy.

A toilet flushed. Through an opening door—whose frosted glass bore the calligraphic Legend INSPIRATION: TEN CENTS—walked a very pale muscular man with a trendy arrangement of dark facial hair offset by a thinning on top. One earlobe, his left, was studded with segments of a severed silver snake, like the colonial DON'T TREAD ON ME.

He was concentrating on tucking his paint-splattered green mechanic's shirt into his Swiss-Army-surplus wool pants, and so did not immediately notice Thurman. Lacking sleeves, his abbreviated shirt revealed several tattoos, including a winged heart.

"Er, Vance?"

The guy stopped and looked up with neither welcome nor discouragement. "Who're you?"

Thurman, growing more and more doubtful, volunteered his name. Then: "I was sent by Shenda Moore. She said you'd have a regular job for me . . . ?"

"You know kandy-flake? Or striping? I could use some help striping. How about bodywork? Can you do bodywork?"

"Well, I'm good with tools, and I picked up a lot of special skills in the Army."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Well, basically I was a demolition expert. But I can learn new things quick."

Vance von Jolly had gotten his shirt stuck in the zipper of his pants, and was now struggling mightily to restore his apparel to its proper functioning. Thurman wondered if he should offer to help.

"Jesus! That Shenda! She drives me nuts! All right, I suppose you can start by washing brushes. Any thumb-fingered idiot can wash brushes."

Thurman was hurt. "Wait just a minute now—"

"Oh, did I mention I can't work with anyone who gets pissed off at my dumb mouth?"

"No. Unless that was it just now."

Unable to free his shirt from the toothy tangle, Vance ceased struggling and moved to the workbench. Buttoning his waistband, he found an alligator clip and pinched shut the upper open portion of his fly. The clip projected outward like a small groin antenna.

"It was. Okay, let's start by showing you where everything is."

Thurman had one question. "Vance—will I be working with a lot of chemicals? I've had some bad luck with chemicals in the past."

Vance seemed to see Thurman and his condition for the first time. He shook his head ruefully. "Man, someone really fucked you up, didn't they?"

"I guess you could say that."

The painter moved to Thurman's side, hanging an arm over his shoulder. A complex odor of sweat, garlic and solvents wafted off the man.

"Thurman, my pal, I want to let you in on a little secret. The Army made you handle the chemicals of *death*! But here we work with the chemicals of *life*!"

"What's the difference? Chemicals are chemicals, aren't they?"

Vance von Jolly merely tapped a finger against his head and winked.

ॐ "let the dog eat vote!"

Sun like a fusion-powered pomegranate in a pristine blueberry sky. Whipped cream clouds. Breezes holding kites and balloons aloft and trying to tug high women's



skirts and slither up men's pants-legs. Acres of open lawn green as celery, with shaded patches the color of new money. Shouts and squeals of playing wild children. Over-the-top, can't-stand-myself canine pack yelping. Bee-buzz adult chatter: gossip, business, philosophy and seduction. Teenage odd-stressed argot in the perpetual search for cool. Pointillistic laughter. Competing music from half-a dozen boom boxes, holding the sonic fort until the Beagle Boys finished their cable-laying, equipment-stacking preparations underway 'neath a Sgt.-Pepper bandstand. Smell of mesquite burning down to perfect grilling coals, and aromatic dope-leaves combusting.

Just another partially organized, partially spontaneous monthly shareholders' meeting of Karuna, Inc.

Shenda thought back to a poetry class.

Rip those boardroom doors from their jambs, rip the executive jambs from the walls, then rip down the corporate walls!

You go, Walt!

Amidst and amongst the several hundred people and several score dogs assembled in Morley Adams Park, Shenda circulated happily, Dame Kind with her flock.

Mama! These festivities always made her high!

Every face smiled to see her, every adult hand juggled drinks or spatulas or books or tapes or purses or babies in order to clasp hers. Children hurled themselves at her as if she were some natural feature of the landscape placed here for their rightful pleasure: a tree, a mountain, a beach. Shenda caught them up, whirled them and set them down. Fur and tongue and tail foamed around her like breakers, then raced away.

A splash of lemon yellow, a flash of Jell-O wattles: Bullfinch scampered to keep up with his fleeter cousins.

This was what Shenda lived for. Not all the petty details of running her brainchild, the squabbling altruistic quasi-corporation known as Karuna, Inc. Certainly not all the hourly, daily, weekly headaches and stress. They all faded like phantoms in the sunshine of this assemblage. Here, under her watchful, beneficent gaze, she could gauge the actual good she had accomplished, count all the people she had helped and observe how that help had spread—was continually spreading—outward in circles of big-heart, wide-mind action.

Shenda really wanted nothing else. (A man, a mate, hell—a date? Well, perhaps. . . .) This gathering was her total and complete yardstick of satisfaction.

This very day would have been perfect, in fact, if not for one matter.

Zingo, that cell-u-licious horse piss.

The actual owner of Maraplan Importing—this brashly illegitimate distributor new to their city—had visited the Karuna Koffeehouse several times since that day Verity had told his men unequivocally to fuck off. At last managing to snare Shenda, he had delivered one final classic performance of intimidation and blustering. Ignorantly self-assured, crudely sly and warthog-aggressive, he refused to take Shenda's "Blow me!" reply-in-kind for an answer.

"Little lady," said Faro Mealey in their ultimate interview, rasping a simian hand across his chin-stubble, "you are not being very smart."

Shenda was a little scared at this confrontation. But stronger emotions were a sense of the scene's absurdity, and utter infuriation at the *nerve* of this guy!

"On the contrary, Mister Mealey. It's you who's acting like a juvenile dumbshit schoolyard thug! You come in here and practically order me to drop my old distributor and replace him with you. Then you tell me that I'll have to take just as many cases of that poisonous antifreeze you call soda as you decide is good for me. Moreover, I'm not the only business you're trying to pull this scam on. You've been to some of *my friends*, as well as dozens of unrelated concerns throughout the city. Does the word 'shakedown' hold any meaning for you, Mister Mealey? Do you know what would happen to you if I went to the cops?"

Mealey unsealed a sporadically gold-capped grin. "Not a fucking thing, babe, I assure you."

Shenda looked the man up and down. Clad like a cheap racetrack tout, Faro Mealey seemed an unlikely type to actually command the clout he now boasted of. Still, Shenda probed for more information.

"Oh, yeah? Who's gonna come bail your ass out? The International Brotherhood of Slimeballs?"

"Very funny. I like broads with a sense of humor. They're always good in bed. No, my business has some important backers. Let's just say that the makers of Zingo take a big interest in insuring their product gets top placement in the marketplace. Now, why doncha think about my proposition for a few days? I should warn you that our terms in the future might not be so generous."

"Mister Mealey, you can take a fucking Zingo enema. Now, get the hell out of here!"

Over the next few days, Shenda had done a little financial-pages, library-stack sleuthing, following a not-too-shadowy paper trail.

Another owned the company that perpetrated Zingo. And that one was owned by yet another. But beyond that level, the path seemed to lead conclusively to something called Isoterm. Who or what motivated *them*, Shenda had been unable yet to learn.

A Nerf football hit Shenda in the side of the head.

"Sorry!" called out little Tara Vadeboncoeur, her face a mix of horrified chagrin and stifled delight.

"*No malo, chica!* That's what I get for daydreaming in a rowdy crowd!" Shenda lofted the ball back, and moved on.

She stopped and talked with Joe Ramos of Kan-do Konstruktion for a while. His firm planned to bid on part of the new Westside highway job. Shenda gave him a rundown on what she had picked up on his likely competitors through the grapevine. After a gleeful handshake, she left Ramos crunching numbers on a calculator.

Mona Condeluccio staggered by under the weight of two aluminum pans, each as big as an unfolded Monopoly board and deep as a footbath. Shenda quickly relieved her of one, and peeked beneath the foil lid.

"Mmm-mm! Potato salad!"

"And this one's macaroni. I got six more in the truck!"

Mona ran Kozmic Katering. She was providing about half the food for today's bash, partially in lieu of her tithe. The rest was all deliciously homemade. Oh, except for the donuts from Krishna Murphy's Krispy Kreme franchise.

Following Mona toward the picnic tables, Shenda said, "Louie Kabloolie, I wish the business part of the day was over already!"

After a few spectacular failures, Shenda had mandated that Karuna, Inc., finish discussing all its outstanding business matters prior to falling like wolves and vultures and savages on the food and alcoholic beverages. Otherwise, not a hell of a lot got done. And also, while Shenda didn't mind being heckled, she found that the intellectual quality of the catcalls and witticisms was higher when the audience was sober.

The women deposited their burdens on the groaning buffet. Shenda grabbed the first teenager to fall within her reach. "You, Haley Sweets! What you thinking, standing there like a goofball statue when there's work to be done? Help Mona! Right now!"

Haley Sweets—acne like strawberry fields—gazed at Shenda with besotted puppy-love. He gulped, sending a hypertrophied Adam's apple yo-yoing, said without satire, "Yes sir!", then trotted obediently off.

Shenda laughed silently. *Boy—we got to find you a woman!*

And then she saw Thurman Swan.

Thurman sat on a folding plastic-basket weave lawnchair, cane hung from the armrest. If his seat had been a gold throne in a Byzantine palace, his enjoyment would obviously not have been increased one iota.

On either side of him stood the gorgeously decorative SinSin Bang and Pepsi Scattergood, owner-beauticians of Kwik Kuts. SinSin was half-Vietnamese, half-Chinese, one of the few good things to come out of the last border war between those two countries. Pepsi was a Nordic-Anglo mix who—Shenda had always privately observed to herself—resembled no one so much as that infamous comix icon, Cherry Poptart.

The two women were fussing inordinately over Thurman. All they lacked for their role of *houris* were giant palm fronds to fan him with.

"Can I get you some more juice, Thurman?"

"Would you like another cushion, Thurman?"

"Is that sun too much for you?"

"Have some potato chips, Thurman! They're fresh!"

A burst of jealousy ignited like a Roman candle in Shenda's chest. What did those two think they were *doing!*

Ever since Shenda had told Pepsi and SinSin that Thurman had admired her pedicure—Shenda's footwork their handiwork—they had taken a silly fancy to him.

"You know how rare it is for a *man* to notice something like that, Shenda?"

"And then to say it *out loud* in a *public place!*"

"Wow!"

Additionally, Thurman's sickly condition had sent their unfulfilled maternal nursing instincts into overdrive.

It was all very innocent and probably good for them all.

But somehow, today, it made Shenda's blood percolate! Shenda marched over.

When Thurman spotted her, he got guiltily to his feet.

"Un, hi, Shen—"

Shenda cut off the feeble greeting. "You, Swan—come with me!"

"I'll be right back—"

"No, you won't! Hurry up!"

Shenda stalked off, leaving Thurman to stump after her.

When they were some distance away, Shenda stopped under the semi-concealing foliage of a willow. Fronds whispered at her passage. Thurman caught up and leaned gratefully against the trunk, out of breath.

"Do you know what those two are?" demanded Shenda. Without waiting for an answer, she spat, "They're lovers! Lesbians! *Lipstick* lesbians!"

Thurman looked puzzled. "So what? I can't be friends with them? It's not like I want babies or anything."

Shenda's ire deflated. She lowered her head and pinched her brow. "Oh my god, what am I *saying?* They're my friends too. I don't *care* they're lesbians. I never even thought *twice* about it before! I swear it! That's not *me!*"

Thurman moved next to Shenda. Cane in his right hand, he took her left in his. He didn't press any advantage that her confusion provided, but simply said, "Don't worry about it, Shenda. You must have a lot on your mind."

Shenda felt immense gratitude for the sympathy. The same tactical pause she employed not to prejudge others, she now used to forgive herself. "I do, I do! "In fact"—she consulted her watch—"I've got a meeting to call to order that's already late!"

"Let's go then."

People were already gathering expectantly about the central focus of the bandstand, growing quiet and alert. The crowd parted for Shenda, and she found Thurman somehow still behind her, his face drained from the small exertions.

"Oh, shit, I am *so* sorry I dragged you around like this!"

"I—I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

"Listen—you can't stand for the whole time, and the only seat is up there with me. Do you mind?"

"Nuh-no," panted Thurman.

They ascended the three stairs, finding themselves amid the band's equipment and instruments. Thurman collapsed onto Buddy Cheetah's drumset stool. Shenda picked up the microphone and tested it. It was on. With a backward glance to make sure Thurman was okay, she shifted into business mode and began.

"This meeting of Karuna, Inc., is now officially underway. Can I have the minutes of the last meeting, please? Ellen Woodrose, are you out there?"

Business was conducted. People ascended the stage as called. Officers read reports. Motions were proposed. Yays and nays were tallied. People were praised or confronted. Plans were debated and modified. Arguments expired in compromise. Agreements were reached. No blood was spilled.

At last Shenda was able to utter one of her favorite sentences. "If there is no more business, then this meeting is adjourned—"

Chef Mona called loudly out from the mass of people. "Shenda, I got a shortage of help and grillspace today! Which should I cook first? The veggie-burgers or the meat?"

The crowd went into noisy spasms. "The meat, the meat!" "No, the falafel first!"

Then an anonymous voice called out: "Let the dogs vote!"

The whole crowd took up the absurd chant: "Let the dogs vote! Let the dogs vote!"

Children ran off screaming to herd the romping packs up to the tables. Like a madman's cattle drive, the dogs were chivvied toward the food tables.

Shenda knew them all by sight. Spaniels, briards, whippets, shepherds, Scotties, terriers, Great Danes, greyhounds, sheepdogs and many a miscegenous mongrel. Hounds and lapdogs, hunters and retrievers. Ten thousand years of human-inspired breeding. There was French Fry, Slinky Dog, Muzzletuff, Oftenbark, E. Collie, Dogberry, Wagstaff, Nixon, Tuff Gong, Gromit, G-Spot, Snake, Whiskey, Deedles, Subwoofer—and dozens more.

And of course, sticking out like a bright bouncy beach ball, the resplendent Bullfinch.

The kids had succeeded in massing the dogs around Chef Mona. In her hands, she held two patties: one meat, one bean. The crowd fell still as Arctic night.

Strangely, the dogs too had grown calm and composed. They seemed aware of the responsibility that had devolved on them.

Mona bent and offered the patties.

Not a single dog moved forward out of the ring. Instead, they seemed to consult with muted growls and ear-pricking among themselves.

Then one animal emerged from the pack as if nominated by the rest, strutting with immense dignity right up to his own personal canine Judgement of Paris.

Bullfinch.

And without a second's hesitation he chose the falafel.

Half the crowd applauded, half booed, before dissolving into a disorganized surge toward the buffet.

On the stage Shenda turned to Thurman, whose face was wreathed in amazement.

"And that's how we do things *por la Karuna*!"

5. THE ILLUSION OF CONQUEST

In his vast, statue-littered bedroom, before his official busy day began, Marmaduke Twigg sought to fortify himself for his off-the-record meeting with Kraft Durchfreude. The guiding black light of Isoterm lifted his silken pajama top, revealing a small titanium port like a robot's nipple implanted in his side. He attached a transparent feed line leading to an IV sac hanging on a stand. Triggered by the connection, his inner pump began to hum. Blue fluid flowed directly into his veins.

No time to get the Zingo through his slow digestive tract now! Durchfreude would be here any moment.

Twigg dreaded the meeting. All he could picture was Durchfreude holding the nail gun and firing into Stanes's head. The expression on the creature's face—! Something not present at previous initiations—a trace of deadly disengagement, of schizoid withdrawal—had crawled beneath the tightly held surface of the Dark Intercessor's face.

Twigg suspected that Durchfreude's unstable brain was finally fractionating. As when a glacier meets the sea, parts were calving off, achieving or struggling for autonomy. The jigsaw pieces of Durchfreude's mind were twitching with a

life of their own, hopping out of their former plane of alignment.

Of course, this made the cat's-paw of the PGL highly unreliable—dangerous in fact—and subject to immediate termination.

Still, Twigg hoped to get just one more assignment out of him. A simple one, to be sure, but necessary.

As the IV bag collapsed with an accompanying mechanical sucking sound from Twigg's thorax, Twigg felt a twinge of regret at Durchfreude's disintegration and imminent demolition. None of this had been the man's own fault, of course. Why, Twigg remembered when Kraft Durchfreude had been the ultra-competent head of Squamous Securities, a legend in the world of cutthroat business dealings. And even after the surgical bungle he had lived a useful life, performing with éclat and brio the dirtiest tasks the PGL members could dredge up for him. Why, even as far back as six or seven years ago, when Twigg had sent the Dark Intercessor to the Persian Gulf, the monster had still been at the top of his form. Look how ingeniously he had raked Isoterm's nuts from the fire, destroying all evidence of the company's sales to Iraq of CBW *materiel*. Even the highly over-rated CIA had been unable to prevent Durchfreude's access to pertinent records of theirs, which had forever after gone conveniently missing. . . .

But now—now was a different story.

After this job, Twigg would present his suspicions and proofs to the godsons and goddaughters of Phineas Gage. Surely they all must have noticed the falling-off in Durchfreude's performance, the strains in his behavior, and would agree on his lethal disposition, despite any temporary inconveniences.

Twigg suspected that only one real issue, never made explicit, had stayed their hands thus far.

Where would they *ever* find a successor with Durchfreude's exquisite taste in kidnap victims for the monthly rites?

The bedroom door opened as Twigg was unsnapping his feed. A quivering Snivelshytz ushered the bald and skeletal Kraft Durchfreude in, then hastily backed out, as if from the vicinity of a cobra.

Dropping his pajama shirt, Twigg manufactured affability out of unease. "Kraft, my good man! Come right in. I hope they fed you well downstairs."

The thing's voice was as uncountoured as a worm. "I ate."

"Wonderful! Never conduct negotiations on an empty stomach, that's my rule. Makes one too eager to have them over! Not that we're performing what one might term negotiations, of course."

"No."

Unnervingly, Durchfreude's popeyed gaze never strayed from Twigg's mouth, as if the Dark Intercessor were contemplating cruel refinements in the form and function of that organ. Twigg stammered, "Yes, well, be that as it may." He tried to project authority. "Here is your assignment. I have recently encountered several nuclei of resistance across the nation, holdouts fighting the introduction of a new Isoterm product. Zingo, a soft drink. I'd like you to visit each of these sites and insure that they are permanently removed as sources of opposition. You

should start with one in particular, more organized than most. It's at the head of the list. You'll find the specifics in these papers."

Twigg handed over a file folder. "Is everything clear?" "Why?"

The simple word stopped Twigg like a wall. He couldn't recall Durchfreude ever uttering that syllable before. Further sign of his slide into mental chaos.

"Why?" What do you mean?"

The monster struggled to cloak nebulous thoughts in the proper words. "Why must—why must you go where you aren't wanted? Can't you purchase those who would be purchased, and—and leave the others alone?"

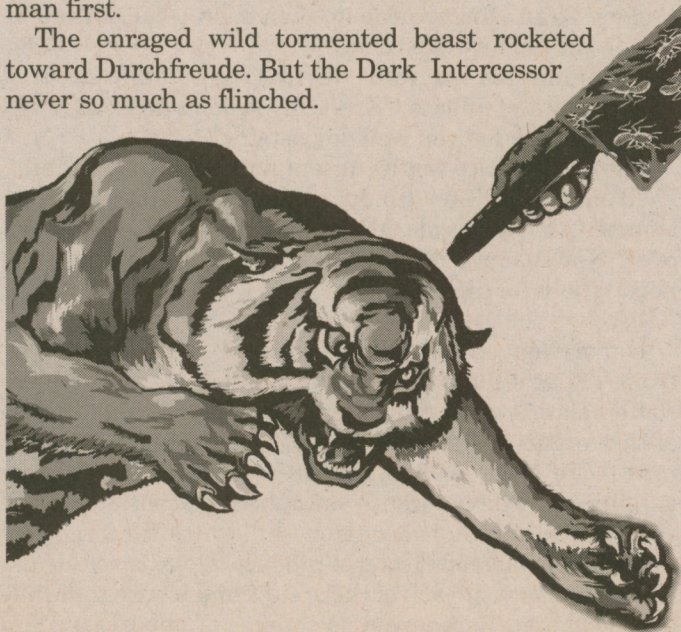
"Kraft, my good fellow, surely you jest! It is my absolute nature to flow into all available niches, to drive out and break all competition, to smash and burn and crush, to grind the faces of the conquered into the dust, until only I alone am left standing, regnant over all I survey, even if that should be a smoking wasteland of my own devising! My categorical imperative is that all my actions must conduce toward the magnification of my supreme presence. Why, had I infinite time and infinite space to fill, it would still not be enough to hold my tremendous vitality! It's not that I particularly want to sell soda pop! Great Satan, no! And there is nothing sinister about Zingo, no addictive properties or brain-washing qualities. In fact, the drink is a not completely unhealthful, if nasty tasting mix of electrolytes, Olestra, Nutrasweet, and some artificial flavors and coloring. Good for keeping the masses fit for the assembly line. And of course, the money is trivial. No, it's simply a matter of not allowing my will, however arbitrary and capricious, to be thwarted."

"I—I see."

Twigg clapped a hand on Durchfreude's shoulder. "Of course you see. You may do no other."

Twigg's shifted line of vision now encompassed the stasis-control device on the tabletop. On a powerful whim, he picked it up, aimed and brought his tiger nemesis instantly to life. At the same time he stepped behind Durchfreude as a screen, so that the tiger would spot that man first.

The enraged wild tormented beast rocketed toward Durchfreude. But the Dark Intercessor never so much as flinched.



Twigg froze the big cat only when its whiskers were nearly touching Durchfreude, who—only upon seeing the threat neutralized—stepped deftly aside to allow it to crash to the carpet.

Durchfreude regarded his employer emotionlessly. Then he turned and left.

Twigg sensed then that he should have let the Siberian finish the job.

But now it was really rather too late.

10. *Karuna Kaput*

Thurman really could not think of much he would want to change right now in his life, except of course for the state of his health, the less-than-optimal condition of his tainted organs and flesh and bones. A collection of mismatched parts barely holding together (although seemingly, thankfully, not getting worse).

And yet—even with that grim toe-stepping partner, Miss Function, he was learning to dance, to shuffle gamely around life's ballroom.

After all: as Shenda had said, his problems were *old* shit.

He was really getting his act together at last, after the disastrous end to his Army career. Coming out of his shell, turning over a new leaf, climbing every mountain, and a raft of other natural metaphors.

Why, one day it seemed possible he might even own a dog!

Things looked sweet.

Every morning he arose early after a semi-decent night's sleep. (His joints still pained him, his stomach still often rebelled against supper, but somehow his mind was more at ease, and that helped a lot.) Dressed, he measuredly walked the ten blocks to the Karuna Koffeehouse and through the laughing door, where he was treated to Verity-whipped espresso eggs and the latest creation of that baking genius, Odd Vibe: a buttery, cheddary croissant with fractal flaking layers.

"You eat good now, Tor-man, you betcha!"

"Very good, Odd Vibe. Thanks!"

The familiar faces and repeated rituals of the place soothed him. There resounded Chug'em's fourth long slurp, here came Nello with his latest dirty joke, there was Buddy executing intricate rhythms on the countertop with two wooden spoons.

Even the mean scowl and mimed expressions of distaste directed his way each day by Fuquan Fletcher (who had never again verbally or physically accosted Thurman) were an integral part of his daily routine.

The place to come when even home isn't kind enough.

Indeed, indeed.

At a quarter to nine, the taxi from Kall-a-Kab would pull up and beep for him, and he'd ride to his job.

Vance von Jolly had proved to be a decent boss. Any sternness or disdain exhibited by the man was a tartness solely in service to his art, and would just as likely be turned toward himself.

"Thurman, I ask you—have you ever seen such a pitifully derivative waste of canvas? If Big Daddy or the ol' Kootchie-Koo his self could see this sad excuse for a painting, they'd break all my brushes in half and throw my

ass out on the street. Scrape it down, will you, before I barf. I'm gonna go sand down that T-bird."

Having no artistic talent or insight himself, Thurman simply did as he was told. (When working with potentially noxious chemicals, he wore full protective duds: respirator, gloves, smock. The proximity to pigments and sprays and solvents seemed not to be worsening his ailments anyhow.) His natural obedience and alacrity, modified by his body's limits, seemed to suffice. For the past two weeks he had collected a more than generous paycheck.

And many times a week, he got to see Shenda Moore.

The vibrant, seemingly inexhaustible leader of the Kompassionate Konglomerate (as Thurman had mentally dubbed Karuna, Inc., inspired by its treatment of himself and all others) blew into the garage like an hourglass-shaped twister at unpredictable intervals, bearing directives, advice, questions, checks, official forms, gifts of food and flowers. And she always offered up a personal comment or two, out of that massive Rolodex concealed in her pretty head.

Whenever she wasn't around, Thurman thought he had no illusions about Shenda ever being more to him than a not-too-intimate friend. That moment of connection under the willow tree had been a fluke, never referred to again.

But when her warm and radiant body and blithe spirit actually occupied the same room as Thurman, he was convinced he loved her and always would.

Maybe all he needed was another opening. . . .

Early Saturday evening in Morley Adams Park. Dusk-calls of birds, skybowl purpling, lawns releasing their night-odors, stonewall still warm against his back, planks of the bench rough under his butt. Hands folded in his lap, Thurman contemplated the foot-gouged trough of dirt at his feet.

What had brought him here? Usually he was abed by now, watching TV or listening to the radio. Hoping to recapture some of that magic willow-shrouded day, perhaps. . .

A tennis ball rolled up to nestle between his V-angled sneakers.

Then a beautifully ugly jonquil dogface appeared, tongue lolling out to drip approximately a pint of slobber on Thurman's Nikes.

"Hey, Thurman, what's up?"

Shenda dropped down beside Thurman. If a transdimensional imp had materialized and hauled a giant cartoon money bag out of some fold of hyperspace and offered it to him, Thurman could not have been more stunned.

Shenda ignored his blank amazement. "Me and Bully are out for the first time in *days!* I could kick myself sometimes! Get so involved in the *biz*, you know. And what's it all for, if not minutes like this?"

"I agree. Minutes. Just like this."

Shenda said nothing for a time. Thurman recalled the silence she had cultivated prior to blasting his psyche apart, and inwardly flinched. But when she spoke, her words were mild.

"How're SinSin and Pepsi and you getting on these days?"

"Oh, them! Great, fine. They're very nice to me. They even took me to the beach the other day. I don't remember the name of the place, but there was a real big-hair crowd—"

"Uh-huh. Been there once with them myself. You should have seen this one lifeguard. Buff but dim! Well, he just went straight after Pepsi like—"

Shenda's story was long and involved and funny. She rattled on as if she hadn't talked recreationally in too long. Thurman had only to nod and interpolate a few monosyllables to keep the narrative flowing. One tale segued into another. Every few minutes one of the humans offhandedly tossed the ball for Bullfinch. When it became too dark for the dog to see anything, he lay beneath the bench and began to snore.

Thurman began to talk a little about himself. Presently he found that their roles had flipped, with Shenda doing most of the listening and nodding.

Around ten-thirty, Shenda jumped up. "Louie Kablooie! I have to make my rounds!"

"Your rounds? At this hour?"

"Before I can sleep, I go around to all our businesses and make sure they're locked up safe. The Koffeehouse is last, at midnight."

Thurman thought this sounded obsessive, but only said, "Even on the weekend?"

"Like maybe thieves don't *work* weekends?"

"Well, I guess I'll say goodbye then—"

"No, don't! Please. You can keep me company."

"Ride shotgun?"

Shenda made pistol fingers and fired a few imaginary shots into the dust. "Dance, pardner!"

The three of them got into the Jetta, Bullfinch sprawled in the back seat, and were soon circulating down lonesome urban trails.

Their small sedate city was winding down by the time they pulled up to the Karuna.

All dark, save for a lone light still on in the kitchen.

"That's probably Fuquan, getting the beans ready for tomorrow so he can sleep in late. He's got a key."

Emboldened by this time spent together, Thurman was about to inquire just what, if anything, Shenda felt for that obnoxious guy.

Then a gunshot sounded, plain as a million-dollar vase shattering.

From inside the Karuna.

"No!" yelled Shenda.

The woman and the dog were out of the car before Thurman could even get the unfamiliar door open. Damn, where was the *handle!*—

All hell arrived, with bells on.

An enormous CRUMP!, followed by a WHOOSH!, and the Karuna burst into flames, sending glass flying like deadly stars into the street.

A stick figure in a business suit emerged from the storeside alley like a demon stepping from an inferno. He walked calmly away from the blazing structure, gun hanging down by his side.

Shenda hesitated, but Bullfinch did not.

The dog raced across the street and catapulted himself at the man.

The living skeleton's reaction was out of all proportion to the unarmed assault. As if facing some supernatural creature, the arsonist-killer dropped his gun, screamed, threw up his arms and tottered backward.

Bullfinch impacted, sending the man over completely to bounce his head off the curb.

By the time Thurman made his lame way over, Shenda was kicking the unconscious man in the side and screaming.

"Bastard! You fucking killer *bastard!*"

Thurman pulled her back. "Shenda, stop!"

Shenda collapsed like a string-and-bead toy whose pushed button releases the tension that sustains it. Thurman kneeled to hold her up. A migraine was flowering behind his eyes.

And then he saw the killer's face.

Furnace skies. Sand lacquered with blood. Greasy, roilsome black clouds . . .

And to his instant horror, Thurman knew he knew him.

II. *la iyalocho*

Nothing would ever, ever be the same.

And Shenda Moore was the one to blame.

This sad couplet ran and ran in Shenda's brain like a mean virus of found poetry self-assembled from fridge-magnet vocabulary. As towers and spurts of crackling fire illuminated her dog and the two men and her own crumpled self on the oil-slicked macadam, Shenda realized with absolute certainty that what she had long awaited and pretended not to fear—like a child whistling in Oya's graveyard—had now found her. The unraveling of all her careful labors. The major fuckup. The explosion of chaos you're lucky to walk away from. The shitstorm that takes innocent bystanders and chews them up like pumpkin seeds.

Innocents like Fuquan Fletcher.

Poor Fuquan!

And despite all prior pretense of equanimity, the disaster scared her.

Scared the piss out of her—

And made her fighting mad!

Some sick and evil motherfucker was going to pay.

Sirens began to wail like delighted banshees. Shenda leaped to her feet.

"In the car with this pig. Quick!"

Thurman's expression revealed major perplexment. "But the police—"

"The police are whores! They *know* this man and his bosses! They suck at the same hindteat! Believe me!"

Thurman bent and lifted the unconscious killer's arms. Shenda saw the crippled Swan try to hide a wince and grunt.

"Oh, Thurman, I forgot. Can you do it?"

"I can do it—"

Between them they hustled the guy into the back seat of the Jetta. Shenda lashed his arms and legs together with rope from the trunk. Bullfinch leaped in and sat atop the man's chest, proudly on guard. Shenda and Thurman piled in. They tore off in the direction opposite from the hastening fire trucks just a block away.

"Where are we going?"

"To my aunt's house."

Shenda hadn't known the answer to Thurman's question until he asked it. But as soon as she opened her mouth, their destination was obvious.

Only Titi Yaya could help her now.

As she drove, Shenda filled Thurman in on the shakedown moves being directed at the Karuna and other businesses in town.

"This has to be Maraplan's doing. Mealey and his fucking Zingo! He practically told me something like this was coming. And me, the stupid smart bitch, so *my* competent, thinking I could handle everything myself! Look where it got me. Look where it got Fuquan!"

Shenda could feel tears threatening to spill out. No, not yet. She sought to relieve some of her feelings by smacking the steering wheel with her fists; the car veered; she recovered.

Thurman looked appalled. "Shenda, don't be so hard on yourself. If the authorities *were* in on this, what else could you have done?"

"A lot! I could have hired some security guards, for one thing."

"And then maybe more people would have died. No, these are jokers who don't mind how many bodies they leave in their wake."

Shenda turned to study her passenger's face. "You sound so sure. What do you know?"

Thurman shared what he knew.

"Louie Kabloolie," whispered Shenda. *El pulpo* grew more and more tentacles. In a louder voice: "Then the jerks behind Zingo—they're the same ones who fucking poisoned all you Gulf War vets!"

"It sure looks like it."

"I hate them!"

Thurman said nothing for a moment. Presently: "Well, I was full of hate for a long time too. Then you told me it was all old shit."

Shenda was too angry to listen to her own past advice. "Well, it's new shit again. Get pissed."

Their cargo did not awake during their journey cross-town. Within twenty minutes, Shenda was in the neighborhood of her childhood, parking in front of the brownstone where Titi Yaya lived.

They hustled the killer up the steps like a sack of cornmeal, the pudgy daffodil Bullfinch somberly following, one awkward jump at a time, tags on his collar jingling. Shenda rang her aunt's bell just to alert the woman, but used her own key. They were quickly in the tile-floored foyer without anyone seeing their unconventional arrival.

Thurman was gasping. "Is there an elevator?"

Shenda was winded too. And everything felt unreal. "Not needed. Just down the hall."

They half dragged their captive down the hall. At the end, a door was already opening.

There stood Titi Yaya, elder sister of Shenda's Mom, Consolacion Amado.

La iyalocho.

The small and trim old woman wore a blue-striped white flannel robe and corduroy slippers. Necklaces and bracelets adorned her form. Long, unbound coal-black hair was at

odds with her age-lined, dark-honey-colored face. Equally unlikely—yet so comfortingly familiar to Shenda—was a vibrant power, tinged with sexuality, that radiated off her, blazed in her eyes.

"I was not sleeping," said Titi Yaya. "The cowries told me there would be trouble tonight, Shen-Shen. And I encountered the twisted branch of Eleggua in my path on the way to the store this morning. I knew that you would need me."

"Oh, Titi! Everything's gone wrong!"

"We'll fix what we can. Although I have to tell you the signs are not good."

They were inside, door shut, as safe as possible, considering.

Shenda looked around. Nothing had changed since the day a scared and tearful five-year-old had come to live here, after the child's father, Tresvant Moore, crack-addled, had killed Consolacion and himself.

All the furniture was old-fashioned and immaculate, much of it in transparent plastic covers. Worn rugs had been vacuumed speckless. Artificial flowers and innocuous prints decorated end-tables and papered walls. Smells of cooking, ancient and recent, permeated the air—and below that olfactory layer, the unmistakable whiff of *omiero*, that potent herbal concoction.

So far, so normal, an apartment like that of any other *aley*, any other nonbeliever.

But then Shenda's eye traveled to the altars and shrines, earthly homes of the celestial *orisha* gods and afterlife *eggun* spirits. Colorful and cloth-draped, laden with statues, pictures, vases, *sopera* tureens, instruments of sacrifice. Sumptuously bestrewn with offerings of live flowers, toys, cigars, rum, and food.

Titi Yaya's apartment was a *casa de santo*, a Santeria temple, site of a thousand, thousand ceremonies, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly observances and propitiations, possessions, beseechings and repayments, spell-castings and curse-cleansings, a refuge for petitioners and meeting place for Titi Yaya's peers, the male *babalawos* and female *iyalochas*.

All of this had been taken for granted by the growing child named Shenda Moore. She had hardly given a thought to the various sanctified weirdness she had often witnessed. The *tambors*, the *rogacions de cabeza*, the *pinaldos*. It had all been part of the new stability she had experienced upon being taken under the wing of her unmarried aunt.

And yet, somehow, she had never penetrated fully into the Religion—or it had failed to penetrate her. About the time she would have been expected to commit to Santeria, she began hanging with the black kids at school—her father's seductive heritage—and the Cuban half of her background grew even less interesting to her. Analogue, antique and uncool.

After testing the stubborn strength of her niece's convictions, Titi Yaya had refrained from coercion. Only an occasional mild reminder from time to time that the door was still open.

Santeria didn't proselytize, didn't do missionary work.

You came to *la iyalocha* because you needed the *orishas*. And now Shenda was here.

But maybe too late.

Titi Yaya stooped to pet Bullfinch and whisper in his ear. The dog's tail propellered. Rising, the *santera* addressed Shenda.

"Get that man in a chair. And untie him."

"But Titi, he's a killer!"

"He can cause no harm here."

With Thurman's help, Shenda did as she was told. Shanghaied into this mess, the man was being more accepting than Shenda had any right to expect.

Thurman whispered. "Your aunt. She's some kind of witch?"

"Not witch. Priestess."

"Oh. Her place is weird. But nice. You know—I had a massive headache when I came in here, but it's gone now."

"That always happens."

Across the room, Titi Yaya, now barefoot, took no notice of them. She made the *foribale*, the prostration before the altar.

The altar of Babalu-Aye.

Louie Kabloolie, as five-year-old Shenda had dubbed him.

Saint Lazarus was the plaster Catholic disguise the *orisha* wore: a loincloth-clad, sore-riddled, bearded beggar with crutch, his loyal dog always by his side.

Standing now, shredding coconut husk fibers before the statue, feeding with liquid the saint's sacred stones concealed in the ornate tureen, chanting in Yoruban, Titi Yaya was invoking his help.

She paused, turned to her visitors.

"I need the *derecho*."

Shenda's purse was forgotten in the car. She said to Thurman, "Give me a dollar."

Thurman dug in his pocket and came up with a bill. Shenda passed it to *la iyalocha*, who tucked it into a niche of the statue.

The ceremony was long and complex. The day began to catch up with Shenda. Despite all the terror and turbulent emotions, she found her eyelids drooping. She cast a glance at Thurman Swan. He seemed riveted, as did an alert Bullfinch. The Maraplan-Isoterm hireling remained eyelid-shuttered and unstimulating.

Suddenly Titi Yaya spun and was upon them. It was not as if she had moved, but as if the room had revolved around her.

Behind her face Babalu-Aye dwelled.

The old woman clutched the killer around the waist with both hands. His body jolted as if electrified, his eyes jolting open.

Then she—or rather, the *orisha* within her—lifted him as if weightless, holding him effortlessly aloft.

Babalu-Aye's voice was a guttural growl. "Speak!"

The man began to recite his personal history, starting with his name.

Kraft Durchfreude's story unreeled for hours. Shenda and Thurman sat transfixed at the enormity of the far-stretching, long-living evil his tale contained. Dawnlight was filtering through the gauzy curtains before he was done. For the whole time Babalu-Aye held him ceilingward like a doll, a rigid tableau.

When at last the recitation was finished, Babalu-Aye dropped Durchfreude back in the chair. The *orisha*

departed his servant, and Titi Yaya returned, her loaned body seemingly unaffected by the superhuman exertion.

Shenda rubbed her grainy eyes. "Titi Yaya, what—what is he?"

"An *egungun*, a shell. He is possessed by the dead man he once was."

Thurman spoke. "A zombie?"

"If you will."

"What can we do with him?" asked Thurman.

"I can end his artificial life with the proper spell—" suggested *la iyalocho*.

Shenda had been thinking about the immense horrors wrought by *Durchfreude* and the Phineas Gage League. Now she spoke.

"No. Wake him up enough to realize what has been done to him. Some of the things he said make it seem he's halfway there already. Then—send him back to his masters."

Titi Yaya reached out to touch Shenda's wrist. "That will set large and uncontrollable forces in action, daughter. You play one *orisha* against another. Are you ready for the consequences?"

Shenda felt emptied of emotions. Pity, remorse, fear, hope, hate—all were just words without referents. Her body was thin as a piece of paper. Only weariness ached inside her.

"All I know is that I don't want to live in a world where such things go on. Let's end them if we can."

"Very well."

Into the kitchen stepped Titi Yaya. Sounds of bottles and tins being opened, bowls and spoons and whisks being employed, trickled in to them.

She returned with two small vials full of subtly differing cloudy mixtures, one open and one corked. From the open one, she anointed *Durchfreude*'s joints and head, made him swallow the remaining pungent liquid, chanting all the while.

The *egungun*'s eyes showed white, his limbs twitched. Bullfinch barked. *Durchfreude* got spastically to his feet. When his vision was again functioning, he lurched out of the *casa de santo*.

Shenda knew it was time for them to leave also. "Titi, you know I can never repay you."

"The debt is all mine, daughter. I should have been more forceful with you, made you take the Necklaces, gotten you under the protection of the *orishas*. Now I fear it is too late. The gods do not like being ignored for so long. And they are vengeful when slighted. I will work for you despite this."

Shenda hugged her aunt. "Thank you, Titi! That's all I can ask. Come on, Thurman. I'll drive you home."

Thurman and Bullfinch preceded Shenda. At the outer door, when Thurman was already down the stairs and on the street, Titi Yaya pressed the second vial into Shenda's hand. "This is for your sick boyfriend, dear. It will help him."

Boyfriend?

Shenda regarded Thurman thoughtfully.

Boyfriend.

What *didn't* Titi Yaya know?

12. A CAVERN MEASUREDEE TO MAN

Samuel Stanes wore only a small head bandage a month after his surgery. Even in the dim light of the abandoned subway station, Twigg could detect the powerful knowledge of the limitless freedom conferred by the neuro-alteration alight in the newest member's eyes.

Now the Phineas Gage League was up to full strength. The resulting synergy and competition would doubtlessly inspire them all to new heights of ambition and conquest. At times, Twigg enjoyed the cruel play that flourished amongst them. At other times, he would have liked to have the entire world to himself, resented the presence of the others. But such had been the way since the League began.

Not that there could never be changes.

And yet Twigg, even in his speculative heresy, failed to intuit that changes waited literally just around the corner.

Out of the darkness and into the station pulled the little mining train, Kraft *Durchfreude* at the helm.

The Dark Intercessor looked like a poorly constructed scarecrow from the fields of Dis. He seemed to have spent a longish period of dirty action without bathing or changing his normally immaculate suit, resulting in a shambolic appearance.

Twigg shook his head ruefully. Deplorable and dangerous. Shameful, if such a word could apply. It was like watching a corpse rot. This would have to be the meeting where they dealt with *Durchfreude*. They could send him on an errand and discuss his fate then.

Climbing aboard with his peers, Twigg noticed two oddities.

The pile of victims in the last car was covered with a tarp.

And instead of the expected whiff of unclean flesh, a strange herbal odor wafted off their driver. Twigg found it instinctively repugnant.

Down the long dark descent the train chugged, finally arriving in the flambeau-lit charnel cave.

The cold fly-blown broken meats of their last feast still festooned the tables. The corpses, thankfully, had been removed. But no pleasant repast awaited their delectation. The smells of old rot were gagsome.

Further strangeness: *Durchfreude* did not servilely hasten to move up the portable steps for their ease of disembarking. He seemed frozen at the controls of the train.

With Twigg taking the initiative, the League members got awkwardly out.

Now *Durchfreude* did an unprecedented thing. He backed up the train until the last car effectively blocked the narrow tunnel mouth, their only exit from the meeting place.

Twigg began to feel very ill at ease.

Durchfreude stepped down. Jerkily, he moved to the caboose. Awkwardly, he pulled the tarp off.

The victims therein were already unfairly dead, some of them quite messily. With a burgeoning horror, Twigg recognized one of the corpses as a highly placed Isoterm executive. Others he knew as important members of other PGL-led companies, a fact confirmed by gasps and demands made by his compatriots.

"What is the meaning of this?" "Is this some kind of obscene joke?" "I can't believe what I'm seeing!" "Durchfruede, explain yourself!"

Give their senior member full credit for bravery. Creaky old Firgower moved toward the Dark Intercessor, relying on old patterns of dominance.

"We want to know the meaning of your actions right now!" quavered the very illustrious head of Stonecipher Industries.

By way of explanation, Durchfreude reached in among the bodies and retrieved an exceedingly sophisticated automatic weapon.

A rubber apron was not a satisfactory shield. The first blast cut Firgower to gory flinders, giving the others time to scatter.

But in the final sense, there was no place to run.

With stoic lack of affect, Durchfreude calmly potted the screaming members wherever they sought to hide. In their frantic scrambles and inevitable death throes, all the furniture of the chamber was overturned and smashed.

Twigg's mind on the conscious side of the dam was blank. But not for long. A single stray bullet in his side filled his superman's brain with crimson anguish.

He fell to the carpet, face-down, a hand going to his wound.

Metal. He felt metal. His pump had caught the bullet, stopped it penetrating further.

Twigg lay still.

Eventually the screaming and inarticulate gurgling stopped.

But the shooting continued, a single round at a time.

Ever conscientious, Durchfreude was slowly walking around the scene of slaughter, putting a *coup-de-grace* shot or three into each surgically altered brain.

Twigg opened his eyes.

He was staring into the lifeless blood-freckled face of Isabelle Fistule a few feet away.

Between them lay a familiar machete, often employed for fun, now his last hope for survival.

With infinite slowness he snaked his hand toward it.

Just as he stealthily clasped the handle Durchfreude's shoes appeared in his vision. The man's back was toward Twigg, as he pumped mercy shots into Fistule.

Still supine, Twigg swung up and around with all his strength.

A deep pained grunt.

Hamstrung, the mad assassin collapsed, rifle flying off.

Twigg was atop the creature in a kind of parody of sexual mounting. The face of the Dark Intercessor remained blank as ever.

Seeking to compose his mind, Twigg felt a greatness invade him from outside. Perhaps it was only his damaged pump flooding him with an uncontrolled mix of hormones and chemicals and soft drink. But whatever the source, amidst the stench and clotting filth, something celestial descended and rode Twigg like a horse.

"Speak," ordered Twigg.

Durchfreude began a mechanical recitation covering the past few days.

When he was finished, Twigg said, "The servant is not to blame for the master's mistakes. Die cleanly now."

Durchfreude's jugular blood sprayed Twigg from waist to head, feeding his power.

Twigg stood up beneath the splattered gaze of Phineas Gage.

Alone. He was all alone, the only one of his kind in all the world.

How wonderful!

13. fuquan 3 dendoff

In the three days following the burning of the Karuna and the visit to Titi Yaya's, much happened.

Thurman felt dizzied by it all.

First, the police. They had found the dropped gun in the street and conclusively linked it to the bullet obtained from Fuquan's charred corpse. The fact that the only fingerprints on the pistol were those of a long-dead respectable businessman proved only that the weapon had probably been stolen and kept unused for years, then handled by a gloved killer. Much persistent questioning ensued. The firemen had reported a fleeing car, but had been unable to provide positive ID that would link it to Shenda. Still, as with any business-related fire—especially one involving apparent concealment of a death—the suspicions of the authorities turned first on the owner and putatively disgruntled employees and customers.

"Now, Mister Swan," said Sgt. Botcher. The policeman was distinguished by a comb-over, a plump ruddy face and a black vinyl belt. This did not cause Thurman to underestimate him. "Witnesses report that you had a little run-in with the victim some weeks ago."

"It—it was nothing. He got mad when he thought I had eyes for a woman he wanted."

"Ah-ha. I see. A woman. Would you mind divulging her name?"

Thurman knew he couldn't lie, and also how suspicious all this would sound. "It was Miss Moore."

"Miss Moore. The owner. Hmmm. She sure has her hand in a lot of businesses in this city. All properly insured, though, I bet."

Sgt. Botcher made a little tick in his notebook. Then he threw Thurman a wild pitch that appeared to be an attempt to establish a specious bond.

"You're a vet, Mister Swan?"

"Yes. The Gulf War."

"Me too. 'Nam. One long hellacious fuckup and fuckover. Yours was penny-ante. Just a few months of the bosses testing some new systems and keeping their hand in."

Thurman tried to imagine his debilitating chronic illness as something penny-ante. Maybe to someone outside Thurman's skin that was how it looked. "I guess . . ."

"Learned all about guns in the service, naturally."

"Well, sure, the necessary drill. But I don't think I ever fired one in combat. Mainly I was a demolitions man."

Sgt. Botcher's eyes got as wide as camera shutters in a dark room. "That'll be all, Mister Swan. And please—don't leave town without letting us know."

But the police were only a minor upset in Thurman's existence. They were blind and unknowing of the strange new reality that had been revealed by Kraft Durchfreude's hypnotic confession. (And God help the authorities if they

were ever unlucky enough to track down that monster!) Tiresome as they were, they grew bored, went away eventually and could be forgotten. A number of other things were more disturbing, less forgettable, and did not seem likely soon to go away.

The shattering of his newly fashioned cozy routine, for one. With the destruction of the Karuna, he had no way to start his day. No familiar faces and rituals, no laughter and jokes, no hearty boost of generosity, goodwill and nourishing food. It left a void at the center of Thurman's day. And whenever he encountered other members of the Karuna family, he saw the same sad feelings at work in them.

"Go home, Thurman," Vance von Jolly told him when he showed up for work the next morning after the dawn departure from Titi Yaya's *casa de santo*. The artist was stretched out on his couch, paint-stained covers pulled over his face. A small rigid tower poked the blanket up at groin level. "Someone's scraped the canvas of my heart with a blowtorch. The palette of my soul is crusted dry. I dragged with the Devil and lost."

Thurman could take a hint. He left. Back in his lonely apartment, he felt that his life was shutting down again. Old physical and mental aches began to reassert themselves. It would be so easy to slip down that dark bottomless well once more—

Thurman got up and went looking for Shenda.

He found her exiting the Kandomble Brothers Funeral Home.

Shenda looked ragged. Red tired eyes, new downward-dragging lines around her mouth. The mainspring of Karuna, Inc., was plainly unwound. Thurman still found her beautiful.

She hugged Thurman tightly, then released him.

"Fuquan's mother asked me to handle the arrangements. She's old, and doesn't have two nickels. It's all taken care of now. No wake, just the funeral day after tomorrow."

"I'll be there. Shenda—"

She placed two fingers gently on his lips, as if in a blessing. Electricity sparked. "Not now, Thurman, okay? After the funeral. Right now I have to cobble together temporary jobs for Verity and Buddy and the other baristas who are out of work. Then there's a lot of official crap connected with the fire. And I want to find a new home for the Karuna. And the police—"

"Sgt. Botcher. I know. Okay, Shenda. See you back here."

He watched her drive away.

On the morning of the funeral—bright, fragrant, dawnrain-washed, implacably beautiful—Thurman was dressing in his lone suit and leather shoes, disinterred from the closet. It felt strange to be out of sweats and sneakers after so long. Too bad it wasn't a wedding. . . .

The radio was giving the news. There seemed to have been an inordinate number of executive corporate jet crashes over the past twenty-four hours, all inevitably fatal. It was almost as if—

Thurman put *that* notion firmly out of his head.



The Kall-a-Kab dropped him off at the funeral parlor. Thurman thought he'd be among the first. But there was already a crowd numbering in the scores. All the people he knew personally, Shenda prominent, plus dozens of faces he recognized from the happy park meeting. Apparently, every employee of Karuna, Inc., had determined to attend, in a show of solidarity that actually brought tears to Thurman's eyes.

Fuquan's relatives were bunched in a tight, slightly suspicious and leery family knot that quickly unraveled under the warm pressure of greetings, introductions and expressions of condolence. Soon they were interspersed among the Karuna Korps, hugging, crying, smiling.

Inside Kandomble Brothers it was a more somber, closed-casket affair, a photo of Fuquan in his off-work finery propped atop the silver-handled box. Foot-shuffling in the general hush, chair-creaking and weeping.

Thurman hitched a ride to the church with the respectful but ultimately irrepressible SinSin and Pepsi in their absolutely fabulous Miata. Now that was a ride and a half! His brain was put to the test to handle the disorienting transitions, from a folding chair in the parlor to a lap-perch in the car to a pew in the church.

Thurman hadn't been inside a church in years, and this one wasn't his old denomination. It felt strange but good. Maybe that incredible visit to the *casa de santo* had awakened something dormant in him.

After the preacher spoke his formal eulogy, the lectern was opened to anyone else who had words to offer.

To Thurman's surprise, a steady stream of people trekked up to speak.

Time to toast the roaster.

Fuquan *had* been a prick. The speakers neither dismissed nor highlighted that fact. But he had been *loved*.

People talked about the man's high-energy approach to life, his unique entrances and exits, his unstinting involvement with whatever thrilled or irked him. Memories of brawls and love affairs, ups and downs, flush times and bust times, generousities and ingenious scams were trotted out and lovingly recounted.

Thurman found himself listening with increasing enchantment. There had been a lot more to the guy than he had ever suspected.

As the flow of speakers ebbed, Thurman realized that one important aspect of Fuquan's life hadn't been touched upon.

Without conscious intention, Thurman found himself heading up the aisle to speak.

Facing the sea of attentive faces, Thurman hesitated for a nervous moment, then began.

"I, uh, I only knew Fuquan for a couple of months, and we didn't always get along, so, um, I don't have a lot to say. But I do know one thing. He made a lot of people happy and wide-awake with his coffee-roasting, er, prowess. And that's better than letting them stay grouchy and sleepy. So we all owe him. And who'll take his place?"

Thurman stepped down to loud applause and chants of "Amen, brother!" His face burned and his mind spun. It

was only by the graveside, as the large crowd dispersed, that he really returned to earth.

Shenda approached him. She wore a black wool dress molded to her opulent figure and a single string of pearls, black nylons on the strong pylons of her legs. Her high-heels pierced the turf with each step. She laid a hand on his arm.

"Thurman, I don't want to be alone. Come home with me."

Bullfinch was waiting behind the apartment door. He leaped and cavorted about them like a bright sunny jowly gnome, barking in a queerly modulated way.

The humans had little attention to spare for the dog.

Shenda kicked off her shoes and led Thurman into the bedroom.

They were kissing. Then she loosened his tie and began to unbutton his shirt. Thurman felt suddenly awkward. He stopped her hand.

"I used to look better than I do now," he said.

"But I only know you now."

Thurman couldn't argue with that.

Sprawled naked on the bed, face alight, cocoa arms and legs open to him, Shenda made Thurman think of a dryad who shared the hue of the exotic heartwood of her home tree, or of an unburnished copper woman.

Shenda was gentle with his disabilities. At climax, it was as if lightning entered his head and blazed along his spine. Something shifted permanently within him, as when an object was lifted from a balanced tray. A coffee cup, perhaps.

Thurman fell asleep cradled in Shenda's embrace. When he awoke, it was twilight. Shenda still held him. Bullfinch had climbed onto the bed, and was snoring. Thurman shifted to look at Shenda's face. Her eyes were open, and tears trickled down her cheek like the first rivulets of spring.

"What's wrong? Did I—?"

"No, not you. It's only that nothing lasts. But what else is stinking new, right? Like I should be exempt for my good deeds! Forget it."

They talked about many things for the next few hours. At one point Shenda said, "Thurman, the most important thing in my life is the Karuna idea. It has to go on, even if I'm not around. But I never found anyone who could take over. Now I think maybe you could."

"Me? How could I ever do what you do? You—you're like a force of nature! I'm just a washed-up old rag next to you. Besides, you're not going anywhere anytime soon."

"Can't say, Thurman. Never can say."

After some further conversation, Thurman happened to notice a familiar vial atop the dresser.

"Is that the second potion your aunt concocted the other night?"

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot. You're supposed to drink it."

Shenda hopped out of bed. Her hand was reaching for the potion.

The apartment door blew off its hinges with a plaster-shattering crash and two burly men, stocking-masked and armed, burst in.



14. tarbabyइ टिन्ते

For the whole day—one whole wasted, unrecapturable day!—after the destruction of the Karuna Koffeehouse and the revelation of the dark forces behind the disaster, Shenda had felt enervated and full of despair. All her efforts, all her hard work of the past few years toward achieving her vision, had seemed a pitiable, naive facade erected against chaos, a tent in a hurricane. She even let the spontaneous blame and guilt that had erupted that fiery night fester and grow.

If I hadn't been so stubborn over my foolish damn principles, if I hadn't stuck my head up above the mass of the herd, trying to change things, then none of this would have happened. Fuquan would still be alive, and the Karuna would still exist. It's all my fault for being so uppity, so arrogant, so greedy to make things better. Why couldn't I have been content with my lot?

But as she got caught up in managing the myriad details of Fuquan's funeral and salvaging her business from the ruins, her natural optimism, tempered and reforged, began to reassert itself.

It wasn't my fault! If some jerk steals my car, do I blame myself for having too nice a car? No! There's right and there's wrong! Titi Yaya taught me that! I didn't light the match under the Karuna, that pathetic egungun did, following the orders of some bastard named Twigg! Karuna, Inc., is the best and most honest thing I've ever done. I built and he destroyed! That's what it boils down to, making and breaking, sane adult or viscous child.

This reborn confidence brought something new to light.

Before the disaster, she hadn't thought much about living and dying, just gone naturally from day to day.

After the tragedy, life seemed worthless and she had felt like dying for nothing.

Now, with the change of heart, she felt like living, and, only if need be, dying for *something*.

So when the midnight intruders crashed through her door, Shenda did not meekly surrender.

Her hand closed not on the potion but on a small necklace box atop the dresser and she hurled it at one of the men. At the same instant Bullfinch flew in a snarling rage at the second.

But these were not supernaturally sensitive zombies like Durchfreude, were hardened mundane professionals.

The first man took the box in the chest without flinching or pausing.

The second shot Bullfinch in mid-flight. The dog squealed and thumped to the floor.

"No!" screamed Shenda, seeing her nightmare realized.

Thurman was struggling with treacherous limbs to rise from the bed. One of the men was quickly upon him.

"Hey, feeb," said the man, "chill." He used his gunbutt on Thurman's skull.

The other now grappled with Shenda, succeeding in pinning her arms.

Within seconds they had her wrists and ankles secured with duct tapé, a strip across her mouth. Then they bundled her nakedness in a sheet and carried her outside.

She was dumped into a car trunk. The car took off.

For a timeless interval her mind raved, visions of lover and dog and her helpless self spinning in kaleidoscopic disarray.

Then Shenda, with greater effort than ever before, forced her habitual pause upon herself.

A curious calm enveloped her now. Always dynamic, always a doer, always proactive, she was now in a situation where she could only lie still, could only react.

Was this the paralysis of the rabbit frozen before the snake? Shenda thought not, hoped not. The calmness felt too big to be simply an instinctive neural shutdown. Instead, it felt more like an opening up, like an activation of an untapped higher function, a heightened receptivity to something she had previously been only dimly aware of.

As the car accelerated toward its unknown destination, a memory came back to Shenda. It was one long sealed away, one she had never had access to before.

She was five years old. Her parents were dead. Titi Yaya had custody of her now. They were on a trip to the ocean. That should be fun.

But they ended up not at a public beach, but at a secluded rock-shored Atlantic cove barren of homes or other people. Titi Yaya had told the little girl to undress then.

"Everything?"

"Everything."

Then *la iyalocha* had given the naked Shenda a white handkerchief knotted around seven bright pennies.

"Step into the sea, child, and offer the coins to Yemaya while you ask for her protection."

Shenda waded out tentatively, the rocks bruising her feet. Waist-deep, she tentatively stuck her hand holding the offering under the water.

Something *pulled*.

Shenda didn't think to let go of the coins, and was dragged under.

There was a face below the waters. Kindly and wise and warm. Shenda could have looked at it forever.

But Titi Yaya was already pulling her up, coinless.

"Yemaya accepts your offering, little Shen-Shen. The *orishas* are your friends now forever, as long as you honor them."

The car went over a bump, and Shenda knocked her head.

All this time. All this time she had had help waiting, but had been too proud to heed the numerous offers.

If any flaw of hers deserved punishment, this was it. Trying always to go it alone.

And now she finally was. All alone.

Or was she?

15. the lady is the tiger

It was very convenient for Marmaduke Twigg that his bedroom was wired, boasting all the electronic conveniences that allowed him to run the Isoterm empire remotely.

For he had found in the days after the massacre underground that, having attained a safe refuge, he could not summon the will to leave his room.

Oh, of course the phobia was quite understandable and certainly only of temporary duration. After all, what survivor of such carnage wouldn't jump at every sharp report or look with suspicion at formerly trusted faces? He just needed a little time to regather his wits and confidence, his sense of the rest of humanity as easily manipulated cattle.

But: dangerous cattle, who could gore.

That had been his mistake. Not to realize that even witless subhumans could inflict pain.

But not as intently and ingeniously as he, Twigg himself, could.

Therein lay his superiority.

Twigg had not delayed in pursuing what would strengthen him.

Immediately upon receiving the requisite medical attention, he had begun to sweep up the crumbling empires of his erstwhile PGL peers. Kalpagni, Ltd.; Stonecipher Industries; Burnes Sloan Hardin Hades; Crumbee Products; Harrow & Wither; Somnifax et Cie; Asura Refineries; Preta-Loka Entertainments; Culex, SA; Brasher Investments, Plc.; Rudrakonig, GmbH; LD-100 Pharmaceuticals. All these firms, unlike more democratic ones, had been particularly susceptible to disintegration upon the lopping off of their

Now they were being engulfed

heads.

With every glorious business absorption, Twigg felt power flow into him.

And yet, something was missing. These conquest were all ethereal affairs of bytes and EFT's, votes and bribes. Too impersonal.

What Twigg needed to fully reinvigorate himself was much more elemental.

Blood. The blood of the cow who had set off the stampede that had nearly trampled him.

And this was the day, now the hour.

A knock came at Twigg's door. He took his feet off his hassock, pausing to pat the frozen kneeler appreciatively before he stood.

Alas, poor Snivelshytz.

Decades of loyal service undone by one incautious aged stumble while bearing the breakfast tray. Now enjoying his retirement.

Without pension.

"Enter," called out Twigg imperiously.

The unconscious woman carried into the room by the two thugs was not in immaculate condition. Contusions mottled her naked form, and her features were smeared. An arm dangled crookedly. Experts had inflicted a certain high degree of damage on her prior to her delivery here. Twigg had not fully recovered his strength yet, was used to dealing with drugged victims, and had heard that this one

was a fiery bitch. Best to have her vitality taken down a notch or three beforehand.

Twigg was not greedy. There was plenty of play left in her still.

The men dumped her on the rug and left. Twigg picked up his favorite knife, a slim Medici stiletto, and kneeled beside her. With expert pricking and a final slap across the face he managed to raise her eyelids.

"Ah, my dear, so pleased to meet you. I'm Marmaduke Twigg, your new best friend. Here is my calling card."

Twigg sliced shallowly across the bridge of her nose. Blood flowed, crimson on brown like lava down a hillside.

"We're going to get along famously, I can tell. What do you think?"

The woman was murmuring something. Twigg had to lean over to listen, since her bruised lips and lacerated tongue had trouble forming words.

"Dog. Your . . . name. A dog."

Twigg straightened. "Oh, dear. How gauche. I'm afraid I must register my dismay."

Twigg began to carve.

Delightful hours passed. Despite all his experience at prolonging agony, matters seemed to be reaching a terminal point. So Twigg paused for refreshment.

A deep swallow of Zingo.

Lowering the bottle from his avaricious mouth, Twigg was inspired. He bent over the shattered woman lying curled up on her side.

Her lips were twitching. Twigg thought to hear her mutter, "Lou—Louie . . ."

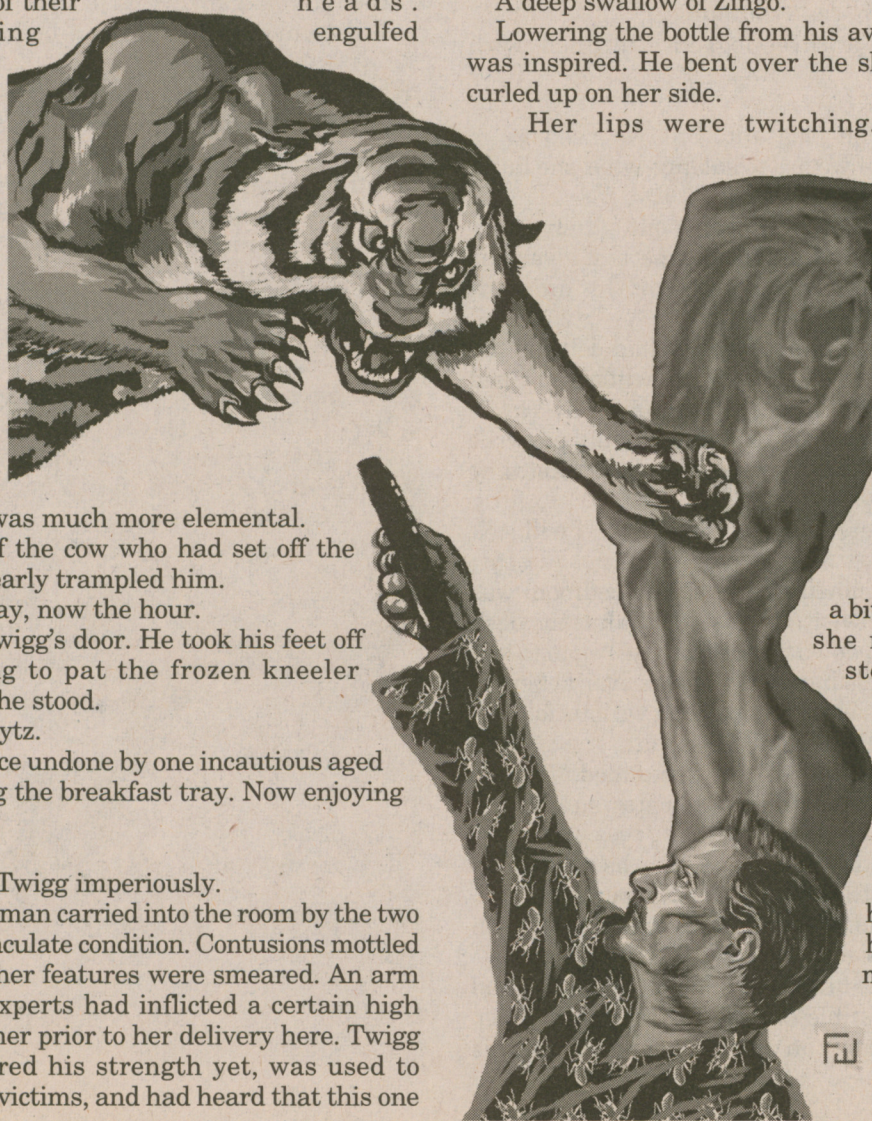
"He's not here, dear. Would you care for a drink? I know you're famously not partial to this beverage though. Too much like vinegar, I take it? Oh, well, if you insist—"

Twigg emptied the cobalt liquid onto her grimly painted face.

It seemed to revive her a bit. With infinite exertion she rolled fully onto her stomach and began to crawl. Twigg watched indulgently.

She reached the table supported by the two male statues. Using their organic irregularities as handholds, she dragged herself upward until she managed to catch the gilt edge of the glass top.

The active workstation across the



FJ

room chimed, signaling its need for a share-selling authorization. Twigg moved quickly to attend it, so that he could resume his pleasures.

When he looked again, the woman held the control for the tiger.

"No!"

Too late.

Death roared.

The dam crumbled.

Twigg dashed insanely for the door.

Impossibly, the woman stood like an iron wall between him and safety.

Something supernaturally strong dwelled now within her.

She clasped Twigg in an iron embrace.

"Come with me," rasped a voice not hers.

And then the tiger was upon them both, claws, jaws, and tropical volcano breath.

But tigers are not cruel.

॥ लोङ्ग लायु योउ रुन

A key turned in the repaired door to Shenda Moore's apartment. The door swung inward.

First entered Titi Yaya.

Behind her, Thurman, cane thumping.

After him hopped a three-legged Bullfinch with bandaged front stump.

Titi Yaya stopped.

"I know this won't be pleasant. But we need to go through all her papers if we are to salvage what she built. You know that's what she wanted."

"Yes," said Thurman. The word came out of him easier and more evenly than he would have expected, given the surroundings. Apparently, he was, for the moment anyway, all cried out.

He had been dreading returning here, had delayed the necessity till a week after the funeral. (Shenda's savaged corpse had come home to them only through Titi Yaya's string-pulling on both supernatural and earthly powers.) But now, with the future of Karuna, Inc., at stake, they could delay no longer.

"You take the desk here," ordered Titi Yaya. "I will look in the bedroom."

Thurman was not inclined to argue. The bedroom was not a place he cared to revisit. "Feeb—" He sat at the desk chair; Bullfinch dropped down beside him. He began to leaf through papers. Shenda's handwriting was everywhere.

After a time Titi Yaya emerged, bearing various folders, Shenda's big satchel—and a small glass vial.

"What is this doing unopened?" she demanded. "How do you expect to accomplish anything if you stay sick? Here, drink this now!"

Thurman did as he was told. The potion was not exactly pleasant, but not vile either. Musty, loamy, powerful.

"I have to go now, child. Meet me at my apartment when you are finished."

Alone, Thurman sorted through a few more sheets and ledgers. Then an irresistible drowsiness started to creep along his limbs from his feet on up, until it crested over his

head and swallowed him entirely. His hand dropped down to graze Bullfinch's back.

He was on a flat city rooftop. Bullfinch was with him, smiling and rollicking, lolloping about on his remaining three legs.

"Throw the ball! Throw the ball! Quick!" said the bulldog. Thurman realized he held a tennis ball.

"I don't know how! Get Shenda to do it. Where is she?"

"She's everywhere! Just look! She's always here! Now let's play!"

Thurman looked around. The sun, the sky, the commonplace urban fixtures. Was that Shenda? It seemed a poor substitute, a deceitful trade for the living woman.

"Don't you see her? Wake up so we can play! Wake up!"

Bullfinch's last words seemed to echo and reverberate. The rooftop scene wavered and dissolved.

Thurman opened his eyes and saw Shenda.

It was only a picture of her as a child, an old snapshot lying atop the papers on the desk.

But it hadn't been there when he fell asleep.

Thurman stood to go. He reached for his cane, then hesitated. Somehow his legs seemed stronger.

Cane left behind, he moved with increasing confidence toward the door.

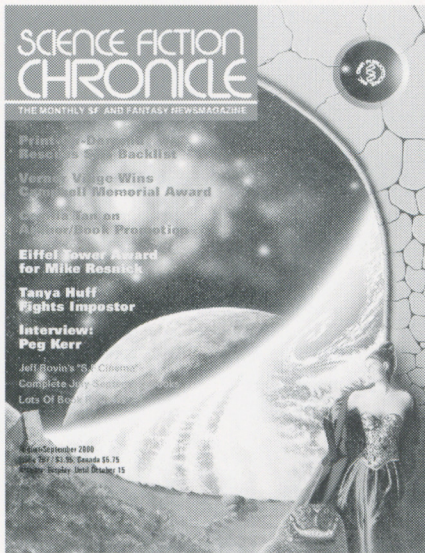
Behind him gamely trotted Bullfinch.

Thurman guessed that now he had a dog.

"[Compassion or karuna] does not seem to die. Shantideva says that every uncompassionate action is like planting a dead tree, but anything related to compassion is like planting a living tree. It grows and grows endlessly and never dies. Even if it seems to die, it always leaves behind a seed from which another grows. Compassion is organic; it continues on and on and on."

—Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*





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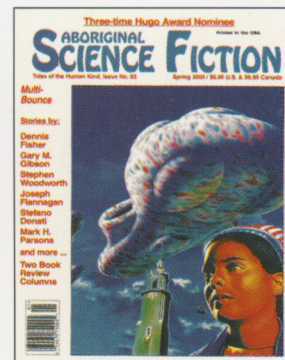
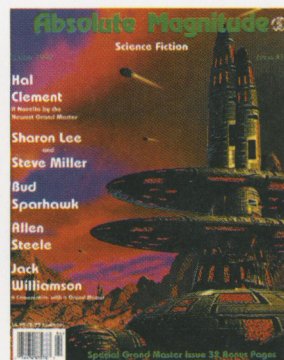
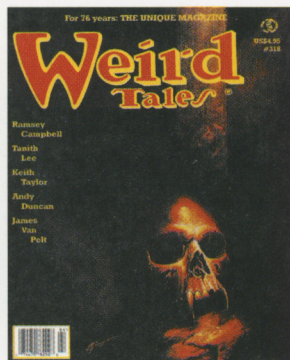
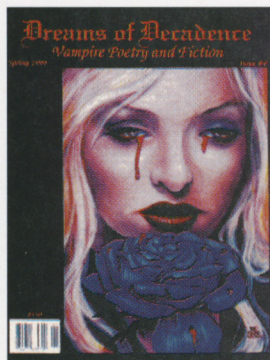
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